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Development path analysis of intangible cultural heritage resources: A qualitative study of Xiangxi Miao folk songs in China

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Abstract

As China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) faces increasing pressures from modernization and globalization, identifying sustainable pathways for its revitalization has become imperative. This study examines the development pathways of Xiangxi Miao folk songs (XMFS), a representative form of ICH resource in China, through field research and qualitative analysis using NVivo software. The findings reveal a trend toward diversified development, yet challenges persist, including homogenized content, superficial integration with tourism, and selective appropriation of cultural elements. Three focal issues were identified: The current XMFS resource utilization, systemic barriers to their development, and prospective strategies. While culture-tourism integration has expanded the reach of XMFS, it has also exposed critical shortcomings, such as shallow cultural transmission and a disconnect between heritage authenticity and tourist-oriented adaptations. Cultural inheritors often tolerate content distortion, whereas non-inheritors demonstrate limited engagement due to inadequate incentives. To address these gaps, this study proposes enhancing macro-level planning, fostering innovation-driven development, and adopting market-oriented strategies to redefine XMFS's cultural connotations. These approaches aim to deepen the synergy between cultural preservation and tourism while ensuring sustainable inheritance. By offering empirical insights into ICH revitalization, this research contributes practical frameworks for safeguarding China's cultural heritage and advancing the ecological vitality of Miao folk traditions in Xiangxi.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage; Xiangxi Miao folk songs; Cultural-tourism integration; NVivo; Sustainable development; Heritage revitalization

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Citation: Si S, Ma M, Luo J. Development path analysis of intangible cultural heritage resources: A qualitative study of Xiangxi Miao folk songs in China. *Arts & Communication*. 2025;3(4):025040004. doi: 10.36922/AC025040004

Received: January 21, 2025**1st revised:** March 27, 2025**2nd revised:** April 5, 2025**Accepted:** April 11, 2025**Published online:** April 30, 2025**Copyright:** © 2025 Author(s).

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Technology is a double-edged sword for developing culture and art, as crisis and opportunity coexist. With the globalization of the global economy, the protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is facing a survival crisis.¹ Globalization promotes the accelerated flow of modern mass culture and entertainment products in various countries, which inevitably causes some traditional cultures to face crises. ICH has

suffered serious resource loss, and many folk crafts have no successors. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes ICH as practices, expressions, knowledge, or skills that are part of the cultural heritage of a place, as well as tools, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces that are considered cultural heritage. Like natural heritage, ICH is also an important part of the cultural wealth of various countries. As an important carrier of human civilization, ICH embodies human cultural vitality and creativity. The safeguarding of ICH has long been recognized as an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization.

How can we balance the protection of ICH and development within the modern cultural industries? This has become the focal point and a significant challenge for many countries when formulating cultural policies. Since the 1960s, several developed nations have taken the lead in enacting laws and regulations to safeguard their national culture. For instance, Japan has enacted the Act on Protection of Cultural Properties, the United Kingdom has the Civic Amenities Act, and France has the Historical Districts Protection Act (Loi Malraux). The problem of preserving the traditions of academic art and folk culture as part of the ICH of the country is becoming more urgent every year.²

In 2003, to protect and save the world's ICH, the 32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH, which was signed by 181 countries or regions. The signing of this treaty marks the expansion of the global heritage protection system from the tangible (i.e., heritage sites and artifacts) to the intangible. This expansion opens a Pandora's Box of challenges marked by difficulties, confusion, and complexity.³ As of December 2023, there are 730 UNESCO ICH items on the list, with China leading the world at 43 items. At present, China boasts approximately 870,000 ICH resources, and the total number of ICH items from four national batches has reached 1,372, making it a veritable powerhouse of ICH resources. In 2018, the merger of China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism Administration marked the beginning of the government's efforts to promote the integrated development of cultural tourism. The sustainable protection and development of ICH resources have thus become a significant research topic.

In the past decade, Chinese governments have actively explored the road to the integrated development of culture and tourism. Famous cities, towns, and villages in ethnic minority areas have become the main battlefields for developing culture and tourism.⁴ ICH has become a key driver in leveraging its unique advantages and shaping

competitive advantages.⁵ In 2008, the Chinese government inscribed the Xiangxi Miao folk songs (XMFS) on the second batch of the national ICH list under the designation II-109.

With an extensive history and a unique social structure, the Miao people living in Xiangxi are essential to the Chinese nation.⁶ Because Miao people have no written expression, their cultural and artistic heritage can only be realized through songs and music.⁷ For this study, XMFS specifically denotes the Miao folk songs disseminated within the Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Xiangxi, Hunan Province, China. Propelled by the convergence of culture and tourism, XMFS and the tourism sector have been progressively integrating and evolving through five fundamental avenues: ICH festivals, tourist attractions, traditional settlements, themed venues, and ICH tourism routes.

1.2. Research question

This study describes XMFS resource development comprehensively, summarizes its development path, and proposes constructive suggestions for the ICH protection development path. This article attempts to answer the following three questions:

- (i) What is the current state of XMFS resource development?
- (ii) What challenges are encountered in the development of XMFS resources?
- (iii) What is the prospective development path of XMFS resources?

