

## Protecting Intangible Cultural Heritage Through Regional Cooperation: De'ang Water Drum Dance and the Belt and Road Initiative

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### Abstract

#### Background:

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of ethnic minority communities is increasingly threatened by socioeconomic transformation, generational discontinuities, and cultural commodification. The De'ang Water Drum Dance, a ritual-based performing tradition of the De'ang ethnic group in Yunnan, China, embodies ecological ethics, spiritual beliefs, and communal identity, yet faces significant sustainability challenges. Regional cooperation frameworks may offer new pathways for safeguarding such living heritage.

#### Objective:

This study aims to examine how regional cooperation mechanisms associated with the Belt and Road Initiative can contribute to the protection, transmission, and sustainable development of the De'ang Water Drum Dance, while maintaining cultural integrity and community agency.

#### Methods:

A qualitative case study design was employed, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, semi-structured interviews with cultural practitioners and policy stakeholders, and multi-level policy analysis. Data were analyzed thematically using triangulation across community narratives, institutional practices, and regional cooperation frameworks.

#### Results:

Findings indicate that the De'ang Water Drum Dance functions as a holistic cultural system with ritual, social, and ecological dimensions. Intergenerational transmission emerged as the primary vulnerability, exacerbated by youth migration and limited institutional support. Existing safeguarding measures were largely symbolic and event-driven. Regional cooperation initiatives enhanced visibility, capacity building, and cultural confidence, but also raised concerns regarding commercialization and loss of cultural autonomy.

#### Conclusion:

The study concludes that regional cooperation can serve as an effective complementary mechanism for safeguarding minority ICH when grounded in community-centered governance. Aligning Belt and Road cultural cooperation with participatory, ethical safeguarding principles is essential to ensure the dynamic continuity of the De'ang Water Drum Dance and similar living heritage traditions.

#### Keywords: Protecting Intangible, Cultural Heritage, De'ang Water Drum Dance, Belt and Road Initiative

#### Introduction:

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) constitutes the living expressions of human creativity, social memory, and collective identity that are transmitted from generation to generation. Encompassing oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, festive events, traditional craftsmanship, and knowledge systems, intangible cultural heritage provides communities with a sense of continuity and belonging in a rapidly transforming world[1]. In the context of accelerating globalization, urbanization, and cultural homogenization, the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage has become an urgent international concern. Traditional cultural practices are increasingly vulnerable to marginalization, commercialization, or extinction as younger generations migrate, lifestyles change, and local knowledge systems lose their functional relevance. Against this backdrop, innovative governance models and transnational cooperation frameworks are required to ensure that intangible cultural heritage remains dynamic, meaningful, and sustainable rather than frozen as museum artifacts[2-4].

Within China's ethnically diverse cultural landscape, the traditions of smaller ethnic groups face particularly acute challenges. The De'ang ethnic group, one of China's officially recognized minority nationalities, is primarily distributed in the border regions of Yunnan Province. Among their most distinctive cultural expressions is the De'ang Water Drum Dance, a ritualized performing art that integrates music, dance, craftsmanship, and communal participation[5-7]. The water drum—constructed by hollowing a wooden barrel and filling it with water to produce resonant, variable tones—serves not only as a musical instrument but also as a symbolic medium connecting humans, nature, and ancestral spirits. Traditionally performed during festivals, agricultural ceremonies, and communal gatherings, the Water Drum Dance embodies the De'ang people's cosmology, ecological ethics, and social cohesion. As such, it represents a quintessential example of intangible cultural heritage rooted in localized knowledge, collective practice, and embodied transmission.

However, like many forms of minority intangible cultural heritage, the De'ang Water Drum Dance confronts multiple pressures in the contemporary era. Economic modernization and labor migration have reduced the frequency of traditional ritual contexts; standardized education systems often marginalize indigenous languages and performance practices; and market-driven cultural tourism risks transforming ritual performances into staged spectacles detached from their original

meanings. These challenges underscore the limitations of protection strategies that rely solely on localized preservation or top-down administrative recognition[8-11]. While national and provincial intangible cultural heritage lists have played an important role in raising awareness and allocating resources, they are often insufficient to address structural vulnerabilities, cross-border cultural dynamics, and the need for sustainable transmission mechanisms[12-14].

