

Cultural Homogenization in Ethnic Minority Heritage Tourism: Responses from Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village

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Abstract: In recent years, the rapid expansion of heritage tourism within China's ethnic minority regions has been accompanied by a significant challenge: the homogenization of cultural tourism imagery and experiences. This phenomenon adversely affects the sustainable development of local tourism industries. To foster the effective integration, preservation, and development of heritage tourism and ethnic cultures, this study presents a case analysis of Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village in Guizhou Province. Drawing upon field research and systematic analysis, the paper critically examines manifestations of homogenization across four key dimensions: cultural image representation, commercial operational models, experiential tourism methodologies, and the depth of cultural engagement. Based on these findings, the study proposes targeted strategies to optimize the cultural tourism experience within this specific context.

Keywords: Heritage tourism; Ancient town tourism; Cultural homogenization; Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village

Online publication: September 26, 2025

1. Introduction

Guizhou Province possesses a wealth of well-preserved ancient ethnic settlements, establishing a foundational basis for high-quality integration of cultural tourism. Notable examples include Zhenyuan Ancient Town, Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village, and Zhaoxing Dong Village—each distinguished by unique cultural attributes that annually attract substantial domestic and international visitation. Since 2019, the Department of Culture and Tourism of Guizhou Province and the Provincial Development and Reform Commission have sequentially designated five batches of key rural tourism villages, aiming to establish “flagship destinations” for provincial rural tourism development. In 2021, the Guizhou Province 14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural and Tourism Development was promulgated, advocating for the strategic development of world-class mountain tourism destinations to facilitate Guizhou's transition from a major tourism province to a globally competitive tourism powerhouse. Furthermore, consecutive “Attracting Visitors to Guizhou” incentive programs were implemented in 2023 and

2024, leveraging preferential policies and subsidy mechanisms to effectively stimulate inbound tourism demand. However, the accelerated expansion of ancient town tourism has precipitated multifaceted challenges, most conspicuously the homogenization of cultural tourism imagery and experiences. This phenomenon poses a latent threat to the sustainable development of local cultural tourism industries. Homogenization is defined as the progressive standardization of cultural products and services within a specific domain, resulting in the erosion of distinctiveness. Such convergence diminishes the unique historical characteristics and cultural identity of ancient towns, leading to standardized visitor experiences. Consequently, the historical value and cultural diversity of these settlements are compromised, thereby undermining the intrinsic appeal and long-term viability of traditional heritage destinations.

Scholars have examined the homogenization challenges in tourism-focused towns^[1] and ancient towns^[2] across Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan provinces. Others have explored strategies and methods to address homogenization through digital technologies^[3-5]. Taking the Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village as a case study, this paper examines its homogenization issues from four perspectives: cultural image presentation, commercial formats, cultural tourism experiences, and depth of cultural excavation. It proposes pathways to overcome homogenization, aiming to provide references for ethnic minority traditional ancient towns to break free from homogenization challenges.

2. Homogenization phenomenon in Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village

Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village, China's largest Miao settlement and a 4A-rated scenic area, spans 5.5 square kilometers and stands as a cultural treasure of Leishan County in Qiandongnan, Guizhou. Hailed as an open-air museum of Miao culture, it showcases rich history and customs, particularly renowned for festivals like the Gucang Festival and Miao New Year. Its distinctive wooden stilt houses, arranged in a picturesque pattern, are listed on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Register. Renowned writer Qiuyu Yu once praised this Miao village as "answering everything with beauty." Since 2008, substantial government investment in infrastructure upgrades has spurred rapid economic growth and tourism development in the ancient town. However, accompanying homogenization issues have gradually emerged. Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village urgently needs to explore pathways to reduce homogenization to preserve its cultural distinctiveness and tourism competitiveness.

2.1. Homogenization in cultural image presentation

The homogenization of cultural image presentation in Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village manifests primarily in two aspects.

The first one is the similarity in the design styles and planning concepts of streets and buildings. The planning and design philosophy for streets and buildings is relatively outdated, assuming that fulfilling basic functional requirements completes the task without considering integration with local natural and cultural characteristics. Without unified, organized, and distinctive planning and design, many new shops and restaurants began imitating the styles of other popular tourist ancient towns, causing the originally distinctive Miao-style street architecture to gradually lose its individuality.

