

Transmission innovation in Taiwanese budaixi: a grounded-theory analysis of Pili budaixi

Hongting Chen¹; Di Li^{1*}

¹ Xinghai Conservatory of Music, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Corresponding author: Di Li (sjld424500@163.com)

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Abstract: Pili budaixi is a series of budaixi (glove-puppet theatre) productions created by Pili International Multimedia Co., Ltd. in Taiwan since 1984, with each instalment title prefixed with “Pili”. By 2021, the franchise had aired more than 2,600 episodes. Using grounded theory, this study identifies four innovative transmission pathways: brand building and market expansion; artistic innovation and distinctive feature formation; digital-technology applications; and cultural exchange and industrial-chain development. These four elements reinforce one another, jointly advancing the transmission and innovation of Pili budaixi. On this basis, the study proposes that maintaining traditional characteristics, integrating modern elements, and pursuing cross-sector collaboration are important routes to achieving transmission innovation in Pili budaixi.

Keywords: Taiwan, Pili budaixi, grounded theory, innovation in transmission pathways

1. Introduction

After centuries of development, budaixi has become a prominent form of intangible cultural heritage, valued for its distinctive artistic appeal and cultural depth (Stenberg, 2015). Yet contemporary social change poses multiple challenges to its transmission and innovation (Gigliotto et al., 2022). A pressing challenge is to preserve budaixi's traditional characteristics while enabling its integration and development in contemporary society (Su, 2018). Taiwan's Pili budaixi provides an instructive case: it combines budaixi with modern entertainment forms such as television and animation, presenting long-form episodic dramas with enriched storylines and elaborate visual effects that have attracted large audiences at home and abroad (SILVIO, 2007).

Grounded theory is a qualitative method with distinctive value for studying intangible cultural heritage transmission (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Glaser, 1978; Suddaby, 2006). Starting from empirical phenomena, it uses in-depth investigation and systematic analysis to progressively distill the key factors that shape transmission, providing an evidence base for protection and inheritance (Gioia et al., 2012). Using Taiwanese Pili budaixi as the case, this study applies grounded-theory methods to examine behavioral approaches to transmission and innovation, aiming to offer new ideas and methods for the transmission and development of intangible cultural heritage (Djabarouti, 2021).

2. Literature review

Pili budaixi (also known as Huang Wenze budaixi or Pili puppet animation) is a series of budaixi productions created by Pili International Multimedia Co., Ltd. in Taiwan since 1984 ([SILVIO, 2007](#)). Because each instalment's title begins with the prefix "Pili", the franchise is collectively referred to as Pili budaixi ([Silvio, 2010](#)). As Pili budaixi's social influence has expanded and attention to intangible cultural heritage development has grown, scholarship on Pili budaixi has progressively deepened ([Eichler, 2021](#)).

Taiwanese Pili budaixi can be situated within scholarship on intangible cultural heritage that treats cultural value as socially produced through continual re-creation, in which "tradition" persists not by freezing form but by sustaining recognizable repertoires of practice, meaning, and authority across changing contexts ([Lenzerini, 2011](#)). Within this framework, Pili is analytically important because it shows how a vernacular performance tradition can remain legible as budaixi while being remade through remediation across television and digital production, thereby extending cultural reach without reducing heritage to static display ([Schmitt, 2008](#)). Work on animation and mediated performance further implies that Pili's cultural significance is partly accomplished through its audiovisual grammar, which reorganizes liveness, agency, and spectatorship and allows older moral-aesthetic repertoires to circulate as contemporary popular culture rather than as heritage "residue" ([Ravasi et al., 2012](#)). Because heritage value is realized through participation and governance, Pili's social meaning also hinges on how audiences, communities, and institutions negotiate legitimacy and stewardship, consistent with evidence that people-centered approaches and community participation are now treated as central to credible heritage management ([Li et al., 2020](#)). Digital platforms intensify these dynamics by rendering heritage values visible, contestable, and legible as data through metrics and traces of engagement, enabling publics to co-articulate cultural significance while also creating conditions under which certain social values are crowded out by economic, administrative, or platform-centered logics ([Bonacchi et al., 2023](#)). At the same time, Pili's industrialization and branding can be read as a creative-industry strategy that converts symbolic attachments into scalable business models, supporting ongoing production while raising classic cultural-policy questions about how value creation is organized, governed, and justified ([Teece, 2010](#)). Empirical work linking cultural participation to well-being, together with evidence that heritage sites carry measurable social value beyond revenue, underscores why Pili's circulation matters as social infrastructure for cultural participation and community meaning-making rather than as entertainment alone ([Blessi et al., 2016](#)). Yet, because these literatures often proceed in parallel (heritage governance, mediated aesthetics, digital participation, and business modeling), an inductive grounded-theory design is well positioned to specify the mechanisms through which "transmission innovation" is actually enacted within Pili's everyday practices and institutional arrangements ([Gioia et al., 2013](#)).