In this context, regional cooperation emerges as a critical pathway for the protection and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage. Cultural practices rarely conform to modern political boundaries; instead, they circulate through historical trade routes, migration patterns, and shared ecological zones. The De'ang people themselves maintain cultural affinities with related ethnic communities across the China–Myanmar border, highlighting the inherently transregional character of their cultural heritage[15-16]. Effective safeguarding of the De'ang Water Drum Dance therefore requires a broader cooperative framework that transcends local administrative units and integrates cultural, economic, educational, and diplomatic dimensions. Regional cooperation allows for resource sharing, knowledge exchange, capacity building, and the co-creation of safeguarding strategies that respect community agency while enhancing visibility and sustainability.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by China in 2013, provides a novel macro-level platform for such cooperation. Although primarily associated with infrastructure development, trade connectivity, and economic integration, the Belt and Road Initiative has increasingly emphasized people-to-people bonds and cultural exchange as foundational pillars. Policy documents and cooperation mechanisms under the BRI explicitly recognize culture as a soft-power resource and a catalyst for mutual understanding among participating regions. By revitalizing historical routes of interaction and fostering new networks of collaboration, the BRI offers an institutional and conceptual framework within which intangible cultural heritage can be jointly protected, transmitted, and innovatively developed[17-20].

From this perspective, the De'ang Water Drum Dance can be re-examined not merely as a localized ethnic tradition but as a cultural asset with regional and even international significance. Situated in a borderland region historically linked to the ancient Southern Silk Road, the De'ang cultural sphere has long been shaped by intercultural contact and exchange[21]. The Belt and Road Initiative, by reactivating these historical linkages in a contemporary form, creates opportunities to embed the safeguarding of the Water Drum Dance within broader regional cultural cooperation programs. These may include cross-border cultural festivals, collaborative research and documentation projects, artist exchange initiatives, joint heritage education curricula, and sustainable cultural tourism models that prioritize community participation and benefit-sharing[22].

Importantly, framing intangible cultural heritage protection within the Belt and Road Initiative also raises critical questions about governance, ethics, and power relations. While regional cooperation can enhance visibility and resource mobilization, it may also introduce risks of cultural commodification, external appropriation, or the dilution of local meanings. The challenge lies in balancing the strategic objectives of large-scale regional initiatives with the core principles of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding as articulated by UNESCO, including community-centered approaches, respect for cultural diversity, and the recognition of heritage as a living, evolving process. The De'ang Water Drum Dance thus serves as a valuable case study for examining how minority cultural practices can engage with transnational development frameworks without losing their cultural integrity[23-26].

This study positions the De'ang Water Drum Dance at the intersection of intangible cultural heritage protection and regional cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. By situating a specific ethnic cultural practice within a macro-level geopolitical and cultural framework, it seeks to bridge micro-level community realities with macro-level policy discourses. The introduction of regional cooperation mechanisms into the safeguarding of the Water Drum Dance is not intended to replace local cultural autonomy, but rather to complement and reinforce it through multilateral support, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development pathways. In doing so, this research contributes to broader debates on how intangible cultural heritage can be protected in ways that are both culturally sensitive and structurally resilient.

Ultimately, protecting intangible cultural heritage in the twenty-first century requires moving beyond static preservation toward dynamic, cooperative, and future-oriented strategies. The De'ang Water Drum Dance, with its deep cultural symbolism and regional embeddedness, illustrates both the fragility and resilience of living heritage traditions. By exploring its protection through the lens of regional cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative, this study aims to demonstrate how large-scale international frameworks can be harnessed to support localized cultural continuity, foster mutual understanding, and promote cultural diversity as a shared human value.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design to examine how regional cooperation mechanisms under the Belt and Road Initiative can contribute to the protection and sustainable transmission of the De'ang Water Drum Dance as an element of intangible cultural heritage. Given the complex, living, and community-embedded nature of intangible cultural heritage, a single-method approach would be insufficient. Therefore, the methodology integrates ethnographic fieldwork, document and policy analysis, comparative case study methods, and stakeholder interviews to capture cultural meanings, governance structures, and regional cooperation dynamics in a holistic manner.

### **Research Design and Theoretical Framework**

The research is grounded in the community-centered safeguarding paradigm of intangible cultural heritage, drawing conceptually from the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). This framework emphasizes living transmission, community participation, and respect for cultural diversity rather than material conservation alone. In parallel, theories of regional cultural cooperation and cultural diplomacy are employed to analyze the Belt and Road Initiative as a multi-level governance platform that links local cultural practices with national and

transnational policy agendas. The De'ang Water Drum Dance is treated as an embedded cultural system rather than an isolated performance, allowing analysis of its social functions, symbolic meanings, and institutional environments. A qualitative case study approach is used because it enables in-depth examination of a culturally specific phenomenon within its real-life context. The De'ang Water Drum Dance is selected as a critical case due to its minority status, ritual complexity, and geographical location in a Belt and Road border region, making it particularly suitable for exploring the interaction between local heritage and regional cooperation initiatives.

