

Research on the Protection and Utilization of Cultural Resources in Ethnic Cultural Characteristic Villages of Gansu

Liyun Yang*, Ailing Zhou

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, 730070, China

*Corresponding author: yangly@nwnu.edu.cn

Abstract: Ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu serve as important spatial carriers of traditional ethnic culture, bearing ethnic memories, cultural identity, and local knowledge. Currently, the protection and utilization of their cultural resources have established a practical system with internal and external coordination, yet they also face many challenges. By sorting out the composition of cultural resources in ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu, this paper analyzes the practical situation of cultural resource protection and utilization and the realistic dilemmas they encounter. Accordingly, this paper proposes optimization paths from three dimensions: adhering to cultural authenticity, constructing a benefit-sharing mechanism, and bridging the inheritance gap. The aim is to promote the integration of living cultural inheritance of ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu with rural revitalization, and to provide a reference for the protection and utilization of cultural resources in similar ethnic cultural characteristic villages.

Keywords: Gansu; Ethnic Cultural Characteristic Villages; Cultural Resource Protection; Cultural Resource Utilization

1. Cultural Resource Endowment of Ethnic Cultural Characteristic Villages in Gansu

1.1 A Multi-Level System of Cultural Expression

The cultural expression system of ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu constitutes a multi-level and dynamically integrated ecosystem, which is mainly manifested in the following five dimensions. In terms of language, local people commonly use both Chinese and ethnic languages. For example, in multi-ethnic villages of Sunan Yugur Autonomous County, people simultaneously use Eastern Yugur, Western Yugur, and Chinese. Although the population and scope of use of the ethnic language continue to shrink due to urbanization and the spread of the common language^[1], the ethnic language remains an important means for local people to express their emotions within families, during festivals, and in social interactions. In terms of clothing, the ethnic costumes listed as intangible cultural heritage in Gansu Province include the costumes of the Subei Mongolians, the Yugurs, the Huarui Tibetans, the Zhuoni Tibetans, and the Baima people, all of which play an important role in local people's daily life, wedding customs, and festival rituals^[2]. In terms of dance, the dances in ethnic cultural characteristic villages of Gansu possess ethnic styles and regional characteristics. For instance, the traditional masked dance of the Baima people in Wen County and the multi-place dance of the Tibetan characteristic village in Zhouqu County are both national-level intangible cultural heritage items, serving as key bonds that unite ethnic emotions and sustain cultural identity. In terms of festivals, the festival activities in ethnic cultural characteristic villages of Gansu vividly reflect the integration of farming and nomadic civilizations as well as the exchange among multi-ethnic cultures, highlighting the ethnic cultural connotations and folk customs. In terms of rituals, the rituals in ethnic cultural characteristic villages of Gansu fall into three categories: life rituals (birth ceremonies, weddings, and funerals), sacrificial and blessing rituals (such as the Tibetan “Mountain God Worship” and the Hui “Nikah Recitation”), and purification rituals (such as “smoke offering” and “mountain circumambulation”). These rituals permeate every aspect of villagers' production, daily life, and spiritual beliefs. Through fixed procedures and norms, these rituals transmit ethnic culture and strengthen ethnic identity.

1.2 Production and Daily Life Knowledge

First, traditional crafts are among the key elements. Traditional ethnic crafts refer to the perceptual and experiential skills accumulated by ethnic minorities through long-term production and daily life. These crafts embody ethnic cultural elements and the life experiences of ethnic groups, thus constituting valuable intangible cultural heritage^[3]. In the ethnic cultural characteristic villages of Gansu, traditional crafts serve important functions in consolidating community emotions, transmitting history, and expressing beliefs. Second, architectural landscapes form another crucial aspect. Ethnic villages in Gansu utilize local materials and adapt to local conditions, featuring a fusion of ethnic customs and cultural beliefs. For example, villages in Tibetan-inhabited areas are built along mountain slopes, where stone-and-timber blockhouses are distinctive. Linxia Prefecture boasts residential, commercial, and religious buildings with a long history. The Hexi region features Yugur tents and uniformly constructed settlements. Additionally, the construction techniques, architectural art, and decoration techniques of Kazakh yurts are also noteworthy. These architectural landscapes not only represent the regional ethnic architectural culture of Gansu but also reflect the production modes, living customs, and economic conditions of various ethnic groups^[4].

