

Research on the Living Transmission and Innovative Development Strategies of Longsheng Yao Herbal Bathing in the Context of Cultural Tourism Integration

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of cultural tourism integration strategies, the living transmission and innovative development of Longsheng Yao herbal baths, which are designated as autonomous regional intangible cultural heritage, face significant challenges. This study examines Guangxi's Longsheng Yao herbal baths through field investigations and literature analysis. It systematically maps the resource advantages and transmission attempts of Yao herbal baths, while deeply analyzing the constraints in inheritor structures, social influence, and resource input-output efficiency. Based on this, the paper proposes relevant strategies, including integrating non-material cultural heritage tourism parks, creating immersive non-material cultural heritage experiences, innovating digital communication systems, and improving policy guarantees. These measures aim to promote the deep integration of Longsheng Yao herbal baths with cultural tourism, thereby achieving sustainable development.

1. Problem Statement

The Yao herbal baths in Longsheng Multi-ethnic Autonomous County, Guangxi, are a distinctive local intangible cultural heritage. With social development and the rise of material standards, traditional Yao bathing practices find it difficult to meet contemporary market demands. Cross-sectoral collaboration and integration represent an innovative way for the transmission of intangible heritage.

Current research on Yao herbal baths mainly focuses on two aspects: historical-cultural studies and preservation-transmission approaches. For instance, Hong Zongguo (2011) offers a detailed description of the customs and characteristics of Yao herbal baths, highlighting their significant role in the daily life of the Yao people.^[1] Liu Yuheng (2001) and Pan Zanqun (1984) respectively analyze Yao herbal baths from resource and historical perspectives, revealing their close connection to the local ecology.^[2]^[3] Du Wei (2021), through practical research on the productive preservation of Yao bathing in Gaohua Village, emphasized the need to adapt to modern market demands while safeguarding traditions.^[4] Tan Jianhao (2023), taking Ruyuan Yao baths as a case study, proposes multiple innovative approaches to promote the living transmission and sustainable development of Yao herbal baths.^[5] Concurrently, scholarly research and clinical applications regarding Yao herbal

baths have emerged. For example, Tang Shengbin (2000) systematized traditional Yao herbal bath formulas, elaborating on the composition and applications of various medicinal bath preparations.^[6] Li Tong (2019) and Wang Chengmei (2018) respectively investigated the application of the Yao large tub bathing in treating blood stasis disorders and postpartum conditions, confirming its distinctive therapeutic efficacy.^{[7][8]} Liu Li (2020) and Li Yongjun (2014) validated the effectiveness of Yao herbal baths in treating rheumatic diseases through clinical observations.^{[9][10]}

In summary, existing academic research mainly focuses on the historical culture, medicinal value, and preservation practices of Yao herbal baths. However, studies exploring their inheritance and innovative development in the context of cultural-tourism integration are still insufficient. Therefore, this paper adopts a cultural tourism perspective, concentrating on how Longsheng Yao herbal baths can gain mainstream recognition through new forms and technologies, thus revitalizing their vitality and integrating into contemporary public life.

2. Resource Advantages and Inheritance Initiatives of Longsheng Yao Herbal Bathing

(1) Resource Advantages

Longsheng Multi-ethnic Autonomous County is located at the southwestern foothills of the Yuecheng Mountains, straddling the Hunan-Guangxi border. With an average elevation exceeding 700 metres, a forest coverage rate of 79.12%, and an annual average temperature of 18.2 °C, its outstanding natural conditions foster abundant medicinal plant resources, offering uniquely favourable conditions for the development of Yao herbal baths.^[11] The local Yao population constitutes 18.42% of the total inhabitants,^[12] having resided here for generations, thereby establishing a traditional ethnic practice centred on medicinal bathing. Guided by Yao medical theory, Yao bathing utilizes the method of bathing in decocted medicinal liquids. Through the combined action of medicinal potency and heat, the active components of the herbs penetrate the body via the skin, mucous membranes, and meridians, exerting therapeutic and health-preserving effects as an external treatment. Yao herbal baths are categorized into daily healthcare, disease treatment, postnatal care, and ceremonial types. Long-term practice has led to the formation of distinctive healthcare customs. Notably, there is the regimen of "being able to start working on the third day after giving birth", along with the formulaic principle of "Five Tigers, Nine Oxen, Eighteen Drills, Seventy-Two Winds", which showcases the profound ethnic medicinal heritage. In 2012, the Longsheng Yao Herbal Bath was inscribed on Guangxi's Intangible Cultural Heritage List, signifying both the modern transformation of local ethnic traditional medicine and its official recognition.

