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A Study on Residents' Place Identity in Rock Art Heritage Sites: A Case Study of Huashan Rock Art in Guangxi

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Abstract: Rock art, as immovable cultural heritage, is physically immovable and intangible, and the mechanism through which its heritagization process influences local residents' place identity has not been systematically examined. Taking the Zuojiang Huashan Rock Art Cultural Landscape in Guangxi as a case study, this paper adopts a qualitative research method combining literature analysis, observation, and interviews to examine the changes in local Zhuang residents' place identity under the background of heritage tourism development, from three dimensions: symbolic translation, historical memory, and geographical space. The findings are as follows: the successful World Heritage inscription of Huashan Rock Art established "Little Red Figure" as the core local symbol, but there is a gap between the official translation of the symbol and residents' daily cognition; the image of "Huashan" is not fully unfolded in residents' identity; from "ancestral spirit place" to "World Heritage", residents' place identity has experienced tensions from sacred to secular, and from local to national; the heritage site boundary exhibits openness in administrative, ethnic, and transnational spaces. This paper proposes the concept of "intangible identity" to explain the special mechanism of residents' identity construction in rock art heritage sites, theoretically expanding the heritage types in place identity research, and practically providing reference for the sustainable management of rock art World Heritage sites.

1. Introduction

In the Zhuang villages along the Zuojiang River in Guangxi, villagers have guarded the ochre-red paintings on the Huashan cliff for generations, calling the mountain "Balai", meaning "mountain with paintings". In 2016, Huashan Rock Art was inscribed on the World Heritage List, becoming China's first rock art World Cultural Heritage. The site consists of over 80 rock art locations distributed along the Zuojiang River and its tributaries, with paintings in ochre-red pigment on limestone cliffs, covering an area of over 8,000 square meters, with more than 1,900 images, dating back about 2,000 years. In 2024, the Ningming Huashan Rock Art Scenic Area was rated as a National 5A-level Tourist Attraction.

In the actual operation of heritage tourism, external forces' interpretation and representation of heritage may separate heritage from its narrative subject, weakening the local residents' subject status and resulting in the absence of local expression. Rock art heritage is particularly special in this regard.

Rock art is usually distributed on cliffs, characterized by immovability, intangibility, and non-renewability. It is difficult for tourists to establish a direct connection with the heritage through touch or close observation, and the meaning connection between residents and heritage therefore highly depends on symbolic translation and collective memory.

When "Balai" becomes "Huashan", and when the "red figures" on the cliff become "Little Red Figures" on street lamps, the relationship between residents and heritage is undergoing profound reshaping. However, how does the "Huashan" symbol unfold in local residents' place identity? From "ancestral spirit place" to "World Heritage", what changes have occurred in the meaning of rock art to local Zhuang residents? Focusing on these questions, this paper explores the impact of Huashan Rock Art heritagization on local Zhuang residents' place identity from three dimensions: symbolic translation, historical memory, and local space.

2. Literature Review

Place identity is one of the core concepts in human geography, referring to the incorporation of emotions and cognitions derived from clan, ethnicity, and culture into the definition of "self" [1]. From the perspective of symbolic representation, place identity is most clearly manifested in individuals' or groups' identification with a certain cultural symbol. Landscape is the center of symbols and meanings of place identity, and landscapes inscribed on the World Cultural Heritage List have an intrinsic connection with place identity. However, heritage movements and heritage tourism may break this intrinsic connection. External capital takes over the power to interpret local heritage, and heritage as a representation is separating from its narrative subject. Peng (2013) proposed the concept of "homeland heritage", believing that heritage ultimately needs to return to the homeland and the local place [2], but how heritage returns to the local place still needs further exploration.

