

# Escape and Return within Neo-Familism in China: A Study on the Inheritance of Folk Opera in University for the Elderly from the Perspective of Individualization

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## Abstract

This paper explores the individualization of Chinese elderly individuals through participatory observation of Chenggong Festive Lantern Opera in Yunnan Province, China. Amidst urbanization, traditional opera culture has declined, but the Chenggong Festive Lantern Opera has gained vitality through the University for the Elderly. It not only helps the elderly realize self-worth and emotional expression but also connects their self-worth to social value, enabling them to transcend the nuclear family and embed themselves within the community of the nation-state. By analyzing the individualization theory of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, this paper proposes an analytical framework of 'relational individuality', suggesting that individualization in China is a fusion of multiple values with a 'relational' characteristic, meaning that the construction of individual subjectivity is always embedded within the networks of family, community, and nation. The paper also attempts to reveal the adaptability of traditional culture in modern society and its key role in promoting social participation and individual development among the elderly.

## 1. Introduction

Festive Lantern Opera, a folk opera form, is widespread popularity among the Han Chinese and certain ethnic minorities in China. It originated and evolved in the Central Plains during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its dissemination followed the migration of Han people into Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou, where it subsequently developed into distinct branches (GU 1986, 104). The opera, originating from the Chinese New Year celebration known as Shehuo, is a significant folk custom within the traditional Han Chinese activities, designed to entertain both humans and deities. During the New Year festivities, people typically stage theatrical performances, don traditional opera costumes, and participate in processions to honor the gods. The number of participants can

reach tens of thousands (GU 1986, 132). The Chenggong Festive Lantern Opera in the local area is associated with the saying 'If the opera is not performed for three years, the cattle will die and the horses will be plagued', indicating its widespread prevalence and its role in conveying local values and social memory. In 2008, Chenggong District was designated as the 'Hometown of Chinese Folk Culture and Art (Festive Lantern Opera)' by the Chinese Ministry of Culture, and in 2013, Chenggong Festive Lantern Opera was listed in Yunnan Province's third batch of intangible cultural heritage.

The urban district of Chenggong, Kunming, Yunnan Province, encompassing a total area of 461 square kilometers, has undergone significant urban transformation since its designation for urbanization in 2003. The planned development covers 107 square kilometers, with a projected population of 950,000 (Chenggong County Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 2012). This region exemplifies the rapid societal shifts associated with 'second modernity', characterized by contradictions, ambiguity, and non-linear changes, reflecting the reflexive nature of this era (Yates 2003). Individuals get more opportunities while simultaneously seeking social belonging and security, placing traditional culture at a critical juncture. Within China's urbanization, traditional theatrical and folk activities have declined, with traditional opera facing challenges such as an aging audience and market contraction. Some genres are innovating in response, exploring new creative themes, stage designs and integrating cultural tourism and new media (Yang, 2024). For instance, Qinqiang opera has re-engaged audiences through live streaming, short dramas, collaborations with rock music and animation, and audience participation (Li, 2025). Similarly, Yingge dance has gained attention through algorithmic promotion on platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou. While 'audience aging' is often framed as a crisis in the discourse of theatrical heritage, my investigation of Chenggong Flower Lantern Opera reveals that it has gained new vitality through its aging demographic. Furthermore, the transmission of Chenggong Flower Lantern Opera illuminates the challenges and triumphs of older adults in their individual journeys.

Recent gerontological and sociological research has focused on the intersection of collective performances, online self-media, and the individualization of the elderly in China. Public performances like square dancing offer older adults avenues for self-expression and address emotional needs (Wang, 2015), fostering subjectivity (Yang, 2018) and social connections (Yang & Feng, 2017). Unlike square dancing, the opera holds a richer cultural heritage, connecting past and present. The revitalization and utilization of cultural heritage, including folklore, as a resource is a response to the needs of social transformation and symbolizes the innovation of cultural reproduction methods, as well as the reshaping of mental order and mental structure (Fang, 2024). This paper examines Chenggong Festive Lantern Opera to understand the significance of traditional folk customs for rural elderly individuals facing the challenges of second modernity. It explores the opera's role and limitations in their individualization process, and whether these limitations can be overcome. Through this cultural practice, the elderly may integrate personal, national, and ethnic identities, adapting traditional customs to contemporary society.

