

Original Paper

The Operational Status and Optimization Paths of the Sojourn Elderly Care Model in plateau Areas from the Perspective of Cultural Embeddedness

Ruiting Wang¹ & Haozhe Wang¹

¹ Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, Guangxi, China

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Abstract

With the deepening population aging and the booming sojourn elderly care industry, plateau areas, boasting unique cultural and ecological resources, have become key carriers for model innovation. Guided by cultural embeddedness theory, this study focuses on Maoxian County's sojourn elderly care model, examining cultural embedding across government institutions, natural health preservation, characteristic medicine, and cultural immersion. It identifies practical dilemmas: cultural identity conflicts, mismatched service supply, limited participants, and talent shortages. Corresponding optimization paths are proposed: optimizing government governance, enhancing natural health preservation, promoting characteristic medicine inheritance, and breaking cultural immersion barriers. The research reveals that cultural embedding in Maoxian's model essentially reflects the symbiosis of ethnic culture and the elderly care industry. Successful practice requires adhering to "local adaptation, multi-stakeholder collaboration, innovation-driven empowerment, and inheritance activation," providing the elderly with "health preservation + culture" dual-value experience while offering practical and theoretical references for cultural resource activation, rural revitalization, and elderly care development in plateau areas.

Keywords

Cultural Embeddedness, plateau Areas, Sojourn Elderly Care, Maoxian County, characteristic Culture

1. Introduction

Currently, China's population aging process is deepening continuously, and the traditional home-based elderly care model is facing challenges such as insufficient resource supply and a single form of services. As a cross-border integration of "elderly care + tourism + health preservation", sojourn elderly

care has become an important innovative path to address aging issues, thanks to its flexible and diversified service forms and composite values (Ming & Yan, 2025). Relying on their unique natural ecological resources and profound traditional cultural heritage, plateau areas have injected distinctive cultural connotations into the sojourn elderly care model (Liu & Xu, 2025). As the core link connecting ethnic culture and elderly care services, the depth and effectiveness of cultural embedding directly determine the regional characteristics and sustainability of the sojourn elderly care model. As a settlement of the characteristic ethnic group, Maoxian County in Aba and characteristic Autonomous Prefecture boasts high-quality natural health preservation resources at the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, unique characteristic medicine culture, and rich characteristic folk customs, endowing it with inherent advantages for the cultural embedding of the sojourn elderly care model. In recent years, Maoxian has gradually explored a multi-stakeholder collaborative development pattern of "government - market - village - guesthouse" and constructed an ecological service system covering healthcare, health, culture, business travel and other fields. However, practical challenges such as inadequate cultural adaptation, low industrial maturity, and talent shortage still persist. Therefore, taking Maoxian as a case study to systematically investigate the current status, dilemmas, and optimization paths of cultural embedding in the sojourn elderly care model in plateau areas not only provides targeted solutions for the high-quality development of Maoxian's sojourn elderly care industry, but also fills the research gap of cultural embedding theory in the field of sojourn elderly care in plateau areas (Ran & Lian, 2025). It further offers referable practical experience for other plateau areas exploring characteristic sojourn elderly care paths, thus holding significant theoretical value and practical guiding significance (Ruan, 2025).

2. Current Situation of Cultural Embeddedness in the Residential Tourism Pension Model of Maoxian County, aba Prefecture

2.1 Government Agency Embedding and Elderly Associations: Coordinated Development between the Mutual Assistance Structure of Local Villages and the Government

The cultural embedding in Maoxian County's residential tourism pension model relies primarily on the government's macro guidance and resource coordination, forming a collaborative governance structure characterized by "government leadership, village response, and elderly association linkage." By formulating industrial plans, improving infrastructure, and establishing inter-departmental collaboration mechanisms, the government connects the characteristic ethnic group's local village mutual assistance structure with the public elderly care service system, laying a solid institutional foundation.