In heritage identity research, He et al. (2024) used grounded theory coding to summarize seven dimensions of tourists' heritage identity at World Cultural Heritage sites from two aspects: object representation and subject construction. The study pointed out that heritage identity is mutually infiltrated and blended with self-identity, place identity, national identity, and cultural identity. The transformation of heritage identity may push identity toward larger scales, but there are also cases where the heritage identity is refused to be pushed from local to world, and local identity is further strengthened [3]. Zheng and Hong (2023) found that after successful World Heritage inscription, tourists' perception of the image of World Heritage sites became clearer, and they more recognized the cultural brand and status, but had higher expectations for service quality and tourism environment. Cultural identity, to a certain extent, became a mediating variable between emotional identity and place identity [4]. Hou et al. (2026) revealed a "resonance loop" of identity emotions between tourists and residents: tourists' attention to cultural heritage strengthens residents' sense of identity pride, and residents' cultural confidence in turn strengthens tourists' place identity; residents have a "familiarity effect" with nearby cultural heritage, and long-term contact leads to aesthetic perception blunting [5].

In rock art heritage research, Gao (2017) through an anthropological investigation of Huashan Rock Art, found that tourism development strengthens the social value connection between the community and rock art, but may also weaken these values due to negative impacts during the World Heritage inscription process [6]. Pan and Liang (2022) starting from empowerment theory, proposed community participation paths for the cultural heritage tourism development of Huashan Rock Art [7]. These studies provide a foundation for understanding the relationship between rock art heritage and communities, but qualitative research systematically examining the impact of rock art heritagization on residents' identity from the perspective of place identity is still limited.

3. Research Design

3.1. Case Site Overview

Huashan Rock Art is located in Chengzhong Town, Ningming County, Chongzuo City, Guangxi, with the core area in Zhuang villages such as Yaoda Village and Zhulian Village along the Mingjiang River. The rock art truly records the social activities of the Luoyue people, ancestors of the Zhuang ethnic group, during the Warring States to Eastern Han periods. Its main content is the grand sacrificial ceremonies held by ancient Luoyue people to pray for favorable weather, agricultural harvest, and population prosperity. The human figures in the rock art mostly appear in a "squatting human form", with dance gestures similar to frogs, reflecting the frog totem worship of the Luoyue ancestors.

Local Zhuang residents hold awe for the rock art patterns, and village regulations have helped preserve the landscape relatively intact. Lin Ninghai, a villager from Laijiang Tun, said: "This rock art is the treasure of the whole village." The village has organized a volunteer service team, with villagers carrying out regular environmental clean-ups in the Huashan Rock Art Scenic Area and promoting protection regulations to tourists.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study design. The research area takes Yaoda Village and Zhulian Village as the core area, Ningming County as the basic area, and other counties and districts in Chongzuo City as the peripheral area. Data sources include: semi-structured interviews with villagers, village cadres, scenic area managers, tour guides, government staff, Zhuang cultural inheritors, and tourists, with over 40 interviewees; participant observation at the scenic area, museum, and boat tours; and textual analysis of planning documents, news reports, and online comments. Data analysis uses thematic coding, summarizing around three dimensions: symbolic cognition, memory change, and spatial perception.

4. The "Huashan" Symbol: From Ancestral Spirit to World Heritage

4.1. Huashan as an Ancestral Spirit Place

In the cognition of local Zhuang residents, Huashan has never been an ordinary cliff. A Zhuang folk singer sings: "Huashan stands high with steep cliffs, Luoyue rock art is our ancestor, not fading for thousands of years, experiencing vicissitudes like the ancestor's face." This folk song is still sung in the Huashan area, indicating that the symbolic meaning of rock art as "ancestor" continues to exist in oral traditions. Local people are willing to believe that the giant frontal human figure at the center of the rock art is the Luoyue King. A Zhuang elderly person from Yaoda Village told the author: "When we were children, we heard the elders say that the red figures on Huashan were painted by immortals, and they could not be touched, or something bad would happen. Later we learned that they were painted by our ancestors, the Luoyue people."

Before the World Heritage inscription, "Huashan" was mainly an ancestral spirit symbol for local residents. It was a relic left by ancestors, a material witness to sacrificial traditions, and a sacred place requiring awe and protection. The protection traditions in village regulations, villagers' folk songs, and folk beliefs in the "Luoyue King" together constituted the symbolic system of Huashan as an ancestral spirit place. This ancestral spirit symbol was not acquired through official education or academic interpretation, but was passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions, festival rituals, and taboo practices in daily life. A villager mentioned that in the past, on major

festivals, the elderly in the village would lead young people to the riverbank opposite the rock art to pay respects and tell stories of the "red figures". This informal ritual activity constituted the most original emotional connection between residents and the rock art.

