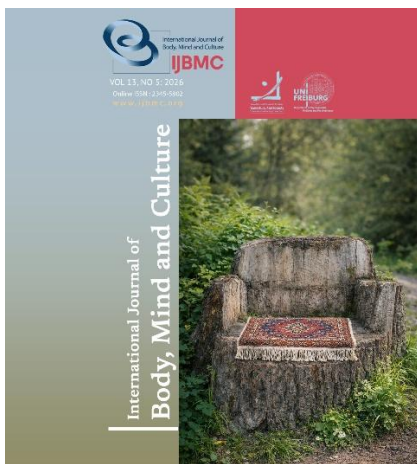


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# Embodied Ritual Participation and Ethnic Identity in Guangxi's San Yue San Festival: A Qualitative Ethnographic Study

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study examined how embodied ritual participation shapes psychological experiences of ethnic identity and belonging during Guangxi's San Yue San Festival.

**Methods and Materials:** This qualitative ethnographic study was conducted in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, mainly in Nanning and Wuming District. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Participants included residents, Zhuang cultural practitioners, festival organizers, and visitors. Field observations focused on ritual performances, mountain-song gatherings, communal celebrations, cultural exhibitions, and interethnic interactions. Policy documents, media reports, and academic sources related to San Yue San and national intangible cultural heritage were also analyzed. Data were examined using thematic coding and triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents.

**Findings:** San Yue San served as an embodied ritual space where singing, collective gatherings, traditional performances, and sensory engagement strengthened emotional attachment to ethnic heritage. Participants experienced pride, belonging, cultural continuity, and group affiliation through direct bodily and emotional participation. The festival also provided a public platform for Zhuang, Yao, Miao, Dong, Han, and other ethnic communities to express distinct cultural identities within a shared heritage framework. Recognition as national intangible cultural heritage increased visibility, while commercialization and digital promotion created both opportunities for cultural dissemination and concerns about authenticity.

**Conclusion:** Embodied ritual participation in San Yue San supports psychological negotiation of ethnic identity by linking cultural memory, emotional experience, and social belonging. The festival remains a dynamic space where heritage preservation and socio-cultural transformation interact.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Cultural Identity, Ceremonial Behavior, Social Identification, Cultural Heritage, Qualitative Research.

## Introduction

The concept of ethnic identity has become increasingly significant in contemporary discussions of cultural heritage and social belonging. In many societies, cultural festivals have emerged as important sites where collective traditions, social memory, and group identity are publicly expressed and negotiated. With the growing global emphasis on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, minority festivals have gained renewed attention as mechanisms for preserving cultural diversity while simultaneously contributing to broader national identity narratives.

Classical theories of ethnicity provide important foundations for understanding these dynamics. Ethnic identity as rooted in “primordial attachments,” including shared language, kinship, and religion, which create enduring bonds among members of a community. However, later scholarship has challenged the rigidity of primordial perspectives by emphasizing the socially constructed and situational nature of ethnic identity. According to [Atkinson & Whitehouse \(2011\)](#), for example, they argued that ethnic identity can function instrumentally as groups strategically mobilize cultural symbols and boundaries to pursue social, economic, or political interests. These debates suggest that ethnic identity should be understood as both historically grounded and dynamically negotiated within changing social environments.

From a psychological perspective, ethnic identity also operates as an important component of individual self-concept. Social Identity Theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-definition and emotional security from membership in meaningful social groups. Through processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison, individuals internalize group membership and develop emotional attachment to shared cultural symbols and collective traditions. Ritual events and communal celebrations may therefore function as contexts in which individuals experience and reaffirm their sense of belonging to an ethnic community.

Constructivist approaches further emphasize the interactive and relational dimensions of ethnic identity. Ethnic boundaries are maintained through social interaction rather than fixed cultural content, highlighting the role of everyday practices in sustaining group distinctions. Similarly, described nations as

“imagined communities,” in which shared narratives and symbolic representations create a sense of collective belonging among people who may never meet directly. These perspectives suggest that cultural rituals and public celebrations can play a crucial role in shaping how individuals perceive and emotionally experience their membership within broader communities.

Recent research in embodied cognition provides an additional psychological perspective for understanding ritual participation. Embodied cognition proposes that cognitive and emotional processes are grounded in bodily experience, meaning that physical actions, sensory stimulation, and collective movement can shape how individuals perceive and internalize cultural meanings. Ritual activities such as synchronized singing, rhythmic movement, and communal gatherings create multisensory environments that may intensify emotional engagement and strengthen collective identification. In this sense, cultural rituals do not merely symbolize identity but can also produce lived psychological experiences of belonging and shared meaning.