Overall, the literature positions Taiwanese Pili budaixi as a commercial cultural-industry extension of traditional Chinese budaixi and documents its historical and cultural connotations, transmission and development, industrialization exploration, and business models ([Zott et al., 2011](#)). However, existing research remains constrained by relatively limited theoretical work and insufficient examination of Pili budaixi's role and influence in international cultural exchange ([Grincheva, 2024](#)). These limitations motivate the need to broaden perspectives and combine multiple methods to more comprehensively specify the cultural value and social significance of Taiwanese Pili budaixi ([Venkatesh et al., 2013](#)).

3. Case selection and grounded-theory framework

3.1 Case selection and data sources

Pili budaixi, also known as Huang Wenze budaixi or Pili puppet animation, is a series of budaixi productions created by Pili International Multimedia Co., Ltd. in Taiwan since 1984 ([Liang, 2013](#)). Because the title of each series begins with the characters "Pili", it is collectively referred to as Pili budaixi. Its narrative centers on three protagonists (Qingxiang Bailian Su Huanzhen, Baishi Jinglun Yi Yeshu, and Daokuang Jianchi Ye Xiaochai) within an expanding story world of the martial-arts community; the series are interconnected yet can also stand alone ([Oltean, 1993](#)). Budaixi, also known as palm theater or glove-puppet theater, is a traditional folk art originating in Quanzhou, Fujian, China, in the seventeenth century, and it was included in the first batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006 ([Lin et al., 2021](#)). With rapid shifts in modern artistic trends, external cultural influences, and intense competition in entertainment markets, the transmission and development of this art form face severe challenges, with recognition among young people particularly in need of improvement ([Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005](#)). By contrast, Taiwanese budaixi culture, which also originated in Fujian, has developed through industrialized transformation and extensive use of modern communication channels, becoming one of the dominant forms of popular culture in Taiwan and largely achieving the "creative transformation and innovative development" of budaixi as intangible cultural heritage in modern society ([Li, 2004](#)). Against this backdrop, we selected Taiwanese Pili budaixi as a case and adopted a qualitative approach using grounded theory, focusing on "innovation in transmission pathways". Materials were compiled from questionnaires, websites, online materials, media reports, and relevant books, journals and theses ([Kozinets, 2002](#)).

3.2 Grounded-theory approach

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that emphasizes starting from empirical phenomena and, through systematic data collection and analysis, revealing an object's essence and internal logic ([Corbin & Strauss, 1990](#)). Its core lies in continuous comparison, induction, and refinement of data to develop explanatory theory ([Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021](#)). In studies of intangible cultural heritage, grounded theory can help researchers understand cultural connotations, transmission mechanisms, and development patterns, providing a scientific basis for protection and transmission ([Aykan, 2015](#)).

4 Analysis of innovation in transmission pathways

To identify empirically grounded patterns in how Pili budaixi innovates its transmission pathways, we applied grounded-theory procedures using data from questionnaires, participant observation, and document analysis ([Gioia et al., 2013](#)). Questionnaire respondents included audiences of Pili budaixi and related groups. Observations covered the development process of Pili budaixi and transmission activities. Document analysis focused on research literature, historical materials, transmission plans, and other relevant documents.

