

## PROTECTION AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR TRADITIONAL ETHNIC MINORITY VILLAGES IN SICHUAN: A CASE STUDY OF A QIANG TRADITIONAL VILLAGE

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### Article history:

Received Date: 29  
July 2024

Revised Date: 29  
November 2024

Accepted Date: 20  
December 2024

### Keywords:

Cultural  
Heritage,  
Traditional  
Villages, Ethnic  
Minorities,  
Sichuan,  
Sustainable  
Development

**Abstract**—The traditional ethnic minority villages in Sichuan Province are renowned for their profound historical heritage and unique cultural value. However, with the advancement of modernization, these villages are facing numerous challenges such as population loss, dilution of traditional culture, and environmental degradation. This study investigates the preservation and development strategies for traditional ethnic minority villages in Sichuan, focusing on the Qiang ethnic village of Xiuxi. Through field surveys, interviews, and literature research, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of Xiuxi Village's cultural, social, and environmental context. Several strategies

are proposed to address these challenges, including strengthening community participation, enhancing tourism development and management, and modernizing agriculture. By implementing these measures, the study aims to protect cultural heritage while promoting economic development, ensuring the sustainable development of Xiuxi Village, and improving the residents' quality of life.

## I. Introduction

Sichuan Province, located in southwestern China, is renowned for its rich ethnic minority cultures and traditional villages. These traditional villages of ethnic minorities not only reflect profound historical heritage but also showcase unique cultural values [1]. With the advancement of modernization, Sichuan's traditional ethnic minority villages face numerous challenges, such as population loss, the dilution of traditional culture, and environmental degradation [2]. Therefore, it is particularly important to strengthen the protection and inheritance of these villages [3].

The First Central Document of 2024 proposes to prosper and

develop rural culture and carry out concentrated and contiguous protection and utilization demonstrations of traditional villages. The continuously updated policies on new-type urbanization construction and rural revitalization bring more opportunities to the traditional villages in ethnic minority areas, while also posing many challenges [4]. Finding suitable paths for protection and development in the current environment is significant for the inheritance and promotion of historical and cultural heritage and the development of the rural economy. It is also a necessary requirement to adapt to the new era.

A review of relevant literature reveals that the academic

community has extensively explored traditional villages in ethnic minority areas. Scholars, through archaeological and historical document research, have traced the history of Sichuan's traditional ethnic minority villages, revealing the background and development process of these villages [5]. Scholars have conducted field surveys and mappings, meticulously recording the architectural styles and structural features of different ethnic minority villages [6]. For example, the Tibetan watchtowers, Qiang stone houses, and Yi wooden houses each have their unique characteristics. Research has also revealed the relationship between the spatial layout of these villages and the adaptation to the local natural environment, as well as the reflection of the internal social structure of the villages [1][7][8].

Based on this, scholars propose that protecting these villages not only helps preserve ethnic cultural heritage but also maintains cultural diversity. They also suggest combining

ecological and cultural tourism to promote the economic development of traditional villages while protecting their cultural and natural environments [9]. Emphasis is placed on the importance of community participation and government guidance [10]. Community participation can effectively protect and inherit the traditional cultures of ethnic minorities by mobilizing the enthusiasm and involvement of villagers. The government should strengthen macro-control over the protection of traditional ethnic minority villages, providing policy support and funding.

Through the study of traditional ethnic minority villages in Sichuan, scholars have not only revealed the rich historical and cultural values of these villages but also provided important theoretical support and practical guidance for their protection and inheritance [11]. It is also evident that research should continue to focus on the changes and development of these villages, exploring more

effective paths for protection and inheritance.

## **II. Theoretical Foundation**

### **A. Theories of Cultural Heritage Protection**

Cultural heritage refers to both tangible and intangible cultural assets that possess historical, artistic, scientific, social, or spiritual value. It is not only a testament to human history and civilization but also an important expression and vehicle for the transmission of cultural diversity. Cultural heritage includes tangible forms such as architecture and artifacts, as well as intangible forms such as traditional customs, performing arts, and festivals [12].