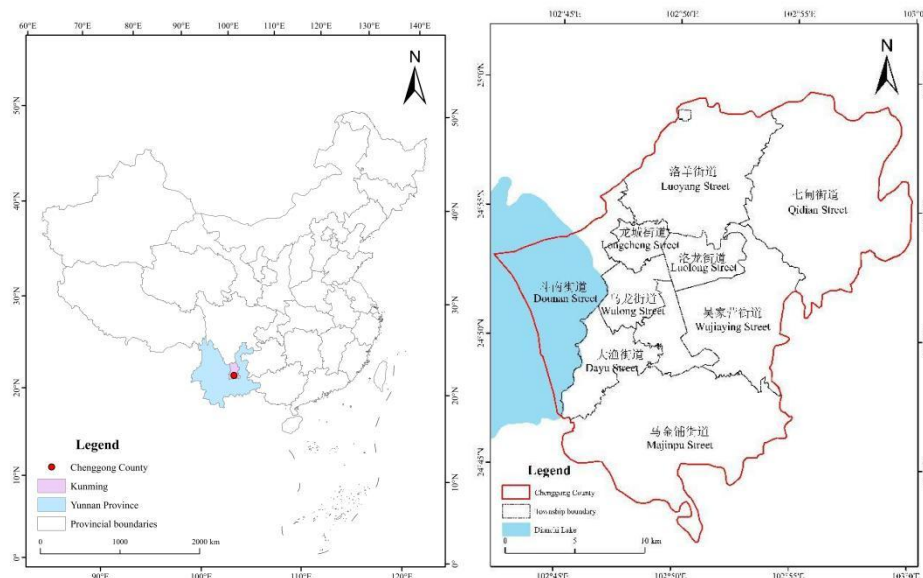


Figure 1.1 Map of the Study Area.

## 2. Individualization of Rural Elderly in China within the Risk Society

Individualization theory, originating in Western societies during the late 20th century, elucidates the structural and sociological transformations impacting social institutions, individuals, and their societal relationships (Beck, 2011). Ulrich Beck's seminal work on social risks highlights the unintended consequences of modern progress, positing the risk society as the genesis of a new modernity (Beck, 1992). This emerging modernity, characterized by contradiction, ambiguity, and non-linear change (Lash, 2003), provides the context for individualization theory. Amidst these societal shifts, individuals assume responsibility for uncertainties. While afforded greater autonomy in lifestyle choices, they also bear the associated risks. Beck characterizes the individual actors of this second modernity as 'tightrope walkers' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Bauman argues that modernity reshapes the individual-society dynamic, molding individuals into perpetually adapting 'liquid individuals' (Bauman, 2005). The pursuit of well-being shifts from a state responsibility to an individual endeavor.

Within the theoretical framework of individualization, aging constitutes a multifaceted social phenomenon, influenced by shifts in social structures, resource allocation, familial support systems, and evolving gender roles. Beck's work underscores the non-linear, dynamic transformations inherent in the outcomes of second modernity, manifesting across both macro-social and micro-individual levels, particularly within the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of later life. He posits that in the "era of post-familialism," traditional family structures are undergoing continuous dissolution, with the emergence of novel familial configurations reshaping intergenerational relationships. Beck's theoretical contributions, integrated with the concepts of reflexive modernity and the risk society, offer a robust perspective for the study of aging.

The theory of individualization, introduced to China in the 1990s, diverges from its Western model, which is marked by standardization and institutionalization. In the Chinese context, individualization is shaped by state governance and cultural paradigms. Yan (2021) posits that the individual is ontologically a moral self, embedded within a multifaceted network of interpersonal relationships, obligated to fulfill moral duties across the life course. Individual autonomy is not solely the freedom to act in defense of one's rights, but a freedom circumscribed by organizational,

collective, national, group, and ethnic affiliations. Consequently, personal liberty is contingent upon the preservation of collective interests (Yang & Fang, 2019). Simultaneously, the absence of societal protections and support compels individuals to seek security within familial and private relational networks, resulting in neo-familism (Yan, 2012). Neo-familism is characterized by a pronounced downward shift in family ethics. Therefore, research on individualization among the elderly in China necessitates consideration of its unique social structure, familial configuration, and traditional culture. The individualization of the rural Chinese elderly reflects their negotiation of self-consistency and transcendence amidst the challenges of the 'inverted family' and the tensions inherent in personal choices.

The region of Chenggong, historically a rural Han Chinese village, underwent significant transformations post-2000 due to extensive land expropriation, which directly influenced its economic configurations, familial structures, and social cohesion. The out-migration of a considerable cohort of young and middle-aged individuals for employment opportunities beyond the region precipitated a shift in Chenggong's family models. This transition moved from the traditional multigenerational, joint family structures to a combination of nuclear families with absent working members and skip-generation families remaining in situ. Interviews with the head of the Dounan Community Committee in Chenggong revealed that the elderly population constitutes two-thirds of the total community, thereby underscoring a pronounced aging demographic. While the elderly in this community have received substantial economic compensation during the processes of urbanization and rural reconstruction, the aging issue is more profoundly reflected in the challenges of re-integrating into novel social relationships and navigating the interplay between individual needs and familial obligations. This represents the individualization phenomenon among rural elderly in China, which is the central concern of this paper. Within the context of studies on China's private life domain, the individualization process largely signifies the erosion of traditional family bonds and the emergence of new intergenerational family relationships. These are characterized by the devolution of power resources to grandchildren, resulting in 'inverted families' (Yan, 2021). In the structure of inverted families, intergenerational dependency is a key dynamic, and 'post-patriarchal intergenerationality' demonstrates a shift away from the previously dominant patriarchal authority, evolving into a new form of multi-generational family. This model operates through novel ethical norms and behavioral patterns, no longer entirely predicated on the traditional concept of filial piety. This can potentially lead to the elderly experiencing a diminished voice within the family and occupying a subordinate position in the power structure (Qi, 2021).