On the one hand, it promotes the standardized construction of elderly associations. Relying on local mutual assistance traditions, it guides these associations to establish communication bridges such as "support groups for elderly residents in tourism," and organizes activities such as neighborhood mutual assistance and cultural inheritance workshops to help elderly tourists integrate into the local community (Editorial Department, 2025). On the other hand, it drives the collaborative development of the two

parties through policy support and financial subsidies, coordinates resources from multiple departments to upgrade village elderly care service stations, cultural squares and other facilities, and encourages elderly associations to participate in their operation (Xian, 2025). This achieves the complementary advantages of "government public services" and "local mutual assistance services," which not only preserves the core of the characteristic ethnic group's mutual assistance culture but also enhances the professionalism and safety of services, providing stable governance support for cultural embedding.

2.2 Natural Health Preservation Embedded in the Characteristics of Local Natural Scenery: Tourism + Health Preservation + Social Interaction

Maoxian County relies corely on high-quality natural ecological resources such as snow-capped mountains and canyons on the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, deeply binds natural health preservation with characteristic culture and social needs, and constructs a three-dimensional embedded scenario of "Tourism + Health Preservation + Social Interaction", making natural landscapes a core carrier integrating ornamental, cultural experience and health preservation functions. The government and market entities work together to create characteristic residential tourism routes such as "forest hiking for health preservation" and "pastoral farming experience", where natural health preservation is deeply integrated with social interaction and culture — the elderly can interact to form social circles while viewing landscapes, feel the characteristic people's "harmony between man and nature" farming culture and achieve physical and mental relaxation during pastoral experiences; homestays and health preservation institutions also rely on the natural environment to create social scenarios such as outdoor tea breaks to facilitate emotional communication (Wei & Xie, 2024). This model not only transforms natural advantages into the core competitiveness of residential tourism pension, but also enhances the richness and sense of belonging of the elderly care experience through cultural empowerment and social construction.

2.3 Embeddedness of Characteristic Medicine in the Characteristic Ethnic Group's Integrated Medical and Elderly Care Model

As a core component of the traditional characteristic culture, characteristic Medicine serves as a crucial underpinning for the distinctive "integrated medical and elderly care" feature of Maoxian County's residential tourism pension model (Liu, Wang, & Du, 2024). With its unique diagnostic and therapeutic concepts and methods, it is embedded in the health security system, forming a medical and elderly care model that combines ethnic characteristics with practical value. The local government has incorporated characteristic Medicine services into the medical security system for residential tourism pension by supporting relevant medical institutions, cultivating professional talents, and promoting the integration with modern medicine. At present, a number of clinics and health preservation centers have been established, providing distinctive services such as acupuncture and herbal conditioning. Characteristic Medicine is deeply integrated into the entire cycle of elderly care: at the preventive health care stage, it offers personalized dietary therapy and health preservation guidance; at the disease conditioning stage, it conducts traditional therapy interventions for chronic diseases; at the rehabilitation nursing stage, it is

supplemented by massage, herbal fumigation and other therapies. Meanwhile, cultural experience activities such as herbal identification are carried out to realize the multiple values of "treatment + health preservation + cultural experience". This model not only gives play to the advantages of ethnic medicine and enriches the content of medical and elderly care services, but also highlights the cultural uniqueness of Maoxian County's residential tourism pension model.

2.4 Embeddedness of Cultural Immersion in Elderly Care via Traditional Cultural Activities

The effective implementation of cultural embedding in Maoxian's sojourn elderly care model relies corely on the multi-stakeholder collaboration of "homestays - economy - government - market - villages - elderly associations" and an ecological service system covering ten fields including medical care, health preservation, elderly care, finance, taxation, law, business travel, education, entertainment, and culture. At the collaboration level, the government coordinates policies and infrastructure construction, market entities (homestays, health and wellness institutions, tourism enterprises) are responsible for product development and service provision, while villages and elderly associations facilitate cultural inheritance and community integration. Notably, homestays integrate Qiang ethnic cultural elements into all operational aspects such as decoration, catering, and services. The government supports industrial development through policy incentives like tax preferences and financial subsidies, while regulating industry standards to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of the elderly. Within the ecological service system, fields including medical care and business travel are deeply integrated, with local natural landscapes and folk customs serving as the core carriers. The medical sector links with Qiang ethnic medicine to form a health security network; business travel combines with cultural experiences to create characteristic cultural tourism routes; education provides traditional cultural courses to meet the elderly's learning needs; and supporting services in law, finance, and taxation offer convenient consulting services, addressing the elderly's concerns. This comprehensive system fully underpins cultural embedding, enabling sojourn elderly to enjoy high-quality services while deeply experiencing local natural beauty and cultural charm, ultimately achieving the sojourn elderly care goal of "physical wellness, spiritual pleasure, and cultural integration."