4.2. Heritagization and the Establishment of the "Little Red Figure" Symbol

The successful World Heritage inscription in 2016 marked the elevation of Huashan Rock Art from a local ancestral spirit place to a World Cultural Heritage of global significance. In this process, the "Little Red Figure" became the most recognizable visual symbol of Huashan Rock Art. Su Yangyang, head of the scenic area operations department, said: "Nowadays, rock art patterns can be seen everywhere in the scenic area. 'Little Red Figures' have jumped from the cliff to street lamps, buildings, and cultural creative products, and have also danced into the lives of surrounding villagers."

The official establishment of the "Little Red Figure" symbol has given Huashan Rock Art unprecedented visibility and recognition. However, it also constitutes a simplification of the complex cultural connotations of the rock art. As a visual symbol, the "Little Red Figure" relies on simplicity and repetition for its dissemination, but the rich connotations carried by the rock art—such as Luoyue sacrificial culture, frog totem worship, and bronze drum ritual music system—have been compressed into easily spread image elements in this process.

4.3. Residents' Acceptance and Alienation Regarding the "Huashan" Symbol

After the World Heritage inscription, surrounding residents showed strong pride in Huashan culture. Liao Shuzhen, the first secretary of Yaoda Village, said: "Even today, when talking about the successful World Heritage inscription, the villagers are still very proud!" One interviewed villager said: "Many people, especially after the inscription, the surrounding residents are very proud of our culture." As the most representative historical evidence of the Zhuang ethnic group, protecting the rock art is protecting the roots of Zhuang history.

However, pride does not equate to complete acceptance of the "heritage" representation. Some studies have pointed out that there is indeed a certain distance between Luoyue culture and modern resident communities, and the rock art was originally not valued by local community residents. A tour guide who has long worked at Huashan frankly said: "Many villagers know this is a World Heritage and feel very honored, but if you ask them what the rock art specifically depicts and represents, they can't say clearly." This state of "knowing the honor but not the reason for the honor" reflects that the unfolding of the "Huashan" symbol in residents' identity is incomplete.

In addition, there are differences in the acceptance of the "Little Red Figure" symbol among different age groups. Younger residents are more likely to accept "Little Red Figures" as tourism logos and cultural creative elements, while older residents tend to regard the rock art as a sacred ancestral spirit symbol and express discomfort with the generalized use of "Little Red Figures" on street lamps and commodities. This intergenerational difference suggests that the effect of symbolic translation is not homogeneous, but is moderated by residents' age, educational background, and degree of tourism participation.

5. Historical Memory: Continuity and Tension

5.1. From "Ancestral Spirit" to "Heritage": The Rise of Memory Scale

The transformation of Huashan Rock Art from "ancestral spirit place" to "World Heritage" has triggered profound changes at the memory level. In the traditional context, the rock art is a product of the sacrificial activities of the Luoyue ancestors. This sacrificial tradition continues to this day in

the form of Zhuang folk rituals such as the Shigong ceremony and the Maguai Festival.

After the World Heritage inscription, the "heritage value" of the rock art has been systematically interpreted and disseminated. Huashan culture has risen from a common folk memory of the Zhuang and Dong ethnic groups to a common national memory of the Chinese nation. This rise in memory scale has endowed Huashan Rock Art with a higher cultural status. Many researchers believe that Huashan Rock Art reflects the exchanges between border ethnic groups and the Central Plains ethnic groups, such as the appearance of bronze drum images in the rock art. A Zhuang cultural researcher told the author: "The rock art is of course Zhuang, but now what is most talked about is ethnic unity and the Chinese national community; the Zhuang's own things are actually talked about less." This feeling of local narrative being relatively marginalized in the grand narrative is not an isolated case in the interviews.

It is worth noting that the rise in memory scale is not a simple replacement relationship, but a process of layering and interweaving. In the same interviewee, multiple representations may coexist simultaneously, such as "Huashan is the relic of the Luoyue ancestors", "Huashan is the pride of the Zhuang ethnic group", and "Huashan is the treasure of the Chinese nation". This coexistence of multiple memories, on the one hand, reflects the negotiation and integration of different narrative scales in the heritagization process, and on the other hand, indicates that residents' place identity is not passively accepting official narratives, but actively selecting and adjusting between local memory and national narrative.

