| RESEARCH ARTICLE

University–Community Collaboration in Hakka Cultural Sustainability

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| ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of universities in promoting local cultural sustainability through collaborative governance, using the transformation of the Xin Ding Festival in Jiadong Township, Pingtung County, Taiwan, as a case study. Facing challenges such as population aging, declining birth rates, and difficulties in cultural inheritance, the traditional Hakka festival experienced a gradual loss of vitality. Since 2017, a university team has participated continuously in the festival, collaborating with the local faith center and community organizations to support cultural revitalization. This research adopts a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with university team members, long-term participant observation and fieldwork from 2017 to 2024, and document and visual material analysis. These data were used to examine the collaborative process, governance mechanisms, and power dynamics among stakeholders involved in the cultural transformation. The findings reveal that the university functioned as a resource broker and value translator within a collaborative governance network. Through a progressive four-stage strategy, the university team introduced external resources, activity innovations, and contemporary social values while maintaining core traditional rituals. This process ultimately facilitated the transformation of the Xin Ding Festival into the "Xin Ding Xin Zhi Festival," incorporating gender equality into local cultural practice. However, the collaboration also exposed power asymmetries and trust challenges, particularly after external funding was secured. In response, the university adopted a flexible conflict adaptation strategy that prioritized long-term relationship sustainability over direct confrontation. This study concludes that universities can play a critical bridging role in cultural sustainability by combining academic resources, contextual sensitivity, and adaptive governance strategies. The findings contribute a practical model of university–community collaboration and offer insights into managing power dynamics in the sustainable revitalization of intangible cultural heritage.

| KEYWORDS

Collaborative Governance; University Mission; Stakeholders; Cultural Sustainability

1. Introduction

The Jiadong Xin Ding Festival is an important folk activity that has continued for over 140 years. It is organized by the Liugenzhuang Three Mountain Kings Temple, the local faith center. However, due to the outflow of the young adult population and the impact of low birth rates, the festival faces a crisis regarding the aging of participants and difficulties in inheritance. Before the university team's intervention, the Xin Ding Festival primarily maintained its traditional form. The university team noticed this Hakka cultural asset and actively engaged based on three main factors:

1. Complementary Needs: The Temple lacked manpower and the energy to plan new activities, while the university needed to demonstrate knowledge transfer and local engagement performance through local interaction. The university team

provided vibrant energy from teachers and students, activity planning (markets, performances), peripheral advertising design (promotional materials, cultural and creative products), and documentation of activity processes, bringing expanded publicity effects to the Temple.

2. Core Faith Factors: As the Temple is the community faith center, the university team used active participation in Temple activities (such as the Xin Ding Festival) as a stepping stone to integrate into the community and gain recognition and trust from local organizations.

3. Geographical Advantage: The Temple is located in the center of the community, adjacent to the market, with a square that facilitates activity promotion and crowd gathering.

The university team's initial goal was to transfer university energy through "participation," ultimately fostering local "systematic autonomous operation." This study aims to understand how the university team acts as a bridge in local cultural sustainability, successfully facilitating the sustainable activation and innovative transformation of traditional cultural assets through long-term, phased intervention.

2. Literature Review

This study explores the collaborative governance model of universities in the process of revitalizing local Hakka cultural assets. To construct an analytical framework, this section will sequentially discuss the theoretical foundations of Collaborative Governance and the University's Role (Actors and Goals), how Network Theory analyzes the mechanism of collaboration (Structure and Mechanism), and how Stakeholder Theory addresses power dynamics and conflicts during collaboration (Challenges and Adaptation), presenting a complete theoretical context.

2.1 Collaborative Governance (CG) and the University's Mission

Collaborative Governance (CG) is seen as a necessary framework for addressing complex contemporary public affairs (such as cultural heritage revitalization). CG emphasizes that multiple actors, under common goals, participate jointly in decision-making and implementation processes through non-coercive interaction and coordination (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Ciangola & Giordano, 2025). In the field of cultural heritage, effective management must be based on the participation of a multi-stakeholder system to incorporate resources and perspectives from different actors, which is a necessary condition for achieving cultural sustainability (Aureli & Del Baldo, 2023; Biondi et al., 2025;).