3. Development Dilemmas of Cultural Embeddedness in the Residential Tourism Pension Model of Maoxian County, aba Prefecture

3.1 Government Agency Level: Coexistence of Cultural Identity Conflicts and Imbalanced Service Supply

As the leader of the residential tourism pension model, the government faces three core dilemmas in cultural embeddedness: conflicts in cultural identity, mismatches in service supply, and rigidification of development models. First, the contradiction between cultural identity and external intervention is prominent. When promoting infrastructure construction and industrial planning, the government tends to prioritize an external modern governance logic while neglecting the uniqueness of local

characteristic culture. For instance, some elderly care facilities directly copy urban models without incorporating characteristic cultural elements. This not only fails to foster a sense of belonging among local elderly residents and meet the cultural experience needs of visiting elderly tourists, but also dampens the enthusiasm of villages and elderly associations for collaborative participation. Second, there is a mismatch between service supply and the actual needs of the elderly. The government focuses on the hardware construction of elderly care facilities but pays insufficient attention to functional adaptability: local rural elderly are in greater need of accessible basic medical care and short-term care services, yet the existing facilities prioritize cultural entertainment and long-term wellness programs. Meanwhile, visiting elderly tourists crave characteristic cultural experiences and personalized wellness services, whereas government public services are mostly standardized. As a result, the utilization rate of facilities and the value of services cannot be fully realized. Third, there is a lack of innovation in the cultural embeddedness model, accompanied by a significant homogenization problem. At present, the government-led model largely relies on "policy support + resource accumulation", lacking in-depth excavation and innovative transformation of cultural resources. Cultural activities are limited to conventional forms such as Guozhuang dance and characteristic embroidery experiences, with no innovations tailored to modern elderly care demands. At the industrial level, the deep integration of culture, wellness, and tourism has not been achieved, leading to low added value and insufficient core competitiveness of residential tourism pension products, which restricts the sustainability of cultural embeddedness.

3.2 Natural Wellness Level: Dual Constraints of Limited Participating Subjects and Insufficient Model Maturity

As a core advantage of Maoxian County's residential tourism pension model, natural wellness faces two major dilemmas in cultural embeddedness: limited participating subjects and insufficient model maturity, which affect the efficiency of resource transformation and the actual effect of embeddedness. On the one hand, the participation rate of local rural elderly remains low due to their busy farming work, insufficient awareness of natural wellness, and adherence to traditional pension concepts. This leads to a situation where resources are mostly oriented toward visiting elderly tourists, making it difficult to achieve the goal of universal accessibility. On the other hand, the model is still immature in multiple aspects. In terms of industrial operation, projects are scattered and run by small-scale entities, lacking unified planning; service personnel are insufficiently professional; and project design fails to deeply integrate characteristic culture, resulting in weak attractiveness. In terms of supporting facilities, the inadequacy of basic medical care, transportation and other infrastructure in rural areas makes it hard to guarantee safety and travel convenience. Moreover, projects are highly seasonal with short operation cycles, which restricts the stable development of the model.

3.3 Characteristic Medicine Level: Dual Bottlenecks of Restricted Diagnosis and Treatment Scope and Insufficient Financial Support

As a characteristic resource for the cultural embeddedness of residential tourism pension in Maoxian

County, characteristic Medicine faces two major dilemmas: restricted scope of diagnosis and treatment, and insufficient government financial support, which hinder its in-depth integration with residential tourism pension. First, although characteristic Medicine has advantages in chronic disease management and health preservation, it is limited by traditional concepts and technical inheritance, resulting in a narrow scope of diagnosis and treatment that makes it difficult to address major diseases (Zhao, 2024). Additionally, its diagnostic and treatment standards have not been fully standardized and lack scientific verification, leading to limited trust among the elderly. Consequently, it only serves as an auxiliary medical method, which affects the depth and breadth of its embeddedness. Second, inadequate government financial support has given rise to several interrelated issues. Talent training primarily relies on "oral instruction and hands-on teaching", resulting in a severe generational gap in inheritance. Diagnostic and treatment facilities remain primitive, and cultural promotion channels are singular. Furthermore, backward industrial policies, and the lack of systematic planning and standardized criteria have led to disorganized industrial development, making it difficult to advance toward large-scale and standardized operations. These factors collectively exacerbate the dilemmas in the embeddedness of characteristic Medicine.