2. Practices of Protecting and Utilizing Cultural Resources in Ethnic Cultural Characteristic Villages of Gansu

2.1 Protection Practices

First, externally promoted intangible cultural heritage protection constitutes one aspect. Gansu has a total of 285 items selected into the fifth batch of provincial-level representative items of intangible cultural heritage^[5], which enables many ethnic cultural resources in the province to undergo systematic surveys, sorting, and recognition. These resources are then incorporated into protection lists at different levels, granting their cultural values official recognition and legal protection. Regarding the construction of a list of ethnic minority characteristic villages, as of 2020, the number of state-level ethnic minority characteristic villages in the province had reached 27. The industrial structures, architectural styles, settlement patterns, and folk customs of these villages serve as concentrated portrayals of the social and cultural development characteristics of ethnic minorities^[6]. Furthermore, Gansu Province has established a four-level recognition system for representative items and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels, which provides institutional guarantees for heritage transmission activities. Relying on village resources, inheritors have set up intangible cultural heritage workshops, thereby driving villagers to learn traditional skills and achieving both cultural transmission and income generation.

Second, the holistic conservation of cultural space constitutes another practice. In terms of maintaining settlement patterns and architectural styles, Gansu Province has designated ethnic minority villages with unique cultural values as characteristic protected villages. It then aligns village planning with conservation planning, coordinates the relationships among protection, utilization, and development, and strives to protect the overall spatial form of the villages, thereby ensuring their integrity and authenticity^[7]. In terms of the living continuity of livelihoods and daily life, holistic conservation covers not only perceptible physical architectural landscapes but also the lifestyles and cultural practices that permeate villagers' daily existence. For example, for agricultural ethnic characteristic villages, the protection of their local knowledge, traditional farming tools, and ecological ethical concepts serves to safeguard the economic foundation and ecological basis upon which their culture relies for survival and development.

Third, the revival of endogenous protection serves as another practice. Endogenous protection takes the cultural self-awareness of village communities and the autonomous actions of villagers as its core driving forces, thereby stimulating their initiative to participate in cultural protection. In the ethnic cultural characteristic villages of Gansu, villagers have spontaneously established organizations such as intangible cultural heritage cooperatives, cultural performance troupes, and tourism service teams. These organizations have gradually become core vehicles for collective decision-making and for connecting with external resources, granting villagers the initiative and voice in the protection of cultural resources. With the advancement of protection publicity, regular education, and external interactions, villagers actively learn traditional languages and skills, and they use modern media to record and disseminate their own ethnic culture. Thus, they have achieved a role transformation from cultural holders to cultural interpreters and promoters.

2.2 Utilization Practices

First, the exploration of community-led tourism mechanisms constitutes one practice. In the tourism practices of ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu, systematically trained farmers open their own houses to provide tourists with accommodation, dining, and venues for cultural exchange. By eating, living, and working together with the farmers, tourists experience authentic rural family life and learn about local customs, beliefs, and cultural connotations. The tourism income belongs to the farmers, which incentivizes them to actively maintain traditional residential forms and hospitality etiquette. Meanwhile, local community cooperatives organize cultural guided tours based on natural resources, and they recruit village elders, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and villagers as local cultural narrators. This transformation turns tourism from one-way performance into sincere interaction, and it elevates simple sightseeing activities into in-depth cultural journeys that are both knowledge-based and spiritually experiential.

