

A study on cultural narratives, spirit of place, and cultural identity of the Zhuang culture in Jiuzhou, Jingxi, from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage education

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ABSTRACT

While retaining the core themes of research into the Zhuang culture of Jiuzhou, Jingxi, this paper incorporates perspectives drawn from Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) education, local curricula, and cultural identity education. The study focuses on three core narrative elements within the Zhuang culture of Jiuzhou—cultural memory, folk rituals, and spatial symbolism—and explores how these elements generate a "spirit of place" through local spaces, collective practices, and symbolic systems. Furthermore, it examines how this spirit of place subsequently influences the construction of cultural identity among local residents and youth populations. Drawing upon literature reviews, fieldwork, interviews, questionnaires, and case studies, the paper argues that the Zhuang culture of Jiuzhou serves not only as a vital subject for local cultural research but also as a significant educational resource capable of being transformed into local curricula, school-based courses, aesthetic education activities, and comprehensive practical projects. Its educational value is primarily manifested in four aspects: first, providing schools in ethnic minority regions with curriculum content grounded in the local context; second, offering authentic contexts for the cultivation of cultural identity among adolescents; third, serving as a practical, actionable vehicle for ICH education, aesthetic education, and labor education; and fourth, providing pathways to support collaborative educational efforts among schools, local communities, ICH workshops, and cultural tourism spaces. The study concludes that the living transmission of local ethnic culture should not remain confined to the realms of mere display and consumption; rather, it should be integrated into the educational system through processes of curricularization, activity-based engagement, and spatial contextualization, thereby achieving a synergistic unity among cultural preservation, identity formation, and educational development.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage education, Zhuang culture, spirit of place, cultural identity, local curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduce the problem

Jiuzhou, located in the southwest border region of Guangxi, is an important Zhuang cultural settlement in which embroidered ball making, folk singing, festival rituals, and traditional village space remain closely

intertwined. The site combines both material and intangible dimensions of culture. Stilted houses, bridges, altars, streets, waterways, and public gathering spaces constitute a visible local environment, while embroidered ball craftsmanship, the "San Yue San" song fair, seasonal rituals, oral myths, kinship memory, and ancestral

narratives form a continuous structure of cultural meaning in everyday life. Jiuzhou should therefore not be understood merely as a scenic old town, but as a narrative place sustained by cultural practice, collective memory, and ethnic identity. This interpretation is consistent with heritage studies that understand heritage as a cultural practice and meaning-making process rather than merely as a static object (Smith, 2006).

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the transmission of excellent traditional Chinese culture, the protection of intangible cultural heritage, and the educational functions of aesthetic education, labor education, and local curriculum development. International research on ICH education has similarly emphasized that heritage transmission can be strengthened through collaborative educational intervention, digital and experiential learning, and university-based heritage education (Cozzani et al., 2017; Ott et al., 2015; Yan and Li, 2023). In this context, culturally rich settlements such as Jiuzhou are no longer significant only as objects of

preservation, tourism representation, or symbolic display. They also deserve to be examined as educational resources that can support students' cultural understanding, aesthetic perception, practical learning, and identity formation, as suggested by studies of local content curriculum and culturally responsive local culture education (Anwar and Sukirman, 2024; Shih, 2022).

However, an important problem remains insufficiently addressed: how can the Zhuang culture of Jiuzhou be transformed from a culture that is merely watched into a cultural resource that can meaningfully enter teaching, learning, and identity formation? This problem is not only relevant to cultural preservation but also to the educational challenge of cultivating cultural belonging among younger generations in rapidly changing social contexts. Related studies of living transmission in Chinese intangible cultural heritage indicate that sustainable inheritance depends on active participation and contextualized practice rather than visual display alone (Song et al., 2019; Wang and Li, 2025).



Figure 1. Street landscape of Jiuzhou, Jingxi, Guangxi (photographed by the author).

As shown in Figure 1, the visible spatial environment of Jiuzhou, including its streets, traditional architecture, and water-related landscape, forms an important material basis for the construction of local place spirit.

Explore the importance of the problem

This problem deserves new research for both cultural and educational reasons. From a cultural perspective, local ethnic traditions are increasingly at risk of being simplified into visible symbols, short-term performances, and tourism-oriented commodities. When culture is presented primarily for display, its deeper narrative structures, lived meanings, and community functions may gradually weaken. In such cases, younger generations may recognize certain cultural symbols without understanding the values, memories, and place-based meanings embedded in them. This concern echoes heritage scholarship that warns against reducing heritage to

authorized, exhibitory, or consumable forms (Smith, 2006) and ICH research that stresses the necessity of living transmission for sustainable development (Song et al., 2019).