5.2. From "Sacred" to "Secular": Sacrificial Tradition and Tourism Development

Huashan Rock Art originally had a strong sacredness. Local Zhuang residents hold awe for the rock art patterns, and village regulations have preserved the landscape relatively intact. However, tourism development inevitably brings a process of secularization. 80% of the employees in the Huashan Scenic Area are local villagers. They have joined the team of Huashan guardians and started agritainment businesses. A villager from Yaoda Village working in the scenic area told the author: "In the past, we were afraid of it (the rock art); now we rely on it for a living." This sentence plainly expresses the tension between sacredness and secularization.

Hou et al. (2026) showed that residents' place identity is closely related to their perception of the depth of agricultural civilization and their recognition of historical continuity, and that the agriculture-culture-tourism integration experience is the primary driving factor of residents' identity emotions. For residents of Huashan Rock Art, the rice-cultivation sacrificial tradition and Zhuang agricultural lifestyle embedded in the rock art constitute the deep foundation of their identity. When tourism development transforms residents from "guardians" to "practitioners", the identity tension brought by this role change is essentially the tension between agricultural civilization tradition and tourism commercial logic. A villager who runs an agritainment business said: "In the past we farmed; now we receive tourists. Our income has increased, but we always feel that something is missing." This feeling of "something missing" is a plain expression of the tension between traditional lifestyle and tourism economic logic.

In addition, the impact of tourism development on sacrificial traditions is also worth attention. Some villagers reported that in the past, during the Maguai Festival, the whole village, young and old, would participate in sacrificial activities, but now because some young people work in the scenic area or go out to work, the number of participants in sacrifices has decreased. However, at the same time, the Zhuang song and dance performances in tourism shows have to some extent "revived" some elements of sacrificial rituals. This "staged" sacrificial performance may not only strengthen tourists' perception of Zhuang culture, but may also make residents' understanding of sacrificial traditions more superficial.

6. Spatial Boundaries: Openness and Flow

6.1. Tension of Administrative Regional Boundaries

The administrative attribution of the Huashan Rock Art Scenic Area is Ningming County, but in heritage inscription and tourism promotion, the overall concept of "Zuojiang Huashan Rock Art Cultural Landscape" is used, covering over 80 rock art locations distributed along the Zuojiang River and its tributaries, involving multiple counties and districts such as Ningming, Longzhou, Jiangzhou, and Fusui. Ningming County, as the core location of Huashan Rock Art, occupies a dominant position in tourism promotion. However, rock art locations in other counties and districts of the Zuojiang River basin also have heritage value. An interviewee from Longzhou said: "Huashan Rock Art is not just Ningming's; we also have it in Longzhou, but when outsiders mention Huashan Rock Art, they only know Ningming." This tension of spatial attribution reflects the actual impact of heritage site boundary delineation on residents' place identity.

Further interviews revealed that residents in Longzhou, Fusui, and other places have significantly lower identification with the "Huashan" symbol than Ningming residents. A cultural worker in Longzhou pointed out: "Our rock art locations here are also very important, but in promotion, Ningming is always the focus. People here don't have much feeling for the 'Huashan' brand." This difference in spatial attribution may lead to differentiation of local identity within the Zuojiang River basin, and even affect regional tourism coordinated development. He et al. (2024) pointed out that heritage identity and place identity are mutually infiltrated. When the spatial boundary of heritage identity is inconsistent with residents' local belonging, it may trigger tension and negotiation of identity. In the Huashan Rock Art case, the spatial tension between Ningming and surrounding counties is a concrete manifestation of this mechanism.

6.2. Softening of Ethnic Cultural Boundaries and Transnational Dimension

As the cultural heritage of the Luoyue people, ancestors of the Zhuang ethnic group, the symbolic meaning of Huashan Rock Art is closely linked to Zhuang culture. The Zhuang population in the Chongzuo area accounts for over 90%. The successful World Heritage inscription of Huashan Rock Art has strengthened local residents' identification with Zhuang culture. He et al. (2024) found that cultural identity is one of the core dimensions of heritage identity. Tourists' sharing of the deep history of heritage and the construction of their own cultural identity constitute the main content of cultural identity.