### **Data Collection Methods**

#### **Ethnographic Fieldwork**

Primary data are collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in De'ang communities in Yunnan Province where the Water Drum Dance is actively practiced. Fieldwork includes participant observation during festivals, ritual events, rehearsals, and community gatherings. This method allows direct observation of performance structures, transmission practices, gender and age roles, and the relationship between music, movement, and ritual context. Detailed field notes are maintained to document variations in performance, community participation, and the influence of external factors such as tourism or government-sponsored cultural events. Informal conversations and cultural immersion are used to gain insight into emic perspectives—that is, how De'ang community members themselves understand the meaning, value, and future of the Water Drum Dance. Particular attention is paid to intergenerational transmission, including how elders teach younger members and how youth perceive the relevance of the tradition in contemporary life.

#### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with multiple stakeholder groups to capture diverse viewpoints. These include De'ang cultural practitioners (dancers, drummers, ritual specialists), community elders, local cultural administrators, heritage scholars, and officials involved in Belt and Road-related cultural exchange programs. An interview guide is developed with flexible thematic sections covering cultural significance, perceived threats, existing safeguarding measures, experiences with cross-regional exchanges, and expectations regarding regional cooperation. Interviews are audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim. Where necessary, translation from local languages or dialects into Mandarin or English is performed, with care taken to preserve culturally specific meanings. The semi-structured format allows comparability across interviews while leaving room for participants to introduce issues they consider important.

#### **Document and Policy Analysis**

To contextualize empirical findings, the study conducts systematic analysis of policy documents at multiple levels. These include national and provincial intangible cultural heritage regulations, local safeguarding plans for minority cultures, and official Belt and Road Initiative cultural cooperation documents. In addition, reports from cultural institutions, museums, and non-governmental organizations involved in heritage protection are reviewed.

#### **Comparative and Regional Perspective**

To strengthen analytical depth, the study incorporates a comparative perspective by briefly examining similar minority drum or ritual dance traditions in neighboring Belt and Road regions, particularly in border areas of Southeast Asia. Secondary literature and selected expert interviews are used to compare safeguarding models, cross-border cultural exchanges, and community participation mechanisms. This comparative element does not aim for exhaustive comparison but rather serves to situate the De'ang Water Drum Dance within broader regional patterns of intangible cultural heritage protection.

#### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis follows a thematic qualitative approach. Transcripts, field notes, and documents are coded using inductive and deductive methods. Initial open coding identifies recurring themes such as cultural identity, transmission challenges, policy support, commercialization risks, and regional cooperation opportunities. These codes are then grouped into higher-order analytical categories aligned with the research questions. Triangulation across data sources—field observations, interviews, and documents—is employed to enhance credibility and reduce bias. Divergent viewpoints, particularly between community members and policy actors, are explicitly analyzed rather than reconciled, as they reveal power dynamics and governance tensions relevant to heritage protection.

#### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles guide all stages of the research. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, and the purpose of the study is clearly explained. Community cultural knowledge is treated with respect, and sensitive ritual information is not disclosed without permission. The research follows a non-extractive approach, seeking to ensure that findings may ultimately benefit the community by informing culturally sensitive safeguarding strategies and policy recommendations.

#### **Results**

This section presents the findings of the qualitative investigation into the protection of the De'ang Water Drum Dance through regional cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Results are organized thematically and supported by six analytical tables. Each table synthesizes empirical evidence derived from ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and policy analysis, and is explicitly interpreted in the accompanying text to ensure transparency and analytical coherence.

#### **1. Cultural Functions and Community Meanings of the De'ang Water Drum Dance**

Fieldwork and interviews consistently demonstrated that the De'ang Water Drum Dance functions as a multi-layered cultural system rather than a standalone artistic performance. Participants emphasized ritual, ecological, social, and educational dimensions embedded within the practice (Table 1).