From an educational perspective, local ethnic culture should not be treated as a decorative supplement to textbook knowledge. It can function as a formative resource that influences students' cultural understanding, aesthetic appreciation, practical competence, and identity construction. Research on local content curriculum and preschool local culture curriculum indicates that locally grounded cultural materials can support students' cultural awareness and identity development when they are integrated into educational activities in meaningful ways (Anwar and Sukirman, 2024; Shih, 2022). If cultural education is detached from local narrative, lived space, ritual participation, and intergenerational practice, students may acquire only fragmented impressions rather than deeper forms of recognition and belonging. For this

reason, the educational transformation of Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture is not a secondary extension of heritage research; it is a necessary response to the question of how local culture may continue to live through teaching and learning.

The importance of this issue is further strengthened by current educational reforms that emphasize school-based curriculum, local curriculum, comprehensive practice, aesthetic education, labor education, and school–community collaboration. Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture possesses strong experiential, narrative, and place-based characteristics, making it particularly suitable for educational transformation. The value of such place-based and community-based educational approaches has been repeatedly emphasized in research on critical pedagogy of place, sense-of-place teaching, and systematic reviews of place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003; Semken and Freeman, 2008; Yemini et al., 2025). Yet without a clear framework linking cultural narrative, place spirit,

cultural identity, and pedagogy, such transformation may remain fragmented and unsystematic.

Therefore, this study argues that the problem is important not only because Jiuzhou represents a valuable local cultural case, but also because it offers a meaningful site for exploring how ethnic culture can be transformed into curriculum resources and educational practice that support cultural identity formation among young learners. The theoretical linkage among spirit of place, authenticity, place memory, and identity also suggests that local culture can become educationally meaningful only when learners encounter the symbolic and emotional meanings embedded in place (Jivén and Larkham, 2003; Lewicka, 2008; Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

As illustrated in Figure 2, under the tourism context, Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture is often presented through symbolic and visualized forms, which may strengthen visibility while weakening deeper narrative understanding and educational transmission.



Figure 2. Symbolic representation of Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture in the context of tourism.

Describe relevant scholarship

Relevant scholarship in this area mainly falls into four strands.

First, studies on cultural narrative emphasize that local culture is not simply a collection of customs or artifacts, but a meaning system constructed through stories, rituals, memory, symbols, and repeated social practices. This perspective is useful for understanding how Jiuzhou's

embroidered balls, folk songs, festivals, and oral traditions operate as narrative resources rather than isolated cultural elements. Heritage theory similarly interprets heritage as a performance of meaning, memory, identity, and place, while studies of Chinese ICH show that living transmission depends on the continuing connection between cultural practice and community life (Smith, 2006; Song et al., 2019; Wang and Li, 2025).

Second, scholarship on place spirit highlights that place

is not merely a physical location, but a meaningful environment shaped by human experience, memory, symbolic attachment, and cultural interpretation. Norberg-Schulz's discussion of *genius loci* provides a foundational architectural and phenomenological interpretation of place spirit, while later studies have linked sense of place with authenticity, character, place attachment, place identity, and place memory (Jivén and Larkham, 2003; Lewicka, 2008; Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Such studies provide an important theoretical basis for explaining how Jiuzhou's village space, waterways, ritual sites, and public gathering areas become carriers of collective feeling and local identity.

Third, research on cultural identity has shown that identity is formed not only through abstract discourse, but also through participation, emotional attachment, symbolic recognition, and shared cultural memory. Research on place attachment and place identity demonstrates the role of memory and spatial experience in identity formation, while educational studies show that culturally responsive teaching and supportive school contexts can contribute to learners' recognition, belonging, and subjective well-being (Lewicka, 2008; Shih, 2022; Tian et al., 2016). This body of work helps explain why engagement with local ethnic culture may contribute to a stronger sense of belonging and recognition among community members and younger learners.

Fourth, research on heritage education, place-based education, and local curriculum has increasingly stressed that traditional culture can serve as a powerful educational resource when it is translated into curriculum content,

experiential learning, aesthetic practice, and community-based pedagogy. Existing studies have discussed critical pedagogy of place, the assessment of sense of place in teaching, collaborative planning for ICH education, digital technologies for ICH education, university-based heritage education, local content curriculum, and systematic trends in place-based education (Anwar and Sukirman, 2024; Cozzani et al., 2017; Gruenewald, 2003; Ott et al., 2015; Semken and Freeman, 2008; Yan and Li, 2023; Yemini et al., 2025). These studies suggest that intangible cultural heritage should not only be preserved as an object of display but also activated as a living educational medium.

Although these strands of scholarship offer valuable insights, there remains a gap in the existing literature. Current discussions of Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture mainly focus on cultural tourism, heritage display, symbolic communication, or local image construction. Comparatively less attention has been given to how the narrative resources of Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture jointly construct place spirit, how place spirit mediates cultural identity, and how these processes may support educational transformation in the forms of local curriculum, heritage education, and school–community collaboration. The present study seeks to address this gap by bringing together cultural narrative analysis and educational application within one integrated framework.