2. Literature review

After China acceded to the Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH in 2004, research on ICH started to increase, and numerous achievements have been made in the research, protection, and development of the concept and value of ICH. Different Eastern and Western approaches shape the conservation and interpretation of cultural heritage landscapes.⁸

There is a clear correlation between the distribution of ICH resources and the state of economic development and historical and cultural heritage.⁹ At present, the research on ICH in China is concentrated in two areas: First, the reflection and discussion on the essential characteristics and cultural attributes of ICH, and second, research on the application of ICH protection and communication strategies.¹⁰ The academic viewpoint of resource protection development includes "static" storage protection, "dynamic" development protection, and rigid and soft mechanisms.¹¹

The "static" storage protection refers to the dissemination of ICH through public cultural platforms such as museums

and libraries, focusing on the accurate recording and sorting out the characteristics of ICH. The “dynamic” development protection is more attentive to the economic value of ICH resources and emphasizes the integration of development with tourism, related industries, and digital platforms.¹² Digitalization has changed the creation mechanism and production mode of performing arts.¹³ Government departments should emphasize the need for authority and institutional cooperation and prioritize legal and digital protection mechanisms for ICH.¹⁴ The rigid protection mechanism emphasizes strengthening protection by laws and regulations, and researchers believe that the legal protection of ICH should follow systematic legislation.¹⁵ The soft protection mechanism emphasizes the development, utilization, and personnel training; it guarantees and improves the living conditions and development space of inheritors, thereby enhancing the endogenous competitiveness of ICH. Researchers discuss the system and training mode of ICH inheritors.¹⁶ ICH protection is not only the responsibility of the government or professionals but must also involve local communities and communities of interest.

In the study of applied conservation, tourism seems to be a “life-saving straw” for many endangered ICH resources. Regarding content, research on the relationship between ICH protection and tourism development, research on the development model, and stakeholder research in tourism development are the focus of Chinese academic circles.¹⁷ At present, research in ICH tourism is mainly composed of three themes: resource planning and sustainability, the impact of tourism development, and tourist behavior and destination marketing.¹⁸ Katelieva *et al.*¹⁹ believe that the protection of ICH increases the opportunities for tourism utilization.¹⁹ However, for all countries’ governments, ICH’s tourism development requires a balance between resource protection and tourism development. Trend analysis shows that ICH listing contributes to a long-term positive trend in international tourism in China.²⁰ The perceived appropriateness of ICH for use in tourism and the accessibility of ICH-based tourism products for visitor markets affect related tourism planning.²¹ Scholars have reduced using the official full name of ICH in tourism studies, while the “social practices, rituals, and festive events” category has been the focus since 2010.¹⁸ In addition, using digital technology to protect ICH is a consensus among many scholars.²² Digital protection of ICH is based on digital technology.²³ The development of the art industry in China is largely due to digitization.²⁴ Digital technology and performing arts have been inextricably intertwined, with their synergy yielding potent results.²⁵ In short, although scholars try to find problems and propose possible solutions in the study of ICH conservation and

inheritance, they are always bystanders. The government still plays a leading role in ICH inheritance, and the role of the market and social organizations has not been fully considered. For ICH protection and development, creating a completely consistent template, personalized, localized, creative development path is impossible to ensure sustainable development.

3. Research framework and methods

This study employs qualitative research methodologies, including field investigation, interviews, and NVivo text analysis. Initially, the research team conducted two field trips to Xiangxi in August 2023 and July 2024 to gather data and contextual information, selecting the enigmatic Miao eco-tourism route for their fieldwork. The team investigated the development of XMFS tourism resources in Huaxian, Jishou, Guzhang, and Fenghuang, subsequently organizing and summarizing the collected data. They utilized NVivo (version 14.23.0), a qualitative analysis software, to examine the interview transcripts of communication and protection stakeholders involved in the XMFS development project. The aim was to conduct a grounded analysis, coding the data in a bottom-up approach to derive an authentic depiction of XMFS development. Finally, drawing on the earlier analysis and integrating insights from existing ICH experiences, the study proposes a development path for XMFS resources (Figure 1).

3.1. Overview of XMFS resource development

XMFS can be categorized into five cavities and 10 keys, characterized by their distinctive melodies and unique singing techniques, which hold significant artistic research value. Modern composers frequently draw upon XMFS as inspiration, as is evident in Tan Dun’s work *Map*. Under the growing trend of cultural and tourism integration, the development of XMFS resources is inextricably linked to regional tourism, with numerous tourist sites emerging as bases for the exhibition and dissemination of ICH. Xiangxi is renowned as a “sea of songs,” and within its traditional cultural ecosystem, the Miao inhabitants of Xiangxi have always embraced singing as an integral part of their lives. They converse through songs, express emotions through melodies, and vocalize their aspirations in lyrical form. Over the extensive sweep of history, a vast array of XMFS, rich in variety, has been amassed.

