

# Cultural distortion and heritage preservation in tourism of the Dong ethnic area

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## Abstract

With the rapid development of tourism, the traditional culture of the Dong ethnic area has received increasing attention. However, while the rise of tourism brings economic benefits, it also poses challenges to the authenticity and heritage of Dong culture. This paper aims to explore the current state of cultural distortion and heritage in the tourism of the Dong ethnic area and to propose corresponding protection and development strategies. This study aims to explore the impact of tourism on the cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic area, analyzing the processes of cultural distortion and proposing strategies for cultural protection and sustainable development. Desk-based research and field observations will be conducted to gather data on the current state of Dong cultural heritage, the extent of cultural distortion, and the local community's efforts to safeguard their traditions. The Dong ethnic group, one of China's minority populations, primarily resides in the provinces of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi. Their distinctive architecture, music, dance, and festival traditions have captivated countless tourists. Yet, the rapid expansion of tourism has led to the distortion and endangerment of Dong culture amid the process of commercialization.

**Keywords:** Dong ethnic area, cultural heritage, cultural distortion, tourism, heritage protection

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism has emerged as a vital sector that contributes to economic development and cultural exchange worldwide (Richards, 2018). In the context of ethnic tourism, travelers seek immersive experiences that offer a glimpse into the traditional lifestyles, customs, and heritage of indigenous communities. This form of tourism not only promises economic benefits for local communities but also provides opportunities for cultural preservation and promotion (Ruhanen & Whitford, 2019). However, it also brings challenges, particularly the risk of cultural distortion as traditional practices are altered to cater to tourist expectations and demands.

The Dong ethnic group, one of China's 55 recognized minority populations, has become a notable destination for cultural tourism. Known for their unique architectural styles, elaborate musical traditions, intricate textile crafts, and vibrant festivals, the Dong people have captivated countless visitors (Xing et al., 2020). However, as the tourism industry in Dong communities has rapidly expanded, the locals have faced the dilemma of preserving their cultural heritage while also capitalizing on its economic potential.

Despite the increasing focus on ethnic tourism and its impacts, there remains a gap in understanding the nuanced effects of tourism on the cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic area. Most studies emphasize economic outcomes or general cultural impacts, often overlooking the specific ways in which tourism-induced changes affect the authenticity and integrity of Dong cultural practices (Zhuang et al., 2019) (Tian et al., 2021). This research aims to address this gap by exploring the intricate relationship between tourism development and cultural preservation in the Dong ethnic area, providing deeper insights into the processes of cultural distortion and the strategies employed by the Dong people to safeguard their heritage.

**Background of the Study** - The variables perceived in this study include cultural heritage, cultural distortion, and tourism development within the Dong ethnic area. Cultural heritage refers to the traditional practices, rituals, arts, and lifestyles that define the Dong community's identity (Zhu & Liu, 2020). Cultural distortion encompasses the changes and alterations in these traditional practices caused by external influences, such as tourism (Zhu & Han, 2020). Tourism development refers to the growth and expansion of tourism activities, infrastructure, and services that attract visitors to the Dong ethnic area (Ping, 2020).

Currently, the Dong ethnic area is experiencing a significant influx of tourists, drawn by its unique cultural heritage and picturesque landscapes (Tu & Zhang, 2020). This surge in tourism has brought about substantial economic benefits, improving local livelihoods and infrastructure. However, it has also led to concerns about the sustainability and authenticity of the Dong cultural heritage. Traditional customs and rituals are increasingly being modified or performed specifically for tourists, sometimes losing their original meaning and context (Zhuang et al., 2019). The local community faces the challenge of balancing economic gains from tourism with the preservation of their cultural identity.

The relationship between these variables is complex and intertwined. Tourism development can lead to cultural distortion as traditional practices are adapted to suit tourists' preferences, potentially eroding the authenticity of the cultural heritage (Luca et al., 2020). Conversely, a well-managed tourism industry can contribute to cultural preservation by providing financial resources and raising awareness about the importance of safeguarding cultural practices (Alhadad & Meparishvili, 2019). The interaction between tourism development and cultural heritage, mediated by the extent of cultural distortion, forms the core focus of this study.

This research is significant as it provides a deeper understanding of how tourism impacts the cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic area. By examining the nuances of cultural distortion and identifying strategies to mitigate its effects, the study can inform sustainable tourism practices that respect and preserve indigenous cultures. The

findings will be valuable for policymakers, tourism developers, and the Dong community, offering insights to balance tourism development with cultural preservation and ensure that tourism benefits, rather than undermines, the rich heritage of the Dong people.

## **2. Methodology**

This study examines the impact of tourism on the cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic area, analyzing the processes of cultural distortion and proposing strategies for cultural protection and sustainable development. A mixed-methods approach, combining desk-based research and field observations, was employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The initial phase of the study involved an extensive review of existing literature, including academic articles, books, government reports, and other relevant documents. This helped establish a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between tourism, cultural heritage, and cultural distortion. Key concepts, historical contexts, and previous case studies related to the Dong ethnic area and similar regions were examined. This phase also involved analyzing statistical data on tourism trends, visitor demographics, and economic impacts to contextualize the current situation.

