

Research paper

Tourism Development and the Dynamics of Cultural Hybridity: Community Insights

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of cultural hybridity in the context of tourism development, with a particular focus on community perspectives in ethnic minority regions. Previous research has examined the impact of tourism development on local culture. Furthermore, in many ethnic minority regions, cultural hybridity has emerged in the context of tourism development. However, there has been limited attention to the stakeholders driving this hybridity, how they contribute to it, and how residents perceive these cultural transformations. Based on Homi Bhabha's theory of "hybridity," this study employed multiple methods including participant observations, interviews, interpretivism, and qualitative analysis. The results indicate that tourism development has led investors, tourism management departments or agencies, entrepreneurs, migrant workers, and even residents to actively or passively participate in the creation of a "hybrid culture" or mixed culture. Residents' attitudes toward this development are not necessarily those of pride; instead, they may experience complex emotions such as a sense of cultural loss and reconstruction. Therefore, hybridity offers many insights into the impact of tourism development in minority areas, but it does not imply that residents are aware of the need to identify with it. They still cling to their original identity, even though the culture associated with that identity has changed significantly.

Keywords: culture change, mountain tourism, hybridity

The impact of tourism on destination cultures has been a subject of ongoing discussion. Generally, tourism is viewed as a source of cultural contamination, diluting or even eroding local traditions (Chen, 2014; Henderson et al., 2009; Sun et al., 2018). However, some argue that tourism can also present opportunities for cultural revitalization (Abrahams, 2015; Tiberghien & Xie, 2016; Yang, 2013), in which local traditions are repurposed, and, in some cases, cultural identities are strengthened (Tiberghien & Xie, 2016). Sun et al. (2018) stated that cultural changes cannot be entirely attributed to tourism; even without tourism development, culture still faces changes. Additionally, some scholars have observed that material culture, such as architecture and clothing, may undergo changes under the influence of tourism, but values, for instance, tend to remain intact (Chen, 2014). Recent studies further emphasize the increasingly complex and dynamic relationship between tourism and cultural transformation (Richards, 2025; Tang & Xu, 2023). These studies suggest that tourism not only reshapes cultural expressions but also contributes to the reinterpretation and selective representation of local cultures.

In some tourism destinations with distinct cultural characteristics, and especially in minority regions, tourism development leads to a transformation of culture into a hybrid form. For example, under the influence of tourism on Mount Everest, the communities of Nepal's Sherpa people have become culturally hybrid, blending Sherpa

culture with that of foreign tourists (Nepal, 2015). In places deeply affected by tourism, such as the Mosuo communities in China, the cultural identity of ethnic communities becomes neither entirely local nor foreign but rather a mixed “third space” (Wei & Sun, 2017). In areas where multiple ethnicities and cultures intersect, such as the Tibetan communities in Luding County, Sichuan, locals perceive that, under the influence of tourism and other forces, the cultures of the Han and Tibetan people are borrowed and adapted, continuously creating new cultural forms (Guo & Zhu, 2013). Li et al. (2024) also highlight that such hybridization processes are often shaped by multiple stakeholders and uneven power relations, leading to diverse community responses and potential cultural tensions.

Furthermore, hybrid cultures make tourism destinations uniquely distinctive. For example, visitors are provided with a distinctive travel experience in a hybrid culture, such as in the Mosuo community in the Lugu Lake region in China (Wei & Sun, 2017). Meethan (2003) criticized the idea of hybridity, arguing that it inherently overlooks the fact that culture is constructed and constantly fluid. Furthermore, tourism is not the fundamental cause of cultural change. Amoamo (2011) demonstrated that the Māori people blend tradition and modernity to showcase the flexibility and dynamism of cultural identity construction in tourism. Cultural hybridity in tourism contexts is not merely a passive outcome but an active process of negotiation, adaptation, and reinterpretation involving local communities and external actors (Lundberg et al., 2024).

The above research has not revealed what forces have driven the phenomenon of cultural hybridity in tourist destinations, whether it is solely the indigenous people, what forms hybridity takes, and what attitudes residents hold toward the hybridized culture. Although recent studies have begun to explore community perspectives and cultural interactions, there remains limited attention to the specific stakeholders driving hybridity and how residents interpret these transformations (Li et al., 2024). In response to this research gap, this study uses Siguniang Town, located in the Gyalrong Tibetan region in China, as a case study. This place is home to a diverse mix of ethnic minorities living together after 30 years of mountain adventure tourism development. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of the new cultural forms that emerge in the context of tourism development, as well as the forces or stakeholders that drive cultural changes, and how the residents perceive these changes. The results will enhance the understanding of the drivers of local mixed cultures and how these cultures contribute to residents’ sense of identity in the context of tourism development.

Tourism and culture change

As tourism develops, local cultures experience diverse impacts, including survival, loss, reuse, and reinvention. For example, Chow (2005) found that material products of indigenous practices are more likely to survive the pressures of tourism in the Yunnan ethnic region of China. Furthermore, spiritual culture has been transmitted relatively unchanged across generations in Dai villages (Chen, 2014). Tourism development can also promote cultural exchange and the preservation of local traditions. Song and Yuan (2020) found that ethnic music had more platforms to showcase Dong music during commercialization, making it more diverse in different spaces and occasions. Further, tourism not only preserves and transforms culture but also reshapes cultural meanings through processes of integration and reinterpretation (Tang & Xu, 2023). However, the loss of culture is inevitable in many cases. Chen (2014) observed that the material and institutional cultures of the Dai villages have changed primarily because of the pressure of social modernization, reflecting a broader trend of modernization affecting traditional cultures as they adapt to tourism. Additionally, while tourism may fuel the preservation of certain aspects of local culture, it can accelerate the de-localization process (Sun et al., 2018). Henderson et al. (2009) highlighted how the commercialization of cultural displays in Miao villages often caters to tourist expectations, eroding the true authenticity of the villages. This over-commercialization weakens the appeal of minority heritage sites and can negatively impact both culture and local livelihood. Such over-commercialism occurred in the case of Lijiang’s Naxi Ancient City in terms of local architecture (Sun, 2015).