In this collaborative framework, the university plays a key role. Higher education institutions are required to strategically apply academic resources to local social welfare and cultural development, transcending traditional teaching and research functions (García-Garrido et al., 2024; Policarpo et al., 2024; García-Garrido, Torres & Londoño-Orozco, 2024). Particularly for the revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, universities can transform traditional rituals or skills into innovative practices that align with contemporary social values (such as gender equality in this study) through knowledge transfer, educational activities, and research analysis (Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, the university's intervention not only brings resources to the locality but also prompts cultural management to shift from static "preservation" to dynamic, knowledge-based "social innovation" and "cultural enhancement" (Moro et al., 2025).

2.2 Network Theory and Polycentric Collaboration: Resource Transfer and Mechanism Construction

The practice of collaborative governance often operates through a Polycentric Network, a structure where power is decentralized and multiple actors are encouraged to exert influence jointly. Network Theory thus provides tools for analyzing the mechanisms of collaboration.

First, the university primarily serves a critical function as a Broker within the network (O'Brien, Ćulum Ilić, Veidemane A, Dusi , Farnell, Šćukanec Schmidt, 2022; Yan, Li, 2023). By establishing cross-boundary connections, the university strategically guides external academic knowledge, design expertise, young talent, and government project funding to local organizations with relatively limited resources (such as community temples or associations). This resource flow mechanism is the foundation for fostering local innovation and expanding activities. Second, the core goal of network collaboration is to establish Participatory Governance. Successful cultural heritage revitalization requires a shift from decision-making by professionals to Civic Participation and Co-design. This requires all actors within the network, especially citizens and local groups, to participate in shared decision-making

based on a Shared Vision, transforming cultural heritage into a driving force for local social innovation (Della Spina, 2025). Furthermore, modern networks expand the breadth of public participation through digital means (such as social media), enhancing the Digital Connectivity and Communication Efficiency of the network (Hu et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2024). Therefore, Network Theory not only explains the structure but also illustrates how universities can achieve effective resource transfer and active community mobilization through mechanism design.

2.3 Stakeholder Theory and Conflict Adaptation

Although Network Theory describes an ideal collaborative structure, when multiple stakeholders in a network begin to interact, they inevitably face power dynamics and conflicts of interest. Stakeholder Theory reminds researchers that sustainable organizational development must go beyond singular goals and comprehensively consider the power, legitimacy, and urgency of all stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Polonsky, 2020).

In university-local culture collaborations, local faith centers or senior elders typically possess the highest Structural Power and cultural authority, while universities provide Knowledge/Discursive Power and external resources. This power asymmetry is a potential source of conflict (Delgado-Baena & Sianes, 2024). When external resources (such as government subsidies) intervene, control over resources and execution rights changes, directly impacting the existing foundation of Trust and easily triggering internal conflict (Li, Lau & Su, 2020; Aureli & Del Baldo, 2023; Huang & Lin, 2024).

Therefore, the analytical focus of this study will center on this challenge: How does the external actor (university) respond to execution conflicts arising from the local organization's (Temple) maintenance of its structural power after successfully introducing resources (instrumental power)? This requires external actors to possess a high degree of Contextual Sensitivity and Flexible Conflict Adaptation Strategies to ensure the sustainability of long-term relationships (McIlwain et al., 2024; Mondoñedo, 2022).

3. Methodology

The Liugenzhuang Three Mountain Kings Temple is the largest temple in the community and the faith center for residents. The Temple's actions are highly respected and, to some extent, form local opinion leadership. On the other hand, festivals organized by the Temple, such as the Xin Ding Festival, easily attract enthusiastic participation from residents. Participating in and assisting with Temple activities helps enhance local identity. In short, "enthusiastic participation and assistance in Temple activities" is a good method for integrating into the community; for the university as an outside team, paying attention to and investing in Temple activities serves as a stepping stone for connecting with the community.