However, few instances have been documented in written records due to the oral and improvisational nature of XMFS creation. Fortunately, the essence of XMFS has remained unbroken, and an increasing number of Miao people in western Hunan continue to inherit and propagate XMFS (Table 1). Although the range of potential resource types for development may appear limited, XMFS integrates the ethnic customs

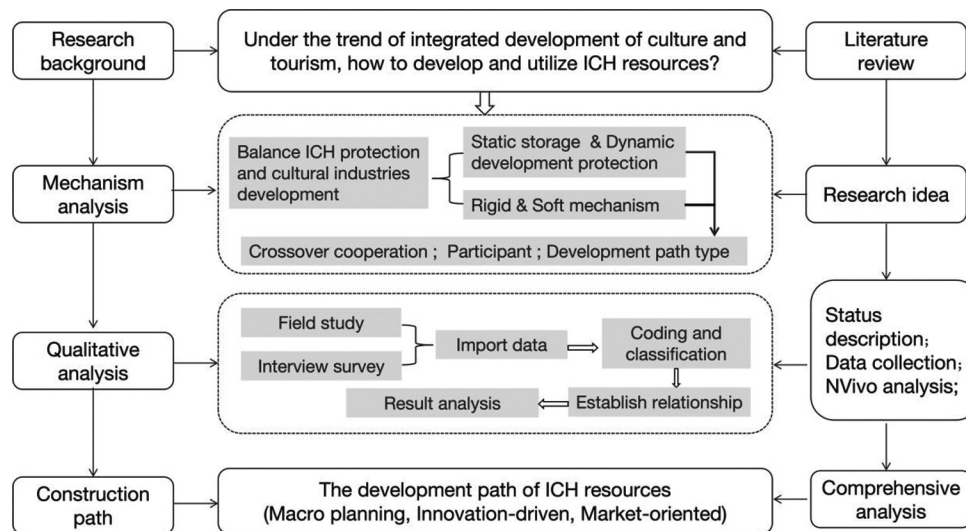


Figure 1. Research framework
Abbreviation: ICH: Intangible cultural heritage.

Table 1. Category and resource orientation of Xiangxi Miao folk songs

Category	Characteristic	Representative song
Labor song	Alleviate fatigue at work	“The lovers work together in the field”
Current political song	Indict the feudal society	“The man-eating demon”
	Praise the communist party of China	“Miao people acknowledge the government”
Ritual song	Reflect the ethnic customs	“The wedding custom song of Miao”
Love song	Praise sweet love	“The well water is sweeter than honey”
Life song	Depict diverse daily life	“Don’t let the moss overgrow the road,” “singing songs everywhere”
Historical legend song	Reflect on the history of the Miao ethnic group	“The troop training song,” “the ancient song of Miao”
Children’s song	Enlightening children’s songs	“The little sparrow”
Narrative song	Narrate Miao ethnic stories	“The Kingfishers,” “Why are Miao people good at singing”

and traditions of the local populace, exhibiting diversity and multi-dimensionality. Tourists can immerse themselves in the lifestyle, history, and culture of the Miao people in Xiangxi, thus highlighting its developmental potential.

At present, the integrated development of ICH and tourism in Xiangxi encompasses three modes: Industrialization, integration, and cooperation (Table 2), summarized from existing ICH projects. The integration of ICH resources and tourism in Xiangxi has reached a preliminary stage of maturity. However, relatively few development initiatives focus on XMFS, with most being live performances. Although primary school music education in the Miao nationality area in western Hunan has received some attention, it still faces many limitations.²⁶ Due to the operational subjects’ insufficient recognition and understanding of ICH, the presentation of XMFS is overly bland and lacks innovation for the current audience.

This study investigates the cultural tourism routes of Xiangxi (Mysterious Miao Township) and summarizes the development status of Miao folk song resources in Huayuan, Jishou, Guzhang, and Fenghuang from the conducted field research (Table 3). Regarding the number of tourist sites, six out of nine Miao villages and traditional folk activities involve the development of folk song resources. Regarding the development methods, the folk customs of door-blocking songs and wedding music are primarily utilized. In terms of the types of folk songs, welcome songs are predominantly used as the main resources.

3.2. Analysis of XMFS resource exploitation degree

To describe the development of XMFS resources on a deeper level, this study employs the qualitative research software NVivo (version 14.23.0) to conduct hierarchical coding and text analysis from interviews with broadcast subjects ($n = 9$) and protected subjects ($n = 3$) conducted

Table 2. Types and characteristics of Xiangxi Miao folk songs development modes

Mode types	Specific mode	Characteristic	Case
Industrialization	ICH+performance; ICH+entertainment	High-value economic benefits	<i>The Wedding Dress</i> (microfilm)
Integration	Festival+tourism	Balance economic benefits and cultural values	Ganqiu festival
Cooperative and synergy	Educational trip	Multiple participants	Juvenile study tour

Abbreviation: ICH: Intangible cultural heritage.