Second, the establishment of handicraft cooperatives constitutes another practice. Establishing handicraft cooperatives is an effective path for ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu to enhance the competitiveness of ethnic handicrafts. In terms of product development, collective discussions integrate traditional techniques with modern design, thereby developing products that possess both practicality and cultural value. In terms of market access, the cooperatives collectively connect with e-commerce platforms and scenic areas, solving the problems of narrow individual sales channels and weak bargaining power. In terms of fair trade, collective negotiation prevents price undercutting and protects the rights and interests of artisans. In 2022, the Qingyang Sachet Embroidery Intangible Cultural Heritage Workshop, the Yugur Costume Intangible Cultural Heritage Workshop, and the Linxia Brick Carving Intangible Cultural Heritage Workshop in Gansu were successfully selected as “Typical Cases of Intangible Cultural Heritage Workshops”. These workshops have demonstrated exemplary effects in driving village employment and income growth, fostering civilized rural customs, and activating rural vitality, thereby making Gansu's ethnic characteristic culture an important supporting force for rural revitalization^[8].

Third, the activation of the cultural festival economy constitutes another practice. The traditional festivals of ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu carry the historical memories, belief systems, and folk customs of various ethnic groups, thereby providing solid cultural support for the development of the cultural festival economy. Among these practices, brand building serves as the core competitiveness of the cultural festival economy. By deeply exploring the cultural connotations of traditional festivals and combining them with local natural scenery, the villages have created a number of cultural festival brands with regional characteristics and ethnic customs, which has enhanced the visibility and influence of the villages. For example, the traditional culture and art festival as well as the agricultural and animal husbandry sports meeting held in Minghua Township, Sunan County integrates artistic performances, ethnic sports competitions, and trade exchanges. This event has successfully created the characteristic brand of “the hometown of Yugur songs and dances”, and it has effectively driven the integrated development of traditional culture industries, tourism, and sports industries^[9].

3. Realistic Challenges in the Protection and Utilization of Cultural Resources in Ethnic Cultural Characteristic Villages of Gansu

3.1 The “Symbolization” and “Stagedization” of Culture

The “symbolization” and “stagedization” of culture refer to the phenomenon in which many folk activities and festivals that originally carried special meanings and functions are removed from their original cultural contexts, and their schedules and content arrangements increasingly cater to peak tourism seasons and the viewing demands of tourists. To meet large-scale production and sales, the shapes, patterns, and materials of handicrafts are often simplified, and they are reduced to assembly-line tourist souvenirs. The reason for the above problems lies in the failure to operate effectively according to the “front stage, curtain, and back stage” model. Driven by the tourism economy, some local governments transform local culture into a “front stage” display area for tourists, which causes traditional culture to gradually decline and disappear^[10]. In the ethnic cultural characteristic villages of Gansu, the daily lives of villagers are selectively incorporated into the “front stage” display system and become paid viewing items, while the real and trivial aspects of daily life

retreat to the “back stage” . As a result, tourists are exposed only to carefully packaged cultural appearances, and the integrity and authenticity of the culture are fragmented.

3.2 Property Rights Disputes and Interest Imbalances over Collective Cultural Resources

The cultural resources of ethnic cultural characteristic villages possess the attribute of collective property rights, yet the commercial utilization following the intervention of the market economy has triggered property rights disputes and conflicts over interest distribution. The ideal state of developing rural folk tourism is a win-win situation in which the public benefits, elites gain fame, and the government achieves political accomplishments. However, in actual operation, conflicts often arise due to income distribution, with the core issue lying in the cognitive differences between social elites and ordinary villagers. Social elites believe that the success of a project stems from their own market insight and risk-taking, and that they therefore deserve greater decision-making power and a larger share of the benefits, without the need to ensure equal returns for all villagers. They interpret the non-cooperation of villagers as ingratitude or jealousy. In contrast, villagers believe that the core capital of folk tourism lies in the cultural and natural landscapes that are collectively owned by the village, and that their own participation also contributes to the project. They hope that elites will lead them toward common prosperity rather than simply pursuing profit maximization^[11].