Within China, the recognition of minority cultural festivals as national intangible cultural heritage has introduced new dimensions to the relationship between culture and identity. Cultural heritage policies often aim to preserve traditional practices while simultaneously integrating them into broader narratives of national unity. This process may transform local cultural traditions into public cultural performances that connect local ethnic identities with national cultural frameworks. Such transformations can generate new forms of interaction among communities, government institutions, and cultural organizations.

The Guangxi San Yue San Festival provides a particularly interesting context for examining these dynamics. Traditionally associated with the Zhuang ethnic community, the festival has evolved into a large-scale cultural event that brings together multiple ethnic groups in Guangxi. Cultural performances, singing competitions, and ritual gatherings have become important expressions of local identity while also functioning as public representations of ethnic diversity within the Chinese nation. This transformation raises important questions about how individuals

psychologically experience and interpret ethnic identity within an officially recognized heritage festival.

Previous studies have examined the historical development and cultural significance of the San Yue San festival. Singh et al. (2020), highlighted the role of ritual performance in maintaining cultural memory among the Zhuang community, while Braun & Clarke (2019), discussed how heritage policies have reshaped the festival's public representation. However, existing research has focused primarily on cultural representation and heritage policy, leaving the psychological experiences of festival participants relatively underexplored.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how participants experience embodied ritual participation and how these experiences contribute to perceptions of ethnic identity and belonging.

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Design*

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design to examine psychological experiences associated with embodied ritual participation during Guangxi's San Yue San Festival. The research focuses on how participants interpret ritual practices and how these experiences contribute to perceptions of ethnic identity and group belonging.

The fieldwork was conducted in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, primarily in Nanning and the Wuming District, where large-scale San Yue San celebrations are held. The researcher conducted fieldwork during the San Yue San festival period and related cultural activities, remaining in the field for several weeks to document ritual practices, performances, and interactions among participants.

Data were collected using three complementary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with festival participants, including residents, Zhuang cultural practitioners, festival organizers, and visitors, to capture diverse perspectives on ritual participation and experiences of ethnic identity. Interviews explored

participants' emotional responses to ritual activities, perceptions of ethnic identity, and interpretations of the festival's cultural significance.

Participatory observation formed a central component of the research design. The researcher observed ritual performances, singing gatherings, cultural exhibitions, and festival interactions, documenting how bodily participation, collective movement, and shared emotional expressions shaped the festival atmosphere. Field notes were recorded to capture behavioral interactions, sensory elements of ritual participation, and the broader social context in which cultural performances occurred.

In addition to field-based data, documentary materials were also examined. Policy documents related to national intangible cultural heritage, media reports, and academic studies on San Yue San were analyzed to contextualize how the festival has been represented in institutional and public discourse.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding approach. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to ritual experience, emotional engagement, and the interpretation of ethnic identity. Through iterative comparison of multiple data sources, the study examined how participants described their psychological experiences during festival participation.

To strengthen analytical credibility, the study employed methodological triangulation. Insights from interviews, participatory observation, and documentary analysis were compared to identify consistent patterns in participants' interpretations of ritual participation and cultural identity. Ethical considerations were also observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and verbal consent was obtained before interviews and observations were conducted, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation.

By integrating ethnographic fieldwork, interview narratives, and documentary analysis, the study provides a qualitative examination of how embodied ritual participation shapes psychological experiences of ethnic identity during Guangxi's San Yue San Festival.

## Findings and Results

### 1. Historical Context of Guangxi's San Yue San Festival

Guangxi is a multi-ethnic region in southern China, where the Zhuang community is the largest ethnic group. This cultural diversity shapes the social setting in which the San Yue San festival functions as a shared ritual event, in which participants collectively experience cultural identity through embodied practices. The festival is widely celebrated throughout Guangxi and has gradually evolved into a regional cultural event that brings together multiple ethnic communities.

Historical accounts commonly trace the origins of San Yue San to ritual practices associated with ancient Luo-Yue cultural traditions. Early celebrations included seasonal agricultural rituals, communal singing, and social gatherings among community members. These practices created participatory ritual environments in which music, bodily movement, and collective interaction shaped the emotional experience of belonging to the community. Such embodied practices continue to influence how participants experience the festival in contemporary settings.