3.4 Cultural Immersion Level: Triple Obstacles of Talent Shortage, Cultural Conflict and Language Barrier

Cultural immersion, as a core dimension of the cultural embeddedness in Maoxian County's residential tourism pension model, faces three major dilemmas: shortage of professional talents, conflicts between traditional and modern cultures, and language communication barriers, which affect the depth of embeddedness and the sense of experience. First, the shortage of professional talents leads to insufficient quality of experience projects (Gou & Luo, 2022). Most cultural immersion projects are led by local villagers and members of elderly associations, lacking professional inheritors and planning talents. Folk artists have limited teaching and organizational capabilities, resulting in projects that merely replicate traditions without innovation. Moreover, there are few young inheritors of traditional skills, putting them at risk of "dying out with no successors." Second, cultural conflicts exacerbate the difficulty of integration. There are differences between traditional characteristic customs and the modern lifestyles and values of visiting elderly tourists, which can easily trigger conflicts due to misunderstandings of customs. In addition, visiting elderly tourists have a superficial understanding of traditional customs, and the impact of modern culture has weakened local customs, further hindering cultural integration. Third, language barriers have become a significant obstacle. Some local elderly people in advanced age and remote villages mainly speak characteristic language. Due to unfamiliarity with the language, visiting elderly tourists find it difficult to communicate in depth and fully participate in cultural experience activities, which increases communication costs and restricts community interaction and the depth of cultural embeddedness.

4. Optimization Paths for Cultural Embeddedness in the Residential Tourism Pension Model of Maoxian County, aba Prefecture

4.1 Optimization Paths for Government Governance: Resolving Cultural Conflicts, Achieving Targeted Supply and Realizing Model Innovation

To address the dilemmas at the government level, namely conflicts in cultural identity, mismatches in service supply, and rigidification of development models, optimization is required in three aspects: governance philosophy, service system, and development model. First, establish a "local culture-oriented" philosophy and a collaborative deliberation mechanism among "government, villages, and elderly associations". Integrate characteristic cultural elements and folk customs into the planning and construction of elderly care facilities to enhance the cultural sense of belonging of the local community. Second, construct a "dual-adaptation" service system. For local rural elderly, add convenient medical stations and short-term care centers to meet their elderly care needs during intervals between farming work; for visiting elderly tourists, launch customized "culture + wellness" packages and cooperate with the market to improve service pertinence. Third, promote model innovation (Zhang, Xie, & Zeng, 2019). Build a platform for transforming cultural resources, deeply integrate "culture + wellness + tourism", develop immersive experience projects, cultivate leading enterprises to integrate resources, and set up special funds to encourage innovation. This will resolve the homogenization problem and support the sustainable development of the model.

4.2 Natural Wellness Empowerment Paths: Activating Local Participation, Enhancing Model Maturity and Adaptability

To address the dilemmas in natural wellness, namely low local participation rate and immature model, efforts need to be made in three aspects: cognitive guidance, industrial integration, and supporting facility improvement. First, strengthen cognitive guidance. Popularize wellness concepts through multiple channels, design "fragmented" wellness projects in line with farming schedules, and implement a "wellness points system" to enhance the participation enthusiasm of local elderly people. Second, promote industrial integration and standardization. The government takes the lead in planning and layout, integrates scattered resources to form clustered development, trains professional service personnel, standardizes relevant criteria, promotes the in-depth integration of natural wellness with characteristic culture, and develops characteristic projects. Third, improve supporting facilities. Upgrade rural transportation and medical conditions, add emergency medical stations in wellness bases and establish a rapid referral mechanism. Develop corresponding wellness projects targeting seasonal issues to enhance the safety, attractiveness and stability of the model.