This study adopts a Qualitative Case Study method, focusing on the revitalization process of the "Xin Ding Festival" in Jiadong Township, Pingtung County, as a single case. Qualitative research helps to deeply understand the local context, complex interactions between actors, and the motivations behind decisions. Research data were collected primarily through the following three methods:

[1] Semi-structured Interviews: Interviewees were key participants from the university team, to understand the motivations for participation, collaboration processes, resource investment, and conflict adaptation mechanisms of the university and local stakeholders.
[2] Participant Observation and Fieldwork: The research team continuously participated in and recorded the activity changes and local reactions of the Xin Ding Festival from 2017 to 2024, including key events such as the introduction of the market, venue extension, and the transformation into the Xin Ding Xin Zhi Festival.
[3] Document and Visual Field Analysis: Analyzed data includes the university team's overseas exchange proposals, internal activity reports, promotional materials, and local news reports. By collecting Field Data, the study reconstructs the four development stages of the Xin Ding Festival from 2017 to 2024.

4. Findings and Results

During the process of promoting temple activities together with local association organizations, the university team faced the following opportunities and challenges regarding cultural sustainability:

4.1 Power Dynamics and Trust Crisis in Collaborative Governance

The interaction between the university team and the Temple within the collaborative network represents a core challenge in collaborative governance, embodying the power asymmetry and trust crisis between stakeholders.

4.1.1 Organizational Complementarity and Network Relations

The university team maintained deep interaction with the Jiadong Cultural and Historical Association, actively cooperating with and expanding activity concepts proposed by the Association, successfully combining university resources with the Association's local mobilization power. At the same time, the university team packaged the participation in festivals within an academic framework of revitalizing community industries and promoting knowledge education. This Discursive Power gave the university's intervention external legitimacy.

"*In the subsidy project, there was no item designed for 'participating in local festivals,' so we could not directly transfer school knowledge and resources to Jiadong. However, because our plan included contents such as 'revitalizing community industries' and 'promoting knowledge education,' we designed market stalls and activities from an industrial perspective. We used data collection and fieldwork methods to transform Xin Ding Festival data into inheritable texts. This presented our means and techniques for institutionally exhibiting folk culture, complying with the basic spirit of 'collaborative governance between universities and local governments.' These methods also provided a reference basis for university teachers to participate in community activities, giving them a context to invest in the project and the community.*" (University Team Interviewee)

4.1.2 Power Conflict and Adaptation after Securing Funding

During the transformation process in 2023, the university team assisted the Temple in securing a subsidy of NT$500,000 from the county government. However, after receiving the funds, the Temple did not hand over the execution of the market and cultural and creative development to the university team as concluded in meetings. Instead, they outsourced to other vendors and used the draft sketches of cultural and creative images designed by the university team without authorization.

This incident exposed the conflict of instrumental power in collaborative governance: the arrival of funds represented a transfer of executive power from the "Soft Power" reliant on university resources to the structural power of the Temple, which possessed the funds. As the local faith center possessing the highest decision-making and local normative power, the Temple chose to allocate funds based on its own interests, impacting the foundation of trust established through the university team's efforts.

The university team ultimately chose silence. This adaptation strategy was based on respect for the structural power of the local faith center, avoiding controversial events that could affect long-term relationships in future local activities. This reflects that external actors (universities) must be aware of the limitations of their knowledge/discursive power when facing local cultural structural power, and prioritize relationship sustainability over disputes regarding single outcomes.