Cultural reinvention is another significant outcome of tourism. Yang (2013) discovered that local villagers in the Mosuo community actively reshape their identity by modifying their traditional dress, dances, and religious practices to meet tourists’ desire for authenticity, bringing numerous changes to their community. Similarly, Tiberghien and Xie (2016) found that Kazakhstani culture in certain villages is constantly being reinvented in response to tourism. Tourism has also played a role in revitalizing cultural pride and identity. Abrahams (2015) similarly found that the value of Dong culture was revitalized in Maan Dong Village through tourism, leading to the reshaping of a positive group identity. The commercialization of ethnic traditions has, in some cases, renewed appreciation for them, as demonstrated by Xiong et al. (2008), who studied the impact of tourism on the sociocultural aspects of the Mosuo community around Lugu Lake. Instead of disappearing, local culture has been reconstructed to some extent within the tourism market. At the same time, recent research points out that these processes are often accompanied by cultural tensions and uneven perceptions among residents, reflecting the complexity of tourism-driven cultural change (Li et al., 2024).

Despite the challenges posed by globalization, Tolkach and Pratt (2019) noted that Pieterse's paradigms of globalization—clash of civilizations, McDonalidization, and hybridization—demonstrate cultural resilience in many cases. In this context, tourism contributes not only to the reinvention of cultural practices but also to the interaction and exchange between host and guest cultures. Canavan (2016) described how these interactions foster distinctive cultural landscapes shaped by the exchange, change, and creativity that emerge from tourism, creating a dynamic fusion of cultures that simultaneously preserves and transforms local traditions. Cultural tourism increasingly involves hybrid forms of cultural expression shaped by globalization and local adaptation (Richards, 2025). This indicates that scholars have noted the impact of tourism on culture, but have not further elaborated on what culture becomes under the influence of tourism, nor who drives the formation of the new culture.

The hybridity framework

The “Hybridity” theoretical framework was proposed by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), which suggests that culture is not fixed to a specific region and does not belong exclusively to a particular group, but rather forms a new, hybrid culture through processes of flow, contact, communication, and conflict. Hybridity originally referred to a crossbreed obtained by grafting or crossbreeding two different varieties of plants. In the fields of linguistics, cultural studies, political science, and race studies, hybridity refers to a mixture produced through interdisciplinary communication. Bhabha (1994) argues that border regions serve as sites of dialogue between different cultures, where a cultural hybrid is most likely to emerge. Border zones are often spaces that create or destroy competing sociocultural dynamics or serve as areas of creative cultural production and intersection across boundaries. Therefore, a border is not merely the endpoint of a political and cultural domain, but also a place of encounter, competition, negotiation, fusion, and mixture, where new cultural identities emerge (Karmi & Salar, 2024; Kramsch & Uryu, 2020). The relationship between the center and the periphery, and between the West and the East, is no longer oppositional but exists in a dialectical interaction (Bhabha, 1994). Ultimately, this hybridity breaks the symmetry of “self” and “other,” and “inside” and “outside,” opening up a space of contradiction and ambiguity where the previously clear boundaries between “center” and “periphery” become blurred, allowing marginalized groups to move closer to the center. Identity is also a construct, and the identity of hybrid cultures is the result of a discursive struggle for power. Further, hybridity is not only a theoretical construct but also a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by globalization and local interactions (Wang et al., 2025).

Similarly, Hannerz (1986) refers to hybridity as creolization, noting that culture is formed only through continuous interaction between different cultures. Culture manifests in two forms: one as a series of meaningful forms perceived through sight or hearing, as well as touch, smell, or taste; the other as an apparent form that carries meaning because the human mind can interpret it. Therefore, culture is the process by which individuals externalize meanings and interpret them. Hannerz (1986) compares culture to a river: “From a distance, the river appears as an eternal blue avenue running through the land. However, as we approach it, its resilience is dissolved by its constant flow, much like the saying goes, ‘A person cannot step into the same river twice,’ so culture is fluid.” Griswold (1994) also posits that culture is a complex and unstable system with fluidity. This complexity arises from the unstable elements within the system, particularly within subcultures, which are often interconnected yet separate. While anthropologists have insisted that “small is good,” meaning that anthropology focuses on “difference” and “otherness” the structure and developmental processes of Western society have made Western culture pervasive, such that there is no true “other” in the world.

Creole cultures are also seen as imbued with asymmetric power structures, as the interacting cultures are sometimes unequal, with at least one culture occupying a dominant position. However, the process of creolized cultural production is also a creative interaction between the center and the periphery (Hannerz, 1986). In the collision of diverse cultures, a new (creolized) culture is created within the multicultural mix, becoming a unique combination. Thus, creolized culture does not simply replicate mainstream culture but creatively and selectively borrows from it, localizing and interpreting it within specific regional contexts.

In the field of tourism studies, some scholars have discussed the formation of hybrid cultures under the influence of tourism. For example, Guo and Wang (2015) noted that under the influence of power and capital, many “new” elements are injected into the original spatial forms of heritage sites or historic districts to satisfy tourists’ consumption needs. This process results in a spatial form distinct from the original, forming a “mixed” space or Third Space. Similarly, Wei and Sun (2017), in their study of Lugu Lake’s Da Luoshui village, argue that the culture of ethnic communities influenced by tourism is neither entirely local nor entirely “other,” but rather a hybrid Third Space. Guo and Zhu (2013) examined the local cultural identity of the Anqing Tibetan community in Luding, Sichuan, and found that, under the influence of tourism and other forces, the region at the intersection of Han and Tibetan cultures constantly borrows and transforms elements from different ethnic cultures, creating new cultures. More recent tourism studies further suggest that hybrid cultural forms are co-produced by multiple stakeholders and shaped by ongoing negotiations between local communities and external actors (Lundberg et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). However, scholars have yet to further explore what exactly the hybrid cultures are and how

they developed. Therefore, this study considers the example of the Gyalrong Tibetan region in China, a Tibetan cultural periphery (Usually Lhasa was thought of as the center of Tibetan culture), to explore how a hybrid culture has formed under the influence of tourism and other forces over 30 years of adventure tourism development.