Table 3. Resource development status quo of Xiangxi Miao folk songs

Area	Tourist destination	Development mode	Folk song category
Huayuan	Shibadong village	-	-
Jishou	Dehang Miao village	Door-blocking songs+dance	Welcome song
Guzheng	Hangwu village	Door-blocking songs+wedding music	Welcome song+wedding lament song
	Morong village	Door-blocking songs+dance	Welcome song
Fenghuang	Heku town	Open ceremony+song competition	New folk song+traditional folk song
	Fenghuang county	Dance+evening music	High tune
	Zhushan village	Door-blocking songs	Welcome song
	Laojia village	-	-
	Shanjiang village	-	-

during field research. From the perspective of the protection and development of ICH resources, it is evident that two important groups are involved in XMFS protection: The “inheritance subjects” and the “protection subjects.” The “inheritance subjects” are the participants in transmitting and displaying these resources and represent the “living essence” of XMFS. The “protection subjects” are the individuals or organizations that leverage their expertise to protect and disseminate XMFS. These two groups complement each other, facilitating the continued survival and development of XMFS.

3.2.1. First-level coding

Interview data of inheritance subjects, such as staff and performance participants of XMFS resource development projects, are used as first-level coding in this study to obtain the true connotation of resource development (Table 4).

Second, the level 1 code of “protection subject” in this study focuses on the government. It includes interviews with managers of business and civil society groups, aiming to describe the real situation of XMFS resource development from the managers’ perspective (Table 5).

3.2.2. Axial coding

Axial coding is based on open coding, and it analyzes the conceptual category relationships obtained from primary coding, such as the parallel relationship, category induction relationship, and statistical inductive conceptual

logic relationship. This study observed, summarized, and concluded the preliminary labels and concepts obtained from XMFS communication practice and deduced the universal relationship (Table 6).

3.2.3. Core coding

In this study, core coding centered on the inheritance subject further uncovers the development practices of XMFS cultural tourism resources against the backdrop of cultural tourism. This process integrates and condenses the initial two levels of coding by incorporating the core coding of the protection subject. Consequently, the subsequent three-level coding is derived by synthesizing open and axial coding (Table 7).

4. Results

4.1. Diversified development paths consisted of the present integration mode

Combined with the above coding analysis, it is evident that the development path of XMFS resources exhibits a trend toward diversification. This trend is reflected in the specific path distribution map and the path’s different development directions (Figure 2). Diversified development paths help expand the dissemination of XMFS, enabling their flow, sharing, and interaction across time and space while promoting its cross-cultural and cross-regional extension. For example, in villages centered around tourist destinations, many tourists can engage in

Table 4. Open coding of Xiangxi Miao folk songs from the inheritor’s perspective

Row data	Open coding	No.
SQ1: Singing love songs during folk performances	Folk performances include love songs	1
SQ2: Non-ecological singing with accompaniment	Creative songs	3
SQ3: Singing toasting songs to the distinguished guests	Toasting song at the feast	1
SQ4: We only have the welcome song as a method	Welcome song in tourist destinations	7
SQ5: Tourists have to engage in song duels when entering the village gate	Folk-custom interaction	6
SQ6: Some performances organized by the government	Tourism performance	3
SQ7: Some employees sing a song at the festival ceremony	Festival singing	2
SQ8: Tourists can only get into the village after they respond to the passionate melody	Singing displaying	4
SQ9: Tourists can construct the cognition of XMFS by the introduction of a tour guide	With the tour guide’s introduction	3
SQ10: The tourist destination only uses some simple and brief-phrase	Simple, short, new, and untraditional	11
SQ11: Miao folk song has played a decisive role	Miao folk song work on tourism	1
SQ12: Miao folk songs could be spread to diverse tourists nationwide with the guidance of national policy	Tourism spreading enlarges the receivers	2
SQ13: Miao folk song would be energized strongly by integrated in tourism	Tourism is beneficial to spread	3
SQ14: Different channels work on spreading XMFS with diverse advantages and purposes	All channels are useful	3
SQ15: Touring is a platform to spread XMFS	Tourism is a display platform	3
SQ16: An increasing number of villagers start to sing XMFS	Arouse national awareness	2
SQ17: Tourists feel those songs are authentic	Tourist has inaccurate awareness	1
SQ18: For instance, the wedding songs can expand the scope of development	The connotation of wedding songs could not present	1
SQ19: It is only representative and works barely on Miao folk song spreading	Tourism does not work on spreading XMFS	1
SQ20: The tourist destination and original channel are similar except for slight differences	Similar except for slight differences	3
SQ21: I think XMFS and tourism integrate effectively	Integrate effectively	2
SQ22: Those channels, reliable by the public and relevant in spreading, are official media, mostly	Activities organized by the government are highly reliable and valid.	1
SQ23: The status quo should be promoted	The status quo is dissatisfied	2
SQ24: I prefer traditional singing	Traditionalism	2
SQ25: Some singers ask me what I shout.	Cognitive bias	1
SQ25: The traditional singers dislike the new tones	Disagree with the older generation	1
SQ27: For instance, the Dehang village could be reorganized as a poetic combination of landscape, songs, and people	Integral development	1
SQ28: Integrating the XMFS into tourism with rich connotation	Connotation should be enhanced	1
SQ29: Excepting the profound integration	High-quality development	3

Abbreviation: XMFS: Xiangxi Miao folk song.

high-frequency communication, achieving highly effective “word-of-mouth” promotion. In addition, diversified paths can ensure the continuity of traditional XMFS, such as ICH exhibitions, folk song competitions, and traditional festivals, which can all serve as institutionalized practices for inheritance and dissemination. Performance activities, folk performances, traditional ceremonies, and cultural products will imbue XMFS with a new era of vitality.