"*After the new, young chairperson of the Temple took office, he began to actively cooperate with us. Whenever we held activities in the community, the chairperson would proactively send people to assist and provide venues, tables, and chairs for free. Subsequently, for the first Xin Ding Festival after he took office, he asked us to help write a proposal to the county government to secure NT$500,000 in funding for the festival. Our team sent people to attend discussion meetings at the Temple multiple times and shared our planning experience for peripheral activities of the Xin Ding Festival over the past few years. We divided the festival into parts such as 'Setting up the Blessing Shed, Conducting Rituals, Worshipping Xin Ding, Touring the Market, Doing Activities, and Eating the Blessing Banquet,' and allocated funds and resources among various activities. Items the university team had handled in the past, such as the market, cultural and creative development, marketing planning, and activity design, were to be handled by our team, while other items were to be organized by the Temple.*

After the application was sent to the county government, it indeed received a subsidy of NT$500,000. However, the Temple did not hand over the relevant activities to us for planning and execution as concluded in the meeting. Instead, they found other vendors to execute these tasks. As a result, the systematic content we had planned in community activities in the past could not be continued. For example, in terms of cultural and creative design, we continued the visual imagery of the past and designed icons for 'Ding' (Male)

and 'Zhi' (Branch/Female), which could be further applied to blessing golden shovels and blessing lanterns to unify the visual identity of the Xin Ding activity and serve as marketing symbols. However, the Temple unilaterally gave these tasks to other vendors and, without our permission, even gave our design sketches to other vendors, who sloppily printed them on video discs and commemorative shopping bags, losing our original design intent and concept.

However, after learning about these things, our team could only choose to silently accept it without protesting. After all, the organizer of this folk religious activity is the Grand Temple, which is the local faith center. The committee members of the temple are powerful figures who have lived locally for many years. We did not want this incident to affect the arrangement and smoothness of the team's future activities in the area, so we chose silence and offered our blessings. Although we did not participate in the execution, the entire Xin Ding Festival process went smoothly, subsequent media reports were positive, and the officials who came to inspect were quite satisfied. Our team later held an internal meeting to discuss that we should be reserved about future cooperation proposals with the Temple, to avoid throwing ourselves into it only to be cast aside by the Temple. Organizing activities always carries risks. If something goes wrong, there is no guarantee the Temple won't push the responsibility onto our team, leading to the worry that 'our team contributes manpower and effort for free, receives no substantial return, and might even have to bear responsibility'." (University Team Interviewee)

4.2 Progressive Transformation and the 4-Stage Innovation Model

The university team's revitalization of the Xin Ding Festival was not achieved overnight but adopted a Progressive, Phased strategy of expansion and innovation. This ensured that core traditional rituals were maintained while gradually introducing modern elements and social values. This transformation model can be divided into four stages as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Four-Stage Transformation of the Xin Ding Festival

Stage (Year)	Stage Theme	Specific Activity Innovation and Expansion Items
Stage 1 (2017)	Initiating Participation & Market Introduction	1. New Market Activities: Creating economic incentives. 2. Digital Promotion: Strengthening external visibility of the event.
Stage 2 (2018)	Activity Enlivening & Official Introduction	1. Promoting Consumption: Printing and distributing vouchers to stimulate market buying. 2. Mass Participation: Renting large stage trucks and inviting elementary school students to perform. 3. Policy Promotion: Inviting local government heads to visit, linking local activities with policy.
Stage 3 (2020)	Venue Extension & Cultural Experience	1. Space Expansion: Extending the activity venue to the Jiadong Laundry Shed. 2. Cultural Experience: Holding "Blessing Lantern Calligraphy" and "Hakka Plate Flower DIY" activities to strengthen participants' sense of cultural practice.
Stage 4 (2023)	Gender Equality & Brand Innovation	1. Cultural Innovation: Formally transforming into the "Xin Ding Xin Zhi Festival," including newborn girls to practice gender equality values. 2. Visual Identity: Designing symbols and cultural products related to Xin Ding and Xin Zhi to enhance activity recognition. 3. Traditional Arts: Inviting young inheritors of Hakka Bayin (Eight-Tone) groups to perform live, promoting art inheritance.