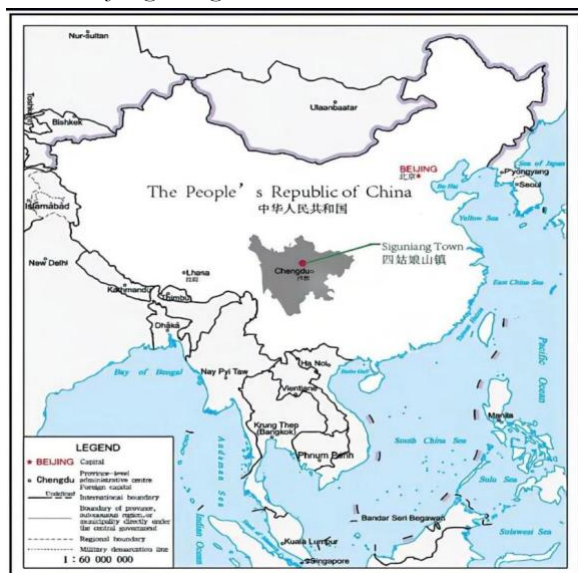
Study site

Siguniang Town is home to multiple ethnic groups, primarily including Tibetans, Qiang, Han, and Hui. The dominant ethnic group is the Gyalrong Tibetan. Various theories exist regarding the historical origins of the Gyalrong people. In ancient times, the people of the Gyalrong region migrated from several groups, including the Xiangxiang Daruor and the Tibetans from Ü-Tsang. Throughout the long course of historical development, the Gyalrong people intermingled with neighboring ethnic groups, forming a mix of different ethnicities; therefore, they are not solely of Tibetan ethnicity (Jinba, 2013). The most significant difference between Gyalrong Tibetans and other Tibetan groups, such as those from Kham and Amdo, lies in their language. Thus, Gyalrong is often considered an independent language, and the classification of Gyalrong vernacular is still academically debated. Some scholars believe that the vocabulary, expressions, and pronunciation of Gyalrong are close to ancient Tibetan, suggesting it is the oldest form of Tibetan. To this day, the Gyalrong people internally use dialects such as Amdo, Kham, and Ergong. The Gyalong region is considered the “border” of Tibetan culture.

Siguniang, located in the western part of Sichuan Province in China (Figure 1), began developing mountain adventure tourism around 1980. With its four peaks 6,000 meters above sea level, it has become one of China’s top 10 mountaineering destinations, offering activities such as climbing, hiking, and rock climbing. Many residents of Siguniang Town have transitioned from traditional livelihoods like farming and herding to roles such as guides, rescue personnel, and guesthouse operators.

Figure 1

Location of Siguniang Town



Source: <http://bzdt.ch.mnr.gov.cn/>

METHOD

A qualitative research design was adopted as it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex social and cultural processes, particularly in understanding how cultural hybridity is experienced and interpreted by local communities. It used an interpretivism approach to understand the cultural impact and driving forces behind reconstruction in the context of mountain and adventure tourism in Siguniang Town. Interpretivism is particularly suitable for this study as it emphasizes subjective meanings, lived experiences, and the ways in which individuals interpret cultural change within their specific social contexts. Interpretivism was possible because the author is Tibetan, familiar with the Tibetan culture, and maintains a sharp awareness of cultural changes. In addition, the use of participant observation and interviews enabled the researcher to capture nuanced perspectives and everyday practices that are often difficult to obtain through quantitative methods.

From June 2018 to March 2022, this study conducted five field surveys in Siguniang Town (Table 1). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore residents’ perceptions of cultural change and tourism development in Siguniang Town. The interview guide included the following key questions: (1) How have you perceived cultural changes over the past 30 years of tourism development in this area? These changes may include

transformations in material culture (e.g., architectural styles), institutional culture (e.g., social norms and conventions), and spiritual culture (e.g., religious beliefs and practices). (2) What factors or forces do you think have contributed to these cultural changes? Who or what actors have played a role in driving these transformations? (3) How do you personally perceive and interpret these cultural changes? A total of 23 individuals were interviewed in this study, including scenic area managers, guides, high-altitude rescue team members, and scenic area staff, coded as RES1 to RES23. Each interview lasted between 48 and 210 minutes, resulting in a total of 43.3 hours of audio data. The interview audio was transcribed into text, which was imported into NVivo 11.0 software for thematic qualitative analysis.

Table 1

Field surveys

Time	Duration	Content
6.17.2018–6.19.2018	3 days	Observe and experience traditional pilgrimage activities, the Second Northwest Sichuan Gyalrong Tibetan Song Festival, the “Night of Siguniang” rock concert, a high-altitude camping event with thousands of tents, and a high-altitude orienteering hiking competition. Take photographs and make brief notes.
12.17.2018– 12.21.2018	5 days	Focus primarily on examining tourism participation in three groups within the village.
8.3.2019–8.8.2019	5 days	Investigate five villages; the Shuangqiaogou Scenic Area, including the population structure; levels of tourism involvement; operation of homestays; and economic development. Conduct informal interviews with eight local residents.
10.24.2020– 11.1.2020	9 days	Conduct formal interviews with more than 20 individuals in five villages. These include scenic area managers, guides, high-altitude rescue team members, and other scenic area staff. Collect planning documents from the scenic area management bureau and take photographs.
3.21.2022–3.27.2022	7 days	Take photos and document observations in five villages.

Among the 23 respondents, there were 22 males and 1 female, indicating a clear male majority. This phenomenon can be attributed to the nature of professions related to mountain adventure tourism, such as mountain guides and mountain rescue, which typically attract males due to the inherent risks. The age of the respondents ranged from 29 to 62 years old, with an average age of 41 years. Most participants were Tibetan, while the operators from outside areas were mainly Han Chinese. They had diverse educational backgrounds, including those who had attended school up to primary school, junior high school, vocational school, and junior college. Among the scenic area managers, one had a master’s degree, while the senior consultant held a doctoral degree.

Fieldwork data in this study were primarily generated through participant observation, which served as the main basis for interpreting cultural changes and hybridity in Siguniang Town. Interviews were conducted as a complementary data source to further support and refine the observational findings. Interview materials were not treated as the sole basis for formal coding procedures but were instead used to identify representative statements that could corroborate or illustrate patterns emerging from the field observations. These selected excerpts were then used to strengthen the interpretive analysis and enhance the credibility of the findings. The analysis therefore followed an iterative interpretive process, in which observational insights formed the core analytical framework, while interview data functioned as supporting evidence to validate and enrich the emerging themes.

