

Original Paper

Exploring the Development of Highway Tourism in Ethnic Minority Areas within the Context of Cultural and Tourism Integration

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Abstract

Economic development in China's ethnic minority regions is vital for strengthening the collective national identity of the Chinese nation. As material living standards improve, there is an increased focus on cultural and spiritual needs, with highway tourism emerging as a current trend. This paper delves into the development of highway tourism in ethnic minority regions, examining routes such as the Tacheng, Duku, and Nenmo highway tours. It evaluates the existing state and distinctive features of these tours, identifies developmental challenges, and proposes strategies for optimizing spatial distribution, enhancing promotion of ethnic uniqueness, strategic route planning, and encouraging ethnic integration.

Keywords

Culture and Tourism Integration, Ethnic Economy, Highway Tourism

1. Introduction

China has always been a unified nation comprising multiple ethnicities, akin to seeds in a pomegranate, collectively forming the Chinese nation. The development of the economy in ethnic minority regions is fundamental to reinforcing the shared identity of the Chinese nation. Fostering the development of minorities and their regions is crucial to achieving shared prosperity and development among all ethnic groups. In the realm of ethnic economies, the cultural tourism industry, a key sector in the economic transformation of developed countries, has become a vital force in global economic growth due to its high monetization potential and sustainable development capacity. The "unity in diversity" cultural framework of the Chinese nation also provides an abundance of rich, high-quality multicultural resources for the development of ethnic economies.

Data from the seventh national census reveals that 509.79 million people in China reside in rural areas, accounting for 36.16% of the national population, with ethnic minorities representing 50.81% of the rural demographic (Zheng, 2023). This underscores the significance of economic and industrial development in minority regions. The advancement of the tourism industry in these areas is anchored in the rural revitalization strategy. The essence of China's rural revitalization strategy lies in revitalizing (Huang, 2018) rural areas by adhering to their intrinsic developmental principles, crafting development plans and methods tailored to their unique characteristics. This approach aims to narrow the urban-rural divide in economic and cultural development and propel the social, political, economic, and cultural progress of rural communities, fulfilling their aspirations for an improved quality of life.

The 19th National Congress advocated the rural revitalization strategy, focusing on fostering industries, ecological livability, civilized rural customs, effective governance, and prosperity (Che, 2019). These five pillars of revitalization are interrelated and indispensable. The 28th session of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress ratified the "Rural Revitalization Promotion Law", reiterating the strategy's objective to respect and build upon the existing developmental trajectories of rural societies and address their various challenges. Cultural and tourism integration in the context of rural revitalization refers to the phenomenon where cultural and tourism industries and their related elements mutually permeate, intersect, and recombine, forming a new symbiotic entity. There is an intrinsic connection between culture and tourism; culture is the essence of tourism, and tourism is a significant medium for culture. Their organic amalgamation and deep integration are natural laws of cultural evolution, driving the transformation and high-quality development of the culture and tourism industry, and more effectively meeting the people's growing needs for cultural and tourism experiences. Since China's reform and opening-up, rapid economic development nationwide and across regions, increased population mobility among ethnic groups, and heightened urbanization levels have led to a unique residential pattern among ethnicities characterized by mixed large-scale settlements, small-scale clustering, and intercrossed living. Highway tourism, a unique form of tourism rooted in road culture, is highly sought after for its convenience, independence, and freedom. It is especially apt for tourism in sparsely populated ethnic minority regions, gradually becoming a significant domain in the tourism industry. Given the substantial presence of ethnic minorities in rural areas, leveraging the rural revitalization strategy to develop the cultural tourism industry in these regions, and exploring ways to deepen the integration of culture and tourism in highway tourism, are essential for maintaining the rapid development trajectory of the culture and tourism industries. This development will enable the achievement of industrial, cultural, talent, organizational, and ecological revitalization in ethnic regions under the backdrop of culture and tourism integration, warranting further academic discourse.