The ethos of 'living for oneself' resonates with the aging population, amplified by media that champion self-awareness and self-enhancement. Successful aging emphasizes individual agency, productive engagement, independence, and personality. This subjectivity underscores the growing emphasis on personal autonomy among older cohorts. Festive Lantern Opera provides a distinctive arena for older adults to negotiate a dynamic social environment, facilitating the construction of positive identities and autonomous life narratives.

### **3. Research Methods and Fieldwork**

The data for this study encompasses ethnographic fieldwork and textual analysis. From September 2019 to the beginning of the following year, the researcher immersed themselves in the Festive Lantern Opera singing class at Chenggong District's University for the Elderly, learning the opera and participating in rehearsals and performances during the Spring Festival, conducting a six-month participant observation. After 2020, due to objective reasons, the

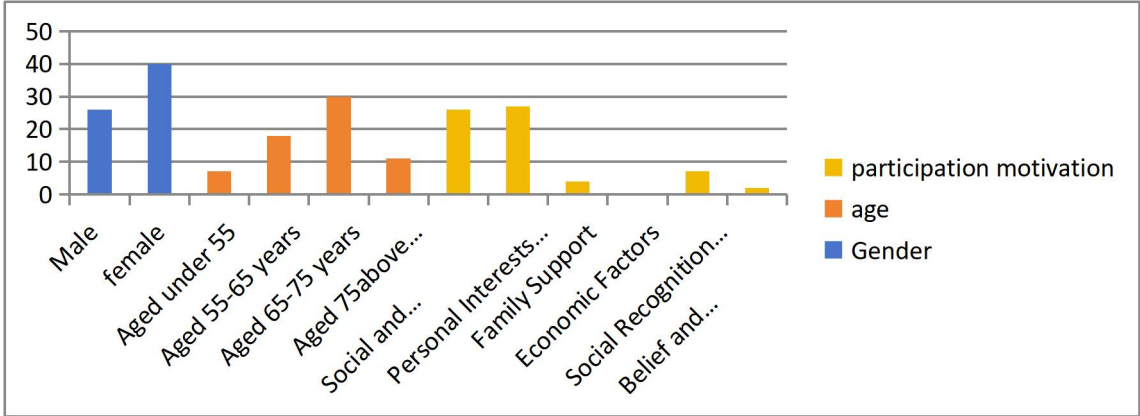
researcher continued to follow up with phone calls and monitor the Douyin videos, WeChat moments, and group dynamics of Chenggong Festive Lantern enthusiasts. In 2022, as public places gradually reopened in an orderly manner and the courses and activities at the University for the Elderly resumed, the researcher supplemented and revisited past field materials, focusing on the field of aging and conducting additional investigations on issues of individualization.



Figure 2.1 The Classroom of Chenggong Elderly University

Chenggong University for the Elderly, founded in 2004, offers Festive Lantern courses at its main campus and 29 community sites, enrolling residents aged 55-80. Annually, it conducts 180 classes, including over 6,000 Festive Lantern courses (including moon guitar, martial arts, vocal performance, waist drum, opera gestures, Festive Lantern singing and dancing, bamboo flute, erhu, etc.). Outstanding students join the Festive Lantern Art Troupe or become instructors, performing about 30 times during the Spring Festival. The courses are taught by experienced performers and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage. The university's art troupe includes inheritors and performers, and in 2019, it was designated a 'Municipal Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance Base'. The researchers conducted observations and over 66 interviews with landless farmers and their families aged 60-80, who are firsthand experiencers of the 'aging and individualization' issue.

Table1.1 An Analysis of the Characteristics of Participants in Festive Lantern Opera at the Chenggong District Senior University



Annotations: Female participants outnumbered males, a demographic distribution potentially linked to traditional gender roles within the opera, as many respondents indicated that the makeup and styling of the Huadeng performance enhanced their self-presentation. The primary audience demographic was concentrated in the 65-75 age bracket. This cohort is typically retired from the workforce, with

grandchildren of school age, and generally possesses sufficient health and available time to engage in cultural activities. Social needs and recreational interests were the primary drivers of participation, which aligns with the Opera's long-standing heritage and community-based function.

