

Potential and Pathways of Canal Cultural Tourism in Ethnic Minority Areas: A Case Study of Pinglu Canal

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Abstract: The Pinglu Canal, as a national century project, is profoundly reshaping the economic geography of Guangxi and the southwestern region. This critical north-south artery connects the Golden Waterway of the Xijiang River with the Beibu Gulf International Gateway Port. For the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, which is geographically remote yet strategically positioned as a key gateway, the imminent completion of the Pinglu Canal heralds a historic turning point. Those intangible cultural heritages long preserved in rural areas, relying on local knowledge transmission and gradually fading from memory, are highly likely to gain unprecedented opportunities for large-scale access to the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and even ASEAN markets. However, the physical construction of a site will not automatically enable the cultural symbols embodied in intangible cultural heritage to achieve immediate cross-regional dissemination or significant value enhancement. How to identify the canal-related cultural tourism potential in ethnic minority regions and how to construct the pathway from “resources” to “assets” have become urgent strategic questions requiring responses.

Keywords: Ethnic minorities; Cultural tourism potential; Pinglu Canal

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1. Introduction

With the Hengzhou straight down, and Qinzhou entered through the Xijin Reservoir, there is a “Yong-Qin Salt Route” which originates in Qinzhou and goes upstream to Lushan Luwu Pier. Various intangible cultural heritage with deep roots have been found along the canal in Lingshan County with most of them centered in the Qishi Hub district of Qinzhou city. They are ritual performances as carriers of community beliefs, traditional production of food based on local agricultural ecosystems, and famous varieties of *Camellia sinensis*.

All of these intangible cultural elements are part of an intangible cultural heritage resource repository that is unique and distinctive to ethnic minority regions. Nevertheless, within the existing structures of protection and development, most of the cultural goods have turned into so-called preserved relics or nominal entries, more like museum pieces in glass cases than living and active cultural goods. The resources are not connected with actual life situations and are not lively. As an example, the canal-based ritual intangible cultural heritage (Lingshan Tiaolingtou) of Lingshan County has a problem of intergenerational gaps among the inheritors, inflexible performance style, and limited space to perform ceremonies. Commercialization of traditional food-

related intangible cultural heritage goods has disconnected cultural symbolism and practical function, and disrupted the original ecological cycles. Brand-focused and craft-oriented intangible cultural heritage is still confined to stereotypical promotional stories—generic statements of what is eco-friendly tea ignore the tacit knowledge and generational experience transmitted by the way women practice them, making the products no different than other types. To sum up, conventional treatment of the intangible cultural heritage mostly implies its stationary preservation, classification in official registers as an instrument of promotion and marketing of tourism. However, modern society is becoming increasingly interested in historical culture, which prompts the need to offer derivative products and experiential performances. Although traditional models of protection might be useful, preserving intangible cultural heritage involves changing over time regional settings and actively responding to new market needs related to scaled, immersive, and branded cultural tourism experiences after the construction of a canal.

The digital revolution, immersive experiences, and user engagement have transformed the cultural and tourism industry profoundly. The conceptualization of new-quality productivity in cultural tourism is based on a combination of information, immersive scenarios, intellectual property (IP), and participatory culture as new production factors in order to redefine the creation, dissemination, and consumption of cultural assets^[1]. Such a paradigm shift creates new opportunities in revitalizing the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of ethnic minority areas: ICH is no longer a passive heritage but a dynamic resource that can be reinterpreted, repurposed, and re-experienced. Nevertheless, available literature either has a sole emphasis on folklore protection measures or is entirely based on branding separate ICH items, with few instances where they are being analyzed in a systematic way to identify and transform the ICH opportunities in the multifaceted context of the linear canal space—ethnic minority regions—for new quality productivity in cultural tourism. Importantly, aspects like gender dynamics, ecological cycles, and community-driven ritual evolution have not been properly integrated in analyses of canal-based cultural tourism schemes.