(2) Preservation Initiatives

In recent years, Longsheng has implemented a series of measures centered on preserving and transmitting Yao herbal bathing culture. In terms of ecological conservation, the number of herbs used in traditional baths has been optimized from 72 to more than 60 varieties, alleviating resource pressure and promoting the natural recovery of rare medicinal plants. Concurrently, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine established the Guangxi Traditional Chinese Medicine Zhuang-Yao Medicine Industry Demonstration Base, thereby facilitating standardized cultivation across over 120,000 mu (approximately 8,000 hectares)^[13] and ensuring a stable supply of medicinal materials. As for inheritance mechanisms, a model combining family transmission with master-apprentice systems has been established. An example is Xiao Meifeng, a municipal-level representative inheritor. Based in Daliu Village, Longji Town, she leads the villagers in learning techniques and takes on apprentices to establish stable inheritance relationships. Meanwhile, she operates a processing factory for Yao herbal medicine plants and a rural medicinal bath experience center, facilitating the conversion of intangible cultural

heritage skills into economic benefits. Regarding industrial development, by capitalizing on the annual tourist influx of millions to the Longji Terraces, the region actively promotes an "ecotourism + wellness experience" model. This entails establishing multiple guesthouses themed around medicinal baths and developing value-added products such as herbal bath packs and botanical essential oils, gradually forming an integrated industry that encompasses health, wellness, and leisure.

3. Constraints on the Transmission of Yao Herbal Bathing

(1) Imbalanced Proportion of Inheritor

Currently, practitioners of Yao herbal bathing are predominantly elderly. Influenced by modern lifestyles and external cultures, the younger generation shows low willingness to participate in preserving traditional Yao bathing practices. They largely perceive the industry as having unstable income and requiring demanding labour. Furthermore, core techniques are primarily transmitted within family lineages rather than through apprenticeship systems. This results in a scarcity of younger practitioners among the transmission group and poses risks of skill attrition.

(2) Limited Public Awareness of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Project

Compared to the internationally renowned Longji Terraces, the Yao herbal bath has far less recognition. Many visitors to Longji are largely unaware of Yao bath culture. This situation mainly results from inadequate promotion, which lacks systematic planning and effective dissemination channels. The promotion is still predominantly local and relies on limited methods, which hinders its broader influence.

Furthermore, the brand development of Yao bath culture lags behind. It fails to establish a distinctive and competitive brand image, which also impedes the growth of its recognition.

(3) Resource Input-Output Ratio Requires Urgent Optimisation

Herbal cultivation and associated costs pose a significant constraint on the development of medicinal bathing. Despite government initiatives to promote the cultivation of Chinese medicinal herbs, certain rare herbs commonly used in Yao bathing require stringent growing conditions. Incomplete cultivation techniques lead to limited yields, which fail to meet market demand. Wild herbs, valued for their superior efficacy, are in high demand but are difficult to harvest and have limited supply. Over-harvesting risks depleting resources, exacerbating supply-demand imbalances and driving up the prices of certain herbs, thus increasing the cost of Yao baths. For practitioners, the elevated herb costs compress profit margins and dampen business enthusiasm. For visitors, the rising bath prices reduce their willingness to consume, hindering the market expansion of the Yao bath industry.

4. Innovative Development Strategies for Longsheng Yao Herbal Baths within the Framework of Cultural-Tourism Integration

(1) Integrating the Intangible Cultural Heritage Tourism Ecosystem

1) Developing Gradient-Based Products

In accordance with regional economics theory, rational product tiering facilitates resource allocation and caters to diverse consumer needs. Building on foundational experiences, local authorities have established scenic area-affiliated "Yao Herbal Bath Experience Centers" to offer visitors swift and convenient introductory experiences. They have also collaborated with local folk communities near the Longji Terraces to provide "Herbal Bath Included" accommodation packages. In addition, they have created Yao-themed "Herbal Bath Rooms", featuring cultural elements such as Yao herbal gathering folk songs played in bathing areas, medicinal herb wall charts, and plaques inscribed with Yao medical proverbs, all of which enhance cultural immersion.