2. Current State of Highway Tourism in Ethnic Minority Regions

2.1 Features of Highway Tourism

With the progression of rural economies, numerous ethnic minority areas have introduced highway tourism routes, such as "Duku Highway" and "Nenmo Highway." These routes capitalize on the era's integration of culture and tourism, utilizing their natural and ethnic cultural resources, and the buzz on social media platforms for promotional emphasis. Highway tourism in these regions is characterized by:

- (1) Concentrated tourism resources along the highways. These routes, designed with self-driving families in mind, are equipped with ethnic tourism reception centers, evolving into primary tourism service centers. These include hotels and guesthouses with ample capacity, supported by comprehensive infrastructure like heating, water supply, electricity, and drainage.
- (2) Distinct ethnic cultural resources. Travelers on these highways can easily access areas showcasing ethnic cultures, where they can immerse themselves in the diverse customs of different groups, understand the extensive history of the Chinese nation, and savor the unique arts, music, and festive atmosphere of the minorities. For instance, the Nenmo Highway features ethnic cultural parks, serving as showcases for Northeastern minority cultures. These comprehensive tourism parks blend dining, accommodation, entertainment, and ethnic crafts, offering unique accommodations and local sports facilities such as horseback riding and archery ranges. Ethnic museums vividly display the spiritual beliefs, nature worship, customs, and fashion of the minorities, providing insights into their historical transformations and lifestyles.
- (3) Abundant natural resources along the highways. The surroundings of these highways often boast diverse geological landscapes, unique vegetation, and regional wildlife. The Duku Highway, for instance, passes through landscapes with snow-capped mountains and grasslands, linking several ethnic settlements. The Nenmo Highway is known for its hilly terrains and snow resources, providing early snow experiences and extreme weather due to its cold temperate continental monsoon climate.

2.2 Development Challenges of Highway Tourism

Reflecting on the existing scenario of highway tourism in ethnic minority areas, several common challenges emerge: Feedback from online tourism forums and big data analyses shows high recognition for ethnic cultural highways. However, when the actual travel experience falls short of expectations, tourists often express dissatisfaction, mentioning "fatigue," "accidents," and "regrets" related to driving. This suggests room for improvement in management and infrastructure along these ethnic minority highways. The dispersion of ethnic cultural displays sometimes leaves tourists feeling rushed and unable to fully engage. Furthermore, the unique residential patterns of ethnic minorities, primarily residing in border areas, make some tourism routes less accessible to distant travelers, leading to frequent online remarks like "interested but unable to visit." Additionally, the current promotional strategies, focusing narrowly on ethnic uniqueness, fail to attract those less interested in cultural aspects, highlighting the need for more diverse marketing approaches in the evolution of ethnic minority highway tourism.

3. Strategic Approaches for the Development of Highway Tourism in Ethnic Minority Areas

Under the umbrella of cultural and tourism integration, a key focus is on the multifaceted fusion of tourism and culture. This encompasses the blending of cultural and tourism ideologies, systemic mechanisms, planning and technology, resources and products, industry formats, functionalities and utilities, spatial carriers, and service management. It also involves a wide-ranging integration within the cultural and tourism industry itself, inter-industry integration, and cross-sectoral integration. In line with this integrated approach and capitalizing on the national policy benefits associated with the rural revitalization strategy, and considering the unique aspects and challenges of highway tourism in ethnic minority regions, the following recommendations are made:

3.1 Optimize Spatial Planning and Enhance Infrastructure

Leverage the natural landscape resources along ethnic minority region highways, optimizing the tourism development spatial layout while developing beautiful rural areas. Integrate natural landscapes with ethnic charm, ensuring a cohesive fusion of planning and resource-product amalgamation. Differentiate and strategically position each tourist area, making travel routes more accessible and user-friendly, thereby enhancing competitive advantage. Create more cultural landscapes along the highways to alleviate aesthetic fatigue for travelers. Bolster the public service guarantee system. In cultural and tourism integration, highway service station construction can also reflect ethnic minority culture, augmenting tourists' perceptions of safety, driving comfort, cultural engagement, and service quality. Train professionals in areas prone to management issues such as highway traffic safety, tourism environment governance, and tourist behavior management, providing more comprehensive services and achieving a synergy in service management.