3.3 The Cultural Inheritance Crisis under the Intergenerational Gap

Globalization, urbanization, and the digital era have impacted the cultural identity of the younger generation in ethnic cultural characteristic villages of Gansu, leading to a serious intergenerational gap crisis in traditional cultural inheritance. The new generation, influenced by the values of modern culture, has begun to doubt or even reject their own traditional ethnic culture. This phenomenon is mainly manifested in the following aspects: on the one hand, some inheritors of ethnic minority cultures give up cultural transmission due to insufficient market development of traditional skills and meager economic returns; on the other hand, the new generation witnesses the economic hardship and financial difficulties of the previous generation of inheritors, lacks the willingness to learn their own ethnic culture, and tends to prefer industries that can yield quick profits. In addition, the orientation of school education towards modernization and urbanization further weakens the ethnic identity of minority students with their local culture, thereby indirectly affecting the transmission of the cultural genes of ethnic minorities^[12].

4. Optimization Countermeasures for the Protection and Utilization of Cultural Resources in Ethnic Cultural Characteristic Villages of Gansu

4.1 Preserving Cultural Authenticity

When engaging in industrial development, ethnic culture needs to adhere to the principle of authenticity. Specifically, it must achieve the integration of the spiritual core of ethnic culture with its industrial carriers, the unification of the religious nature and performative aspects of ethnic ritual activities, and the coordination of the social functions and tourism functions of ethnic culture^[13]. For example, by relying on the “front stage, curtain, and back stage” model, functional areas should be reasonably divided. The original timing and procedures of folk festivals should be respected, thereby allowing culture to return to authentic inheritance. The production standards of handicrafts should be standardized, and the blind simplification of patterns, materials, and techniques should be eliminated. In summary, moderate innovation should be carried out on the basis of preserving the traditional cultural core, so as to avoid cultural superficiality and homogenization and to achieve coordinated progress in ethnic cultural protection and tourism development.

4.2 Coordinating Multilateral Interests amid Property Rights Dilemmas

In the process of developing ethnic culture, stakeholders need to scientifically define various rights and interests concerning cultural resources, including ownership rights, operation rights, profit rights, supervision rights, and disposal rights^[14]. Ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu should adhere to a development model characterized by government leadership, standardized enterprise operations, and active resident participation. They should also guide local residents to take part in the protection of ethnic cultural resources and in the development of cultural tourism, thereby changing the previous

passive role of residents and forming a development pattern in which the government, enterprises, and residents jointly construct and share benefits. Meanwhile, relevant parties should establish a fair and transparent benefit distribution mechanism. Core information such as project revenues and expenditures, profit dividends, and other key data should be disclosed throughout the entire process. This mechanism prevents excessive concentration of profits in the hands of a few developers, ensures that villagers receive their due returns, and balances collective common prosperity with market-oriented development, thereby fundamentally alleviating conflicts of interest.

4.3 Bridging the Intergenerational Gap in Cultural Inheritance

Ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu face the problem of an intergenerational gap in traditional cultural inheritance, and stakeholders can address this issue from three aspects. In terms of industry, they should base their efforts on local intangible cultural heritage and folk custom resources, and launch new cultural and creative products as well as folk experience projects. By doing so, they can extend the industrial chain, increase the income of inheritors, and change the current situation where inheritors earn meager incomes and face livelihood difficulties. In terms of institutions, they should improve the incentive and guarantee mechanism, establish special subsidies for older generations of intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and introduce youth support policies. These measures will encourage the new generation to return to their hometowns for employment and guide young people to abandon utilitarian career choices. In terms of education, they should rely on traditional cultural venues to carry out regular teaching and practical activities, enhance the cultural identity of the new generation, and reserve young forces for the inheritance of ethnic culture.