It is recommended to establish an educational workshop covering "Herbal Identification-Foraging-Formulation". Herbalists will explain the characteristics, habitats, and therapeutic values of medicinal plants and guide visitors through field foraging using demonstration techniques. After returning to the workshop, participants will learn to blend herbs and receive their custom-made blends as souvenirs to enhance engagement and memorability. Heritage practitioners or Yao physicians should diagnose visitors' constitutions through observation, auscultation, inquiry, and palpation to formulate bespoke herbal bath prescriptions. Additionally, derivative products such as portable medicinal kits should be developed. These kits should be packaged in deluxe gift boxes with cards signed by practitioners. This will elevate the cultural significance and collectible value, while also extending the industrial chain to meet the demands of home-use experiences and gift-giving.

2) Establishing a Benefit-Sharing Mechanism

Incorporating the preservation of medicinal bath culture into community performance metrics effectively motivates villagers to engage in conservation efforts. Community performance assessments should establish quantifiable metrics in dimensions such as the cultivation and conservation of medicinal herbs, the inheritance and demonstration of skills, and the preservation of folk traditions. Villagers can participate in conservation efforts to receive dividends from the tourism revenues of local scenic areas. This not only increases household income but also strengthens their cultural identity and sense of pride.

Such a mechanism not only motivates villagers but also enriches the cultural substance of scenic areas through community participation, enhancing tourism appeal and ultimately achieving a win-win outcome for cultural preservation and tourism development.

(2) Creating Immersive Cultural Experiences

1) Establishing an Ecological Museum

Establish an intangible cultural heritage eco-museum by reconstructing traditional Yao village herbal bathing spaces and implementing an AR (Augmented Reality) herbal identification system. This approach balances cultural preservation and transmission while meeting the public's demand for diverse and dynamic exhibition formats.^[14] The ecological museum may be located within the Longsheng Yao enclave, adopting the architectural styles typical of traditional Yao villages. Inside, a traditional Yao bathhouse will be recreated at a 1:1 scale. It features bluestone-paved bathing areas and displays of bathing tubs, wood-fired stoves, and medicinal gathering tools, simulating the process of preparing medicinal baths. An augmented reality herbal identification system allows visitors to scan and view three-dimensional images of medicinal plants along with explanatory videos, facilitating interactive learning. Inviting practitioners to demonstrate skills on-site enhances the authenticity and impact of the experience, creating a living cultural space that integrates preservation, exhibition, and education.

2) Developing of Immersive Artistic Performances

The original scenic drama "The Secret of Yao Bathing" weaves the Yao herbal bathing legend into its narrative, incorporating intangible cultural elements such as herbal-gathering songs and bathing rituals. The stage is set amidst mountains and forests, using the natural landscape as a backdrop. Actors in traditional attire perform rituals such as the "Three-Day Bath" and "Coming-of-Age Bath" through song and dance, vividly conveying the Yao medicinal philosophy and life rites. The theatre performance makes use of the natural mountain-water stage, employing advanced lighting, sound effects, and special effects to create an immersive audiovisual atmosphere. This significantly enhances the expressiveness of the plot, achieving the artistic dissemination of intangible cultural heritage elements.

3) Developing Study-Travel Courses for Primary and Secondary School Students

Local authorities collaborate with schools to design study programs themed around medicinal

bath culture and enrich the content through guided tours, interactive games, hands-on herbal preparation, and medicinal bath experiences. This allows students to engage deeply with and understand the herbal bath heritage of Longsheng during their studies. For instance, the curriculum includes engaging elements like the "I Am a Little Yao Medicinal Practitioner" task cards, which guide pupils to identify medicinal herbs and learn about herbal combinations. Through systematic and entertaining course design, this initiative brings the intangible cultural heritage to young people, achieving a deep integration of cultural transmission and educational travel.

(3) Innovation in Digital Dissemination Systems

1) Establishing a Digital Yao Herbal Bathing Resource Database

Establishing a digital repository for Yao bath culture facilitates its systematic preservation and transmission. This begins with assembling a specialist research team to conduct comprehensive audiovisual documentation of representative practitioners. This documentation encompasses medicinal bathing techniques, cultural customs, and personal artistic journeys. Filming utilizes 4K ultra-high definition and professional audio technology, with post-production incorporating multilingual subtitles and annotations to ensure precise and standardized recording.

2) Establishing a New Media Matrix

Leveraging platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat Official Accounts to disseminate the thematic content "The Diary of a Yao Bath Practitioner," thereby establishing a new media matrix that effectively broadens the reach of Yao bath culture.