During the twentieth century, San Yue San gradually transitioned from localized folk traditions to a more publicly recognized cultural event. Cultural productions inspired by the Liu Sanjie legend and regional song festivals contributed to broader recognition of Zhuang musical traditions. This transformation illustrates how local ritual practices were increasingly reinterpreted

within broader cultural and institutional frameworks while still retaining their experiential ritual character.

From the 1980s onward, regional cultural policies and heritage initiatives further increased the festival's visibility. Official recognition encouraged wider participation from multiple ethnic groups and expanded public celebrations. However, field observations indicate that participants primarily engage with the festival through embodied activities such as singing, dancing, and communal gatherings rather than through institutional narratives alone. These ritual practices remain central to the psychological experience of ethnic belonging.

The designation of San Yue San as national intangible cultural heritage in 2014 further expanded its cultural significance. Despite institutional recognition, participants continue to interpret the festival primarily through sensory engagement, emotional participation, and shared ritual performance. These experiences illustrate how embodied cultural practices shape the psychological understanding of ethnic identity among festival participants.

Within the context of this study, the historical development of San Yue San is therefore considered primarily as background for understanding how contemporary participants experience ritual practices and interpret ethnic identity through embodied cultural participation.



**Figure 1**

Location of Guangxi, the fieldwork site. (Source: Researcher, 2025)

### *1.1 Historical Origin: From the Folk Rituals of the Luo-Yue to the Prototype of National Rituals (from Pre-Qin to the Mid-20th Century)*

The cultural DNA of "San Yue San" originates from the production and beliefs of the pre-Qin Luo Yue ethnic group. As the main source of the Zhuang people, Luo Yue's rice-based agriculture gave rise to the primitive functions of the "San Yue San" spring sacrifice, which prayed for a bountiful year, social song fairs, and matchmaking. The frog pattern symbolizes rainwater, while cloud-and-thunder motifs, representing cosmic order, are revealed in archaeological findings. These core objects embody the nature worship and ethnic memory. Similarly, "San Yue San" is mentioned as a "secular ritual" that serves the folk practice in Zhuang descendants to secure ethnic boundaries. In "Lingwai Dai Da," events such as "throwing embroidered balls for engagement" and "song fairs" are recorded during the Song Dynasty (Bulbulia et al., 2024). Notably, scholars remain divided on whether Guangxi's March 3rd originated from indigenous development or was influenced by the Central Plains 'Shangsi Festival. Local scholars argue that, despite influences from the Shangsi Festival, Guangxi's March 3rd evolved into a distinctively ethnic and regional observance. This provides historical evidence for later narratives about the shared ethnic origins of the Chinese nation (Lai et al., 2022).

The mid-20th century marked the beginning of the national ritualization of "San Yue San". In 1953, Yishan County in Guangxi launched the Caidiao opera "Liu Sanjie", distilling the Gezhou culture into the theme of "resisting oppression and pursuing freedom", thereby transcending Zhuang ethnic boundaries to become a shared symbol among Guangxi's ethnic groups. In 1959, Liuzhou City Opera Troupe further adapted the work by

incorporating elements of Central Plains opera, earning national-level artistic recognition (Kao et al., 2020). During this phase, the state granted it preliminary public status through artistic reconstruction. However, it had not yet become an official national ritual and remained in a transitional stage of interaction between folk traditions and state culture (Fischer et al., 2014).

### *1.2 Institutional Construction: The Formal Formation of National Rituals (1980s-2000s)*

Since the 1980s, the state has promoted the transformation of the 'March 3rd Festival' through 'institutional endorsement' and 'cultural empowerment,' reflecting the 'institutional embedding' logic in the theory of state rituals, by transforming local rituals into public practices serving national governance through policies and legislation (Galen, 2025).

The year 1983 was an important one: the government of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region officially proclaimed the third day of the third lunar month the day of the Zhuang Ethnic Song Festival and held its first festival in Nanning. The leaders of the regions were present, and singers from different nationalities performed; it was the first time the festival was officially recognized by the local government. This program did not break down folk rituals, as it was based on the cultural values of the Zhuang people, who embrace inclusivity and openness. Rice cultivation requires collaboration, and official endorsement reinforced cultural legitimacy while creating opportunities for multi-ethnic participation. For instance, in 1984, the festival invited singers from 11 indigenous ethnic minorities in Guangxi, forming a "Zhuang-led, multi-ethnic celebration" that aligned with Durkheim's theory that "rituals coalesce groups through shared participation" (Hobson et al., 2017).