RESULTS

Culture change and the hybrid space

This study posits that Siguniang Town is not a monolithic space defined by traditional/modern or Tibetan/Han/Qiang/Hui ethnic cultures. Rather, it is a hybrid space formed through the fusion of multiple cultures. The following sections will explore aspects such as architectural forms, resident clothing, weddings, funerals, cuisine, sacred spaces, and resident perceptions.

Architecture

In terms of architectural forms, Shuangbiao Village is officially promoted as a “Tibetan Village.” The exteriors of the residential buildings in this hillside village feature the typical sun and moon symbols (Yungdrung)¹, which

¹ “Yungdrung” is a term associated with the Bon religion—an ancient spiritual tradition of Tibet. In Bon, the “Yungdrung” is a sacred symbol that represents eternity, permanence, and indestructibility. The symbol is also closely linked to the Bon teaching of the “Yungdrung Bön” tradition, a non-Buddhist, pre-Buddhist spiritual system in Tibet.

are the most recognizable symbols of Bon, an indigenous Tibetan religion. However, the interiors of these houses are designed in a modern style. According to the villagers, the houses, including their exteriors, were constructed with government funding after the 2008 earthquake (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Architectural exteriors and windows of Shuangbiao Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, August 2020.

Changping Village is the first area of Siguniang Town to develop tourism, and nearly all the residential buildings located in the flat areas have been converted for tourism purposes. Additionally, new hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants are continually being constructed within the village. The overall architectural style leans toward Tibetan design, with some proprietors intentionally following the “Lijiang model,” which emphasizes creating a relaxed atmosphere for tea drinking, chatting, and unwinding (Figures 3 and 4). Furthermore, the village also contains many modern hotels and guesthouses with eclectic styles. The most famous of these is the trendy hotel “Kongshan,” a fully modern luxury hotel where guests can enjoy stunning views of the Peak of Siguniang Mountain from their rooms. The original investors for this trendy hotel were Japanese.

Figure 3

Street Scene and Guesthouses in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, August 2020.

Figure 4

Exterior Decor of Guesthouses in Changping Village, Siguniang Town

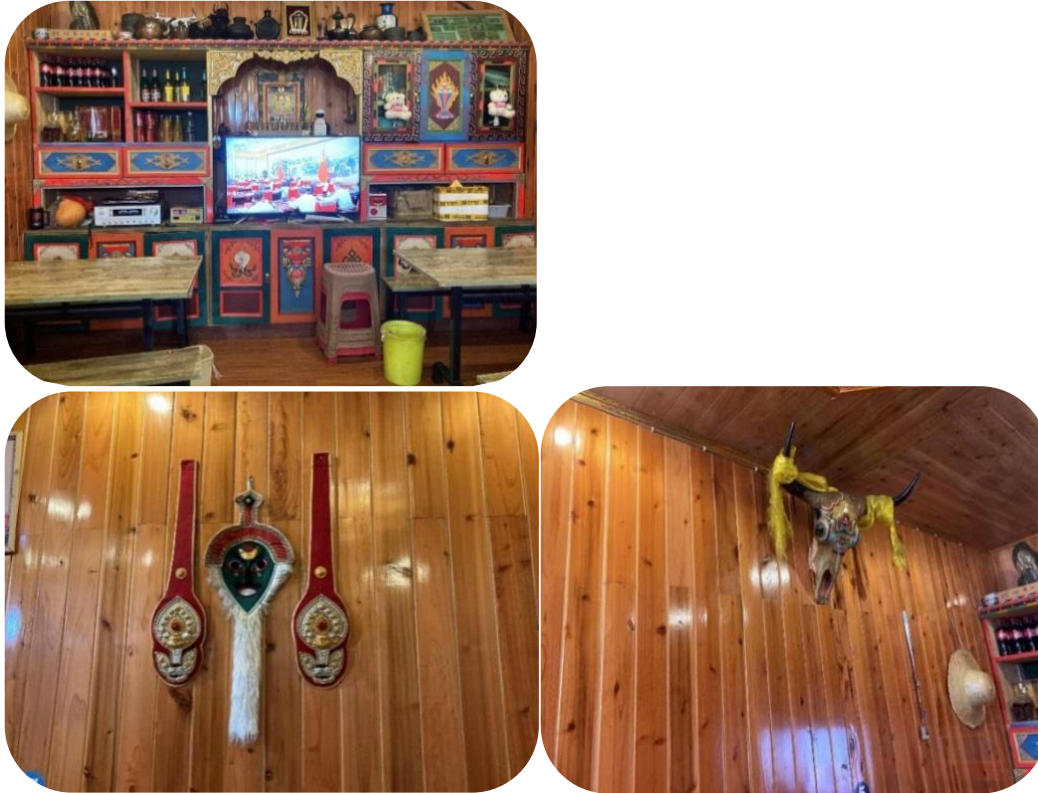


Source: By Author, August 2020.

According to residents, Jinzi Street in Changping Village was predominantly developed by outside investors, with only two local hotels among the village's businesses. During our field survey, we observed that a barbecue restaurant featured Tibetan-style cabinets and decor, including Tibetan opera masks and waist hangings of Amdo² women on the walls (Figure 5). The cultural symbols presented in the restaurant extend beyond the local Gyalrong Tibetan community to reflect a broader cultural landscape of Tibetan society. This cultural landscape of the village within the scenic area is no longer confined to the culture of the Gyalrong Tibetans alone but incorporates cultural symbols from a wider range of Tibetan society, presenting a "Tibetan cultural generalization."

Figure 5

Display Cabinet and Decor in a Barbecue Restaurant in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, November 2020.

In a guesthouse in Changping Village operated by an outsider. The owner stated that the decor was "done according to personal preference." In the distinctive reception area, Tibetan-style beds are adorned with brightly colored Tibetan carpets, while the pillows on top, specifically, the Nordic Swedish Aklara cushions, are from "IKEA" (Figures 6 and 7). This scenario vividly illustrates the production of a hybrid cultural landscape at tourism destinations and reflects the recognition of and response to tourist demands by the external capital.