However, when Huashan Rock Art is interpreted as historical evidence of the pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation, its Zhuang attribute is to a certain extent encompassed by a broader representation. This softening is positive for promoting ethnic unity, but may also make Zhuang residents feel that the uniqueness of their culture is diluted in the grand narrative. A Zhuang cultural inheritor said: "Huashan is the root of the Zhuang ethnic group, this cannot be forgotten. But now everyone is talking about the Chinese nation; Zhuang things should be talked about, but not only about Zhuang." This statement reflects residents' balancing strategy between ethnic identity and national identity.

The spatial boundary of Huashan Rock Art also has significant openness. Huashan Rock Art is located in the China-Vietnam border area, and its cultural significance extends to Southeast Asia. The rock art records the social activities of the ancient Luoyue people, and the influence of Luoyue culture covers areas such as northern Vietnam. Hou et al. (2026) pointed out that in the Chinese context of "pluralistic unity", place identity has openness and extensibility. For travelers from the same cultural background, they may also develop place identity beyond the region due to isomorphic cultural backgrounds. This view provides support for understanding the openness of the spatial boundary of Huashan Rock Art—for Ningming residents, Huashan Rock Art is not only a local heritage of China

but also a core symbol of the transnational Luoyue cultural circle. An interviewee engaged in cross-border cultural exchange mentioned: “The Tay and Nung ethnic groups in Vietnam have cultures similar to ours. Huashan Rock Art can be said to be our common cultural origin.” This transnational cultural connection makes the place identity of Huashan Rock Art transcend a single national boundary, exhibiting multi-scale and fluid characteristics.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

Taking Huashan Rock Art as a case study, this paper examines the changes in residents’ place identity in rock art World Heritage sites from three dimensions: symbolic translation, historical memory, and geographical space. The findings are as follows:

From the perspective of symbolic translation, Huashan Rock Art has transformed from a sacred symbol of an ancestral spirit place to the highly visualized heritage symbol of “Little Red Figure”. This transformation has given Huashan Rock Art unprecedented visibility, but it is also accompanied by simplification of cultural connotations and superficialization of residents’ understanding. The unfolding of the “Huashan” symbol in residents’ place identity is incomplete.

From the perspective of historical memory, the heritagization of Huashan Rock Art has continued history and awakened memory, but the history continued by heritage movements and heritage tourism as a driving force is a partially fractured history. This fracture is manifested as the fracture from “ancestral spirit” to “heritage”, from “sacred” to “secular”, and from “local” to “national”.

From the perspective of geographical space, the heritagization of Huashan Rock Art has given Ningming a clearer cultural regional concept, but other counties and districts in the Zuojiang River basin also have rock art resources, and there is tension in the spatial attribution of the “Huashan” symbol. At the same time, the Zhuang cultural attribute and transnational Luoyue cultural connection of Huashan Rock Art make residents’ place identity unfold among multiple scales such as county, ethnic group, and nation.

Based on the above findings, this paper proposes the concept of “intangible identity” to summarize the special mechanism of residents’ place identity construction in rock art heritage sites. Unlike residents in architectural heritage sites who can establish material connections with heritage through living, using, and touching, the intangibility of rock art heritage makes residents’ identity construction more dependent on oral traditions, sacrificial rituals, and collective memory. This identity is mediated, memory-driven, and multi-scale flowing—it does not depend on direct experience of the heritage itself, but is generated in the interweaving of symbolic translation, historical narrative, and spatial imagination.

It is worth considering: who is the owner of “Huashan”? For heritage sites like Huashan Rock Art, the resident group itself is diverse and mobile. Left-behind villagers, migrant workers, returning entrepreneurial youth, scenic area employees, cultural inheritors—different groups may have significantly different identities with “Huashan”. Future place identity research needs to pay more attention to the internal differences of residents in heritage sites and the distribution of discourse power among different groups in heritage representation.

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