#### 4.Festive Lantern Opera Illuminating the Path of Individualization for Rural Elders

Ulrich Beck's theory of individualization is characterized by the process of disembedding from existing structures and traditional contexts, the loss of practical knowledge, faith, and guiding norms; disenchantment; reintegration. Through this process, individuals complete the transformation of identity consciousness and integration into new environments (Beck, 1992). the individual's detachment from established institutions, marked by a weakening of constraints imposed by kinship, familial ties, and social identities, leading to a more pluralistic society. In China, the life trajectories and social roles of the elderly born in the 1950s and 1960s have undergone a societal transformation from the planned economy of early socialism to the socialist market economy, representing a profound history of social change in their individualization processes. Given the complexities of individualization in China, this paper proposes an analytical framework of 'relational individualization', emphasizing that the self-realization of Chinese elderly individuals is consistently embedded within a tripartite network of 'family-state-culture'. The following analysis will explore how the elderly navigate the challenges of neo-familism through participation in traditional art practices, specifically through participant observation of Huadeng opera in Chenggong District, Yunnan Province.

Table4.1 Mapping the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Key concepts	Example	Theme(s)
Social change	The post-1950s and post-1960s elderly in China have experienced the transition from a collectivized economy to a market economy, a complex process of individualization.	Social Change and the Individualization of the Elderly
individuation	By participating in Festive Lantern Opera activities, the elderly become disembedded from traditional family roles and re-embedded into society.	The individualization of the elderly and their social participation
Disembeddin	The post-1950s and post-1960s elderly in China have experienced a complex process of disembedding from the collectivized economy and traditional family relationships, yet still bear heavy family responsibilities.	The disembeddin of the Elderly and Family Dilemmas
Reintegration dimension	By engaging in cultural activities such as Festive Lantern Opera, the elderly become re-embedded into society, acquiring social roles and recognition.	The Re-embedding of the Elderly and the Acquisition of Social Roles
Reflexivity	By engaging in Festive Lantern Opera activities, the	The Reflexivity of

	elderly reflect on their own circumstances, express emotions, and evoke memories	the Elderly and Cultural Practices
Neo-Familism	Children provide insufficient care for the elderly; the elderly bear multiple family responsibilities.	The dilemmas of the elderly within neo-familism
National identity	Festive Lantern Opera, as intangible cultural heritage, has become a national cultural symbol; the elderly gain a sense of identity through the transmission of culture.	National Identity and the Cultural Practices of the Elderly
Altruistic individualism	While pursuing their personal lives, the elderly participate in public affairs through cultural inheritance.	Altruistic individualism and the social participation of the elderly
Cultural inheritance	Festive Lantern Opera, as a form of local culture, has become an important pathway for the elderly to re-embed themselves into society.	Cultural inheritance and the social integration of the elderly

#### 4.1 Disembedded Individuals and Limited Freedom

The focal region exhibits optimal edaphic and climatic characteristics, historically underpinning an agrarian economy. Older cohorts reminisce about their formative years, characterized by communal farming, a period marked by economic austerity, material deprivation, and limited cultural expression. Paramount values were national allegiance and self-sacrifice, with collectivist structures curtailing individual autonomy. Commencing in 1979, the dismantling of rural communes was implemented nationally, accompanied by the privatization of collective assets, excluding arable land. In 1983, a Chenggong District family introduced *Gladiolus* cultivars from Guangdong, China, for cultivation on their private plots, a practice subsequently adopted by other agriculturalists. This catalyzed the expansion of floriculture, the development of an export market, and the establishment of a substantial industry with an annual output exceeding tens of billions of yuan, currently ranking as the second-largest floral production center in Asia. Simultaneously, the concept of individualization gained traction, with active participation in economic development. As key agents of reform and opening-up, individuals born in the 1950s and 1960s significantly influenced socio-economic and familial dynamics. This era witnessed the emergence of private spaces within the family unit, a shift in allegiance towards the nuclear family, and the prioritization of familial provision. Men were primarily responsible for income generation, while women managed agricultural tasks, domestic responsibilities, and the care of the elderly and children.

The urbanization process has genuinely liberated the agrarian population. As the children of the post-1950s and 1960s generations migrate to urban centers for employment, the elderly, constrained by factors such as educational attainment and age, are often relegated to menial labor or continue agricultural practices. With advancing age, their opportunities for societal engagement diminish. Concurrently, increased longevity has resulted in the emergence of the "sandwich generation," and even multiple generations experiencing this phenomenon. Within these complex intergenerational dynamics, individuals bear the dual responsibilities of caring for their parents while also supporting their adult children and grandchildren. This pattern is prevalent in both rural and urban contexts across China.