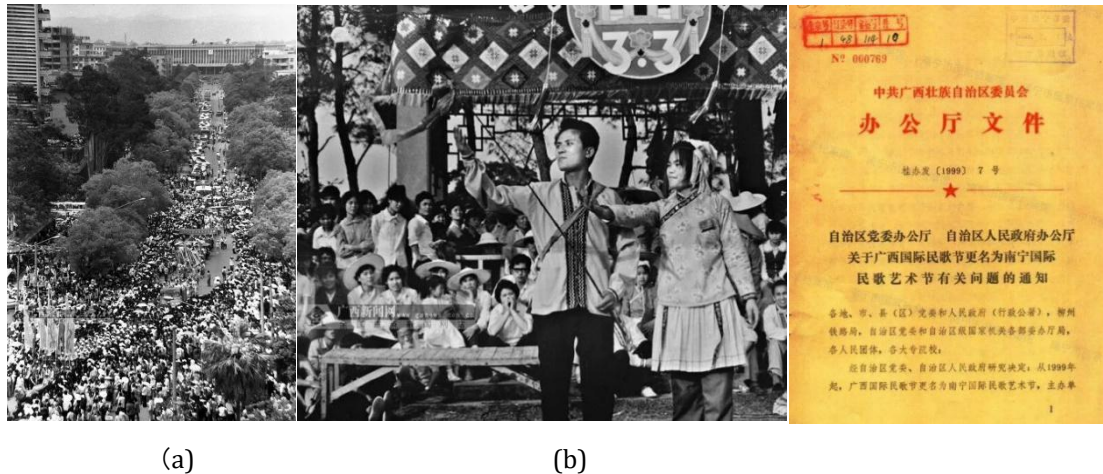


Figure 2

Early institutional San Yue San celebrations. (Sources: Guangxi News Network; China Archives).

In 2014, the national ceremony of "San Yue San" was officially established: it was included in the fourth batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, and Guangxi also designated it as a two-day public holiday through local legislation. This design carries dual significance: the "national intangible cultural heritage" status endows it with the sacredness of "a shared cultural heritage of the Chinese nation," elevating it

beyond local boundaries; the "public holiday" ensures nationwide participation and reinforces the recognition of "March 3rd as a shared festival of the Chinese nation." By this point, it has already acquired the core characteristics of a national ceremony, institutionalized, public-focused, and aimed at fostering national identity (Hove & Risen, 2009).



Figure 3

San Yue San is listed as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage (2014). (Source: Guangxi News Network)

### 1.3 Symbol Reconstruction: National Expression of Luoyue Elements

The core of the national ceremony is "to convey the community values through symbolic reconstruction". The "San Yue San" festival has not abandoned the cultural roots of the Luoyue people but selectively inherits and nationalizes core symbols such as bronze drums and song fairs, becoming a visual carrier of "the unity of diversity in the Chinese nation".

(1) Bronze Drum: From the Power Symbol of the Luoyue to the Witness of the National Culture

The pre-Qin Luoyue bronze drums, serving as "dual symbols of ethnic authority and ritual sanctity," were exclusively controlled by tribal leaders for major

sacrificial and military ceremonies. This framework was reinforced by heritage that preserves cultural roots, as exemplified by the Wuming District, which features the "Luoyue Bronze Drum Sacrificial Ceremony," which primarily follows traditional practices and appoints Luoyue descendants to protect historical memory (Keshavarz, 2025). Secondly, these drums were introduced into China's national cultural symbolism, as shown in the Guangxi Nationalities Museum's exhibition, which combines Shang-Zhou and Yi bronze to stress "technological affinity and functional complementarity" and to recast Luoyue symbols as tangible evidence of ethnic unity (Konvalinka & Roepstorff, 2012).



(b)

Figure 4

(a, b) Bronze drum symbolism in contemporary festival events. (Sources: Nanning News Network; WeChat Official Account).

Historically, the Song Festival (Ge Xi) was a secular ritual where Zhuang youths "chose partners through song." The national cultural ritualization reshaped the public arena for multicultural dialogue. In the year 2016, "Zhuang March 3rd Bagui Carnival," mountain-song duets were notified as the Chinese National Song Festival, featuring Yao, Miao, Dong, Han, and Zhuang performers in cross-ethnic events that transform local folk song into cultural symbols (Lang et al., 2020). These reimagining views that Fei Xiaotong's cultural philosophy of "appreciating one's own beauty and inspiring others' beauty, as Zhuang's improvisational duets. Yao Changgu drum elements, and Miao lusheng performances emphasize cultural traits to strengthen national identity by creative shared expression.