**Table 1. Core Cultural Functions of the De'ang Water Drum Dance Identified in Fieldwork**

Cultural Function	Description	Frequency of Mention (n=42 interviews)
Ritual-spiritual	Communication with ancestors, blessings for harvest	36 (85.7%)
Social cohesion	Strengthening kinship and community bonds	34 (81.0%)
Ecological symbolism	Respect for water, forests, and natural cycles	29 (69.0%)
Identity formation	Marker of De'ang ethnic distinctiveness	31 (73.8%)
Intergenerational education	Informal transmission of values and skills	27 (64.3%)

Table 1 shows that ritual-spiritual and social cohesion functions were most frequently cited, underscoring that the Water Drum Dance is perceived primarily as a living cultural practice rather than a performative commodity. Ecological symbolism—particularly reverence for water—was repeatedly highlighted, reinforcing the dance's relevance to environmental ethics. These findings justify treating the dance as intangible cultural heritage requiring holistic safeguarding strategies.

## 2. Current Transmission Patterns and Generational Dynamics

Analysis revealed significant generational asymmetry in knowledge transmission. While elders remain primary custodians, younger community members demonstrate uneven engagement influenced by education, migration, and employment patterns.

**Table 2. Intergenerational Participation and Transmission Patterns**

Age Group	Primary Role	Level of Participation	Key Challenges Identified
≥60 years	Ritual leaders, master drummers	High	Physical limitations, lack of successors
40–59 years	Organizers, instructors	Moderate	Time constraints, economic pressure
20–39 years	Occasional performers	Low–Moderate	Migration, reduced ritual exposure
<20 years	Learners/observers	Low	Competing schooling priorities

Table 2 indicates a transmission bottleneck: although elders possess deep cultural knowledge, younger cohorts lack sustained participation. This generational gap was repeatedly cited as a major risk factor for cultural continuity. Respondents stressed that without institutional and regional support mechanisms, natural intergenerational transmission alone may be insufficient.

## 3. Perceived Threats to the Sustainability of the Water Drum Dance

Participants identified multiple, interrelated threats affecting the viability of the tradition. These threats operate at community, institutional, and market levels.

**Table 3. Major Threats to the Sustainability of the De'ang Water Drum Dance**

Threat Category	Specific Manifestation	Stakeholders Reporting (%)
Socioeconomic	Youth labor migration	78.6%
Institutional	Limited long-term funding	66.7%
Cultural	Ritual context erosion	61.9%
Commercialization	Stage performance distortion	57.1%
Educational	Lack of formal curriculum inclusion	52.4%

As summarized in Table 3, socioeconomic pressures—particularly youth migration—emerged as the most critical threat. Importantly, more than half of respondents expressed concern that tourism-oriented performances risk simplifying or de-ritualizing the dance. This highlights the tension between visibility-driven protection and cultural authenticity.

## 4. Existing Safeguarding Measures and Their Effectiveness

The study assessed current safeguarding mechanisms at local and provincial levels, focusing on their perceived effectiveness from community and policy perspectives.

**Table 4. Evaluation of Existing Safeguarding Measures**

Safeguarding Measure	Implementing Body	Perceived Effectiveness	Key Limitations
ICH listing	Provincial government	Moderate	Symbolic recognition only
Festival subsidies	Local authorities	Moderate	Short-term, event-based
Cultural centers	County level	Low–Moderate	Limited community access
Documentation projects	Academic institutions	High	Weak feedback to community

Table 4 demonstrates that while formal recognition and documentation are viewed positively, they are insufficient in isolation. Community members valued documentation for preserving knowledge but criticized the lack of mechanisms translating research outputs into local education or practice. This gap underscores the need for integrative and cooperative safeguarding approaches.

## 5. Role of Regional Cooperation under the Belt and Road Framework

Respondents involved in cross-regional cultural exchanges emphasized that Belt and Road-related platforms have begun to reshape heritage governance by expanding networks and resources.

**Table 5. Identified Contributions of Regional Cooperation Initiatives**

Dimension	Observed Contribution	Illustrative Examples
Resource mobilization	Increased funding opportunities	Joint cultural forums
Knowledge exchange	Sharing safeguarding models	Cross-border workshops
Visibility	Broader regional recognition	Multinational festivals
Capacity building	Training for practitioners	Artist exchange programs

As shown in Table 5, regional cooperation primarily contributes by enhancing visibility and capacity rather than replacing local practices. Cultural practitioners reported that cross-regional exchanges strengthened confidence and pride, provided learning opportunities, and reframed the Water Drum Dance as a shared cultural asset rather than a marginal local tradition.

## 6. Community Attitudes toward Regional Cooperation and External Engagement

Despite recognizing benefits, community members expressed nuanced and sometimes ambivalent attitudes toward external involvement.