Using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 12, we conducted three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and core coding.

4.1 Open coding

Open coding follows the material as presented, proceeding without theoretical presuppositions and maintaining an open analytic stance. After repeated reading to establish familiarity with the raw materials, we used line-by-line analysis to extract meaning categories and then compared and summarized the data to conceptualize original statements. We subsequently examined relationships among the initial concepts, merged similar concepts, and defined initial categories (Han et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2013; Y. J. Zhao et al., 2024). Using NVivo 12, we performed preliminary coding of more than 50,000 words of selected textual materials collected from multiple channels; keywords were extracted for naming, yielding 88 initial concepts across 674 reference points. The word cloud is shown in Fig. 1.



Figure 1. Word cloud of Pili budaixi

Categories summarize concepts and are indispensable in grounded-theory research. Based on further analysis, refined concepts were distilled and summarized into categories; through iterative induction and synthesis, we obtained 40 concepts (c1–c40), as shown in Table 1.

Concepts derived from open coding	
c1 an intricate and enigmatic plot	c2 DVD, television and film
c3 dynamic film-style special effects	c4 exquisite and ornate costume design
c5 Pili International Multimedia Co., Ltd.	c6 preserving the essence of traditional art
.....
c35 mass production of cultural products	c36 official fan club
c37 opening mainland and international markets	c38 protecting and rescuing traditional arts
c39 exploring new pathways for transforming traditional arts	c40 innovation in filming techniques

Table 1. Concepts derived from open coding

4.2 Axial coding

Axial (secondary) coding built on open coding. Using a typical model that analyzes conditions, context, intervening conditions, action strategies, and outcomes, we linked categories derived from first-stage coding to establish causal relations among classes or concepts (Liu et al., 2025; X. Zhao et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2013). Based on the 40 concepts (c1–c40) derived from open coding, further refinement yielded 12 axial codes (C1–C12), as shown in Table 2. Some concepts carry multiple definitions and connotations and therefore belong to more than one category.

Axial coding (categories)	Open coding (concepts) (letters)
C1 Multiform dissemination	c2
C2 Building a proprietary IP brand	c5, c10
C3 Attracting younger audiences	c8, c11, c33
C4 Expanding consumer markets	c31, c34, c36
C5 Distinctive artistic features	c1, c4, c6, c19, c20
C6 Boldness in transmission and innovation	c7, c12, c13, c17, c18, c38
C7 Emphasis on work quality	c15, c16
C8 Use of digital technologies	c3, c28, c32, c40, c22, c25, c27, c39
C9 Addressing audience needs	c23
C10 Sustained cultural exchange	c37
C11 Building a cultural industry chain	c14, c21, c26, c29, c30, c35
C12 Leveraging policy support	c9, c24

Table 2. Axial coding

4.3 Core coding

Core (third-stage) coding is the final step in data processing. Building on axial coding, it involves rigorous analysis to select core categories, relate core categories to other subcategories, examine relationships among categories, and refine remaining incomplete categories. By organizing keywords describing concept attributes across the 12 axial codes (C1–C12), four core categories were derived; the subordinate relationships between categories and core categories are shown in Table 3.

Core coding (core categories)	Axial coding (categories)
Brand building and market expansion	C1 Multiform dissemination

Core coding (core categories)	Axial coding (categories)
Artistic innovation and distinctive feature formation	C2 Building a proprietary IP brand C3 Attracting younger audiences C4 Expanding consumer markets C5 Distinctive artistic features C6 Boldness in transmission and innovation C7 Emphasis on work quality
Emerging media and digital-technology applications	C8 Use of digital technologies C9 Addressing audience needs C10 Sustained cultural exchange C11 Building a cultural industry chain C12 Leveraging policy support
Cultural exchange and industrial-chain development	

Table 3. Subordinate relationships between categories and core categories

The analysis yielded four core categories: brand building and market expansion; artistic innovation and distinctive feature formation; emerging media and digital-technology applications; and cultural exchange and industrial-chain development. Based on the grounded-theory data analysis, we constructed a research model for innovative transmission pathways in Taiwanese Pili budaixi (Fig. 2).

