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Living Heritage Transmission of Traditional Sports at the Donggui Nadam Festival: the Practical Logic of the Cultural Field

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Abstract

To elucidate the practice logic underlying the living transmission of traditional sports heritage at the Donggui Nadam Festival, this study adopts cultural field theory as an analytical framework. Drawing on the historical memory of the Torghut eastward return, traditional sporting practices, and contemporary heritage transmission initiatives, it examines interactions among multiple stakeholders, the conversion of cultural capital, and the reproduction of embodied habitus. The analysis suggests that festival competitions, community-based transmission, school education, and cultural tourism have expanded the social spaces in which traditional sports heritage is practiced and transmitted. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including limited youth participation, the reduction of cultural practices to symbolic displays, and insufficient coordination among stakeholders. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening the interpretation of cultural meanings, improving mechanisms for intergenerational transmission, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders to sustain living heritage transmission amid transformations of the cultural field.

Keywords: Donggui Nadam Festival; traditional sports heritage; living heritage transmission; cultural field; practice logic

Introduction

Against the combined backdrop of economic globalization and digital transformation, the conservation-oriented development of cultural heritage has become an important concern in modernizing national governance [1]. As a festival featuring traditional sports shared by multiple ethnic communities in northern Xinjiang, Nadam has historically contributed, and continues to contribute, to interaction, exchange, and integration among local ethnic groups. It also carries practical significance for fostering a stronger sense of community for the Chinese nation in the contemporary era [2]. Urbanization, changing lifestyles, and the integration of culture and tourism have transformed the environments in which traditional sports are transmitted, placing established forms of informal learning under pressure. Examining stakeholder relationships, resource flows, and changing practices within the cultural field can therefore clarify the contemporary logic of transmission and inform the safeguarding of traditional ethnic sports heritage.

1. Cultural Formation and Field Foundations of Traditional Sports Heritage at Donggui Nadam

The traditional sports heritage of Donggui Nadam emerged through the prolonged interaction of specific historical memories and nomadic modes of production and everyday life. Its cultural formation is characterized by a distinctive regional setting, embodied knowledge, and practical engagement.

1.1 Ritual Transformation of the Eastward Return and the Construction of Regional Cultural Identity

Nadam, also referred to as Nair, derives from a Mongolian term meaning entertainment or games. The festival, prominently associated with the three traditional Mongolian competitive sports, occupies an important place in Mongolian social life. Initially embedded in various gatherings on the grasslands, Nadam gradually developed a distinctive thematic identity,

incorporated new activities, and became a widely influential form of traditional sporting folklore [3] [4].

The cultural foundations of Donggui Nadam lie in the historical memory of the Torghut Mongols' eastward return in 1771. Through its subsequent integration with Mongolian Nadam traditions, this historical narrative became a recurring festival practice open to public participation. In 2004, Bayingolin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture designated June 23 as the annual Donggui Festival, thereby situating the history of the eastward return within a fixed ritual calendar and setting. Horse racing, Bökh wrestling, and archery became embodied means of recounting the journey and expressing its associated cultural spirit. Through competition, spectatorship, and ritual interaction, participants repeatedly evoke a shared historical memory and strengthen their emotional connections to Donggui culture. In this way, a broad historical narrative becomes an accessible and experiential cultural practice. The successive transformation from historical event to festival ritual to embodied practice provides a stable social setting for expressing the memory of the eastward return while reinforcing the regional cultural identity that distinguishes Donggui Nadam from Nadam celebrations elsewhere [5].

1.2 Embodied Accumulation in Nomadic Life and the Formation of Traditional Sports Heritage

The traditional sports featured at Donggui Nadam are closely connected to the longstanding nomadic livelihoods of the Oirat Mongols. Their heritage forms emerged as productive skills were transformed into competitive practices. Nadam is a distinctive Mongolian cultural activity and an important medium for expressing collective cultural traditions and values [6]. Horse racing developed from the horsemanship required for riding, herding, and migration. Bökh wrestling reflects the demands that nomadic life placed on strength, endurance, and physical confrontation, while archery preserves skills associated with hunting and warfare. Horse roping, calf roping, barrel racing, and picking up a khata ceremonial scarf from horseback retain clear characteristics of pastoral labor. Through sustained practice, these skills evolved from embodied experiences of production into relatively stable movement patterns, competition rules, and value systems. They consequently developed into regionally distinctive bodily techniques presented collectively through Nadam. This progression from productive skills to competitive rules and cultural values enables traditional sports both to preserve the embodied

knowledge of nomadic societies and to function as living cultural heritage carrying memories of production and ways of life.