The principles of cultural heritage protection encompass integrity, authenticity, completeness, sustainable development, public participation, and legal safeguards. These principles guide the systematic protection of cultural heritage, the maintenance of historical authenticity, the preservation of temporal and spatial integrity, the coordinated development of

the economy and society, widespread social participation, and support through laws and policies.

Based on these principles, a comprehensive approach to promoting the protection and transmission of cultural heritage can be achieved through various methods [13]. These methods include the conservation of artifacts, digital preservation, legislation and policies, community involvement, international cooperation, cultural tourism, and educational outreach. By employing these strategies, the sustainable use and development of cultural heritage can be realized.

### **B. Theories of Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development refers to the coordinated development of the economy, society, and environment, aiming for the efficient use of resources and ecological balance, while emphasizing social equity and inclusiveness [14]. Through strategies such as policy and regulation formulation, technological innovation

promotion, community participation, and public awareness enhancement, the goals of sustainable development can be achieved [15-16].

Applying sustainable development theories to the protection of traditional villages can effectively realize the coordinated development of the economy, society, and environment [17]. By promoting green tourism, developing traditional handicrafts, encouraging community participation, protecting the ecology, and preserving cultural heritage, comprehensive protection and rational utilization of traditional villages can be achieved [17], [18]. This ensures the effective preservation of their historical and cultural heritage and creates better living conditions for residents.

### **C. Theories of Community Participation**

Community participation holds irreplaceable importance in the protection of traditional villages

and other fields. By enhancing protection effectiveness, promoting social cohesion, driving sustainable development, fostering economic growth, and improving governance outcomes, community participation can effectively preserve and transmit traditional culture, while also improving the quality of life for residents and promoting comprehensive social progress [19-20]. Encouraging and supporting community members to actively engage in various activities can achieve more comprehensive and effective development and protection goals [20].

Through models such as collaboration, consultation, cooperation, autonomy, and participatory decision-making, combined with methods like community meetings, surveys, volunteer services, and feedback mechanisms, the effectiveness of community participation can be significantly enhanced, promoting sustainable development and governance of the community [21].

### **III. Methodology and Data**

#### **A. Methodology**

This study combines field surveys, interviews, and literature research to collect data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the culture, history, society, and environment of Xiuxi Village. Field surveys offer firsthand observations and experiences, which are crucial for exploring the current issues the village faces and identifying potential development pathways [22].

Xiuxi Village is a traditional Qiang village located in Sichuan Province. The village is economically underdeveloped but has a long history and rich cultural heritage. While its cultural traditions are well-preserved and passed down, modern infrastructure is limited, and the level of sustainable development is low. As a traditional ethnic minority village, Xiuxi is representative of challenges in cultural heritage preservation and rural development, making it a valuable case study.

The study employs purposive sampling to ensure that selected

participants represent different perspectives within the community. Participants were chosen for their deep knowledge of the village's history, culture, and social structure. A total of 30 participants were selected, including people from different age groups, genders, and social roles, such as elders, village leaders, cultural practitioners, and younger villagers.

The study used semi-structured interviews to engage in in-depth discussions with key informants about their views and experiences concerning the village's past, present, and future. This interview format ensures consistency while maintaining flexibility. The interview guide includes both open-ended and focused questions to encourage participants to elaborate on their views. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Additionally, informal conversations were conducted with other villagers to gather insights into daily life.

A variety of data collection tools were used in this study, including interviews, field

observations, and literature research. The interview guide was pre-tested with two villagers to ensure clarity and relevance. In addition to interviews, detailed field notes were taken during site visits, documenting observations related to the village's cultural practices, social interactions, and environmental conditions. Photographs were also used to capture key cultural sites and traditional practices. Finally, literature research provided historical context and background information on Xiuxi Village and the Qiang people, complementing and enriching the primary data findings.

The field surveys adopted an exploratory approach, aiming to broadly investigate the current challenges facing the village, including cultural preservation, infrastructure development, and sustainable growth. The survey lasted for one month, with multiple visits to the village at different times of the day to capture the dynamics of daily life. Observations included community gatherings, market

activities, and cultural ceremonies, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of the village.