### 1.4 Community Cohesion: The Practical Effect of National Rituals

The ultimate aim of "San Yue San" is to "strengthen the sense of community among the Chinese nation through ritual practices" (Lyons et al., 2021). By leveraging three mechanisms, multi-ethnic participation, emotional resonance, and value transmission, it transforms the abstract concept of community into tangible practices. Building on Guangxi's traditional ethnic unity, the initiative amplifies its influence through state support.

In the context of multi-ethnic participation, "San Yue San" expands beyond Zhuang ethnic boundaries, as shown by the 2021 events, where 82% of over 200 events featured joint performances. The Hezhou integrates Zhuang song festivals, Yao Panwang rituals, and Liuzhou's bronze-drum pattern competition,

combining Dong, Miao, and Mulao symbols into integrated artworks (Marshall, 2023). This participatory approach stems from the Zhuang people's inclusive and open cultural ethos, with the state elevating local traditions into a model of ethnic community practice through ritual design.

"San Yue San" builds community relationships through shared experiences that resonate emotionally. Guangxi's "Ethnic Unity Hundred-Family Banquet" has 12 families from ethnic groups to gather a communal meal, which turns the idea of "community" into a concrete emotional line with Durkheim's theory. This unites groups through emotional resonance (Newson et al., 2023). Through shared celebrations and experiences, ethnic groups naturally develop a sense of belonging as "one Chinese nation," embodying Fei Xiaotong's cultural philosophy of "harmonious coexistence."

"San Yue San" has transformed Luo-Yue rituals into a modern state-endorsed ceremony that combines ethnic tradition with cultural governance. Symbolic reinterpretation and institutional support have evolved from local heritage into shared national identity and ethnic national cohesion (Wlodarczyk et al., 2023).

## 2. The "Guangxi's San Yue San" Festival in the dimension of ethnic cultural politics in the context of presenting Guangxi as the land of ethnic diversity in China

As a traditional festival shared by the Zhuang people and other ethnic groups in Guangxi, "Zhuang March 3rd" embodies the cultural memory of rice cultivation, traditional ethnic interactions, and folk art wisdom. In 2014, it was officially inscribed on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, marking its elevation from a local folk practice to a national cultural heritage. From the perspective of cultural and political theory, the process of heritage formation for this festival is essentially a dynamic interplay and integration of national discourse, local practices, and ethnic memory (Reddish et al., 2016).

### 2.1 Cultural Political Practice and Reconstruction of National Identity in the Process of Heritage

#### (1) State Discourse Intervention and the Reconstruction of Festival Connotation

The state's recognition of intangible cultural heritage has transformed the cultural significance of "San Yue San" (the traditional Zhuang ethnic festival) from a "cultural identifier" to a "cultural shared experience" (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Since 2014, Guangxi has declared

"San Yue San" as a public holiday, which defines the Zhong Song Festival as a multi-ethnic celebration that reinforces Zhuang culture within China's intangible cultural heritage. Second, through holiday provisions and organized official celebrations, it engaged diverse ethnic communities, including Han, Yao, and Miao, fostering cross-ethnic cultural identity.

Taves (2021) argued that the "San Yue San" Song Fair Festival has evolved by drawing on the Han people's Shangsi Festival in both duration and activities, while incorporating the Zhuang ethnic group's cultural essence of "expressing emotions through song" and "choosing partners based on songs." This cultural fusion exemplifies the interaction between ethnic minority cultures and Central Plains culture, guided by national discourse. Through heritage certification, the state has integrated "San Yue San" into the construction system of the shared spiritual homeland of the Chinese nation, elevating ethnic identity from internal cultural consciousness to recognition of the Chinese national community (Uchino et al., 2018).

#### (2) Response and Innovation of Local Practice to National Discourse

The integration between local governments and civil society has reestablished the "San Yue San" in Wuming District, merging the Luoyue Cultural Tourism Festival with ancestral worship and the bronze drum to redefine Zhuang historical memory and ethnic identity within the national heritage framework (Wang & Liu, 2023). This approach not only aligns with the national emphasis on the "living inheritance" of intangible cultural heritage but also enriches the cultural dimensions of ethnic identity through exploration of Luoyue culture. On March 3rd, the Bagui Carnival, held by local governments, includes folk song contests, intangible cultural events, and ethnic sports competitions, serving as a model of government leadership and broad social and public participation (Fischer & Xygalatas, 2014).