2. Mechanisms of Living Heritage Transmission within the Cultural Field

The living transmission of traditional sports heritage at Donggui Nadam operates through interconnected mechanisms of stakeholder interaction, capital conversion, and the reproduction of habitus within the cultural field [7].

2.1 Participation of Multiple Stakeholders and the Formation of Transmission Networks

The cultural field of Donggui Nadam is not constituted by a single group of heritage bearers. Rather, it comprises a complex network of relationships continuously negotiated among government agencies, herders, intangible cultural heritage practitioners, commercial organizations, schools, and cultural associations. Government agencies organize competitions, safeguard intangible cultural heritage, provide policy support, and develop cultural brands, thereby creating institutional conditions for traditional sports to enter public cultural spaces. Wrestlers, horse-riding herders, and archers possess the embodied skills through which this heritage is practiced and sustained. Educational and research institutions and performing arts organizations broaden transmission channels through teaching, documentation, and public presentation. Tourism enterprises, media platforms, and visitors facilitate wider social circulation. [8] [9] These stakeholders establish complementary roles around competitions, skills training, cultural presentation, and public communication. Resource exchange and functional complementarity strengthen their relationships and gradually support coordinated participation. Traditional sports thus move beyond practices confined to herding communities and become shared public cultural activities, with the resulting relational network providing a foundation for continued living transmission.

2.2 Conversion of Cultural Capital and the Multidimensional Reproduction of Heritage Value

Traditional sporting skills constitute embodied cultural capital held by practitioners of Bökh wrestling, horse racing, archery, and related activities. Their value as living heritage is socially recognized through ongoing processes of conversion within the cultural field. Nadam competitions provide public arenas in which these skills can be demonstrated and evaluated.

Competitive achievements may generate economic rewards, while championship titles and athletic reputations can accumulate symbolic and social capital, bringing recognition to practitioners within their communities and competitive networks. Through its development as a recurring festival, cultural branding, and integration with tourism, Donggui Nadam also converts historical and cultural resources embedded in traditional sports into a regional cultural image and tourist appeal. Cultural capital thereby acquires economic and regional symbolic value. This process is not simply the one-way consumption of heritage. Recognition, honor, and cultural dissemination can motivate practitioners, enhance the public visibility of traditional sports, and reinforce cultural identification. Repeated practice thus generates renewed support for sporting skills and contributes to the ongoing reproduction of heritage value.

2.3 Continuity of Embodied Habitus and the Intergenerational Transmission of Sporting Skills

Embodied habitus provides a deeper mechanism through which the traditional sports heritage of Donggui Nadam persists. Over generations, nomadic life has integrated riding, horse roping, and wrestling into the everyday productive activities of herding communities. Through family life, pastoral labor, and community interaction, individuals repeatedly encounter relevant movements and develop relatively stable bodily perceptions, movement repertoires, and competitive experience. Such embodied knowledge is not transmitted exclusively through written rules; it is passed between generations through observation, imitation, training, and shared participation. Traditional sports therefore retain their connection to everyday life and practical experience. Herders in Bayanbulak have long brought their own horses to Nadam competitions, transferring the riding, horse-training, and handling skills acquired through pastoral production into competitive settings. This illustrates the continuing reproduction of nomadic embodied habitus in festival sports. As younger generations become increasingly removed from traditional nomadic environments, opportunities for informal acquisition diminish. Competition participation, community-based instruction, and sustained training are consequently needed to reactivate embodied habitus and maintain both intergenerational continuity and the living character of traditional skills [10].

3. Practical Forms of Living Heritage Transmission at Donggui Nadam

Through competitive performances, community-based instruction, school education, and cultural tourism, Donggui Nadam brings traditional sports heritage into contemporary life. Participation across diverse social settings helps maintain the vitality of cultural transmission and its wider social influence.