The second phase involved field research conducted in the Dong ethnic area. This included direct observations of cultural practices, tourism activities, and interactions between tourists and the local community. Observations focused on identifying changes in traditional rituals, festivals, and daily practices that might have indicated cultural distortion. Photographs, videos, and detailed field notes were used to document these observations. Additionally, informal conversations with residents, cultural practitioners, and tourists provided qualitative insights into their perspectives on the impact of tourism.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with key stakeholders, including local leaders, cultural experts, tourism operators, and community members, to gather in-depth information on the perceived impacts of tourism. Focus groups with different community segments, such as artisans, elders, and youth, facilitated a broader understanding of the community's views and the diversity of opinions within it. These methods helped uncover the nuanced effects of tourism on cultural heritage and the community's efforts to protect their traditions.

The final phase of the study involved a synthesis of the literature review and field observations to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between tourism development and cultural heritage preservation in the Dong ethnic area. This phase involved analyzing the data to identify patterns, themes, and critical issues related to cultural distortion and the strategies employed by the Dong community to safeguard their heritage.

The data collected from desk-based research, field observations, interviews, and focus groups was analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to cultural distortion and preservation efforts. Quantitative data was used to support the qualitative findings and provide a holistic view of the impact of tourism. The findings were then synthesized to propose strategies for sustainable tourism development that respected and preserved the cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic area.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

### *3.1 Phenomena of Cultural Distortion*

#### **1. Commercialization of Cultural Performances**

Driven by the tourism industry, traditional song and dance performances in the Dong ethnic area have become increasingly commercialized. Many traditional rituals, which originally held religious or social

significance, have been simplified or adapted to cater to tourists' preferences. While these commercialized performances may attract more tourists, they also lead to cultural distortion. For example, the Grand Song of the Dong, an important component of Dong culture, has gradually deviated from its original purity and solemnity in terms of performance form and content.

In addition, the commodification of traditional handicrafts has resulted in the mass production of souvenirs that lack authenticity and artistic value. As highlighted in (Shi et al., 2012), the creation of "fake" traditional products undermines the true craftsmanship and meaning behind these cultural artifacts. Furthermore, the overemphasis on tourism has led to the loss of traditional apprenticeship systems, as younger generations are drawn to more lucrative opportunities in the tourism industry rather than learning traditional skills (Upadhyay, 2020).

## **2. Alteration of Traditional Architecture**

The traditional architecture of the Dong ethnic area, such as drum towers and wind-rain bridges, is renowned for its unique style and exquisite craftsmanship. However, to cater to tourism demands, many newly constructed or renovated structures in the region differ significantly from the traditional craftsmanship in terms of materials and design. This not only disrupts the original architectural landscape but also compromises the integrity and authenticity of Dong culture. Furthermore, the rapid development of tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation facilities, has led to the encroachment on and even destruction of historic buildings and sites (Li et al., 2020). This threatens the preservation of the Dong's vernacular architecture and the overall spatial structure of their traditional villages (Liu et al., 2019).

## **3. Homogenization of Cultural Products**

In the tourism market, traditional Dong handicrafts such as embroidery and silver ornaments are mass-produced and sold in large quantities. However, many of these products adopt modern production methods focused on profitability, neglecting the manual processes and cultural significance of traditional crafts. This has led to the homogenization of cultural products and the erosion of traditional skills. The proliferation of standardized cultural souvenirs and the dilution of traditional designs undermine the uniqueness and authenticity of Dong's cultural heritage. As reported in, the shrinking market for locally produced handicrafts due to the influx of cheaper, machine-made products is a significant challenge faced by traditional artisans in the Dong ethnic area (Huang & Anderson, 2019).

## **4. Challenges to Cultural Heritage**

**Loss of Traditional Skills.** With the rapid modernization and the influx of external cultures, the younger generation in the Dong ethnic area is gradually losing interest and engagement with traditional culture and skills. Many of the Dong's cherished traditional crafts, such as intricate embroidery, delicate silverwork, and the skilled construction of drum towers and wind-rain bridges, face the dilemma of having no successors to carry on these time-honored techniques. This poses severe challenges to the inheritance and protection of these invaluable cultural skills, which are essential to preserving the integrity and authenticity of Dong heritage. Without concerted efforts to revitalize interest and pass on these traditions to future generations, the Dong ethnic area risks losing the mastery of their unique cultural expressions (Zhu & Han, 2020).

## **5. Insufficient Cultural Education**

In the Dong ethnic area, cultural education resources are relatively scarce, and the popularization of traditional cultural education is limited. Many schools lack systematic and comprehensive education on Dong culture, resulting in the younger generation having insufficient understanding, appreciation, and recognition of their own rich ethnic heritage and cultural traditions. This lack of cultural education has contributed to a growing disconnect between the younger Dong people and their ancestral customs, threatening the continuity and preservation of this unique cultural identity (Yang & Zhang, 2020).