4.2. Relatively unsophisticated music content discovered in scene exhibition

The development of XMFS resources within cultural and tourism integration is relatively simplistic, with only a select few songs being utilized in existing settings. Xiangxi, renowned as a land of songs, is characterized by a traditional cultural ecosystem where the Miao residents of Xiangxi perpetually sing. They communicate through

Table 5. Open coding of Xiangxi Miao folk songs from the preserver’s perspective

Row data	Open coding	No.
SQa1: Miao folk songs play a significant role in tourism	Significance	3
SQa2: By presenting the traditional national culture	Distinctive culture demonstration	1
SQa3: Festivals of the Miao minority group	Festivals of the Miao minority group	1
SQa4: Activities of Fenghuang county	Activities	1
SQa5: By representations	Demonstration	1
SQa6: Competition of Miao folk songs	Competition of XMFS	1
SQa7: Building the professional team	Building the professional team	1
SQa8: Establishing the Miao folk song training school	Training school	1
SQa9: It is a path of contributing to rural revitalization	Rural revitalization	1
SQa10: Becoming the performing art product in the tourist destination	Performing art product	1
SQa11: A beauty-appreciation combination of historical background and public need	Match public esthetic	1
SQa12: Simple XMFS, the creative category, is what we sing	Creative	1
SQa13: The melody is apparently cantabile compared with the traditional songs	More melodic	1
SQa14: Forming the performing art product that shows the local traits and tourist-found	Inclusiveness	1
SQa15: The old generation have the ambiguity in the creative XMFS	The old generation has ambiguity	1
SQa16: The young generation sings songs in the improper tune	Authenticity missing	1
SQa17: We do not have resources	Resource integration	1
SQa18: So, we need force from outside	Needing leverage from outside	1
SQa19: It gradually became prosperous when investors from Zhangjiajie got involved	Rational administrator	1
SQa20: It is not enough to rely on Miao people only	Needing to break the limits	1

Abbreviation: XMFS: Xiangxi Miao folk song.

Table 6. Axial coding of Xiangxi Miao folk song

Row data	Open coding	Axial coding	No.
I1 – I5	Residents around the tourist destination	Identification of spreader	14
I6 – I9	20 years experience	Spreader work experience	6
I10 – I14	Family inheritance	Learning path of spreader	15
I15 – I17	Only sing some love songs	Variety of Xiangxi Miao folk songs	5
R1 – R3	Rite ceremony	Channel of communication	8
R4 – R5	We only sing welcoming songs	Variety of communication	8
R6 – R7	Based on the schedule of the government	Frequency of communication	5
SQ1 – SQ4	Creative songs	Variety in tourism practice	12
SQ5 – SQ7, SQa1 – SQa10	Tourism performance	Channels in tourism practice	11+12
SQ8 – SQ10, SQa11 – SQa13	With the tour guide’s introduction	Traits in tourism practice	18+4
SQ11 – SQ16	Tourism spreading can expand receivers	Positive impacts on tourism practice	14
SQ17 – SQ20	Tourism does not work on spreading	Passive impacts on tourism practice	6
SQ21 – SQ22	Integrate effectively	Positive appearance on tourism practice	3
SQ23 – SQ29, SQa14 – SQa16	Disagree with the older generation	Passive appearance in tourism practice	6+2

songs, express emotions via melodies, and vocalize their aspirations in lyrical form. However, in practical communication scenarios, the repertoire of XMFS, despite its vast diversity, is underutilized, with only welcome songs being predominantly featured in development practices.

For instance, during an interview with a resident of Ramwu Miao Village, it was mentioned that “we generally sing welcome songs” at the scenic spot. Similarly, in the study context, the type of song highlighted was again “welcome songs.” Furthermore, XMFS is represented in the