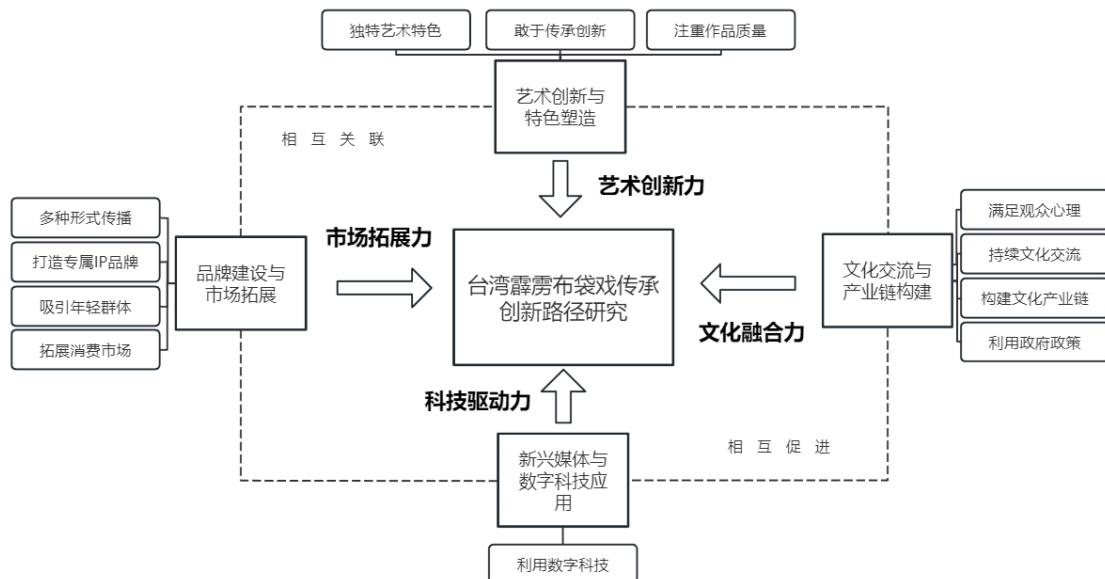


Figure 2. Coding model for the study of transmission-innovation behaviors of Pili budaixi as intangible cultural heritage in Taiwan

Brand building and market expansion. Multiform dissemination, Taiwanese Pili budaixi enhances brand value and recognition through diverse forms and media ([Gensler et al., 2013](#)). Building a proprietary IP brand, given the popularity of IP culture in Taiwan, Pili budaixi uses distinctive plots, character design, and visual effects to shape a distinctive budaixi IP brand ([Aaker, 1997](#)). Attracting younger audiences, by updating fashionable elements and integrating content and forms favored by young people, it attracts younger viewers and injects new vitality and cultural connotations ([Hollebeek et al., 2014](#)). Expanding consumer markets, it actively develops new consumer markets, including diverse online and offline sales channels, to increase sales and market share ([Neslin et al., 2006](#)).

Artistic innovation and distinctive feature formation. Distinctive artistic features, Pili budaixi maintains budaixi's unique artistic style and expressive forms, highlighting cultural depth and aesthetic characteristics ([Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008](#)). Boldness in transmission and innovation, on the basis of transmitting tradition, it attempts innovation, exploring new expressive techniques and thematic content to sustain contemporaneity and innovativeness ([Teece, 2007](#)). Emphasis on work quality, it consistently upholds high production standards, striving for excellence to create high-quality works and improve viewers' experience and satisfaction ([Brakus et al., 2009](#)).