The study focuses on the north-south Pinglu Canal in Guangxi as its central axis and examines the intangible cultural heritage of the local ethnic groups as a whole. By means of field research and classification analysis, it deals with two key questions. The first question is whether the most significant impediment to the development of local cultural tourism is caused by the clash between traditional conservation mindsets and new elements of production.

The paper subsequently presents a realistic development strategy. It involves digital storytelling, daily scene integration, community inheritance, and ecological industrial chains. The method preserves cultural authenticity but is also market competitive, which can assist ethnic minority regions to move beyond just having cultural assets to producing real cultural worth. There are also concrete suggestions on how to revive the intangible cultural heritage and promote cultural tourism along the linear heritage corridor in southwest China.

2. Current situation and opportunities of canal cultural tourism in the region of ethnic minorities

2.1. Overview of the research: Distribution of intangible cultural heritage types along the Pinglu Canal

The research was undertaken by means of fieldwork carried out along the Pinglu Canal in Qinzhou City, Lingshan County, which is an important part of the canal bank with a radius of 0–15 km. This area has several distinct characteristics of its intangible cultural heritage resources, including their abundance and quality, including 2 national-level items, 12 autonomous region-level items, and 28 municipal-level items. They are also diverse, with most of the resources being located within a 5-kilometer distance of the canal. Considering

the cultural form and revitalization potential, there are three main categories of such heritage items, which include ritual performance traditions (e.g., Tiaolingtou); traditional food categories (e.g., Lingshan zongzi); and agricultural branding initiatives (e.g., Lingshan black tea) ^[2]. These three types are very different in terms of inheritance status, industrialization process, and brand development, but they have one thing in common: they are honored, but not really alive.

2.2. Potential and limitations of intangible cultural heritage on the basis of ritual performances: An example of jumping over ridge head ceremony

Lingshan Tiaolingtou is one of the ancient sacrificial mask dances in Guangxi, and in 2014, it was included in the list of provincial-level intangible cultural heritage projects. Although in other villages of Qinzhou City there are other inheritors of this tradition, we focused on Zou Hai, the inheritor at Deqing Hall, which is the official inheritance base of Qinzhou Tiaolingtou in Lingshan County. The costumes have a weight of over ten kilograms and still have a very bright color, giving the dance a sense of mystery. Alongside exaggerated actions and strong gestures of Nuo masks, the performance can be creatively combined with modern cultural phenomena and popularized by using short videos to enhance its cultural influence. Furthermore, the three-day ritual performance may be transformed into experiential tourism programs, which would make it more accessible to the younger population and expand the audience. Yet, most of the inheritors in the villages are elderly, and young learners tend to be disinclined because they do not receive much financial assistance. In the face of only 36 masks left and the art at risk of being lost, the tradition has a generational divide. Many performances depend on the goodwill of the community and the voluntary funding of the villagers, but the online marketing is shallow, so the performances are performed as rituals instead of stories. The shows are barely surviving during festival seasons and cannot cope with the massive tourist influx in the area of the Grand Canal.

2.3. Potential and limitations of traditional food intangible cultural heritage: A case study of the Lingshan Grand Zongzi

In 2008, Lingshan Large Zongzi was recognized as a piece of regional intangible cultural heritage. It has created an initial ecological cycle of cultivation, breeding, processing, and festival consumption utilizing local ingredients of glutinous rice, mung beans, and free-range pork. The enterprise that was visited and surveyed, “Taixiang Zongwang,” is a big zongzi manufacturer in the region that has been producing standardized and commercialized products. By the end of the year 2023, it had delivered 64 kilograms of large zongzi to the canal workers and had built a fruitful model of promotion based on the concept of river and large zongzi. Nevertheless, there are issues: cultural symbolism and functionalism of the product do not correspond; inheritors are older people; poor online selling infrastructure; a slack ecological cycle regardless of size; and the necessity of effective and innovative approaches to create tourism brands and publicize the cultural value of the canal as an intangible heritage of food culture.