By using these methods, the study aims to provide a comprehensive, multi-dimensional perspective on Xiuxi Village's cultural heritage, social structure, and potential pathways for sustainable development. The combination of qualitative data from interviews, field observations, and literature research allows for an in-depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities the village faces, offering informed recommendations for future development.

## **B. Data**

All qualitative data, including interview and field observation data, were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers first coded the data, identifying key themes and patterns, and then categorized and integrated them to further understand the main issues and challenges in the village's culture, history, society, and environment. Although this

study primarily relies on qualitative data, quantitative data related to infrastructure, such as road quality and power supply, were also collected. These quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistical analysis to supplement the findings from the qualitative analysis.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the following measures were taken in this study:

- i. Reliability of Interviews: The study used purposive sampling to ensure that participants represented different social roles within the village. The interview guide was pre-tested with two villagers before the study began to ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions. All interviews were conducted by a single researcher to minimize bias during the interview process.
- ii. Consistency of Data Analysis: The study employed thematic analysis to analyze the qualitative data. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the data was independently

coded by two researchers, and cross-validation was performed to ensure consistency in the analysis results.

- iii. Triangulation: To ensure the validity of the data, the study incorporated triangulation by using multiple data sources, including interviews, field observations, and literature research. Additionally, the researchers applied the constant comparative method to verify the data, ensuring that no important information was overlooked or misinterpreted.

## **IV. Result**

### **A. Village Overview**

Xiuxi Village is in Li County, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. It is situated in the mountainous area of Li County, surrounded by high mountains with complex terrain and intersected by rivers. The climate is significantly influenced by the mountainous environment. The village is in the southeastern part of Puxi Township, with the land



primarily consisting of terraced fields. It is situated at an elevation of 2,570 meters and is 20 kilometers away from the main road.

## **B. Current Protection Status**

Xiuxi Village has preserved many traditional Qiang-style buildings, such as watchtowers and stone houses. These structures not only serve practical functions but also reflect the unique architectural style and historical culture of the area. Local government and relevant cultural protection agencies have implemented preservation measures, including repairs and maintenance, to prevent damage from natural and human factors.

The village also features Qiang religious sites, such as the sacrificial tower and sacrificial square, as shown in Figure 1(a). These are not only centers of faith but also significant cultural heritage. Religious activities and ceremonies remain active in Xiuxi Village, with important festivals involving sacrificial rites. These activities play a

crucial role in maintaining and transmitting religious culture.

Traditional Qiang festivals, such as the Qiang New Year and the Qiang Shibi Festival, are widely celebrated in the village. These festival activities include sacrifices, songs, dances, and traditional sports, reflecting the uniqueness of Qiang culture.

The village also continues the tradition of Qiang embroidery and silver crafting. These handicrafts are both utilitarian and artistic, showcasing the craftsmanship of the Qiang people.

Overall, the preservation of cultural heritage in Xiuxi Village is in good condition, with traditional buildings, religious heritage, festival activities, and handicrafts well-preserved and transmitted. However, in the face of modernization, natural disasters, and population loss, further comprehensive measures are needed to strengthen the protection and transmission of cultural heritage to ensure the continuity and development of these valuable cultural resources.

### C. Living Environment

The main roads in Xiuxi Village have been resurfaced, but some village roads still require further repair and widening. The village has a basic water supply system, and irrigation facilities are relatively well-developed, meeting the needs for agricultural irrigation. Electricity supply is widespread, and most households have stable power. Mobile communication signals are well-covered, meeting the communication needs of villagers, and there is a basic medical and health station in the village, though its equipment and supplies are relatively rudimentary.

Xiuxi Village boasts a beautiful environment with high greenery coverage and good air quality. Most villagers live in traditional farm courtyards, although some households have upgraded to modern brick houses. The primary livelihood

of villagers is agriculture, which provides a relatively single source of income. However, with the development of tourism in recent years, some villagers have increased their income by starting farm stays and selling local products. Cultural activities for villagers are mainly centered around traditional festivals and off-season periods, with a variety of community activities, though modern entertainment facilities are relatively scarce.