Figure 6

Guesthouse Living Room of an Outsider Owner in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, November 2020.

² Amdo generally refers to the three main dialects or linguistic branches of the Tibetan language: Amdo, Ü-Tsang, and Kham. However, the differences are not limited to language; there are also noticeable distinctions in clothing, lifestyle habits, and architecture.

Figure 7

Tibetan Carpet and Swiss Cushions at the Reception of a Guesthouse Operated by an Outsider in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, November 2020.

In the village, researchers discovered a Sichuan restaurant with an entire wall featuring a map of the Siguniang Mountain, depicted as “four fairies” (Figure 8). Locally, the mountain is known as “Sigu La,” a name believed to have been misheard by Japanese climbers as “Siguniang Mountain,” leading to the term “Siguniang Mountain” (The local name is “Sigu La,” and legend has it that Japanese climbers mistook the name “Sigu La” as “Siguniang Mountain” when they asked locals, thus creating the term “Siguniang Mountain”). The pronunciation of “Siguniang” in Chinese sounds like “four girls.”

Figure 8

Depiction of “Four Fairies” on the Wall of a Restaurant in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, November 2020.

In local culture, however, Siguniang Mountain is referred to as “Worji Sigu La,” a male warrior deity who rides a white horse and wields a spear. He is also one of the three major protective deities of the Mount Mardo range, which is the most authoritative and influential sacred mountain in eastern Tibetan society and is recognized by the Gyalrong Tibetan people as the mountain god. This dramatic contrast is related to the development of mountain adventure tourism and the entry of diverse interest groups into the region.

In stark contrast, another group of buildings in Changping Village, located on a hillside and seldom visited by tourists, maintains traditional patterns such as the lotus from the Eight Auspicious Symbols on the exterior walls of residential buildings (Figure 9). The Eight Auspicious Symbols, also known as the “Eight Buddhist Treasures” or “Eight Auspicious Signs,” include the Dharma wheel, precious umbrella, golden fish (pair of fish), precious vase, lotus flower, conch shell, endless knot, and victory banner, all of which are symbols with profound auspicious meanings.

Figure 9

Lotus Pattern on the Exterior of a Residential Building and Local Residents in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, August 2020.

In the relatively flat area of Siguniang Town, Jin Feng Village features many highly modern buildings. During the field survey, researchers visited a hotel operated by locals. The owner mentioned that the designer and materials for the hotel were sourced from Guangzhou. Similarly, in Jin Feng Village, a riverside tea house with floor-to-ceiling windows reflects a contemporary atmosphere (Figure 10). Thus, even in this ethnic village, one can find some of the most modern hotels.

Figure 10

Tea Lounge and Floor-to-Ceiling Windows of a Hotel in Jin Feng Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, August 2020.

Shuangqiao Village, located within the Shuangqiao Valley Scenic Area, is home to the renowned hotel named “Wuse Mountain Villa.” The building’s exterior is adorned with gravel, and the outer walls are decorated with the distinctive “sun and moon” symbols of Yungdrung Bon, as well as the Eight Auspicious Symbols (Figure 11). This design highlights the characteristics and traditional values of the local culture.

Figure 11

Exterior Wall of the Popular Hotel “Wuse Mountain Villa” in Shuangqiao Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, November 2020.

During the peak tourist season, many locals host visitors in their own homes. One guide’s living room, which was visited during the survey, is almost entirely Tibetan in style, with walls adorned with Thangkas of the Bon founder “Rao Miwo” and the “God of Wealth,” as well as portraits of leaders (Figure 12). The wooden floor and the stove also contribute to showcasing the local cultural characteristics.

Figure 12

Living Room of a Guide in Shuangqiao Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, November 2020.

In Shuangqiao Village, researchers observed a very old building. The owner claimed that this was a true example of a Gyalrong Tibetan dwelling, with a history dating back 200–300 years. The building features typical Gyalrong architectural elements such as beams, columns, and small windows. The original owner had intended to transform it into a “Gyalrong Tibetan Dwelling Museum.” However, a local popular guesthouse owner named “A Juan” signed a contract with nearby residents to turn the entire village into a trendy guesthouse destination and also plans to establish a dwelling museum soon. Consequently, the owner’s “museum dream” had to be put on hold ([Figure 13](#)).

Figure 13

The Oldest Traditional Residence in Shuangqiao Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, April 2022.

Note: 卐 swastika is tilted in a different direction than that seen in the photo: “卐”, called “Yungdrung,” is a term associated with the Bon religion—an ancient spiritual tradition of Tibet. In Bon, the “Yungdrung” is a sacred symbol that represents eternity, permanence, and indestructibility. The symbol is also closely linked to the Bon teaching of the “Yungdrung Bön” tradition, a non-Buddhist, pre-Buddhist spiritual system in Tibet.

Several hundred meters away from the ancient residence, brightly colored trendy guesthouses are under construction, with some already in use. These guesthouses retain the architectural characteristics of Gyalrong residences but feature more vivid red and yellow color schemes. Inside, modern amenities offer visitors a more comfortable stay. Additionally, the guesthouses have employed traditional painters from regions like Kham and Amdo to decorate various corners of the guesthouses. These painters also perform at the guesthouse’s evening entertainment program—the bonfire party ([Figure 14](#)).

Figure 14

Exterior of Trendy Guesthouses and Evening Entertainment Program in Shuangqiao Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, April 2022.

In Changping Village, which has relatively few tourists, local residences primarily serve as resident homes. These houses have retained a more traditional appearance, featuring motifs such as the Auspicious Knot and “Great Wall Pattern” (Figures 15 and 16). Simultaneously, there is a significant difference in interior decor between houses that do and do not participate in tourism. In Shuangqiao Village, investigators found that, after the 2008 earthquake, the government standardized the external appearance of the village’s residences, enhancing the characteristics of the ethnic village. Changes in interior decor were also noted, including the use of more vibrant patterns.

Figure 15

Kitchen Space of an Old-Style Residence on the Mountain in Changping Village, Siguniang Town (Auspicious Knot and Great Wall Pattern, Yungdrung Bon Design)



Source: By Author, April 2022.