Conclusion

Ethnic cultural characteristic villages in Gansu serve as carriers for the inheritance and continuation of ethnic culture, as well as important spaces where multiple ethnic groups coexist and thrive. Although these characteristic villages have currently formed a dual protection mechanism consisting of both external and internal forces, they still face some practical dilemmas. Practice has shown that the sustainable development of ethnic culture is neither a rigid preservation of tradition nor a complete concession to the market economy. Instead, it requires the preservation of authenticity in cultural development, the coordination of multilateral interests amid property rights dilemmas, and the reshaping of cultural identity through intergenerational inheritance in education. Only in this way can the synergistic progress of cultural survival and rural revitalization be achieved, and can ethnic cultural characteristic villages truly become a spiritual homeland where diverse cultures integrate and develop, and where tradition and modernity coexist harmoniously.

Fund Projects

This research was supported by the Gansu Provincial Basic Research Program - Special Project for Soft Science under Grant No. 23JRZA405.

References

- [1] China Ethnic Culture Resources Library. Yugur Language. <http://www.minwang.com.cn/mzwhzyk/663688/686477/686479/614105/index.html>.
- [2] Weiyou Gansu. Gansu Costumes in Intangible Cultural Heritage. (2024-08-12). <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20240812A05HL800>.
- [3] Sun Fengrui. *The Vocational Education Path for the Dissemination and Inheritance of Traditional Ethnic Skills: Based on Observations and Reflections on the 2019 China-ASEAN Vocational Education Joint Exhibition and Forum*. *Vocational and Technical Education*, 2020, 41(30): 53-59.
- [4] Wang Shengpeng, Wang Yutao. *Research on the Development of Cultural Tourism of Gansu Ethnic Characteristic Architectural Heritage under the Background of Rural Revitalization*. *Gansu Agriculture*, 2021, (11): 23-26.
- [5] The People's Government of Gansu Province. *Notice on Publishing the Fifth Batch of Provincial-Level Representative Items of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. (2024-12-31). <http://www.gansu.gov.cn/gsszf/c100054/202412/174054777.shtml>.
- [6] You Tingting. *Gansu Adds 10 "Ethnic Minority Characteristic Villages of China"*. (2020-01-21).

<http://gs.people.com.cn/n2/2020/0121/c183283-33734810.html>.

[7] The People's Government of Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Notice of the People's Government of Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture on Issuing the Territorial Spatial Master Plan of Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (2021-2035): Zhou Zheng Fa No. 21. (2024-06-06). <http://www.gnzrmzf.gov.cn/info/1930/70942.htm>.

[8] Luo Yunpeng, Zhang Longtang. Gansu Intangible Cultural Heritage Workshops: Inheriting Ancient Skills and Depicting a Happy Life. China Tourism News, (2023-03-20). https://www.ihchina.cn/project_details/26871.html.

[9] Luo Huan su, Wu Xuefeng. The Traditional Culture and Art Festival of the Yugur People Opens, Presenting the Unique Charm of the "Hometown of Songs and Dances". (2019-05-27). https://gs.ifeng.com/a/20190527/7393609_0.shtml.

[10] Yang Zhenzhi. Front Stage, Curtain, Back Stage: An Exploration of a New Model for Ethnic Culture Protection and Tourism Development. *Ethnic Studies*, 2006, (02): 39-46+108.

[11] Xin Yunxing. The "Cultural Publicity" Issue in the Development of Rural Folk Tourism. *China Social Sciences Today*. (2024-04-30).

[12] Li Ming, Yao Jiali. The Crisis and Response of Ethnic Minority Cultural Inheritance in the Process of Modernization: From the Perspective of Cultural Genes. *Guizhou Ethnic Studies*, 2018, 39(07): 67-71.

[13] Qin Huiduo, Fan Jianhua. On the Principles and Models of the Development and Utilization of Ethnic Cultural Resources. *Chinese Culture Forum*, 2021, (2): 114-124+158-159.

[14] Tang Jian, Zhang Mingshan. Property Rights Definition and Protective Development of Ethnic Minority Cultural Resources: From the Perspective of Barzel's Economic Theory of Property Rights. *Ethnic Studies*, 2016, (6): 12-22+123-124.