While the infrastructure and living environment in Xiuxi Village have significantly improved in recent years, there is still room for enhancement, particularly in modern facilities and educational resources. The living environment harmonizes with nature, offering a superior ecological setting, but economic development remains relatively lagging.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 1: (a) Sacrificial square (b) Wetland (c) Upper village (d) Low village

## V. Discussion

### A. Village value

The geographical location of Xiuxi Village is highly suitable for human habitation, living, and production. The village's feng shui reflects the wisdom of the Qiang ancestors in selecting settlement sites, as they carefully chose this auspicious location. Situated in a high mountain canyon, Xiuxi Village benefits from a geographically advantageous position, nestled between mountains and water, making it easy to defend and difficult to attack. Facing the opposite Puxi Village, the two are separated by mountain ranges, creating both a visual and symbolic connection. The surrounding towering mountains, with snow covering the peaks for over half the year, combine with lush green fields and clear lakes to form a beautiful and

tranquil natural landscape. The pristine natural scenery of Xiuxi Village serves as a unique ecological resource, as shown in Figure 1(b). In interviews, villagers widely expressed that Xiuxi Village's natural environment is not only the foundation of their livelihood but also an integral part of the village's culture. Most participants mentioned that the village's geographical location and natural scenery have a profound impact on their lives and spiritual well-being. For instance, one villager shared, "The natural scenery here is peaceful and tranquil. Every time I see the snow-capped mountains, I feel as though I draw strength from nature." This deep integration of culture and nature endows Xiuxi Village with a unique cultural charm and provides a distinctive resource

for future sustainable development.

Through long-term development and evolution, Xiuxi Village has formed a layout comprising the upper, middle, and lower villages. The historical buildings in the lower and middle villages are primarily constructed from earth and slate, while the buildings in the upper village were repaired and newly built after the 2008 earthquake. These newer constructions incorporate elements such as slate, wood, and carved windows, reflecting a respect for and continuation of traditional architectural styles, as shown in Figure 1(c). The buildings in the lower village preserve the ancient architectural style of the Qiang people, utilizing slate, yellow clay, and timber. These structures are both sturdy and historic, offering significant academic value for studying the craftsmanship and cultural essence of Qiang traditional architecture, as shown in Figure 1(d). According to an investigation of building types in Xiuxi Village, approximately 80%

of traditional buildings retain the original Qiang architectural style, particularly in the lower and middle villages. Although the upper village underwent restoration after the earthquake, over 50% of its traditional architectural elements, such as timber and carved windows, remain intact. This demonstrates that Xiuxi Village has successfully preserved its traditional culture while incorporating modern architectural elements, creating a unique architectural style.

Xiuxi Village boasts a rich and diverse cultural heritage, with a high degree of ethnic integration and a wide range of cultural elements. The village is home to traditional Qiang residences, stone tablet culture, Qiang embroidery, and sheepskin drum dance, among other cultural features. These cultural elements are deeply integrated with the ecological landscape, forming a unique village scenery. Interviews reveal that villagers generally view Xiuxi Village's cultural traditions as a source of their identity and pride. This is especially true for the sheepskin

drum dance and Qiang embroidery, where villagers have a strong cultural connection. For example, an elderly villager shared, "The sheepskin drum dance was passed down by our ancestors. Whenever we dance, we feel a connection to our ancestors and nature." The close integration of cultural heritage with the ecological landscape has contributed to the creation of a unique rural scene in Xiuxi Village, which also serves as an important resource for attracting tourists. According to data on cultural activity participation, Xiuxi Village shows a high participation rate in traditional cultural activities, especially the sheepskin drum dance and Qiang embroidery, with approximately 65% of villagers taking part. The village's cultural activities not only preserve traditions but also demonstrate strong potential for tourism appeal. Around 50% of interview participants stated that the village's traditional cultural activities have become an important part of their lives and expressed hope that these

activities will attract more visitors from outside.