**Table 6. Community Perceptions of Regional Cooperation**

Perception Category	Positive Responses	Negative/Concerned Responses
Cultural pride	76.2%	—
Economic opportunity	61.9%	19.0%
Knowledge preservation	69.0%	—
Cultural dilution risk	—	57.1%
Loss of autonomy	—	42.9%

Table 6 highlights a critical duality: while most participants welcomed regional cooperation for enhancing pride and preservation, over half expressed concern about cultural dilution. These findings indicate that community consent and participatory governance are essential prerequisites for sustainable cooperation.

## Discussion

This study set out to examine how regional cooperation mechanisms, particularly those associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), can contribute to the protection and sustainable transmission of the De'ang Water Drum Dance as a form of intangible cultural heritage. The findings provide a nuanced picture in which cultural vitality, structural vulnerability, policy opportunity, and ethical tension coexist. In this discussion, the results are interpreted in relation to existing scholarship on intangible cultural heritage safeguarding, minority cultural governance, and regional cultural cooperation, with particular attention to community agency and sustainability.

### Reframing the Water Drum Dance as a Living Cultural System

One of the most significant findings of this study is the confirmation that the De'ang Water Drum Dance functions as a holistic cultural system rather than a discrete performing art. Its ritual-spiritual, ecological, and social cohesion roles align closely with UNESCO's conception of intangible cultural heritage as "living heritage" embedded in daily life, belief systems, and social relations. This supports existing critiques of protection models that prioritize aesthetic performance or touristic display while neglecting cultural context[11-13]. The Water Drum Dance's close association with water, forests, and agricultural cycles demonstrates that its safeguarding cannot be separated from broader ecological and social transformations affecting De'ang communities[14]. This finding has important implications for policy and practice. Protection strategies that focus narrowly on stage performance, competitions, or festival showcases risk fragmenting the tradition from its cultural matrix. By contrast, approaches that recognize the dance as a system of knowledge, values, and relationships are better suited to sustaining its relevance. Regional cooperation initiatives, when properly designed, can reinforce this holistic perspective by facilitating exchanges on ritual practice, environmental knowledge, and community governance rather than focusing solely on performative outputs.

### Intergenerational Transmission as the Central Vulnerability

The results highlight intergenerational transmission as the most critical vulnerability facing the De'ang Water Drum Dance. While elders remain highly committed custodians of cultural knowledge, younger generations experience structural barriers to participation, including migration, formal education demands, and limited economic incentives[16-18]. This pattern is consistent with broader research on minority and rural intangible cultural heritage in rapidly modernizing societies, where cultural continuity is disrupted not by lack of recognition but by changing life trajectories. Importantly, the findings suggest that this transmission gap cannot be resolved through community effort alone. While elders expressed strong willingness to teach, they lacked institutional support, formal platforms, and long-term security. Here, regional cooperation under frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative may offer indirect but meaningful support by enabling training programs, youth exchange initiatives, and educational integration across regions with similar cultural challenges. However, the discussion must remain cautious: external programs should support, not replace, endogenous transmission mechanisms. The legitimacy of cultural knowledge continues to rest with the community, and any external involvement must respect this hierarchy.

### Socioeconomic Pressures and the Limits of Recognition-Based Protection

Another key insight from the results is the limited effectiveness of recognition-based safeguarding measures when they are not accompanied by sustained structural support. Inclusion on intangible cultural heritage lists and periodic festival subsidies were widely acknowledged by participants, yet these measures were perceived as symbolic or episodic rather than transformative[19-21]. This finding reinforces critiques in heritage studies that warn against "heritagization" without empowerment, where cultural practices are labeled as heritage but remain economically and socially marginalized. Socioeconomic pressures—especially youth labor migration—were identified as the most severe threat to sustainability.

This underscores a critical point: intangible cultural heritage protection cannot be isolated from development policy. If safeguarding strategies do not address livelihoods, education, and social security, they risk becoming ceremonial gestures. In this regard, the Belt and Road Initiative's integration of cultural cooperation with broader development agendas presents both an opportunity and a risk. On one hand, it allows heritage protection to be embedded within regional development frameworks; on the other, it raises concerns that culture may be instrumentalized in service of economic objectives.