This cohort experienced a disembedding from the collective economy, traditional industrial modes, and established familial structures. In family, they relinquished the authority of the

patriarchal head and the moral constraints of filial piety, yet became the locus of familial responsibilities, navigating the risks of individualization without commensurate agency in life choices. It is acknowledged that, for some, prioritizing family interests represents a voluntary choice. Numerous analyses characterize the post-1950s and 1960s generation in China as exceptionally self-sacrificing, enduring hardship for the nation prior to the reform and opening up, and subsequently viewing their familial sacrifices as a defining life choice. Their formative education emphasized altruism, endurance, and selflessness as paramount moral virtues, with suffering framed as an emotional investment within the family. Suffering and hardship are central to the construction of the elderly's daily lives within the ethical and moral framework (Thomason, 2021). Consequently, the author posits that true disembedding remains elusive for the Chinese elderly.

## **4.2 Reflexivity in Learning Festive Lantern Opera**

The individualization of elderly Chinese villagers does not necessarily entail a complete detachment from ascribed roles; thus, the family-centered private sphere will persist. The individualization of Chinese elders is realized through the expansion of family care and support. Paradoxically, the elders' contributions still engender uncertainty and anxiety. For instance, the declining influence of filial piety, compounded by objective constraints, renders it difficult for contemporary adult children to fulfill their caregiving obligations. They often sympathize with their adult children's inability to provide care, rather than accusing them of unfilial behavior. Many elders opt to maintain self-care for as long as possible. Consequently, when emotional deficits or inadequacies arise within the family, individuals seek fulfillment from society. This compels the elderly to seek new identities and affiliations beyond the familial domain to achieve successful aging, reflecting the reflexive and disenchantment processes inherent in individualization theory.

Playing Festive Lantern Opera, a culturally specific and traditional activity, holds significant meaning for the local elderly population. For them, the opera represents childhood memories of their grandparents' performances, participation in politically-driven collective activities during their youth, and a means of emotional expression and reminiscence in their later years, serving as a platform for self-expression and individual actualization. They recall that the greatest joy of their youth was singing and dancing with peers while earning work points. They found joy amidst hardship, rehearsing and adapting model operas for political propaganda, fostering deep emotional bonds through singing, dancing, and shared meals. However, after marriage, their participation in Festive Lantern Opera diminished. In rural contexts, married women performing Huadeng opera on stage was deemed inappropriate. Societal norms compelled them to abandon their passion, assuming roles as compliant wives, dutiful daughters-in-law, and self-sacrificing mothers. Only in their later years did they regain the opportunity to revive their youthful interests.

In 2023, the researcher participated again in the Festive Lantern singing class at the University for the Elderly, studying with the elderly twice a week. The teacher of the singing class was a retired actor. The teacher played the piano, singing a line for the students to follow, with an emphasis on correcting the students' vocal habits during the process. Most of the students did not recognize simple music scores, but because Festive Lantern Opera, as a local drama, features the integration of music with dialect narration, the students were already familiar with the tunes, making the learning process smooth and enjoyable. This embodied learning reflects the importance of blood and geographical relationships in local society, to some extent, fostering closer relationships among people. 'It's better to visit friends than to seek teachers' is a common saying among those who play with lanterns, revealing the way to learn Festive Lantern Opera and



the purpose of the elderly in participating in Festive Lantern classes. After each class, the students would have a meal together, and it was not uncommon to see elderly people playing the erhu and singing Festive Lantern Opera at the dinner table. Learning Festive Lantern Opera is not only a form of artistic inheritance but also a very practical way of making friends. This relaxed learning system provides a platform for the elderly to showcase themselves and seek friendship. During the learning process, participants also shared their daily experiences, such as conflicts in intergenerational care and abandonment by children after they have acquired assets. This prompted discussions within the senior university, emphasizing the need to reduce reliance on offspring and actively engage in public activities to maintain well-being. Amidst the interplay of individualization and neo-familialism, the elderly found camaraderie and emotional fulfillment through a traditional cultural activity, connecting with peers who shared similar experiences. Their discussions also reflected dissatisfaction with their circumstances under neo-familialism and a questioning of established values.

Furthermore, an examination of the content within the popular lantern opera among the elderly reveals their reflections on their own circumstances. Taking the traditional lantern opera 'Killing the Dog to Teach the Son' as an example, the drama commences with a scene depicting an elderly mother being subjected to verbal and physical abuse by her pregnant daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law berates the mother for her advanced age, the financial burden of her upkeep, and her perceived lack of contribution. The son, in turn, turns to verbally abuse his mother, accusing her of causing his wife distress despite her pregnancy. The mother, confronted with such humiliation, not only refrains from resistance but also expresses concern for her daughter-in-law's well-being, fearing that her anger might harm the fetus. Within Han Chinese society, the ideology of perpetuating the lineage is deeply ingrained, and the phenomenon of 'motherhood conferring status persists in contemporary rural areas, which corresponds to Yan Yunxiang's discourse on the inverted family. This is evident in the centuries-old, orally transmitted traditional lantern opera, which demonstrates the profound historical roots of the phenomenon of resource allocation disproportionately favoring the youngest generation within Chinese families. The climax of the story involves a butcher searching for a knife to slaughter an elderly dog, only to witness a puppy retrieving the knife and concealing it in its den, tearfully protecting its mother with its body. Upon witnessing this, neighbors collectively condemn the couple's mistreatment of their mother, denouncing them as 'worse than dogs'. Ultimately, the couple tearfully acknowledges their wrongdoing and receives their mother's forgiveness. Filial piety serves as the core value conveyed by this drama, and its enduring popularity stems from its continued resonance with the public's aspirations for familial harmony. Whether the pursuit of familial happiness necessitates the sacrifice of the elderly's rights remains a subject of ongoing reflection. The fact that this drama continues to be performed in community exhibitions during festivals such as the Double Ninth Festival indicates its capacity to evoke emotional resonance among the elderly, reflecting their anxieties regarding their future lives.