Figure 16

Traditional Kitchen Space in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, April 2022.

From the perspective of architectural appearance and internal structure, it is evident that, in the context of tourism economic development, ethnic villages exhibit a coexistence of diverse architectural styles. Most inns and standalone hotels choose an “internal-external difference” style. Under the local government’s encouragement to create distinctive ethnic villages, operators often select the typical Gyalrong Tibetan residence style for the exterior, while the internal rooms are constructed to standard hotel specifications to meet tourists’ comfort needs. Some chain hotels, however, opt for a “uniform internal-external” style, wherein both the exterior and interior are designed to standard hotel formats. Bars and tea houses often adopt a “mixed” style, incorporating both ethnic cultural symbols and Lijiang-style “leisure culture” and bourgeois aesthetics, providing consumers with a unique cultural experience that differs from their usual environment. Additionally, barbecue restaurants run by locals aim to create an “authentic” “museum-like” style, using decorations that are not typical household items but rather everyday attire, presenting a more museum-like “primitive culture.”

During the peak tourist season, when accommodations at lower altitudes are fully booked, visitors opt for lodgings at the mid-mountain villages. Thus, compared with the spaces at the base of the mountain, these mid-mountain villages represent marginal spaces. Residents, in meeting their own lodging needs, gradually convert additional rooms into simple guest rooms, adding beds and bathrooms. In these family-run guesthouses, tourists eat and live with the hosts. Under the leadership of economic elites in ethnic villages, some popular guesthouses “from inside out” adopt Gyalrong Tibetan architectural styles, especially using vibrant red and yellow colors in their decoration to significantly enhance the aesthetic value of the guesthouses. Additionally, the luxurious internal facilities improve the visitor experience. Overall, the architecture reflects different actors’ decoding of local culture while also considering the needs of space consumers (i.e., tourists), resulting in a mixed space with various styles.

Fashion

From the perspective of the clothing culture of residents, typical Gyalrong Tibetan attire is predominantly worn by nearly all residents only during the Mount pilgrimage festivals (Figure 17).

Figure 17

Mount Pilgrimage Festival in Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, June 2018.

In this study, the researchers observed that only residents over the age of 50 years wore traditional ethnic clothing in daily life, while others preferred casual attire. Residents explained that the long, traditional garments are inconvenient for daily labor, leading them to choose more practical clothing. Local women’s daily adornments, such as earrings and bracelets, are predominantly Tibetan in style (Figure 18). This study suggests that these adornments may be preserved owing to their visual “exotic” appeal.

Figure 18*Traditional Bracelets Worn by Guesthouse Staff in Changping Village, Siguniang Town**Source: By Author, November 2020.***Weddings and funerals**

Local wedding ceremonies illustrated a blend of Western, Tibetan, and Han cultures. Despite all guests wearing traditional Gyalrong Tibetan attire, the wedding decorations tended to follow a Western style, featuring elements such as balloons and large English “LOVE” signs (Figure 19). Additionally, the banquets serve exclusively Sichuan cuisine, demonstrating the diverse and mixed cultural landscape present in local ceremonies.

Figure 19*Wedding Ceremony with a Mixed Style in Changping Village, Siguniang Town**Source: by Chen Feifeng, November 2020.*

During the field survey, researchers closely observed a funeral in Changping Village (Figure 20). According to residents, the family hired a Taoist priest to chant scriptures. The family members were seen holding a photo of the deceased and wearing black mourning attire to pay their respects, while other villagers came to assist with the funeral arrangements.

Figure 20

Funeral Ceremony of Local Residents in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, November 2020.

Culinary

Most local hotels offer Sichuan cuisine, but a few restaurants provide local specialties such as yak meat hotpot, local clay-pot dishes (**Figure 21**), butter tea, and barley cakes.

Figure 21

Local Claypot Dish at a Guesthouse in Changping Village, Siguniang Town



Source: By Author, November 2020.

During this study, a restaurant in Changping Village offered a specialty dish called “Qingke Cake.”³ The chef preparing the Cake explained that the dish involves adding Qingke (highland barley) flour to wheat flour. What is labeled as Qingke Cake is a type of pancake made from wheat flour, with added milk and a small amount of sugar (**Figure 22**). This finding indicates that in the context of mountain tourism development, residents modify their

³ Qingke (qīngkē), also known in Tibetan as “མོ་མོ་” (*nas*), is a variety of barley primarily grown in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and other high-altitude regions. Qingke is used to make traditional Tibetan foods, such as tsampa (a staple food made from roasted barley flour), as well as for brewing Qingke wine. This crop is not only a key economic resource in Tibetan regions but also an integral part of the local culture and cuisine.

local cuisine to better cater to the tastes and preferences of tourists. If the Qingke Cake were made with pure Qingke flour, tourists might find it unpalatable or unappealing. Thus, behind the seemingly authentic product name, familiar ingredients are chosen to better meet tourists' tastes and needs. This finding reflects the constructed authenticity of cultural development in ethnic village tourism. Despite the authentic name of the Cake, emphasis is placed on catering to tourist preferences and satisfying their expectations of the locale.

Figure 22

Qingke Cake from a Restaurant in Changping Village



Source: By Author, November 2020

The mid-mountain family-run guesthouse where the researchers stayed primarily offered Sichuan cuisine. However, they also served a local specialty drink, butter tea, in the mornings (Figure 23). In March 2020, which coincided with the spring planting season in the County, villagers in Shuangdiao Village helped each other with the planting of crops such as peas and potatoes. The host family prepared a sumptuous lunch comprising various traditional Sichuan home-style dishes (Figure 24).

Figure 23

Breakfast Prepared by the Female Host of a Local Family Guesthouse in Shuangdiao Village



Source: By Author, August 2020

Figure 24

Lunch During the Spring Planting Season in Shuangdiao Village



Source: By Author, April 2022

Language

In terms of local everyday language, the researchers observed that most residents communicate with each other in the Sichuan dialect. However, during one visit to a mid-mountain household in Changping Village, a few people over the age of 60 years were using the local Gyalrong language.