3.1 Reconfiguring Festival Competitions: Revitalizing Donggui Cultural Memory through Ritualized Sport

Annual festival competitions constitute the principal platform through which Donggui Nadam brings traditional sporting activities, previously dispersed across pastoral production and everyday life, into shared public cultural events. The 26th festival in 2026 included speed horse racing, gaited-horse competitions, a Xinjiang-wide Shalbor Bökh invitational tournament, equestrian endurance racing, a grassland riding-and-running challenge, horse roping, calf roping, barrel racing, and the retrieval of khata scarves from horseback. These events allow riding, wrestling, and pastoral skills to remain visible in organized competition. [11] Competition programming is also linked to narratives of the eastward return through live performances featuring galloping horses, the outdoor theatrical production Donggui: Impressions, and the original dance drama Sawurden. Sport and cultural performance are thereby embedded in the same festival setting, strengthening historical storytelling and ritual experience. [12] Recurrent participation in the festival enables historical memories to be reenacted and deepened. Accordingly, the festival is more than an occasion for determining competitive results: by combining a recurring schedule, distinctive setting, traditional events, and cultural performances, it allows participants and spectators to engage repeatedly with the history of the eastward return, making traditional sports a practical medium for revitalizing historical memory and sustaining regional cultural identity.

3.2 Cultivating Heritage Bearers: Sustaining Traditional Sporting Skills through Community-Based Instruction

Living heritage transmission depends on practitioners who possess traditional skills and can transform their embodied experience into teachable resources. Hejing County has sought to

sustain its community of heritage bearers through the official recognition of representative practitioners of intangible cultural heritage, local teaching, public-interest instruction, and cultural performances. Among the sixth group of representative intangible cultural heritage practitioners recognized at the autonomous-region level in 2026, 12 came from Bayingolin Prefecture. In Hejing County, Zuluman has long engaged in the choreography, teaching, and promotion of Sawurden dance; Saierjie has sustained the transmission of long-song traditions; and Qiaolongbatu has specialized in Tovshuur music. Together, such practitioners constitute locally rooted transmission resources. For traditional sports, wrestlers, horse-riding herders, and archers can similarly integrate movement demonstrations, competitive training, event participation, and experiential instruction, enabling younger participants to acquire technical conventions through continued practice. As practitioners assume teaching roles alongside competitive participation, individual experience can become a more stable educational resource, improving continuity and consistency in skills transmission. The Donggui Ulan Muqir performing arts troupe also regularly participates in Nadam events and township cultural tourism festivals, providing platforms for intangible cultural heritage and linking instruction, performance, and competition in a community-based transmission chain.

3.3 Extending the Educational Field: Supporting Intergenerational Continuity through School-Based Engagement

As traditional nomadic lifestyles change, schools have become important settings for compensating for the contraction of informal heritage transmission. At Hejing County No. 4 Middle School, instruction in the Tovshuur musical instrument has been introduced into the school, with more than 100 students learning on campus and several hundred learners participating outside school. Performances of the Jangar epic have also been promoted across the school, bringing cultural knowledge previously passed on orally through families and communities into a relatively stable educational setting. These initiatives provide a practical foundation for introducing the traditional sports of Donggui Nadam into schools. Basic Bökh movements, traditional archery culture, equestrian knowledge, and competition etiquette could be incorporated into curricula, clubs, and school competitions according to students' ages and available facilities. Connections could be established among demonstrations by heritage practitioners, teacher guidance, and student training. Schools could also organize presentations and traditional sports experiences around the Nadam festival calendar, increasing opportunities for sustained engagement. Integrating classroom learning, extracurricular practice, and cultural

experience would allow young people to move from festival spectatorship toward active learning and participation. Institutionalized education could thus help compensate for the weakening of informal embodied learning in nomadic environments [13].

3.4 Expanding Social Spaces: Strengthening Heritage Vitality through Community Participation and Cultural Tourism

The settings in which Donggui Nadam traditional sports are practiced have expanded beyond county-level festivals into townships, communities, and tourism venues. Hejing County and surrounding areas continue to organize local Nadam celebrations, including the Silk Road Ancient Route Cultural Tourism Festival and Nadam gathering in Baluntai Town, the Nadam gathering in Bayingolin Township, and the lakeside Nadam festival in Benbutu Town, Bohu County. Together, these events form a multilevel network linking county-level gatherings with township celebrations. Township competitions allow herders to participate in horse racing, Bökh wrestling, and related customs closer to their everyday environments, increasing opportunities to practice traditional sports beyond major festivals. Cultural tourism centered on the Bayanbulak grasslands also incorporates spectatorship, folk experiences, and cultural consumption into visitors' itineraries, widening public exposure to traditional sports. Regular community participation and tourist mobility expand the audience for heritage beyond concentrated festival occasions. [14] [15] [16] Nevertheless, Donggui Nadam should not be reduced to easily consumed visual symbols of riding, wrestling, singing, and dancing. Event commentary, activity design, and tourism presentations should communicate the origins of sporting practices, competitive customs, and the history of the eastward return, ensuring that expansion into new social spaces also sustains cultural meaning.