It is worth mentioning that while Chinese elderly are actively practicing these activities, they always tie their pursuits to family interests, such as using the Festive Lantern courses at the University for the Elderly as a way to exercise their bodies. They hope to maintain health and vitality through diet and exercise, promote independent personality through emotional fulfillment, and thus avoid serious illness, expensive medical expenses, and dependence on their children. However, it is affirming that Festive Lantern Opera, as a traditional folk activity, allows the elderly to experience a social role and identity different from family life, serving as a palliative in dealing with family relationships and interpersonal difficulties.

### 4.3 Re-embedding: From the Nuclear Family to the 'Greater Family'

The attainment of successful individuation among the elderly cannot be solely contingent upon transient psychological gratification derived from public life. The question arises: is there a countervailing force against the potential exploitation of the elderly within the context of neo-familialism? This author posits that the nexus of ethnicity and the state provides such a force. Contemporary China's emphasis on the home-nation sentiment underscores the intimate connection between family and nation, the symbiotic relationship between familial prosperity and national flourishing, and the unification of familialism and patriotism. According to this ideology, individual self-cultivation is essential for the orderly governance of the family, which, in turn, forms the bedrock of national stability. The Chenggong flower lantern, for the individual, serves as a means of self-cultivation; for the state, it constitutes a provincial-level intangible cultural heritage. In China, intangible cultural heritage is regarded as a significant component of the traditional Chinese culture. In recent years, Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized the importance of intangible cultural heritage, recognizing its crucial role in enhancing cultural confidence and its function as a vital spiritual force in realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Consequently, the elderly's transmission of flower lantern opera transcends mere personal recreational activity; it ascends from a small tradition to a grand tradition within the national discourse. This provides legitimacy for the elderly to pursue a life beyond the confines of the family.



*Figure 4.1: The elderly university actors performed the newly adapted festival lantern opera 'The Grand Mansion Gate' on a professional stage*

#### 4.3.1 Chenggong Festive Lantern Opera as a National and Ethnic Symbol

Through the joint efforts of the government and cultural bearers, Chenggong Festive Lantern Opera has not only entered the University for the Elderly but has also become a provincial 'intangible cultural heritage'. Traditional folk artists have been granted the title of 'Representative Inheritors of Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects'.

The initiative to introduce Festive Lantern Opera to the Chenggong District University for the Elderly came from the local district party secretary, who, after retiring, was appointed by the district government as the principal of the University for the Elderly. A lover of Festive Lantern Opera in his youth, he believed that widely offering training classes at the Chenggong District University for the Elderly would contribute to local social stability. Amidst the rapid urbanization of Chenggong, a large number of left-behind elderly face changes in their living environment and psychological adjustments. Only by ensuring the stability of the elderly at home can the younger

generation develop the economy outside. Singing Festive Lantern Opera not only allows the elderly to exercise their bodies while taking care of their families but also reduces the burden of diseases to a certain extent. On the other hand, ideological stability and a sense of belonging are fostered at the Chenggong District University for the Elderly, where a significant amount of official political discourse is embedded. National and ethnic discourse is integrated into play creation, such as emphasizing the promotion of national policies and praising hometowns. Plays like 'Praising Daughters-in-Law' and 'Flower Capital Anecdotes' have been performed multiple times in Chenggong. These programs vividly interpret policies like rural revitalization in China, transforming the elderly from recipients of policy to propagandists. Meanwhile, the establishment of party branches within the University for the Elderly encourages the elderly to join the party and regularly receive party education. Through these quasi-public welfare traditional culture teaching activities, the spiritual needs of left-behind elderly are cared for, and their thoughts are subtly disciplined in a way they enjoy. These practices point to a socio-political governance model from family to clan to nation.

At the same time, based on the significant role of intangible cultural heritage in the cultural renaissance of China, some elderly artists have changed their destinies with their skills, strengthening their professional and cultural identities, and finding a new path for self-actualization and social participation, gaining a strong sense of self-identity. The personal ideal of 'cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the country, and bringing peace to the world,' rooted in Confucian culture, is reflected in the process of inheriting Festive Lantern Opera, reflecting the homogeneous connection between home and country, and providing strength for the elderly to adhere to their ideals.