3.2 Ethnic Cultural Promotion to Boost Tourism Image

Enhance both online and offline promotional activities for highway tourism in ethnic minority regions by leveraging various online communities and physical advertising platforms to cultivate a tourism brand centered on "ethnic minority culture." This strategy aims to facilitate ethnic interaction and assimilation across platforms, merging cultural and tourism concepts with spatial carriers. Post-pandemic, the first quarter of 2023 witnessed a significant rebound in domestic tourism, with 1.216 billion tourist visits, marking a 46.5% increase year-on-year, and tourism revenue soaring to 1.3 trillion yuan, up by 69.5%. During the New Year holiday, domestic tourism recovered to 42.8% of the 2019 levels with 52.7134 million tourist visits and revenue reaching 26.517 billion yuan, or 35.1% of the 2019 figures. Capitalizing on this "tourism boom" to amplify comprehensive highway tourism promotion is crucial.

Online promotion should focus on strengthening the distinct branding of highway tourism. Utilizing short video platforms, the most popular online promotional channels, to create unique tags for highway tourism in ethnic minority regions, such as ethnic theme parks, landscapes imbued with ethnic characteristics, self-driving tours, wellness tourism, and rural ethnic tours, will deepen potential customers' impressions and enhance consumer attraction. Offline promotion should leverage the policy

advantages of ethnic minority regions to support local tourism businesses with tax breaks and financing incentives. Local tourism authorities and enterprises should engage in or host tourism development conferences, briefings, trade shows, and ethnic cultural performances both domestically and internationally, inviting media to conduct on-site inspections and coverage. Employing news media to disseminate tourism information externally will facilitate integration within the industry, across industries, and beyond industry boundaries.

3.3 Flexible Tourism Routes to Foster Ethnic Integration

In 2021, General Secretary Xi Jinping underscored at the Central Ethnic Work Conference the necessity of promoting interaction, communication, and integration among ethnic groups. He emphasized considering the unique situations of different ethnic groups and regions, coordinating urban and rural planning, and public service resource allocation to create a conducive environment. The aim is to gradually achieve an all-encompassing integration of ethnic groups in spatial, cultural, economic, social, and psychological dimensions (Xi, 2022). In developing highway tourism in ethnic minority areas, beyond enhancing public service resources and fostering an ethnic tourism environment using policy measures, it is also vital to engage local ethnic residents in the development process. Respect for local ethnic customs and the development of versatile tourism routes are essential. These routes should allow tourists to genuinely engage in local life during self-driving tours. In addition to routes focusing primarily on natural or cultural landscapes, integrated routes linking highways, service stations, ethnic settlements, and natural landscapes should be considered. Tailoring these routes to local conditions can deepen tourists' immersion in the living, economic, cultural, and psychological spheres of the resident ethnic communities, ensuring the sustainable development of ethnic tourism.

4. Conclusion

The ethnic minority regions of China, characterized by their expansive landscapes and abundant tourism resources, have identified highway tourism as a vital conduit to collective prosperity and the enhancement of ethnic unity. This initiative fosters ethnic solidarity and integration, guiding diverse ethnic groups towards a unified journey of modernization within a socialist framework. The potential for highway tourism in these ethnic minority areas, set against the fusion of culture and tourism, hinges on capitalizing on ecological resources and augmenting public service infrastructure. Concurrently, emphasizing and promoting the unique attributes of ethnic minorities is crucial. Enhancing marketing efforts, creating versatile tourism routes, and encouraging inter-ethnic amalgamation are key. This strategy will highlight the diverse benefits of highway tourism, combining leisurely vacations with authentic ethnic cultural experiences. Striking a harmonious balance between ecological preservation and economic growth will thus aid in propelling ethnic economic development, rural revitalization, and strengthening ethnic unity. Furthermore, it will adeptly cater to the escalating cultural and tourism demands of people across all ethnicities.

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