## **B. Current problem**

The living environment in Xiuxi Village lacks effective protection and has already suffered a certain degree of damage. The mountains on both sides of the village are relatively high, but there are no strict protective measures in place, leading to widespread vegetation destruction. In some areas, soil erosion has occurred, which has damaged the natural landscape and ecosystem, increasing the risk of geological disasters such as landslides, collapses, and mudslides. According to villagers, about 20% of the vegetation in the mountains has been destroyed in the past decade, and soil erosion has become increasingly severe, directly affecting the ecological balance.

The existing historical buildings in Xiuxi Village include only the Low Old Fort, the Upper Fort Ruins, and the Old Watchtower. Other historical buildings have been severely damaged or destroyed

due to human demolition and earthquake disasters. Villagers have a weak awareness of the importance of protecting and preserving traditional culture, and some newly built structures fail to follow traditional architectural styles, which has damaged the overall aesthetic of the village's architectural ensemble. Construction activities have also disrupted the landscape and architectural style of the old forts. According to building survey data, about 40% of the village's historical buildings have been damaged. This phenomenon indicates that in the process of modernization, Xiuxi Village has neglected the protection of traditional culture and architecture, which will have a long-term impact on the village's cultural landscape.

The existing infrastructure in Xiuxi Village is poorly maintained, with issues such as damaged public toilets, unprotected fire hydrants, and exposed pipes. These problems not only degrade the overall appearance of the village but also impact both the daily lives of residents and the experience

of visitors. In addition, the village's infrastructure is generally underdeveloped. The sewage network is not connected to a treatment plant, causing untreated wastewater to be discharged directly into the environment, which harms the fragile ecosystem and leads to local water pollution. Xiuxi Village also lacks natural gas pipelines, has incomplete lighting facilities, and is missing essential signage systems—all of which hinder the development of tourism. Interview data reveals that villagers commonly report that these infrastructure issues directly affect their quality of life. Specifically, many residents mention that "life is very inconvenient, especially when tourists come, as the facility problems become even more apparent."

Xiuxi Village lacks a key industry, and most of its residents are engaged in small-scale, low-efficiency agricultural activities. Only a small number of villagers are involved in tourism services or businesses. The village does not have standardized guesthouses,

and the existing buildings are for residents' personal use only. According to the survey, around 70% of residents feel that the underdeveloped tourism industry has limited the village's economic growth and job opportunities. Statistics show that fewer than 20% of the villagers are involved in tourism, and the utilization rate of available tourism resources is under 40%. There are no prominent tourist attractions or products, and the tourism industry chain has yet to develop, with tourism activities remaining unorganized. The survey also found that about 85% of tourists reported that the village lacks necessary tourism facilities and signage, which significantly affects their experience.

The village is facing serious population loss, particularly the outflow of residents with higher education and skills. The remaining population is mainly older and less educated, leading to a decline in population, a lack of vitality, and a shortage of high-quality talent, which significantly impacts the long-

term development of Xiuxi Village. In interviews, many villagers stated that the outflow of young people and educated labor force has resulted in a shortage of workers in the village. One young villager mentioned, "I originally planned to stay in the village, but since I couldn't find suitable job opportunities, I had to go to the city. There are basically no career opportunities in the village." Some villagers expressed a strong desire to participate in tourism decision-making, but their actual involvement is low. During the tourism decision-making process, villagers usually do not genuinely participate and are merely informed of the decisions through meetings. Due to the relatively low education levels of some villagers and their limited understanding of the tourism industry, they have lost a central role in the decision-making process. Survey results show that while nearly 60% of villagers expressed willingness to participate in tourism decisions and development, fewer than 30% actually

participated. This indicates that although villagers are willing to engage, their actual influence in tourism decision-making is limited due to the lack of proper training and information channels.

### **C. Protection and Development Strategies**

#### **i. Strengthening Community Involvement**

First, establish a village self-governing organization by forming a villagers' committee or a villagers' representative assembly to ensure villagers have a voice in village management. Hold regular village meetings to discuss and decide on village affairs, enhancing villagers' sense of participation. Increase information transparency by making village affairs and financial information public, allowing villagers to understand the village's development and fund usage. Use bulletin boards, village affairs public platforms, and other channels to timely release important village information [12].