4. Practical Adaptation of Living Heritage Transmission amid Changes in the Cultural Field

To sustain living heritage transmission amid transformations in nomadic livelihoods, tourism development, and stakeholder relationships, Donggui Nadam must respond to the restructuring of its cultural field by adjusting transmission practices and relationships among participants, thereby strengthening the internal conditions for heritage continuity [17].

4.1 Rebuilding Youth Participation to Address Transmission Gaps Caused by the Weakening of Nomadic Habitus

Urbanization and changes in production and everyday life have reduced young people's opportunities to encounter traditional riding, horse roping, and Bökh wrestling in nomadic settings. Embodied dispositions previously developed through family production and community life have consequently weakened. At the same time, some skilled practitioners are older, while sustained participation among younger people remains limited, increasing the risk of an intergenerational gap between skills instruction and competitive practice [18]. County- and township-level Nadam events could therefore introduce dedicated youth experiences and competition categories. Tiered training in Bökh wrestling, traditional archery, horse racing, and pastoral competitions could be delivered by accomplished local athletes, herders, and heritage practitioners. Linking school clubs, holiday instruction, community training, and annual competitions would create a progressive pathway from initial experience to learning, training, and competition. Such a pathway could help young people become regular practitioners rather than occasional spectators, rebuild embodied dispositions through sustained participation, and strengthen intergenerational skills transmission.

4.2 Strengthening Cultural Interpretation to Reconcile Heritage Authenticity with Tourism-Based Value Creation

The integration of culture and tourism has increased public attention to Donggui Nadam. Yet visually appealing events such as Bökh wrestling, horse racing, and archery risk being reduced to tourist spectacles, obscuring the history of the eastward return, nomadic lifeways, and ethnic cultural meanings embedded in sporting practice. Tourism resources should therefore be developed responsibly, guided by a commitment to appropriate development and comprehensive safeguarding. On the supply side, this entails enriching the cultural content of Nadam tourism, developing new products and experiences, promoting sustainable tourism industries, and improving the quality and composition of tourism offerings [19]. For distinctive practices such as horse roping and traditional archery, core techniques, basic rules, and customary etiquette should be retained, while entertainment-oriented modifications detached from their cultural contexts should be limited. Existing performance platforms, including

Donggui: Impressions and massed horse-riding displays, could further connect sporting events with narratives of the eastward return. Integrating spectatorship, historical understanding, and cultural experience would allow tourism value to expand without compromising the cultural integrity of traditional sports heritage.

4.3 Optimizing Stakeholder Relationships through Government Guidance and Community-Led Collaboration

The living transmission of Donggui Nadam involves government departments, herders, intangible cultural heritage practitioners, schools, performing arts organizations, and tourism enterprises. If events are organized solely through administrative initiatives, community members may shift from being active cultural practitioners to passive event participants, weakening the community foundations of traditional sports. The respective roles of stakeholders within the cultural field should therefore be recalibrated. Government agencies can provide institutional support through heritage safeguarding, competition standards, financial assistance, and public services. Herders, accomplished athletes, and local heritage practitioners should have meaningful and sustained roles in designing sporting events, demonstrating skills, and providing training. Township Nadam gatherings can involve local herders in event planning and organization, while schools and cultural organizations support youth development and cultural communication, and tourism enterprises contribute market services and wider dissemination. Regular consultation, resource-sharing arrangements, and mechanisms for aligning stakeholder interests could help establish a collaborative model combining public support, community practice, educational transmission, and market participation [20].

5 Conclusion

The continuity of traditional sports heritage at Donggui Nadam depends on preserving the deep connections between sporting practice, the culture of the eastward return, nomadic livelihoods, and local society. In response to changing transmission environments, living heritage safeguarding should not be equated with expanding competitions or staging formal displays. Rather, herders, heritage practitioners, and younger generations must remain actively involved in the practice of skills and the expression of cultural meanings. Future efforts should strengthen the connections among community-based instruction, school-based transmission, local

competitions, and cultural interpretation in tourism. By expanding contemporary forms of expression while respecting traditional rules and cultural meanings, Donggui Nadam can maintain cultural continuity amid social change and develop a regionally distinctive model for transmitting traditional sports heritage.

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