Religion

In December 2018, researchers visited a family shrine in Changping but were unable to collect photographic data as the hosts requested no photography. Researchers noted that the local people worshiped land deities from the Theravada Buddhist tradition, whereas the broader Tibetan society generally worships Buddha images from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. This finding indicates that there are many differences between the County and the wider Tibetan society.

Resident perspectives on culture and culture change

During the peak tourist season, Changping Village hosts a three-dimensional panoramic Gyalrong Tibetan dance-drama titled “Sgula.” Directed by a renowned singer, this performance showcases various aspects of Gyalrong Tibetan culture, including their origins, coming-of-age ceremonies, and Qingke barley wine rituals (Figure 25). However, residents indicated that they found the show uninteresting or lacked the time to watch it, suggesting a disconnect between the culturally elite-driven culture and the everyday cultural needs of the residents. Scholars argue that this type of cultural production, which is detached from ethnic communities, is highly vulnerable.

Figure 25

Three-Dimensional Panoramic Gyalrong Tibetan Dance-Drama “Sgula”



Source: By Author, November 2020

Residents seemed to lack an understanding of “ethnic cultures.” When researchers asked the daughter of a guesthouse owner about the differences between various ethnic groups in the village, she was unable to provide an answer. Similarly, a successful local entrepreneur also exhibited little knowledge of what is termed ethnic culture. As many scholars have noted, ordinary people often have a limited understanding of their own cultural backgrounds in many minority regions in China (Li & Wall, 2009).

However, the lack of awareness of ethnic cultures also reflects an inclusive attitude towards the cultures of other ethnic groups in Si guniang town. Additionally, the researchers found that residents consistently emphasize their Gyalrong Tibetan identity to distinguish themselves from Tibetans from other regions, thereby constructing an ethnic identity that is distinct from the broader, generalized “Tibetan” identity.

Local traditional culture is the foundation for establishing cultural confidence. Traditional culture establishes its boundaries and demonstrates its uniqueness through material landscapes, customs, festivals, and rituals, while aiming for local and ethnic development. Despite scientific viewpoints labeling religion as “backward” and “superstitious,” it has established a simple human–environment relationship and ethnic values in residents’ consciousness in some religiously inclined ethnic areas. Religion also maintains the internal and external spatial order of ethnic village residents, serving to unite and educate people.

Under the influence of tourism and modernization, some traditional cultures in the County are gradually disappearing, and traditional social and cultural spaces are showing signs of disorder. First, the loss of traditional culture is evident in local cuisine, which now primarily caters to tourists’ preferences. For example, “They have their own festivals and beliefs, but usually, the local food is mainly based on tourists’ eating habits” (RES12). The impact of tourism has also led to a modernization of architectural styles; traditional cultural elements are only

reflected in some building exteriors, while the interiors focus on comfort and convenience. For instance, “Traditional Tibetan houses are more ornamental, but for actual living, they are not as convenient, so standard rooms are preferred” (RES03).

The spiritual core of local traditional culture is also undergoing transformation, as shown in weakened unity, narrowed perspectives among residents, a loss of simplicity, and a decrease in honesty. For example, “We have lost many aspects of our ethnic culture, which is the most passive situation. We no longer speak our mother tongue, our simplicity is gone, everyone is busy making money. People’s minds have become narrower, and they are no longer as united, focusing more on personal gain and scheming” (RES01). Additionally, there is growing skepticism towards religious authority. For instance, “After interacting more with tourists, I feel that lamas (religious authority) are not as sacred as they used to be. Previously, we thought what lamas said was very sacred” (RES03). This indicates that the market economy is replacing the original sacredness of local culture, leading to a shift in the values of ethnic village residents. Furthermore, the development of mountain tourism has also raised residents’ awareness. During interactions with other cultural groups, residents have started to reflect on their own culture and question the authenticity and authority of religion.

However, there is also evidence of cultural assimilation, such as, “In the past, Tibetan women here would be afraid of strangers and usually would not eat with strangers, but now this has changed, which is related to the weakening of traditional customs” (RES02). The atmosphere of respecting elders has begun to disappear, as residents are focused on making money, and traditional local dances and native languages are fading. For example, “Speaking personally, I have forgotten many Tibetan words and can no longer speak to them. However, elderly people still speak it, but the younger generation has largely switched to Mandarin” (RES05). Owing to economic disparities between locals and tourists, there is a cultural potential gap, leading to the infiltration of languages from areas with higher cultural potential to those with lower potential. Consequently, dialects in many economically underdeveloped areas are gradually disappearing, with residents increasingly speaking more developed languages.

Although efforts to revive local culture are underway, traditional cultural rejuvenation faces many challenges. In the wave of global integration, residents’ desire for modern life leads to the loss of traditional culture and customs. For example, “We don’t have our own script here, and if we don’t pass it down, it may become increasingly lost” (RES02). Even if residents are confident about reviving their culture, they face significant challenges. For instance, “I think it’s a pity. But there is no way to restore or preserve it” (RES03).

Nevertheless, against the backdrop of mountain adventure tourism development, traditional culture has not completely faded and disappeared. Some aspects of culture have been reconstructed. Tourists who travel to the village show interest in local languages, ethnic architecture, and costumes, which has prompted residents to begin learning about these cultural elements again. Simultaneously, with improvements in local economic conditions, the number of residents’ daily rituals and large-scale events has increased, and the content of folk activities and rituals has become more diverse, indicating that local culture has experienced a degree of revival. For example, “The living conditions have improved. Activities such as moving down from the mountains or children going to school or getting married have become more frequent” (RES23). Additionally, the scale of folk sacrificial activities has grown larger than before. For instance, “I think their traditional religious rituals or gatherings are now more ceremonial and richer compared to the past” (RES23). Driven by mountain tourism, traditional culture has garnered attention and further development, which is another way to keep traditional culture vibrant.