4.3 Characteristic Medicine Inheritance and Development Paths: Expanding the Scope of Diagnosis and Treatment, Strengthening Financial Support and System Construction

To address the dilemmas of characteristic Medicine, namely the limited scope of diagnosis and treatment and insufficient financial support, breakthroughs need to be made in three aspects: talent training, technological innovation, and financial and policy guarantees. First, construct a collaborative

training system of "colleges and universities + intangible cultural heritage inheritors + medical institutions". Set up characteristic Medicine majors, train talents through "oral instruction and hands-on teaching + systematic teaching", provide special subsidies to encourage young inheritors, and introduce modern medical talents for collaborative research and development to resolve the talent gap. Second, establish a research and development center relying on scientific research institutions, carry out research on diagnostic and therapeutic mechanisms and clinical verification, standardize relevant criteria, explore a collaborative diagnosis and treatment model of "characteristic Medicine + modern medicine" to expand the scope of application, and develop health-preserving products to enrich product forms and enhance added value (Li, 2023). Third, increase investment in special support funds, introduce preferential policies such as tax reductions and exemptions to attract social capital, establish a cultural promotion system, improve the awareness and trust of characteristic Medicine, and promote its in-depth integration with residential tourism pension.

4.4 Cultural Immersion Breakthrough Paths: Cultivating Professional Talents, Resolving Cultural Conflicts and Overcoming Language Barriers

To address the dilemmas in cultural immersion, namely the shortage of professional talents, cultural conflicts, and language barriers, solutions need to be implemented in three aspects: talent cultivation, cultural integration, and language adaptation. First, construct a diversified talent cultivation system. Fund local intangible cultural heritage inheritors for teaching through special support programs, introduce professional planning teams to carry out the "mentorship" model, and cooperate with colleges and universities to set up relevant majors for targeted training to fill the talent gap. Second, promote cultural integration. Establish a pre-popularization mechanism for characteristic culture, build a cultural exchange platform between "local residents and visiting elderly tourists", encourage the younger generation to spread characteristic culture through modern media, and promote positive interaction between traditional and modern cultures. Third, build a language adaptation bridge. Equip bilingual guides and translation manuals, develop bilingual cultural materials, and launch simple characteristic language learning camps to reduce communication costs and deepen cultural embeddedness.

5. Conclusion

Endowed with its unique characteristic culture and high-quality natural ecological resources, Maoxian County of Aba Prefecture has constructed a cultural embeddedness model for residential tourism pension centered on government coordination, natural wellness, characteristic Medicine integration and cultural immersion. It has also formed a rudimentary ecological service system featuring multi-subject collaboration and multi-domain resource integration, providing a valuable practical sample for residential tourism pension in ethnic areas. This study finds that although the model has achieved the initial integration of characteristic culture and elderly care services, it still faces multiple dilemmas: conflicts between government intervention and local cultural identity, and mismatches between service supply and demand; immature natural wellness models and low participation rates of local elderly;

restrictions on characteristic Medicine imposed by the limited scope of diagnosis and treatment and insufficient funds; as well as talent shortage, cultural conflicts and language barriers in cultural immersion. In response to these problems, this paper proposes targeted paths including optimizing government governance, activating participation in natural wellness, strengthening the inheritance of characteristic Medicine, and breaking down barriers to cultural immersion. Guided by the principles of "local adaptation, multi-subject collaboration, innovation empowerment, and inheritance activation", these paths are designed to promote the transformation of cultural embeddedness from formal integration to in-depth integration, and enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of the model. Essentially, the practice in Maoxian County is an exploration of the innovative integration of ethnic cultural inheritance and elderly care industry. It not only provides a new "wellness + pleasure" pension option for the elderly, but also offers a new path for the activation of cultural resources and rural revitalization in ethnic areas (Lian, 2019). In the future, it is imperative to adhere to the philosophy of "culture as the core, wellness as the foundation, and collaboration as the key", continuously optimize the coordination mechanism, and deepen the integration of culture and elderly care services. It should be noted that the cultural embeddedness of residential tourism pension in ethnic areas cannot be pursued hastily; instead, it is essential to respect the inherent laws of local culture and avoid homogeneous and utilitarian development. Future research can focus on constructing an evaluation system for the effects of cultural embeddedness and refining the implementation details of the proposed solutions, so as to provide more targeted theoretical and practical support for the development of related industries in more ethnic regions.

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