Table 7. Selective coding of Xiangxi Miao folk song

Row data	Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding	No.
I1 – I5	Residents around the tourist destination	Identification of spreader	Identification and responsibility of spreader	54
I6 – I9	20 years experience	Spreader work experience		
I10 – I14	Family inheritance	Learning path of spreader		
I15 – I17	Only sing some love songs	Variety of Xiangxi Miao folk songs		
R1 – R3	Rite ceremony	Channel of communication		
R4 – R5	We only sing welcoming songs	Variety of communication		
R6 – R7	Based on the schedule of the government	Frequency of communication		
SQ1 – SQ4	Creative songs	Variety in tourism practice	Manifestation of tourism integration	88
SQ5 – SQ7, SQa1 – SQa10	Tourism performance	Channels in tourism practice		
SQ8 – SQ10, SQa11 – SQa13	With the tour guide’s introduction	Traits in tourism practice		
SQ11 – SQ16	Tourism spreading can expand receivers	Positive impacts on tourism practice		
SQ17 – SQ20	Tourism does not work on spreading	Passive impacts on tourism practice		
SQ21 – SQ22	Integrate effectively	Positive appearance on tourism practice		
SQ23 – SQ29, SQa14 – SQa16	Disagree with the older generation	Passive appearance in tourism practice		

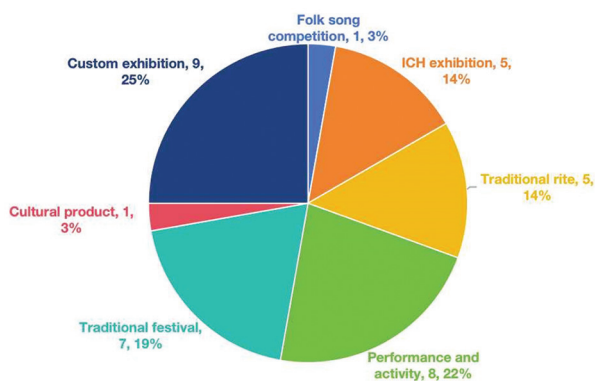


Figure 2. Development path distribution of Xiangxi Miao folk songs

folk performances of Dehang Miao Village, the live scene performance of *Border Town* in Fenghuang County, and the Miao-style evening show *Dream Tuojiang*. In each of these instances, the same song is repeatedly used, consisting of merely two lines, serving solely as an introductory segment for dance music.

4.3. Superficial integration of XMFS and tourism noticed in the development path

The development of XMFS resources remains superficial, focusing merely on the literal meaning of the songs without delving into their cultural connotations or the stories behind them. For instance, in the customary performances of Dehang Miao Village, dancers at the scenic spot depict scenes of young Miao men and women expressing their love through love songs used as background music. Similarly, the gate-blocking ceremony of Zhushan Miao

Village employs the Miao nationality’s welcome song from Xiangxi to welcome tourists warmly.

While tourists gain an initial understanding and emotional connection to XMFS through these songs, such practices do not contribute positively to the long-term development of XMFS. Instead, they lead to a superficial selection of cultural elements and a deviation in the coding of cultural information during this singular mode of cultural transmission, thereby hindering the conveyance of deeper cultural meanings. Another example is the real-scene performance of *Border Town*, which features only two lines of lyrics, resulting in significant negative feedback during interviews.

4.4. High tolerance of “content distortion” detected from inheritor participants

Although XMFS faces the issue of “catering to tourists and content distortion” in developing cultural and tourism integration, non-genetic successors maintain an inclusive attitude. These inheritors actively participate in gate-blocking ceremonies, cultural tour-related performance activities, and Miao song volunteer services in Murong Miao Village. The types of communication they engage in include welcome songs and new folk songs. As cultural subjects, they preserve the vitality and cultural characteristics of XMFS, which is the greatest assurance of its authenticity.

For example, Interviewee A, a provincial heritage person, stated, “There are also positive aspects in the scenic spots. For instance, we typically sing XMFS only in local activities, reaching primarily the Miao people. However, in

the scenic spots, under the policy of integrating national culture into tourism, it can be disseminated to tourists from all over the country. With the introduction of guides, others can gain an understanding of XMFS.” Yet, this is not the true essence of XMFS. Although tourists may perceive these songs as authentic, they are, in reality, a distorted version.

Another example is Interviewee B, a state-level inheritor, who believes, “We also place great emphasis on tradition. Usually, I perform in an original ecological style, but today, I wanted to change it because this is a significant cultural event. Here, I believe art should be like a hundred flowers blooming and a hundred schools of thought contending.”

However, some inheritors feel that the current development practices of XMFS have not significantly altered its natural dissemination and even hold a negative attitude. For instance, Interviewee A, an interviewee from Zhushan Miao Village, said, “Singing XMFS in scenic spots is not truly for its dissemination; it is merely a demonstration and is, in fact, ineffective for spreading XMFS. If it could reach a wider audience, that would be ideal, but I look forward to a deeper integration. I do not wish to remain in the current state; instead, I want to integrate the rich connotations of XMFS into tourism.” As Interviewee B mentioned, “More Miao people should be involved to give it a more authentic rural atmosphere.”