2.4. Potential and limitations of agricultural brand intangible cultural heritage: The Case of Lingshan Black Tea

The Autonomous Region-level Intangible Cultural Heritage List featured Lingshan Black Tea in 2021. The plantation of Teng Lingshan, a registered intangible cultural heritage inheritor, covers more than 2,000 mu of tea fields, and a developmental model of 101 cooperative groups and more than 80,000 mu of tea plantations has been developed. In addition to the conventional charcoal roasting method, Lingshan Black Tea has a high added value, a great cultural premium opportunity, and a high frequency of use. Furthermore, it has a female-dominated inheritance and collaboration network with over 60 percent of tea consumers being women, which

would make the brand strategy based on female perspectives the perfect storyline basis. Since the construction of the Pinglu Canal, Lingshan Black Tea will have access to the higher-end market of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and access ASEAN markets through the route of the Ancient Tea Boat Trade.

Nevertheless, Ling Shan black tea does not have a strong brand story at present, and it has shown generational technological gaps in its marketing plans. The inheritance of Teng Lingshan continues to focus on ensuring that three major attributes are highlighted, i.e., selenium-rich, ecological, and traditional craftsmanship, as it still lacks a narrative structure that would appeal to modern women's cultural tastes. It is found that traditional charcoal-baked black tea production volumes per annum are only 20 tons, and the export volumes are 5 tons, which are significantly less than the 80 tons produced and 75 tons exported by industrialized black tea, which is causing a gradual erosion of market awareness of this intangible cultural heritage craft. There is also a high level of digital divide: inheritors cannot utilize the new media to promote their activities, whereas platforms do not have standardized promotion material ^[3]. According to an interview, Teng Lingshan said, The tea industry has a long and difficult path to go through that demands combined actions of tea companies, the population, and the government.

2.5. Overall assessment of “potential vs. constraints”

An overview of the three types of intangible cultural heritage identifies various general traits of the canal-based cultural tourism potential of ethnic minority regions: these regions have abundant resource bases, varied kinds and focus in their distribution; but do not have ways of converting these resources into material cultural tourism products. Furthermore, there are generational gaps in inheritance, storytelling styles are inflexible and non-innovative, ecological relationships are poor, and digitalization is not well developed. On a more profound level, there is also a structural disconnect between the traditional mode of conservation and new modes of production. The conventional mode of conservation involves keeping the intangible cultural heritage in its initial form to be performed during the festivals or transferred by the system of a master and apprentice, and the modern-day canal-based cultural tourism needs completely different content dynamic components that may be experienced, spread, purchased, and re-energized. The mismatch should be overcome by incorporating digital technology, immersive experiences, active involvement of communities, and better cooperation with local actors in various aspects to develop the so-called new quality productive forces ^[4].

3. Approaches to unlocking the cultural and tourism potential of the canal

3.1. Digital narration: From oral transmission to editable content

One of the major challenges of overcoming the problems of incomprehensibility and limited dissemination of intangible cultural heritage is to increase digital coverage and access. With regard to the remaining 36 Nuo masks of the Deqingtang Tiaolingtou dance, a digital twin registry may be developed using 3D modeling as well as AR to enable visitors to watch movements of the masks on their smartphones; 3D printing may subsequently be used to replicate lost masks and restore these traditional dances. In the case of Lingshan black tea, virtual inheritors may be formed according to the character Teng Lingshan, allowing tourists to gain knowledge of tea-making by engaging in interactive activities on screens. In the case of Lingshan large zongzi, short video recordings of the daily life of the inheritors can be turned into stories of how the canal workers are supported and converted into brand assets; finally, it is the conversion of tacit knowledge, which is gained through touch, personal contact, and practical knowledge, into explicit, tangible, audible, and shareable content in digital form.