### **Commercialization, Visibility, and the Authenticity Dilemma**

The ambivalence expressed by community members toward commercialization and external engagement reflects a classic dilemma in intangible cultural heritage governance: the tension between visibility and authenticity[22-24]. Increased exposure through festivals, tourism, and regional exchanges can enhance cultural pride and generate economic benefits, yet it may also encourage simplification, standardization, or loss of ritual meaning. The study's findings demonstrate that De'ang practitioners are not opposed to visibility per se; rather, they are concerned about losing control over representation and context. This nuance is crucial. Too often, debates frame communities as either resistant to change or eager for commercialization. In reality, the De'ang community's position is conditional and strategic[25]. They support external cooperation when it respects ritual integrity, community decision-making, and benefit-sharing. This aligns with contemporary participatory heritage governance models, which emphasize consent, co-design, and reflexivity. Regional cooperation platforms must therefore incorporate safeguards that allow communities to define the terms of engagement, including where, when, and how performances are shared.

### **Regional Cooperation as a Complementary Safeguarding Mechanism**

The results clearly indicate that regional cooperation is most effective when it functions as a complementary mechanism rather than a replacement for local safeguarding. Participants valued cross-regional exchanges for their capacity-building effects, including skill development, confidence enhancement, and exposure to alternative safeguarding models. These benefits suggest that regional cooperation can strengthen cultural resilience by expanding practitioners' horizons and resources. At the same time, the findings caution against assuming that large-scale initiatives automatically benefit local heritage. The Belt and Road Initiative operates at a macro-political and economic scale, whereas intangible cultural heritage is lived and transmitted at the micro-social level. Bridging this scale gap requires intermediary institutions—such as cultural centers, universities, and non-governmental organizations—that can translate regional objectives into locally meaningful actions. Without such mediation, there is a risk that cooperation remains abstract or unevenly distributed.

### **Governance, Power, and Ethical Considerations**

A critical contribution of this study lies in its illumination of governance and power dynamics. While regional cooperation opens new opportunities, it also introduces new actors and decision-making layers. The concern expressed by some community members about loss of autonomy reflects an acute awareness of these dynamics. This echoes broader critiques of top-down heritage governance, where communities are positioned as cultural resources rather than rights-bearing actors. Ethically, the findings reinforce the importance of community-centered governance as a non-negotiable principle. Regional cooperation must be grounded in free, prior, and informed participation, with transparent benefit-sharing and accountability mechanisms. This is particularly important for minority cultures in border regions, where historical marginalization may exacerbate power imbalances. The De'ang case illustrates that safeguarding success is not measured solely by visibility or funding levels, but by the degree to which communities retain agency over their cultural futures.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Taken together, the findings suggest several implications. First, safeguarding policies should move beyond event-based and recognition-focused models toward integrated, long-term strategies that link culture with education, livelihoods, and ecological sustainability. Second, regional cooperation frameworks like the Belt and Road Initiative should explicitly incorporate intangible cultural heritage principles, including community participation and cultural diversity, into their cultural cooperation agendas. Third, mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating cultural impacts are needed to ensure that cooperation initiatives do not inadvertently erode cultural integrity. For practitioners and policymakers, the De'ang Water Drum Dance serves as a reminder that intangible cultural heritage protection is not about freezing traditions in time, but about enabling adaptive continuity. Regional cooperation can support this process by providing platforms, resources, and solidarity, but only if it remains attentive to local meanings and power relations.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

While this discussion highlights the strengths of regional cooperation, it also acknowledges limitations. The study focuses on a single case, and while the De'ang experience offers valuable insights, further comparative research across different Belt and Road regions is needed to assess transferability. Longitudinal studies could also examine how regional cooperation affects transmission outcomes over time, particularly among youth. Future research should explore quantitative and mixed-method approaches to complement qualitative insights, as well as participatory action research models that directly involve communities in designing and evaluating safeguarding initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the De'ang Water Drum Dance represents a living, community-embedded form of intangible cultural heritage whose sustainability depends on both local transmission and supportive external structures. While existing safeguarding measures provide symbolic recognition, they remain insufficient to address intergenerational gaps, socioeconomic pressures, and risks of cultural dilution. The findings highlight that regional cooperation frameworks, particularly those associated with the Belt and Road Initiative, can play a constructive complementary role by enhancing visibility, capacity building, and intercultural dialogue. However, such cooperation must be grounded in community participation, cultural autonomy, and ethical governance to avoid commodification or loss of meaning. Ultimately, effective

protection of the De'ang Water Drum Dance requires an integrated, people-centered approach that aligns cultural safeguarding with education, development, and regional collaboration, ensuring the dynamic continuity of this heritage for future generations.

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