Second, cultural symbols have become superficial. To cater to tourist preferences, traditional Miao handicrafts and souvenirs in the village have increasingly been replaced by mass-produced goods. This not only diminishes the uniqueness of Miao culture but also impacts the livelihoods of local artisans. Merchants now prioritize short-term commercial value over deepening the cultural significance of intangible heritage. The market is flooded with

poorly crafted imitations, gradually diluting the cultural essence of Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village.

2.2. Homogenization of commercial formats

Field investigations reveal that Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village shares commercial similarities with numerous other ancient towns. Snack stalls, ethnic makeup and costume photography studios, and various chain stores line the streets, creating a modern commercial atmosphere that inevitably dilutes the original traditional Miao village lifestyle. Vivid scenes—such as farm women singing while washing clothes, elderly women embroidering and chatting on bridges, and Miao youth singing and dancing—have gradually faded from visitors' view, making it harder to uncover the village's deeper cultural essence. Furthermore, to meet tourists' growing consumption demands and boost the town's economy, modern entertainment venues like bars have proliferated in Xijiang. Particularly along the Baishui River, the second floors of numerous stilt houses have been converted into bars. While these nighttime entertainment venues inject new vitality into the town's evenings, they also bring considerable noise and commotion, disturbing visitors' rest and compromising the quality of their immersive cultural experience. Excessive modern commercialization risks distorting and altering the town's traditional culture.

2.3. Homogenization of cultural tourism experiences

The homogenization of cultural representation and commercial operations has resulted in increasingly standardized visitor experiences at Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village. To empirically assess this phenomenon, a quantitative survey was conducted during the summer peak season, involving 100 randomly selected visitors within the scenic area. Findings revealed significant perceptual convergence: 50% of respondents expressed reluctance to engage with ethnic performances due to perceived redundancy with similar offerings at other destinations; 40% declined participation in ethnic costume and makeup services, citing indistinguishability from comparable attractions; and 90% perceived local handicrafts and streetscapes as replicating those found in alternative heritage sites. These data substantiate a critical homogenization crisis in the village's cultural tourism product delivery.

Three primary dimensions of this homogenization were identified:

(1) Commercial product standardization: Miao cuisine serves as a fundamental medium for cultural transmission. However, escalating tourist demand has prompted many food establishments to introduce non-traditional, mass-market menu items. This adaptation has progressively eroded the culinary distinctiveness of authentic Miao gastronomy, thereby compromising the experiential authenticity sought by cultural tourists.

(2) Tourist activity conformity: To accommodate mass tourism preferences, certain Miao performing arts have been reduced to formulaic productions, sacrificing the cultural heterogeneity and artistic uniqueness inherent to Miao traditions. Concurrently, the proliferation of commercial photography services has generated standardized visual scenarios and costuming options, diminishing both the individuality of visitor documentation and the destination's distinctive cultural imagery.

(3) Service delivery homogeneity: Operational efficiencies achieved through standardized service protocols—including uniform tour narratives and fixed itineraries—ensure baseline quality control but simultaneously engender monotonous visitor experiences. This systemic standardization impedes nuanced appreciation of Miao cultural complexity and diversity, ultimately constraining the depth of cultural engagement achievable within the destination.

2.4. Homogenization in cultural depth exploration

Homogeneity in cultural excavation depth manifests in two aspects. The one is the shallow capacity for cultural element excavation. For ancient towns, insufficient cultural elements significantly diminish visitor appeal, while a simple accumulation of numerous but poorly refined elements blurs the town's cultural identity and direction. Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village possesses diverse cultural expressions—culinary traditions, costume culture, architectural heritage, and festival celebrations—yet its excavation remains insufficient. While visitors can sense the unique charm of Miao culture, their engagement often remains superficial, limited to observation and fleeting experiences. This phenomenon is often dubbed “sightseeing tourism,” lacking deeper cultural exchange and understanding. The other aspect is the low value of tourism products. Miao silverware, embroidery, and batik crafts are key tourism products in Xijiang, yet as the tourism market expands, these goods have lost their original cultural distinctiveness and artisanal value. They now resemble products from other ancient towns and even lack uniqueness within the Miao village itself, with most being replicas. Truly dedicated artisans crafting authentic pieces are increasingly rare.