On Douyin, short videos will document the daily work of Yao bath practitioners in a documentary style, incorporating interviews and themed challenges to enhance the appeal of the content. Xiaohongshu focuses on illustrated notes and short-form content. It invites influential bloggers to experience and share insights, thereby strengthening interaction and user engagement. Additionally, video content can be sliced and analyzed from the original footage for release, boosting online influence.

3) Developing Cultural and Creative IP (Intellectual Property) with Distinctive Cultural Significance

Intangible cultural heritage-themed IPs possess promising prospects and align with the consumption preferences of the younger generations. Therefore, choosing medicinal bath heritage elements to develop an IP series with original content strength will lay the foundation for creating animated shorts and related merchandise, enabling seamless integration into daily life.^[15] We have designed a series of sub-characters inspired by medicinal herbs, each assigned distinctive names and skill sets to enhance recognizability and appeal. We have produced animated shorts incorporating Yao ethnic traditions, leveraging vivid narratives and ethnic aesthetics for dissemination on video platforms to engage younger audiences. Simultaneously, we have developed multi-domain IP merchandise to organically integrate cultural dissemination with commercial value, propelling intangible heritage into contemporary life.

(4) Enhancing Policy Safeguards for Herbal Bathing

1) Strengthening Skilled Personnel Training

To enhance the comprehensive capabilities of Yao bath practitioners, ensure the safety and professionalism of Yao bath services, and promote the integration of traditional techniques with modern medicine, a "dual certification" mechanism can be implemented. This requires practitioners to hold both the status of intangible cultural heritage inheritor and professional medical practitioner qualifications. Recognition as an intangible cultural heritage inheritor requires a comprehensive assessment of their mastery of traditional techniques and tangible contributions to cultural transmission. Professional medical qualifications necessitate the completion of systematic medical training and passing national examinations to ensure that practitioners possess standardized medical knowledge and practical capabilities.

2) Establishing an Ecological Conservation Mechanism for Medicinal Herbs

Implement a rotational harvesting system for medicinal herbs and designate core protection zones for Longsheng Yao medicinal plants. This is a crucial measure for safeguarding the Yao herbal bath plant resources and maintaining ecological balance, thus providing an ecological foundation for the sustainable development of the Yao herbal bath culture.^[16] Rotational harvesting should establish reasonable harvesting schedules, designated areas, and quantity quotas based on the growth cycles and regenerative capacities of different herbs. A harvesting registration system should be implemented to achieve a balance between resource conservation and industrial demand.

3) Formulating Service Standards for Yao Herbal Bathing

The formulation of the Yao Medicinal Bath Service Specifications will systematically promote the industry towards standardization and regulation. These standards should cover service venues, practitioner qualifications, medicinal herb management, operational procedures, and hygiene and safety protocols.

Specifically, they must clarify the requirements for facilities and equipment, specify the professional knowledge and practical skills that practitioners must possess, and align with the dual-certification system. Concurrently, strict regulations should govern the sourcing, quality testing, and storage management of medicinal herbs. They should also detail the specific operational steps and precautions for herbal bathing. Implementing these standards will provide clear technical guidance for Yao bath services, improve service quality and industry credibility, strengthen consumer trust, and promote the cultural heritage and sustainable development of the Yao bath industry.

5. Conclusion

Longsheng Yao herbal baths embody the medical wisdom and ecological philosophy of the Yao people. Their intangible cultural heritage and innovative development require a systematic mechanism based on the integration of culture and tourism. Through hierarchical product development, immersive experience design, digital dissemination systems, and robust policy frameworks, we can address the constraints of herbal resources, improve communication channels, and ensure the sustainable development of Yao herbal bathing. This approach fosters a virtuous cycle between cultural preservation and tourism development. It is noteworthy that preserving cultural authenticity remains of paramount importance in the transmission of Yao herbal bathing. This involves strengthening primary transmission channels through family and apprenticeship systems while actively integrating into modern educational frameworks to cultivate multi-skilled talents proficient in both traditional techniques and contemporary knowledge. Looking ahead, efforts should focus on deepening interdisciplinary research, optimizing community participation mechanisms, and strengthening international exchanges and cooperation. This will enable Yao herbal bathing to thrive with lasting vitality through both preservation and innovation, offering the "Longsheng Model" as a valuable reference for safeguarding cultural diversity and revitalizing rural communities.

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