### 2.2 Presentation Strategies and Practical Paths of Ethnic Minority Cultural Diversity

#### (1) Inclusion and Symbiosis of Multicultural Elements

The San Yue San festival is a vibrant opportunity to showcase the diversity of ethnic minority cultures. The song festival also includes not only Zhuang-mountain song duets but also performances of various ethnic arts, such as the long drum dance of the Yao ethnic group, the lusheng dance of the Miao ethnic group, and the pipa

singing of the Dong ethnic group (Yip et al., 2019). This coexistence of multi-ethnic arts transcends cultural boundaries, reflecting the role played by Guangxi as a land of ethnic cultural diversity.

These cultural elements are not merely pieced together but organically integrated through a "cultural synthesis" approach. The Zhuang people in the Guilin and Liuzhou regions performed mountain songs in the Guilin-Liuzhou dialect to preserve traditional rhythms through cross-ethnic exchange, illustrating cultural diversity through continuous interaction.

### *(2) Integration of Tradition and Modernity: Living Presentation of Cultural Diversity*

The traditional festival "San Yue San" celebrates ethnic minority culture through cloud-song fairs, live streaming, and e-commerce. This festival is increasing cultural diversity by converting cultural resources into economic value. The open and inclusive nature of Zhuang culture forms the basis for their ability to communicate with and integrate into other ethnic cultures. In preserving the 3rd March Festival "San Yue San," this cultural ethos helps traditional and modern elements blend without interference, allowing ethnic minorities to preserve their identities while adapting to current development. The cultural practice of the San Yue San festival of the Zhuang Ethnic Group redefines cultural diversity, including state certification and holiday status as an ethnic festival, contributing to the construction of Chinese national identity. Meanwhile, local innovations and grassroots efforts, while responding to state discourse, have achieved a dynamic presentation of ethnic minority cultural diversity by integrating multicultural elements and blending tradition with modernity.

### *3. The "Zhuang San Yue San" and the process of becoming a national intangible cultural heritage*

#### *3.1 The Precondition of "San Yue San" Being National Intangible Cultural Heritage: Living Inheritance and Cultural Consciousness*

Before being inscribed on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2014, the "Song Fair" had already demonstrated the essential characteristics of a "living cultural heritage." As a folk practice embodied through song fairs, it preserves the memory of Zhuang rice cultivation civilization, ethnic interaction norms, and artistic expression systems, forming a dual inheritance mechanism of "folk-led preservation and

locally-guided development. These gatherings involved embodied practices such as mountain-song singing, ritual performances, and communal participation, through which individuals experienced emotional connection and a sense of belonging to their ethnic community. This living nature manifests in two dimensions: First, the continuous reproduction of artistic symbols, such as the ritualized application of bronze drum patterns and regional variations in mountain song modes (e.g., the parallel coexistence of Guilin-Liuzhou dialect mountain songs and Zhuang language mountain songs), demonstrates both the stability of its cultural core and formal adaptability. Second, the awakening of ethnic cultural consciousness. After the 1980s, spontaneous "San Yue San" song-fair activities in Guangxi increased significantly. Zhuang communities in Wuming (Nanning) and Rongshui (Liuzhou) maintained the folk functions of song fairs through family inheritance and village mutual aid. This grassroots-level cultural awareness laid the practical foundation for subsequent national applications of intangible cultural heritage. The national ICH policies of Guangxi transform "San Yue San" from a continuous folk practice into an institutionalized heritage by reshaping its cultural significance and traditions, thereby emphasizing how ICH status emerges from synergy between the state government and local practice.

#### *3.2 Institutional Process of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Certification: Application Logic and Cultural Narrative Reconstruction*

Using the national ICH status from 2012-2014, Guangxi reshaped the cultural framework of "San Yue San" through heritage guidelines and aligned historical tracing to link the festival to Luoyue sacrificial traditions and bronze ritual artifacts into a craft "millennia-long transmission" lineage. Second, standardization of technical narratives: They consolidated scattered folk arts like mountain song performances, five-color glutinous rice preparation, and embroidered ball weaving into the core techniques of "Zhuang Ethnic March 3rd Folk Customs," while clarifying inheritance responsibilities for representative inheritors at various levels. This standardization process met the national requirement for intangible cultural heritage on "identifiable core techniques". The cultural identity of "San Yue San" was elevated from a local symbol of China's multi-ethnic unity, strengthening Zhuang, Han,