The crux of these issues lies in insufficient cultural excavation, preventing the full expression of Miao culture's essence and depth. The village prioritizes superficial forms over substance in cultural promotion, neglecting the exploration and preservation of deeper layers like Miao history, religion, and customs. This not only diminishes the cultural influence of the Miao people but also hinders visitors' ability to genuinely comprehend and experience the unique charm of Miao culture.

3. Solutions to homogenization

3.1. Strengthening ethnic cultural exploration, promoting intangible heritage protection and digital resource development

Firstly, establish collaborative partnerships with academic institutions to undertake systematic ethnographic research on Miao cultural heritage. Implement digital archiving and repository systems for cultural preservation, supplemented by academic symposia to facilitate cultural exchange. Develop intangible cultural heritage (ICH) transmission bases featuring skill demonstration workshops and certification programs. Define strategic positioning for Miao villages through culturally authentic carriers to enable sustainable tourism. Construct a digital ethnic tourism framework integrating distinctive cultural elements (as illustrated in **Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Silverware crafting scene at Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village

Secondly, foster innovation through talent recruitment and technology transfer to develop immersive cultural products. Formulate incentive policies targeting local entrepreneurs to revitalize ICH skills through community participation. This facilitates visitor transition from passive observers to active participants in authentic cultural experiences. Integrate traditional crafts with culinary heritage via digital platforms (e.g., augmented reality-based craft design, interactive Miao cuisine workshops) to enhance experiential engagement.

3.2. Promoting industrial integration to develop a diversified industrial ecosystem

Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village can counter homogenization by capitalizing on its unique ethnic culture and natural landscape to develop distinctive tourism products. By cultivating region-specific crops such as Miao-style terraced rice and medicinal herbs, and expanding their sales via e-commerce, the village effectively integrates agriculture with cultural tourism. This approach facilitates the transformation from a traditional agrarian economy toward a diversified industrial structure, driven by a “primary industry leading tertiary industries” model. Furthermore, promoting convergence with sectors like wellness and educational tourism extends industrial chains and generates regional synergies. Such strategies not only create a multi-dimensional industrial ecosystem but also reinforce the foundation of rural revitalization through tourism.

3.3. Building traditional Miao Village cultural IP through new media

Adhering to the principle of IP uniqueness, Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village should prioritize establishing a distinctive heritage tourism brand. This requires strengthening support for agricultural product processing and developing regionally specific souvenir products that align with tourists’ demand for high-quality rural goods. Concurrently, collaboration with tourism platforms and sites should be enhanced to promote Miao cultural offerings through live streaming, short videos, and official social media accounts, thereby expanding the brand’s market reach beyond niche audiences.

The village must also leverage new media platforms to foster dynamic visitor engagement. By disseminating high-quality visual content (images, videos, and narratives) showcasing the site’s scenic and cultural assets, and actively responding to visitor feedback, the destination can cultivate interactive relationships. Transforming smart tourism platforms from static information portals into conversational hubs will enhance visitors’ emotional connection to the site. Such engagement not only strengthens cultural identification but also stimulates sustained interest in Miao heritage.

3.4. Enhancing visitor service quality through digital technology

Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village can enhance digital innovation through marker-based augmented reality (AR) systems. Complementing existing virtual reality experiences and digital tours, AR modules would enable visitors to access layered cultural content—including historical narratives, architectural analyses, and ethnographic demonstrations—via smartphone scanning of designated site markers. This approach facilitates deeper cultural immersion while enhancing experiential engagement.

To optimize these innovations, the site should implement systematic visitor feedback mechanisms. Digital analytics platforms can collect and evaluate satisfaction metrics across multiple touch points (e.g., social media, online surveys, integrated review systems), enabling data-driven service refinements. Such iterative improvements, responsive to visitor expectations, may effectively mitigate cultural homogenization by tailoring experiences to authentic cultural engagement.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the homogeneity of Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village. It proposes pathways to overcome homogenization through four strategies: enhancing the exploration of ethnic cultural resources, fostering industrial convergence, establishing a distinctive Miao Village cultural IP, and utilizing digitalization to improve visitor services. These approaches offer scientific and practical references for the preservation and development of traditional ancient towns. Through collaborative efforts among local government, tourism enterprises, and residents, ethnic tourism destinations can effectively address homogenization and advance toward sustainable development.

Funding

This work was supported by Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication Research Platform Construction Project (KYCPT202501).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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