4.5. Limited motivation observed from current non-inheritor participants

In contrast to the traditional family-based learning and mentorship inheritance model of XMFS inheritors, who begin their training from a young age, many non-inheritors lack the avenues and incentives to participate in resource development actively. For instance, the acquisition of Miao love songs by non-inheritors is often passive, driven primarily by the demands of performance activities. Interviewee C, a participant from Ramwu Miao Village, noted in an interview, “Generally, I rarely sing outside. Some people sing, such as during Miao festivals or when certain employees perform, but I usually do not go.” In terms of communication attitudes, non-inheritors, as communication subjects, lack the mindset and enthusiasm for engaging in such interactions. An interviewer from Dehang Miao Village stated in response to the question about the future direction of cultural tourism communication practices, “As for what direction to pursue, it is part of our job. If the government and companies demand it, we can implement and collaborate effectively. However, for ourselves, it is not our field of interest.”

In summary, the development of Miao resource folk songs in western Hunan is characterized by extensive yet

shallow and singular content. Taking the hometown village and Shanjiang Miao Village as examples, the proportion of folk song resource development is relatively high, accounting for 71%. However, this mostly pertains to the proliferation of different tourist destinations rather than the depth of development. In the development of XMFS, the welcome song is utilized to localize the scene of Miao tourist destinations in western Hunan, which, to some extent, showcases the regional authenticity of XMFS. Yet, it largely represents a simplistic transfer of traditional scenes and lacks innovation relevant to the contemporary era. Moreover, the development methods of XMFS in traditional village tourism destinations are strikingly similar, with song types becoming homogenized. The songs developed in many places are repetitive, and the homogenization phenomenon is prominent, which can easily lead to experience fatigue among tourists and audiences, affecting the cultural consumption experience.

5. Development path and related suggestions

As a very important intangible heritage resource in western Hunan, XMFS should be fully explored in the development process, and the contradiction between XMFS protection and tourism development should be alleviated on this premise. In fact, in the process of XMFS development, the single cultural information transmission will cause the superficial selection of cultural elements, the deviation of cultural information coding, and the transmission of cultural meanings. Therefore, selecting, presenting, explaining, and arranging XMFS, innovating its product form, and enhancing the market competitiveness of Miao traditional villages in Xiangxi is particularly important. Therefore, the XMFS resource development path is proposed.

5.1. Strengthen macro planning and build a new blueprint for XMFS

As an accompanying literary travel resource, the development of XMFS resources often operates randomly and passively, lacking systematic planning and design. The absence of top-level design restricts participants to merely following tourist attractions for performance activities, leaving little room for proactive innovation. Therefore, it is essential to lead with government initiatives, expand the connotations of XMFS resources based on academic research, and draw on practical experiences and first-hand data from the business community to promote new pathways and high-quality development of intangible heritage resources. Consequently, local government cultural and tourism authorities should introduce phased protection and development plans based on thorough research and discussion.

As the crucial hand of XMFS's protection and development, local government cultural and tourism authorities are the junction and cornerstone that connect XMFS to diverse communities in multiple paths. Specifically speaking, for sustainable development in the future, a well-formed protection and unclassified system of traditional XMFS by researching and documenting is impending stewardship. Particularly, prioritizing the preservation through sound and video provides a foundation for database development and safeguarding existing achievements, enabling the systematic collection, arrangement, and sharing of XMFS. Meanwhile, popularizing the documentary and data resources for society and propelling the utilization of available resources by citizens is also a significant design for the related branch.

As the important force behind XMFS's protection, the academic community safeguards its authenticity and pioneers new content. The in-depth exploration of the rich and diverse content of XMFS is essential for its preservation and creative development, which are closely linked to scholarly involvement. Furthermore, training, lectures, and communication between academia, inheritors, and enthusiasts are crucial for maintaining authenticity and promoting the dissemination of high-quality content. Finally, as a professional adviser, academia increasingly contributes valuable suggestions to public institutions and the business sector, fostering a more refined and sustainable cultural and creative ecosystem.

Eventually, the business community, serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity, acts as a vital platform for showcasing the cultural richness of XMFS. As a conduit for cultural expression, its involvement must be guided by the principle of protective development, which is essential for the distribution of various development paths. Notably, XMFS performances of high authenticity, such as those used in traditional welcome rites, receive strong positive responses, suggesting that enhanced audience experiences rooted in authenticity can lead to more effective development paths. Hence, this paper argues that protective-based protection and development is the foundation for meeting modern needs. Only by preserving the cultural roots of XMFS can we energize the connotation of times and modern development in the new blueprint for XMFS.

5.2. Innovation-driven new connotations for XMFS

Adhering to the right kind of innovation is one of the key principles in the current development of intangible heritage resources. XMFS resource development should be innovation-driven, integrating more contemporary content while respecting the fundamental connotations of

XMFS, making it more relatable to audiences and tourists. In addition to retaining content such as gate songs and toast songs, more new folk songs should be developed around village tourism. Many XMFS inheritors are already engaged in creating new folk songs.

Three vital innovation-driven factors are excellent content, fair-sounding melody, and easy-participant paths. Specifically, the excellent content of XMFS represents the cultural gene of the minority of Miao in Xiangxi. Based on the field research and the qualitative analysis, the current development paths that follow unsophisticated music content and superficial integration are shortcomings. As a result, this paper suggests that innovation-driven needs must be rooted in its long history and ample categories to avoid the evaluation of over-commercialization.