Yao, and Miao interaction in line with the national goals of the spiritual homeland of China. The certification process of this intangible cultural heritage embodies a logic of "cultural selection", application materials prioritize visually striking and culturally distinctive elements of "San Yue San" (the traditional folk festival), such as bronze drums and mountain songs, while downplaying private aspects like the intimate ritual of "choosing a partner through song. This choice does not diminish cultural authenticity; instead, it reflects the unavoidable outcome of establishing cultural publicness within the ICH framework in China. San Yue San officially became part of the national ICH list in 2014, and it is no longer a local cultural practice, but rather a national cultural heritage. This transformation granted the festival state-level cultural legitimacy and provided institutional safeguards for its ongoing living inheritance.

### *3.3 The Adaptation of Inheritance after the Transformation of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Interaction between National System and Folk Practice*

After being designated as a national intangible cultural heritage, the "San Yue San" avoided the pitfall of "museumization" and instead achieved adaptive living inheritance through the interaction between "national institutional guidance and folk practice innovation." At the institutional level, Guangxi has designated the "San Yue San" as a statutory holiday for the entire region (since 2014). Through a "government-led, society-participated" model, it organizes large-scale public events like the "Zhuang March 3rd Festival in Guangxi Carnival. This institutional design provides public space and resource support for the festival's heritage, shifting the transmission of intangible cultural heritage from "folk spontaneity" to "nationwide participation under national guidance". Folk practices form a creative national institution. The older Zhuang people in Wuming protect authentic ancient songs at official fairs and distinguish them from over-commercialized versions. New developments integrate "San Yue San" in education and rural tourism. This has expanded the festival into daily life, making it an everyday cultural practice (Qin, 2018). The reflection of cultural adaptability theory protects core traditions in modern social contexts.

### *3.4 Theoretical Enlightenment of the Process of Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Paradigm of Minority Culture*

### *Protection under the National Intangible Cultural Heritage System*

The "San Yue San" cultural heritage system has a dual-track parallel paradigm to protect ethnic minority cultures in China. Firstly, the ICH system provides "legitimacy endorsement" and "resource support" for ethnic cultures. Through certifications and festival establishment, these cultures integrate the national cultural framework to protect themselves from marginalization during modernization. Secondly, the autonomy of folk practices forms the core of living cultural inheritance. The ICH system must respect the subjectivity of folk culture, granting inheritors sufficient creative space to avoid "cultural alienation" caused by excessive administrative intervention.

The "Cultural Practice Theory" posits that the intangible cultural heritage process of "San Yue San" is not a one-way "state-led cultural shaping of the folk," but rather an interactive and dynamic game among the state, local authorities, and the folk in the cultural practice field. This interaction not only achieves the state's cultural governance objectives but also preserves the diversity of ethnic minority cultures, offering valuable lessons for the preservation of ICH in other ethnic minority cultures. ICH preservation should not be "cultural ossification" but rather "a living cultural development under institutional safeguards."

### *4. Presentation of Zhuang Cultural Identity within the Intangible Cultural Heritage Context*

Ethnic. The recognition of the San Yue San festival as national intangible cultural heritage has created new platforms for the public presentation of Zhuang cultural identity. Within this heritage framework, ritual performances, traditional music, and symbolic cultural elements function as embodied cultural practices through which participants experience and express their ethnic identity. Cultural symbols such as bronze drums, mountain songs, and ritual foods act as visible markers of Zhuang cultural heritage and reinforce collective memory within the festival setting.

At the same time, Zhuang identity is presented through the interaction between community practices and institutional cultural programs. Field observations suggest that while official festival narratives emphasize themes of ethnic unity and cultural diversity, local participants often experience the festival primarily as a continuation of community traditions and shared

cultural memory. These embodied practices allow participants to interpret ethnic identity through lived cultural participation rather than through symbolic representation alone.

Multicultural performances during the festival also shape how ethnic identities are represented in public space. Performances by Zhuang, Yao, Miao, Dong, and other ethnic communities highlight Guangxi's cultural diversity. However, these performances do not simply merge cultural expressions into a unified narrative; instead, different groups emphasize distinctive cultural symbols to communicate their own cultural identities within the shared festival environment.

Modern tourism and digital communication technologies have further transformed how cultural identity is presented. Livestreaming events, short-form video platforms, and cultural tourism activities increase San Yue San's visibility and enable Zhuang participants to present their cultural traditions to wider audiences. At the same time, these developments introduce new contexts in which traditional practices are adapted for contemporary cultural consumption.