Through the transformation across four stages, the university team successfully acted as a resource broker and value converter. On one hand, the team introduced external resources (e.g., government project funding, university manpower, design expertise) into the community; on the other hand, the team transformed the cultural connotation of the traditional ritual (Xin Ding Festival) into new values meeting modern social expectations (local economy, gender equality). Ultimately, through the Temple's local legitimacy and the local Association's mobilization power, the innovative transformation was completed.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

5.1 Conclusion

This study confirms that the university team, acting as a broker in collaborative governance, can effectively promote the sustainable transformation of traditional Hakka cultural assets. Successful revitalization is built on two core mechanisms:

[1] Successful Practice of the Progressive Model: The university team successfully introduced modern elements and social values sequentially while maintaining traditional rituals, transforming the traditional festival into a composite celebration with cultural, economic, and social significance.

[2] Flexible Conflict Adaptation Strategy: When facing power dynamic conflicts caused by the introduction of funding with the core stakeholder (the Temple), the university team chose a strategy of Silence that prioritized relationship sustainability. This strategy ensured the university team's continued existence as an external collaborator in the local network and the possibility of future cooperation.

The findings of this study provide a concrete practical model for the revitalization of Hakka cultural assets, emphasizing that the university's Third Mission must possess high local context sensitivity, resource bridging capabilities, and flexibility in adapting to power asymmetries within collaborative governance (Córdoba-Marentes, 2024).

5.2 Research Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, the following two suggestions are proposed for future cultural sustainability and collaborative governance practices: (1)Establish Formal Resource and Responsibility Agreements: To prevent trust crises and disputes over rights and responsibilities caused by the introduction of external funding, university teams and local organizations should establish formal collaboration memorandums covering intellectual property rights (such as cultural and creative designs), division of execution labor, and details of fund allocation during the initial cooperation stages. (2) Focus on the Establishment and Empowerment of Local Knowledge Systems: University teams should gradually shift their focus from "direct execution" of activities to the "establishment of local knowledge systems" (e.g., systematically compiling festival manuals, designing local tour guide training courses). This move can strengthen the autonomous operational capability and discursive power of local organizations, enabling them to become the true core of a polycentric network capable of cultural sustainability.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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Appendix. Cultural Transformation of the Xin Ding Festival.

Stage 1 (2017) : Initiation and Market Introduction	
Addition of 12 market stalls, located beside the Blessing Shed	Products sold: bananas, wax apples, peanut candy, tofu pudding, pickled products, and other local foods

| Performances by elementary school students | Promotional posters |

Stage 2 (2018) : Market Consolidation and Participation Expansion

| Merchants' product sales at the festival market | Expansion of market-based commercial activities |

Stage 3 (2020) : Cultural Experience and Intergenerational Participation

| Poetry recitation by senior citizens | Poetry recitation by schoolchildren |

Blessing Lantern Calligraphy activities	Hakka Plate Flower (Pan-Hua) DIY workshops
Promotional materials	Promotional materials (multiple formats)
Student performances	Live performance of Hakka Bayin (Eight-Tone) traditional music

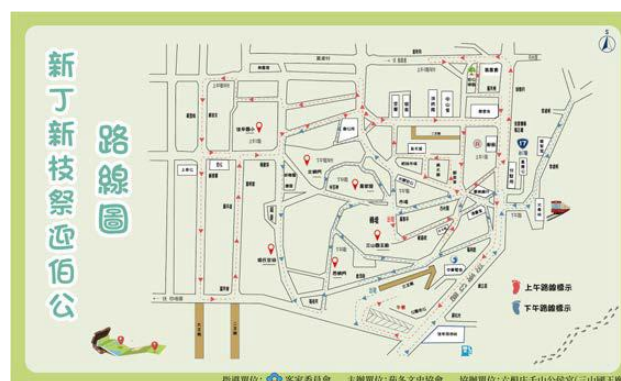| Stage 4 (2024): Branding, Innovation, and Gender-Inclusive Transformation	
Festival market stalls	Children's dance performances
Promotional materials (development of Xin Ding cakes)	Promotional materials (ritual route map for welcoming the Earth God / Bogong)