Wang, a well-known folk Festive Lantern Opera performer in the past, had to disband her team due to urban-rural transformation. It was not until she received a call from the University for the Elderly and was invited to perform in a district government show that she joined the Chenggong District University for the Elderly's Festive Lantern Art Troupe as an actor. The Chenggong District University for the Elderly provides new ways and spaces for traditional folk artists to inherit by inviting experts for training, recommending folk artists to apply for inheritors, and establishing art troupes to subsidize actors. They can systematically learn courses such as vocal tunes, body movements, and drama direction from professional teachers and apply for inheritor status under the guidance of cultural centers through art troupes. Today, Wang has successfully applied to become a municipal inheritor. She said, 'I have a lot of family matters to attend to, my mother is old and needs my care, and my granddaughter can only be taken care of by my in-laws because I have rehearsals and performances in the art troupe. There are many times when I don't want to perform anymore. But the old principal always retains me, saying that inheriting traditional culture is my mission, and we should persist'. In this case, performing Festive Lantern Opera conflicts with taking care of the family. However, when inheriting Festive Lantern Opera becomes a mission, the elderly embed themselves in the nation and ethnicity, realizing the connection between self-worth and public bonds. This combination of individualization and nationalism provides the elderly with a force to resist unfairness under neo-familism. Therefore, the goal of Chinese society in responding to the challenges of individualization should be to achieve a new social solidarity, where when neo-familism cannot provide shelter for individuals, nationalism can establish common bonds between individuals and others, embedding everyone in the community of the nation-state.

Furthermore, it has, to some extent, become an instrument of governance. According to the head of the senior university, the initial intention of introducing the flower lantern into the senior university education system was to maintain social stability following urbanization and land

occupation. In the context of urbanization, Chenggong District has produced a large number of elderly people left behind, who are facing changes in their inherent living environment and psychological adjustment. Only when the elderly are stable at home can young people develop the economy outside. Singing festival lantern opera allows the elderly to exercise their bodies while taking care of their families, which to a certain extent reduces the trouble of diseases. In the senior university of Chenggong District, a large number of official political discourses are placed in it. The discourse of the nation-state is integrated into it. For example, in the creation of the repertoire, the emphasis is on the propaganda of national policies and the praise of the hometown. Dramas such as 'Praising the Daughter-in-law' and 'Anecdotes of Flower City' have been performed many times in Chenggong. These programs interpret policies such as China's rural revitalization in a vivid and lively way, allowing the elderly to change from recipients of policies to propagandists. At the same time, a party branch is established in the senior university to encourage the elderly to join the party and receive regular party education. The senior university cares for the spiritual needs of the elderly left behind through traditional cultural teaching activities that are close to public welfare. At the same time, it subtly disciplines their thoughts in a way that the elderly like. These practices point to the social and political governance model of family—clan—nation.

#### **4.3.2 Seeking Personal and National Connection in Passion**

The narrative of Deng was gleaned from discourse with members of the Chenggong Senior University's Opera class. According to recollections by Aunt Song, 'this guy was considered eccentric; he followed us for three decades, attending every performance'. Another participant highlighted his generous contributions to the Chenggong Festive Lantern Association: 'Deng donated twenty thousand yuan, stating that if we had funds, we should repay him, but if not, it would be considered his support.' Deng's profound passion for Festive Lantern Opera led him to invest tens of thousands of yuan in supporting the performances and preservation of Chenggong Festive Lantern Opera. His decades-long dedication to troupes and his substantial financial support for folk Opera, particularly significant for a rural elder, are noteworthy.

Born in 1952, Deng's life, as analyzed in the second section of this paper, reflects the profound societal transformations experienced by his generation, who continuously sought personal value amidst these changes. He lived through the era of the collective economy, where the interests of the state and nation were paramount in his ideology. Following the Reform and Opening-up, he adapted to the changing times, becoming one of the earliest factory directors of a seed farm in Chenggong. He achieved significant success in local agricultural production, accumulating a degree of wealth. Yan Yunxiang's concept of China's Individualization 1.0, which posits that the state, through institutional reforms, encourages individuals to assume greater responsibility and enhance their competitiveness to foster economic growth, is exemplified by Old Deng. During this period, he achieved a highly successful form of individualization, improving his quality of life through his endeavors. In 1992, Mr. Deng, having transferred the agricultural tool sales business to his children, dedicated himself to the promotion and support of Huadeng opera. He organized numerous performances, personally funded the productions, and was hailed as a key figure in the development of Chenggong Huadeng. For Mr. Deng, who had achieved financial independence, he had fulfilled his economic responsibilities to the state and his familial obligations, thus gaining the freedom to pursue his passions.