## 6. Temptation of Economic Interests

Driven by the pursuit of immediate economic gains, many Dong communities are more inclined to prioritize the development of tourism projects that can generate quick profits, often at the expense of protecting their cultural heritage. This shortsighted behavior not only compromises the preservation of the Dong's unique cultural identity but also has a detrimental impact on the sustainable development of their culture in the long run. By prioritizing economic interests over the safeguarding of their cultural legacy, these Dong communities risk losing the very assets that make their region distinctive and attractive to visitors (Ping, 2020). This trade-off between economic development and cultural preservation poses a significant challenge that requires a more balanced and holistic approach to ensure that Dong's cultural heritage is respected and maintained alongside the pursuit of tourism-driven prosperity (Song et al., 2020).

### 3.2 Strategies for Protection and Heritage

To address these challenges and ensure the sustainable development of the Dong's cultural heritage, a comprehensive approach is necessary.

1. **Enhancing Cultural Identity and Pride** By strengthening cultural promotion and education, the recognition and pride of the Dong people in their own culture can be improved. Community activities and cultural festivals can be used to increase the interest and love for traditional culture among Dong residents, especially the younger generation.

1.1 **Promoting Deep Integration of Culture and Tourism, and Developing Tourism Projects** Promote the deep integration of Dong culture and tourism by developing tourism projects with cultural connotations and educational significance. For example, offer traditional skills demonstrations and experiential courses so that tourists can personally experience and understand Dong's traditional culture and skills while visiting. Traditional tourists often focus on sightseeing and tasting Dong cuisine. However, with the rapid development of tourism, these activities no longer meet tourists' demands. They now seek to immerse themselves in local culture through experiential tourism, which is a new direction for tourism development. According to this trend, allowing tourists to personally experience the charm of the Dong Grand Song can spark their interest in it.

1.2 **Regional Tourism Project Cooperation** Incorporate songs into activities during special festivals to create a tourism culture with Dong characteristics. Build the influence of the Dong Grand Song into a renowned brand in Sanjiang. While enjoying the programs, tourists will also inadvertently spread the ethnic culture. Under the influence of globalization, the Dong Grand Song, as an intangible cultural heritage, faces pressures from various sources, creating a challenging environment for its survival and development. In this context, the arrival of the "high-speed rail era" is more advantageous than disadvantageous for the development of the Dong Grand Song. Adhering to sustainable development during tourism development has positive implications for the Dong Grand Song and the economic development of the Sanjiang area.

2. **Strengthening Legal Protection of Cultural Heritage.** Formulating and implementing relevant laws and regulations can significantly enhance the protection of Dong's cultural heritage. Important cultural heritage sites should be formally registered and rigorously protected, prohibiting any improper development or destructive actions that could compromise their integrity. Additionally, increasing dedicated funding and technical support from the government and other stakeholders can further strengthen the comprehensive protection and preservation of this invaluable cultural heritage. Establishing a robust legal framework and dedicating sufficient resources are crucial steps to safeguarding Dong's unique cultural expressions and ensuring their continuity for future generations.

3. **Improving Cultural Education Levels.** Strengthen the promotion and education of Dong culture within school curriculums by establishing dedicated Dong culture courses and extracurricular activities. Encourage and

support cultural inheritors, such as skilled artisans and knowledgeable elders, to regularly visit campuses and share their expertise, teaching traditional skills and imparting cultural knowledge to students. This will help foster the younger generation's interest, appreciation, and awareness in preserving and continuing the Dong's rich cultural heritage. Integrating Dong culture into the education system is crucial for cultivating a strong sense of ethnic identity and pride among young Dong people, ensuring the sustainable transmission of this invaluable cultural legacy to future generations.

4. Promoting Community Participation and Co-construction. Encourage and support Dong communities to take the initiative and actively participate in the protection and preservation of their cultural heritage. Through increased community involvement and collaborative efforts, enhance the awareness and capabilities of residents to safeguard their unique culture. This should involve the formation of a comprehensive cultural protection mechanism that engages the government, the community, and individuals working in partnership to ensure the continuity and vitality of Dong's cultural traditions. By empowering the Dong people to be stewards of their heritage, this approach can foster a sense of ownership and pride, thereby strengthening the long-term sustainability of these invaluable cultural assets.

#### 4. Conclusion

While the tourism industry in the Dong ethnic area brings economic benefits, it also poses severe challenges to the protection and heritage of traditional culture. Only by enhancing cultural identity, promoting the deep integration of culture and tourism, strengthening legal protection, improving cultural education levels, and promoting community participation can effective protection and heritage of Dong culture be achieved. As the tourism industry develops, we must make a concerted effort to cherish and protect the unique culture of the Dong, allowing it to flourish with renewed vitality and adapt to the demands of modern society. This will require a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that balances economic progress with the preservation of Dong's rich cultural legacy, ensuring that their distinctive traditions and identity are not lost in the pursuit of tourism-driven prosperity.

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