3.2. Contextual integration: Reconstructing rituals and experiences in linear space

The straight line of the canal offers perfect opportunities to combine the intangible cultural heritage with the immersive experience. Once open, passenger ships will be launched to form a luxury water tourism line between Guigang, Nanning, Qinzhou, and Beihai to encourage the growth of cruise tours, yacht tours, and evening excursions. This route may also be exploited by the scenario-based design in forming an Intangible Cultural Heritage Corridor along the Ling Mountain section (0–15 km) with specific experience locations: (1) Immersive performances that summarize a three-day ritual into a two-hour best-of performance that includes visual demonstration and Nuo dance practice; (2) Creative workshops during which visitors would have the opportunity to prepare zongzi or participate in the daily activities of a tea farmer and buy souvenirs of local culture; (3) Integrated thematic stations that incorporate various heritage components into interconnected hubs providing better “Canal+” interpretation services and progressively develop core experience spots and consolidate the heritage corridor network.

3.3. Community-based reproduction: Empowering tourists as disseminators

Until recently, it was possible to say that intangible cultural heritage was transmitted by official media and festive celebrations, which reached a restricted group of people. The concept of community-based reproduction is to convert consumers into producers of content and change one-time consumerism into a long-term interaction system. To be more specific, there are three different communities of intangible cultural heritage that can gain special social interaction and content-sharing platforms. As an illustration, Tiaolingtou would be able to have a TikTok topic named Nuo Mask Challenge, where customers have to wear the reproduced masks in the experience center, take a video of less than six seconds, label it with appropriate tags, and get points to redeem cultural goods. Lingshan Traditional Zongzi Festival could come up with a Zongzi King Competition whereby participants are allowed to make a 1.5 kg zongzi in a workshop and send in pictures to be voted on every month, where the top prize will be branded cultural items. Lingshan Black Tea can start a Xiaohongshu topic known as Her Tea Diary, in which women are encouraged to post photos of their visit to tea plantations and their experience of drinking tea; the most popular entries can be rewarded with co-branded tea gift sets.

Moreover, a WeChat group named Lingshan Intangible Cultural Heritage Co-Creators can be built to involve the participants of the experience programs as members of the community and convert them into long-term users. The group may receive frequent news about new developments in heritage, discount coupons, and special edition goods, converting temporary visitors into devoted fans.

3.4. Coupling of the ecological industrial chain: From “single-point protection” to a “closed-loop economy”

The existence and sustainability of intangible cultural heritage require a sound ecological base. The bean residue is used to feed pigs in the traditional Lingshan rice dumpling production, pig manure is returned to farmland, and glutinous rice is grown back on the fields. Since the end of the canal construction, it became incorporated into the adjacent ecosystem and received certification as “Canal Ecological Rice Dumplings.” Raw material localization and waste usage statistics were well-defined and supported by an entirely traceable supply chain to create a systematic, verifiable eco-friendly manufacturing process. The farmer engagement program of Lingshan black tea provides a strong basis for future development, allowing quality improvements such as turning it into the Women’s Tea Farmers Cooperative 2.0—incorporating tea harvesters into profit-sharing schemes that improve product quality. Every tea package has carbon emissions tags to meet green consumption needs and comply with eco-standard regulations. The agricultural traditions are transformed into blessing ceremonies in Tiaolingtou, where tourists buy the local rice fields and harvest the rice and are given the blessing certificates,

connecting the ceremonial traditions, agricultural purchases, and environmental contribution into one unified experience that will deepen the understanding of ethnic beliefs by the visitors through physical actions.

4. Conclusion

The upcoming development of the Pinglu Canal is an important chance that can be used to enhance cultural tourism in areas through which it will pass within the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Nevertheless, it is necessary to make this happen with concerted actions by local administrations, holders of intangible cultural heritage, populations, economic actors, and technology suppliers. The region should constantly focus on the innovation of local intangible cultural heritage traits by adding new features, but not only by incorporating other aspects like Tiaolingtou dance, zongzi packaging and tea-making experience but also by creating whole corridors that are focused on particular ethnic intangible cultural heritage, creation of digital narratives, integration of heritage into immersive contexts, use of community-based revitalization, and matching those programs to ecological industrial chains. Such a strategy will help to investigate adaptive variations in revitalization frameworks in various ethnic locations and linear infrastructure developments^[5]. Finally, the canal that connects the southwestern part of China needs to become a warm cultural channel that allows the flow of intangible cultural heritage based on local customs down its waters to a wider global population.

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