Mr. Deng stated, 'My entire family has no connection to the arts, I am an outlier. My primary occupation is as a seed business owner. I cannot perform, sing or dance, but I have loved it since

childhood.' Despite his lack of artistic skills, Mr. Deng invested nearly 200,000 yuan in local opera over the years. Furthermore, he consistently documented artistic performances in mountainous areas, communities, and grassroots settings, interviewed local veteran artists to collect opera scripts, and preserved extensive visual records of Chenggong Festive Lantern opera. Regarding his family's support for his financial contributions to local performances, he noted that his children are very supportive, stating, 'Rather than investing in gambling or saunas, it's better for my father to invest in Huadeng opera.' To this day, Mr. Deng frequently attends Huadeng opera classes and maintains close relationships with various folk performance groups, providing unconditional assistance to the activities of Huadeng opera inheritance.

Previous research has often misinterpreted individualization as solely individual liberation, expression of personality, and the pursuit of individual desires. Studies on the collective artistic activities of the elderly often interpret their performance activities as a nostalgia for the collective era and a pursuit of public associations. The aforementioned case reveals a broader perspective on individualization, demonstrating that beyond the family, the state and the nation can provide the elderly with higher forms of social embedding.

## 5. Conclusion

Recently, the cinematic adaptation of a true story featuring a retired female worker in her fifties embarking on a self-drive tour, titled 'Like a Rolling Stone', has garnered attention. Concurrently, the protagonist, Su Min, provided her ex-husband with a compensation of 160,000 yuan, culminating in a divorce agreement. In 2020, she experienced widespread support from both media outlets and the public, amassing 460,000 followers on the Chinese social media platform RED NOTES'. This phenomenon reflects the aspirations of a significant segment of the elderly population to 'live for oneself'. Media coverage initially emphasized the emancipation aspect of individualization theory. However, as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim elucidate in *Individualization*, the pursuit of 'a life of one's own' does not inherently preclude altruism. Individualization in China represents a synthesis of diverse values, embodying the integration and harmonization of collectivism and individualism, tradition and modernity. For instance, inheritors of Huadeng Opera, through their participation in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, not only enhance their personal social value but also respond to the national call for cultural confidence. This duality suggests that individualization among Chinese elderly individuals is a dynamic equilibrium between self-interest and altruism embedded within social networks. Unlike Western individualization, which is rooted in an atomized societal context and characterized by a detachment from institutional constraints, Chinese individualization is distinguished by the fact that the construction of individual subjectivity is always oriented towards the family, community, and nation, thus constituting relational individualization.

Subsequently, this study, grounded in fieldwork on Chenggong Festival Lantern Opera, inevitably presents limitations. For instance, the specificity of regional culture may constrain the generalizability of the conclusions. As a localized intangible cultural heritage in Southwest China, the transmission of Chenggong Flower Lantern Opera is profoundly influenced by local lineage structures and economic models. Its artistic forms differ significantly from those of Qinqiang Opera and Yingge Dance, precluding the application of universal success models. Furthermore, while the ethnographic method's in-depth description of small samples can capture the complexity of cultural practices, it struggles to encompass the diversity within the group. These limitations, however, offer opportunities to deepen the understanding of localized theories, as ethnographic deep descriptions can expose micro-mechanisms overlooked by macro theories. The research

reveals that local governments, through the Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritor certification system, incorporate the cultural practices of the elderly into the national discourse, linking their individual identities with the national narrative of cultural confidence. This top-down individualization path contrasts sharply with the Western bottom-up model of rights struggle. Based on this, this paper proposes an analytical framework of relational individualization, emphasizing that the self-realization of Chinese elderly individuals is always embedded within a triple network of family-nation-culture. Policy-wise, it is necessary to construct a support system that links individuals-families-the state, such as integrating intangible cultural heritage inheritance with community elderly care. This approach provides the elderly with a platform for social participation and enhances their family discourse power through the conversion of cultural capital. Simultaneously, this paper also reflects the advantages of "audience aging" in the inheritance of folk opera. The participation of the elderly in opera activities often drives other family members, forming a reverse flow model of intergenerational transmission. At a theoretical level, a critical dialogue with Western paradigms is required to develop an individualized theory based on Chinese ethical traditions. This should focus on how state policies legitimize individualization. For example, cultural confidence grants social prestige to the inheritors of folk opera, and how digital technology reshapes the expressive space of elderly subjectivity.

In conclusion, the individualization of the elderly in China is an exploration of the symbiotic balance between the individual and the collective in localized practice. Future aging society policies that ignore this cultural gene and rely solely on transplanting the Western concept of independence may exacerbate intergenerational conflict and cultural alienation. Only by respecting the localization tension in theoretical reflection and practice can a truly sustainable Chinese solution for 'the elderly can do something' be provided.

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