A fair-sounding melody is regarded as the most compelling element driving the dissemination of XMFS, constructed by the receivers' needs. However, distortions in the current development paths of XMFS can largely be attributed to the lack of melodic quality noted by cultural promoters. In Xiangxi, a wide variety of XMFS exists, enriched by diverse rites and regional accents, offering significant potential for differentiated development. Thus, this research assumes that the fair-sounding melody needs to be divided into two dimensions: a traditional dimension, which combines exhibition or tourism site performance to demonstrate the authenticity of XMFS, and a modern dimension, in which melodies are adapted or newly composed by professional musicians to reflect contemporary cultural narratives. Creating accessible and participatory pathways is essential to redefining XMFS with modern meaning. In terms of specific inheritance, more inheritors should be encouraged to use accessible media such as short videos (e.g., TikTok) and social platforms (e.g., RedNote) to reach younger audiences. They should select engaging stories from Miao culture and disseminate them online, attracting more viewers to travel and watch performances.

5.3. Market-oriented new trends for XMFS resources

The market for XMFS resources still has significant room for improvement. Compared to tangible Miao products that can be purchased, folk songs hold more mystery and are more likely to pique the curiosity of tourists. Based on the tourist profiles of the Mysterious Miao Township route in Western Hunan, the development path of XMFS cultural tourism resources can be expanded in three directions: research, new scenes, and immersive creative travel.

Study tour, as one type of research path, is the appropriate method to commercialize XMFS. Along with study tours becoming a new trend in China, a collaborative project

with the local government, XMFS inheritors, academia, and the business community has become a natural and necessary development. For example, a series of art research projects with XMFS, a children's musical theater program with XMFS, and a summer camp with XMFS can be included. As a result, tourists can be encouraged to engage in art research and analysis through the "learning + travel" method.

New experiential settings offer the most market-oriented path for XMFS commercialization. By drawing on the diverse XMFS melodies, categories, and stories behind them, this article considers that developing live performances led by professional art organizations around local resources, including the glorious landscape, beautiful costumes, rites, and XMFS, can rebuild the "dreamland of songs." Consequently, XMFS can draw on the essence of Miao culture to create cultural and creative products that attract tourists and gradually turn into a commercial, cultural brand.

Immersive creative travel offers an upgraded experience by implementing a creative tourism development approach that combines "cultural value and creative empowerment" for XMFS. Tourists can be encouraged to engage in local life or a magnificent performance by being part of it. This paper argues that immersive creative travel will become a popular market-oriented path among young tourists and create a tourism experience that is both participatory and authentic.

The market-oriented path of XMFS is a modern approach that connotes time. However, this new trend is accompanied by numerous challenges. Hence, exploiting these intangible treasures requires prioritizing protection to safeguard authenticity and cooperation with diverse social forces for a promising future.

6. Conclusion

XMFS has progressively become an integral part of traditional Miao village tourism in Western Hunan during its inheritance and development process, emerging as a distinctive landscape and a symbolic element of cultural tourism. While preserving the authenticity and vitality of XMFS, it is presented and disseminated through the integration of culture and tourism. For this study, two field visits were conducted in Western Hunan in August 2023 and July 2024. Qualitative analysis software NVivo was utilized to analyze interviews with communication and protection subjects involved in XMFS resource development projects. Data were coded hierarchically from the ground up using grounded theory, yielding a realistic depiction of XMFS tourism resource development.

The development of XMFS resources mirrors the journey of China's ICH protection efforts. Although resources

are abundant, the challenge of balancing protection with development exists. At present, many regions in China face issues in ICH resource development, such as an aging pool of inheritors, insufficient funding, homogeneous content, similar forms, and low levels of social engagement. ICH practitioners should make decisions about sustainable development within the complex context of their self-interest and social benefits.²⁷

Looking ahead, this study advocates for increased government support to encourage more social organizations and the public to participate in ICH protection. For example, destination marketers and managers should actively coordinate with higher and peer authorities to create a favorable policy context for promoting ICHs through ritualized experiences for visitors and local residents.²⁸ Raising public awareness through education and publicity is essential to engage a broader audience in ICH conservation efforts. In addition, promoting the integration of ICH with tourism and contemporary life can enhance its role in modern society. This dual "static" protection and "dynamic" development approach and strengthened international cooperation will contribute to the global governance of ICH.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

The research was supported by the National Social Science Foundation of China (No. 23ZD15).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Arts Management at the China Conservatory of Music (Approval ID: 20230401). Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees involved in the study.

Consent for publication

All participants in this study were fully informed of the research's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from

each participant before the interviews. They were assured that their identities would be treated with the utmost respect and that their contributions would be accurately represented. We confirm that all participants consented to the publication of the data and information they provided and understood how their responses would be used within the context of this research.

Availability of data

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. Due to the sensitive nature of the data, which primarily consists of participants' personal perspectives and opinions, participants expressed discomfort with making their responses publicly available on an open-access platform. Therefore, to protect their confidentiality and privacy, the data are not publicly accessible.

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