The results of this study indicate that some residents still believe in the core of traditional beliefs and culture. For example, “Because of the sacredness of Mount Siguniang, if you go to the top and use the restroom, it’s very disrespectful. So, although our language and other aspects have disappeared, faith remains. Tibetans have a characteristic: if you treat them well, they will double your kindness. But if you damage something they believe in, it can cause significant harm” (RES02). In the case study of this County, the livelihood of mountain adventure tourism did not significantly conflict with residents’ beliefs in sacred mountains. However, tourists climbing the “sacred mountain” partially conflicts with residents’ beliefs. Although climbing sacred mountains is also present in the County, residents have not indicated any conflict with their beliefs. This finding suggests that the meaning of sacred mountains to residents is quietly changing; in the past, sacred mountains were seen as a revered domain, but now snow-capped mountains are considered providers of “food and clothing.” Residents noted that the snow mountains bring more tourists and provide more economic resources. Moreover, residents do not perceive climbing sacred mountains as desecration. However, guides still adhere to basic regulations. For example, one guide mentioned that when a guest fell ill and wanted to use the restroom on the mountain, the guide insisted on taking them down because they believed that urinating on the mountain could offend the deities.

Siguniang Town, as a place with multiple coexisting cultures, may have a less intense belief in sacred mountains. Some residents believe that the spiritual core of traditional culture has not disappeared but has found new life in the modernization process. For example, “Tibetan elders like to go to temples to burn incense, but our rescue team is genuinely doing good deeds” (RES20); “Rescue from a folk perspective is more reassuring and effective than burning incense in temples” (RES11). This finding indicates that residents are putting the traditional cultural

emphasis on doing good deeds into practice and believe that this approach is more effective than traditional practices.

Furthermore, researchers have found that local residents consistently emphasize their Gyarong Tibetan identity to distinguish themselves from Tibetans in other regions, thereby constructing an ethnic identity distinct from the generalized “Tibetan” identity. “We, the Gyarong Tibetans, might be one of the earliest semi-agricultural and semi-nomadic groups to have settled down from a nomadic lifestyle” (RES01).

CONCLUSION

This study used field research and found that, under the influence of mountain adventure tourism, Siguniang Town exhibits a phenomenon of cultural hybridity, characterized by the blending of Han, Tibetan, Qiang, and modern cultures. Local guesthouses, Tibetan-style tables and teapots are used alongside Swiss-style cushions. Barbecue restaurants display Tibetan (Gyalrong-Tibetan) cultural decorations, such as Amdo women’s waist ornaments and Tibetan opera masks hanging on the walls. Meanwhile, teahouses and other leisure venues present elements of modern architectural culture, such as floor-to-ceiling windows and scenic rooms. Hotels combine Tibetan cultural symbols with modern hotel architecture, featuring walls adorned with images of the Eight Auspicious Symbols while offering modern hotel rooms. In homestays, the living room decor blends religious and secular elements, such as using Thangka paintings as decorative items. Wedding and funeral ceremonies incorporate both Western and Han-Tibetan rituals, with Buddhist and Taoist ceremonies coexisting. Additionally, in daily life, residents frequently mix Mandarin and Tibetan languages, and Tibetan singing and dancing performances share the stage with martial arts demonstrations. The stakeholders contributing to this phenomenon are not only the Siguniang scenic spot administrators, but also outsiders, residents, and even Tibetans from other places.

Siguniang County is in a region where multiple cultures converge. Even before the development of tourism, it was already a place where multiple ethnic groups interacted and integrated. With the rise of mountain adventure tourism, local culture has undergone further change. This finding validates the hybridity theory framework, which posits that culture is not fixed to a particular region or exclusively tied to a specific group, but is formed through contact, exchange, and conflict, resulting in a new form of culture. Although residents are aware that their culture is changing and sometimes feel helpless, they simultaneously make compromises and adjustments for tourism development. Within this blended culture, they emphasize their own identity, which is different from that of Tibetans generally, but they also borrowed from the Tibetan culture for the cultural landscape leading to tourism development. In Siguniang Town, the intermingling of Han, Tibetan, Qiang, and Western cultures has created a relationship of mutual penetration. As Homi Bhabha suggested, geographical borders create opportunities for cultural mixing. The Gyalrong Tibetan community, to which Siguniang Town belongs, is located at the intersection of multiple cultures. With the development of mountain adventure tourism, which is also a process of modernization, various cultures meet, compete, negotiate, merge, and mix, creatively and selectively borrowing cultural forms to create a unique culture.

Furthermore, cultural hybridity not only demonstrates the fluidity of culture itself but also constructs new cultural identities for those immersed in this cultural environment, significantly impacting their social identity and sense of belonging. Residents of tourist destinations witness the evolution and transformation of their culture through tourism and modernization. As seen in this case study, although they are constructing hybrid cultures, they do not fully identify with these actions and may even feel uneasy about them. In some cases, such behaviors are compromises made for economic benefits. Nevertheless, they feel uneasy because their own culture is perceived as being insufficiently pure or authentic. Our role, it seems, is to understand and respect their choices. Recognizing hybrid culture also contributes to embracing a more diverse population and fostering a more inclusive collective consciousness (Yazdiha, 2010; Jahid et al., 2026).

Despite this, this study is limited to a specific case context, which opens several avenues for future research. Future research could further explore the dynamic evolution of cultural hybridity under the long-term influence of tourism. In particular, longitudinal studies are needed to examine how hybrid cultures continue to change over time and how residents’ perceptions of these changes evolve. Special attention could be given to generational differences, especially how younger generations—who are born into already hybrid cultural contexts—perceive cultural change, identity, and belonging, compared to older generations who have directly experienced the transformation process. In addition, future studies could investigate tourists’ perceptions of hybrid cultures, examining whether such cultural forms are viewed as creative innovations or as inauthentic representations, and how these perceptions may influence tourism experiences and destination attractiveness.

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Ethical statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant institutional guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Sichuan Tourism University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this research. All data were anonymized to protect participant privacy.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests. No financial or personal relationships have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Author contributions

Pian Pu was responsible for the conception, design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript preparation; Lijun Liu was responsible for review, supervision, project administration, as well as the final approval of the version to be published.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to privacy or ethical restrictions, the data are not publicly available but can be shared with qualified researchers subject to institutional approval.

AI disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Google Scholar AI Studio and ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language translation and grammar/style improvements. All AI-generated outputs were reviewed, edited, and finalized by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and scientific validity of the content. No AI tools were used for data analysis, result interpretation, or conclusions.

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