Emerging media and digital-technology applications. Use of digital technologies, leveraging the momentum of emerging media, Pili adjusts the content and form of Pili budaixi in a timely manner, keeps pace with the times, and strengthens audience participation ([Brodie et al., 2011](#); [Wu et al., 2025](#)). It also applies advanced digital technologies, such as computer-generated effects and virtual reality, to enhance visual effects and interactivity and to create richer viewing experiences ([Li et al., 2025](#); [Steuer, 2006](#)).

Cultural exchange and industrial-chain development. Addressing audience needs, by understanding audience demands and psychology and accurately tracking market dynamics, it continually adjusts and optimizes content and form to strengthen appeal and influence ([Kohli & Jaworski, 1990](#)). Sustained cultural exchange, it actively participates in international cultural exchange, strengthening cultural cooperation and exchange with other countries and regions to promote international development ([Crane, 2014](#)). Building a cultural industry chain, it establishes a comprehensive Pili budaixi industry chain, including production, distribution, marketing, and derivative development, to support healthy development and sustained growth ([Colucci et al., 2008](#)). Leveraging policy support, it makes full use of policy support and assistance from government and relevant departments, such as funding, taxation, and talent, to promote industrial development and expansion([Weber et al., 2024](#)).

These four core categories capture close links among brand, art, technology, and markets, jointly underpinning the prosperity and development of the Taiwanese Pili budaixi industry ([Chong & Li, 2025](#); [Morgan et al., 2009](#)).

5. Results

Building on the four core categories identified in this study of innovative transmission pathways in Taiwanese Pili budaixi, transmission-innovation behaviors can be grouped into four main types. At the same time, the four core codes, namely brand building and market expansion; artistic innovation and distinctive feature

formation; emerging media and digital-technology applications; and cultural exchange and industrial-chain development, remain interconnected and mutually reinforcing within Pili budaixi's transmission and innovation as intangible cultural heritage, jointly promoting its transmission, innovation, and development.

5.1 Pathway 1: Brand building and market expansion

Brand building and market expansion provide critical market-expansion capacity for intangible cultural heritage transmission, sustaining the visibility and influence of Pili budaixi in contemporary society ([Fan et al., 2025](#); [Qiu & Zuo, 2023](#)). From the perspective of brand building, Pili budaixi has continuously innovated by combining traditional art with modern technologies to create a distinctive wuxia world and a clear brand image. Pili International also emphasizes brand communication, extending influence and recognition through multiple channels, including television, film, and the internet. In terms of market expansion, Pili budaixi follows contemporary trends and actively develops overseas markets, disseminating Chinese traditional culture globally ([Rabêlo Neto et al., 2020](#)). Huang Liangxun, the fifth-generation descendant of the Huang family, serves as the person in charge for mainland China and actively promotes cross-strait cultural and creative exchange and cooperation. The Pili company also collaborates with industries such as gaming and animation to develop more diversified products and meet the needs of different consumer groups. Attracting younger audiences is another key pathway: according to a Pili Group survey, fans aged 20–25 account for 65% ([Hollebeek et al., 2014](#)). To further advance brand building and market expansion, continued innovation, sustained improvements in work quality and artistic standards, strengthened publicity and promotion, and enhanced brand influence and recognition are measures through which Pili budaixi can continue to develop ([Zeithaml et al., 1996](#)).

5.2 Pathway 2: Artistic innovation and the formation of distinctive features

Artistic innovation and the cultivation of distinctive characteristics provide enduring support for the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. Pili Puppetry not only preserves the traditional essence of glove puppetry but also boldly innovates in plot, character design, and visual effects ([Cominelli & Greffe, 2012](#)). For instance, by incorporating modern film and television technology, it merges traditional glove puppetry with contemporary screen arts to create a unique martial arts world. Such innovation not only revitalizes glove puppetry but also attracts a younger audience. In terms of cultivating distinctive features, Pili Puppetry is rooted in Chinese culture and integrates diverse clan and sectarian traditions to construct a xianxia (immortal heroes) universe, enhancing both its artistic value and cultural identity. In content, Pili Puppetry inherits the fantastical storytelling of Jin Guang Puppetry while further intensifying its mystical elements. The narration and voice acting continue to use the Minnan dialect, with the "eight-tone virtuoso" Huang Wenze voicing all characters ([Sandel, 2003](#)). To address language barriers, Pili adds subtitles to its programs, which broadens the audience base to some extent. Many fans have even learned the Minnan dialect, contributing to cultural transmission.