Through embodied ritual participation, such as mountain-song singing, traditional performances, and communal gatherings, participants often report feelings of pride, belonging, and emotional attachment to their ethnic heritage. These experiences illustrate how ritual participation generates psychological interpretations of ethnic identity within the festival context. By participating in ritual performances and cultural celebrations, individuals not only represent their cultural heritage but also experience ethnic identity as an embodied and emotionally meaningful dimension of social belonging.

### *5. Guangxi's San Yue San: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Diversity within the Intangible Cultural Heritage Framework*

The findings of this study suggest that the San Yue San festival operates as a cultural space where ethnic identity is experienced through embodied ritual practices and public cultural expression. Through activities such as mountain-song performances, communal celebrations, and traditional artistic displays, participants experience emotional engagement and a sense of cultural belonging, reflecting the psychological dimensions of ethnic identity formation during

#### *5.1 Reconstruction of Folk Ritual within the Heritage Framework*

Historically, San Yue San developed from community-based rituals associated with agricultural life and social interaction among Zhuang communities. The recognition of the festival as national intangible cultural heritage has contributed to the selective reinterpretation of these practices within a broader public cultural framework. Through these ritual practices—such as mountain-song singing, communal gatherings, and traditional performances—participants continue to experience a sense of cultural belonging and emotional attachment to their ethnic heritage. While institutional recognition has increased the festival's visibility, field observations indicate that many participants continue to value local ritual practices as expressions of community tradition and shared cultural memory.

#### *5.2 Interaction between Institutional Heritage Policies and Local Cultural Practice*

The development of San Yue San illustrates the interaction between institutional cultural policy and local community practices. Heritage recognition and official festival programs provide resources and visibility for cultural traditions, but local communities continue to shape how these traditions are practiced and interpreted. Through participation in both officially organized performances and informal community celebrations, individuals experience embodied cultural practices that reinforce emotional attachment and a sense of belonging to their ethnic community. In many cases, participants engage with both official performances and informal community celebrations, reflecting a dynamic relationship between institutional frameworks and lived cultural practice.

#### *5.3 Commercialization and Cultural Representation*

Tourism and commercialization have introduced new dimensions to the contemporary celebration of San Yue San. Cultural tourism events, festival branding, and digital promotion have expanded the festival's audience and increased its public visibility. However, participants express mixed views regarding these developments, with some welcoming increased recognition while others emphasize the importance of preserving community-centered cultural practices. For many participants, these changes influence how ritual participation is experienced, shaping both pride in cultural visibility and concerns about maintaining the

emotional and cultural meanings associated with traditional festival practices. These perspectives suggest that commercialization may both support cultural visibility and raise concerns about the transformation of traditional practices.

#### 5.4 Cultural Diversity and Interethnic Interaction

San Yue San has increasingly become a platform for showcasing Guangxi's cultural diversity. Performances by Zhuang, Han, Yao, Miao, Dong, and other ethnic communities highlight the region's multicultural composition. Rather than representing complete cultural integration, these performances illustrate how different communities present distinctive cultural identities within a shared festival environment. Such interactions create opportunities for cultural exchange while maintaining visible cultural differences.

#### Conclusion

This study examined how participants experience ethnic identity through ritual participation during the San Yue San festival in Guangxi. The findings suggest that embodied cultural practices—such as singing, collective gatherings, and festival performances—play an important role in shaping participants' emotional engagement with cultural identity. Rather than functioning solely as a symbolic cultural representation, the festival creates a participatory environment in which individuals experience a sense of belonging through shared ritual activities.

The study also indicates that contemporary celebrations of San Yue San involve interactions between traditional practices, heritage recognition, and modern cultural presentation. Participants interpret these changes in different ways, reflecting both appreciation for increased cultural visibility and concerns about maintaining the authenticity of local traditions. These observations suggest that the festival's transformation involves ongoing negotiation between cultural preservation and social change.

However, this study has several limitations. The qualitative fieldwork was conducted in specific locations in Guangxi and involved a limited number of participants. Future research could expand the scope by

including additional communities, longer-term ethnographic observation, and comparative analysis of other ethnic festivals in China.

Overall, the study contributes to understanding how ritual participation shapes the psychological experience of ethnic identity. Within the context of the San Yue San festival, embodied cultural practices provide meaningful spaces for participants to express their cultural heritage and interpret their sense of belonging in contemporary society.

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#### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

#### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

#### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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#### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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