Secondly, organize community activities. Arrange cultural and entertainment activities, such as festivals, cultural performances, and sports competitions, to enhance interaction and cohesion among villagers. Conduct volunteer service activities, such as environmental protection volunteers, community cleaning, and poverty alleviation, to improve villagers' social responsibility.

Additionally, offer education and training. Provide agricultural technology training, entrepreneurship training, and vocational skills training to improve villagers' overall abilities. Encourage young people to return to the village for entrepreneurship by providing policy support and financial assistance, stimulating village economic development and community participation. Involve young people in village management, bringing fresh blood and innovative thinking. Through cultural activities and education, inherit and promote traditional culture and customs, enhancing villagers' cultural identity and pride. Discover and



protect local cultural heritage, develop cultural tourism, and increase the village's attractiveness and economic benefits.

#### ii. Enhancing Tourism Development and Management

Formulate detailed tourism development plans, clearly defining the direction, goals, and measures to ensure orderly tourism development [23]. In planning, focus on protecting traditional buildings, folk culture, and natural landscapes to prevent damage from overdevelopment. Conduct environmental impact assessments and take measures to reduce the negative impact of tourism activities on the ecological environment, promoting sustainable tourism.

Improve infrastructure, enhance road and traffic conditions, and build parking lots, trails, and other facilities to facilitate tourists' travel. Develop distinctive homestays and local cuisine to enhance visitors' accommodation and dining experiences. Construct visitor centers, public toilets,

and information points to provide convenient public services.

Enrich tourism products by developing unique cultural experience projects, such as traditional handicrafts and folk performances. Utilize natural resources to develop ecological tourism, sightseeing agriculture, and outdoor sports projects, attracting tourists with different interests. Host local festivals to attract tourists and increase the village's visibility and influence.

Establish a fair benefit distribution mechanism to ensure villagers benefit from tourism development, motivating their participation. Encourage the establishment of tourism cooperatives for villagers to jointly participate in tourism development and management, maximizing collective benefits.

#### iii. Achieving Agricultural Modernization

Increase government support policies by providing financial subsidies and preferential loans to support the introduction and promotion of agricultural machinery and technology.

Implement tax incentives to reduce farmers' burdens and stimulate their production enthusiasm. Construct and renovate efficient water-saving irrigation systems, such as drip irrigation and sprinkler irrigation, to improve water resource utilization efficiency. Build and maintain field roads and farmland water conservancy facilities to improve production conditions. Introduce and promote high-yield, disease-resistant, and drought-tolerant crop and livestock varieties to improve yield and quality. Promote the use of modern agricultural machinery, such as tractors, harvesters, and seeders, to improve agricultural production efficiency. Apply technologies like the Internet of Things, sensors, big data, and drones to achieve precision agriculture and improve resource utilization.

Develop various forms of tourism projects, such as ecological tourism, cultural tourism, and agricultural sightseeing. Assess the village's tourism carrying capacity and reasonably control the number

of tourists to avoid overdevelopment. Promote the concept of ecological tourism, guide tourists to develop environmental awareness, and reduce damage to the natural environment. Formulate long-term development plans to ensure the sustainability and continuity of tourism development, avoiding short-term behavior.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The protection and development of Xiuxi Village is a complex and multifaceted task. While the village has preserved many valuable traditional heritage assets in terms of architecture, culture, and natural landscapes, it also faces challenges brought about by modernization and population decline. This study, through interviews and field surveys, gained an in-depth understanding of the villagers' recognition of and commitment to traditional culture, as well as their expectations regarding tourism and infrastructure development. The research also presents data highlighting the

weaknesses in infrastructure, the inefficient use of tourism resources, and the specific situation of population loss. The study identifies the main issues currently facing the village and proposes strategies for policymakers, including strengthening community involvement, improving tourism management, and achieving agricultural modernization. These comprehensive measures not only help promote economic development but also effectively protect cultural heritage, ensuring the sustainable development of Xiuxi Village and improving the living standards of its residents.

## VII. Acknowledgement

The support provided by University Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah for this study is highly appreciated.

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