5.3 Pathway 3: Emerging media and digital-technology adoption

Emerging media and digital-technology applications constitute a technological driving force and, as an innovation engine for intangible cultural heritage transmission, provide new expressive forms and

dissemination channels for Pili budaixi, strengthening its appeal and influence ([Pietrobruno, 2014](#)). In the past, Pili budaixi was adept at disseminating content through film and television technologies; today it should also seize this opportunity and make full use of digital technologies to enhance performance effects ([Mohamed & Mohd Nor, 2015](#)). In 1995, Huang Qianghua, chairman of Pili International, established a television station, creating a dedicated channel for Pili budaixi; in 2000, the company invested 300 million New Taiwan dollars to enter the film market; in 2014, Pili cooperated with Taobao to establish its first official online store, the "Pili International Brand Pavilion", selling Pili budaixi DVDs and related cultural products, opening a new chapter in online marketing ([Maier & Wieringa, 2021](#)). In 2015, the first 3D budaixi animated film directed by Huang Qianghua was released. In addition to selling DVDs and broadcasting on Pili Taiwan Channel, Pili established a subsidiary in mainland China the same year, and its series content was made available on video platforms such as iQIYI and Bilibili. Through the internet, Pili budaixi has accumulated a large fan base in Chinese-speaking regions, including mainland China and Southeast Asia. Since 2017, paid-video revenue and copyright income from mainland China have grown substantially, becoming an important segment supporting company performance ([Nieborg & Poell, 2018](#)).

5.4 Pathway 4: Cultural exchange and industrial-chain development

Cultural exchange and industrial-chain development provide cultural integration capacity: through exchange and integration with other cultural forms, they enrich the cultural connotations of Pili budaixi while promoting the improvement and development of the industry chain, providing sustained economic support and cultural momentum for transmission ([Fan et al., 2025](#); [Gereffi et al., 2005](#)). Pili budaixi has attracted large overseas audiences through international cultural exchange activities. It also cooperates with cultural industries in other countries and regions to jointly promote the international development of budaixi culture. In industrial-chain development, it has formed a budaixi-centered cultural industry chain that covers creation, production, performance, and derivative development ([Ponte & Sturgeon, 2014](#); [Wu et al., 2025](#); [Zhang et al., 2025](#)). By integrating industry-chain resources, achieving resource sharing and complementary advantages, it improves overall competitiveness. In addition, a series of cultural policies and activities introduced by the Taiwan provincial government have effectively promoted the dissemination and development of Pili budaixi. Pili budaixi strengthens cooperation with government, enterprises, and social organizations to jointly promote the healthy development of the budaixi industry.

6. Conclusions and future directions

Taking Taiwanese Pili budaixi as a typical case of intangible cultural heritage, this study systematically examined innovative pathways for its transmission ([Lenzerini, 2011](#)). Using grounded theory, we first collected extensive materials on transmission innovation through multiple channels and then organized, synthesized, and mined these materials through open, axial, and core coding ([Fendt & Sachs, 2008](#)). This process identified four core categories: brand building and market expansion; artistic innovation and distinctive feature formation; emerging media and digital-technology applications; and cultural exchange and industrial-chain development ([Ravasi et al., 2012](#)). On this basis, we developed corresponding strategies and recommendations, underscoring that maintaining traditional characteristics, integrating modern elements, and pursuing cross-sector collaboration are important routes for achieving transmission innovation in Pili budaixi.

([Bryson et al., 2006](#)). Looking ahead, further work is needed to strengthen the training of inheritors, build policy-support systems, and connect with market demand, so that Pili budaixi can realize commercial value while playing a greater role in the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage ([Parga Dans & Alonso González, 2019](#)).

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