Figure 3 presents embroidered balls and embroidered pieces as representative cultural artifacts through which Zhuang symbolism, craftsmanship, and intergenerational transmission are materially embodied.



Figure 3. Jingxi embroidered balls and embroidered pieces as representative Zhuang cultural artifacts.

Research questions and their correspondence to research design

Based on the above discussion, this study addresses three research questions:

RQ1: What are the core narrative resources of Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture, and how do they contribute to the construction of place spirit?

RQ2: How does place spirit support the formation of

cultural identity among local residents and younger learners?

RQ3: How can the narrative resources of Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture be transformed into local curriculum, heritage education, aesthetic education, and school–community collaborative practice?

These questions are logically derived from the preceding theoretical and practical discussion. The first question responds to the need to identify the cultural content and narrative structure embedded in Jiuzhou's local life. The second question examines the interpretive link between place meaning and identity formation. The third question extends the analysis into the field of education and focuses on practical pathways of transformation.

To answer these questions, the study adopts a research design combining cultural analysis, field-based observation, narrative interpretation, and educational transformation analysis. The identification of narrative resources is supported by the examination of local practices, symbolic forms, and spatial settings. The analysis of place spirit and cultural identity is grounded in the interpretation of how memory, ritual, and spatial meaning interact in community life. On this basis, the study further develops educational pathways that connect local ethnic culture with curriculum design, practical activities, and school–community cooperation. In this way, the research design corresponds directly to the three questions and enables both theoretical explanation and practical educational application.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopted a field-based mixed-methods case study design with a qualitative orientation. Taking Jiuzhou in Jingxi, Guangxi, as the focal site, the study combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation, questionnaire surveys, case analysis, and policy

document review to examine how the narrative resources of local Zhuang culture contribute to place spirit, cultural identity, and educational transformation.

The design was developed to address three interrelated concerns: the identification of core cultural narrative resources, the interpretation of the relationship between place spirit and cultural identity, and the exploration of how local ethnic culture may be transformed into educational resources for local curriculum, heritage education, and school–community collaborative practice. Because these issues involve both lived cultural meanings and observable patterns of perception, a mixed-methods design was more appropriate than a purely quantitative or purely descriptive approach.

Research site and participants

Jiuzhou was selected as the research site because it represents a culturally active Zhuang settlement in which handicraft traditions, ritual practices, village space, tourism development, and everyday cultural life remain closely interconnected. The site includes both visible spatial forms and intangible cultural practices, making it especially suitable for examining the interaction among cultural narrative, place spirit, cultural identity, and educational transformation.

To capture the multiple layers of this cultural ecology, the study included participants from six groups: Zhuang cultural inheritors and practitioners, university teachers in relevant disciplines, cultural and spatial designers, consumers (including residents and tourists), tourism practitioners, and government or industry organization personnel. These groups were included because they represent different positions within the production, transmission, interpretation, consumption, and governance of Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture. In particular, the inclusion of university teachers allowed the study to connect cultural analysis with pedagogical interpretation and educational application, which is essential for the present education-oriented framework.

Table 1. Summary of the participant groups, corresponding data collection methods, and core analytical focuses of the investigation.

Participant group	Sample size	Data collection method	Core analytical focus
Zhuang cultural inheritors and practitioners	30 (interviews + observation)	Semi-structured in-depth interviews; participant observation	(1) Core meanings and current transmission of cultural narratives, including myths, rituals, and symbols; (2) the impact of tourism-oriented development on narrative integrity; (3) difficulties and innovation needs in narrative transmission

Table 1. Continues.

University teachers in relevant disciplines	15 (interviews teaching-research review)	+	One-to-one interviews; review of teaching and research outputs	(1) Current academic research on Zhuang cultural narratives; (2) the role of universities in narrative transmission and talent cultivation; (3) pedagogical pathways linking place spirit and cultural identity
Cultural and spatial designers	20 (case studies interviews)	+	Case analysis; focused interviews	(1) Contemporary design transformation of Zhuang cultural symbols and narrative elements; (2) approaches to constructing place spirit in spatial design; (3) balancing cultural authenticity and market demand in design practice
Consumers (residents and tourists)	400 (questionnaires) + 60 (interviews)	+	Online and offline questionnaires; random interviews	(1) Awareness of Zhuang cultural narratives, including folklore, symbols, and legends; (2) core needs related to place experience and spiritual perception; (3) factors influencing cultural identity and expectations for improvement
Tourism practitioners	40 (field visits interviews)	+	On-site visits; group interviews	(1) Modes and effects of cultural narrative communication in tourism settings; (2) tourist feedback on narrative experience; (3) narrative simplification in culture-tourism integration and possible improvements
Government and industry organization personnel	12 (policy analysis interviews)	+	Policy document review; semi-structured interviews	(1) Policy planning for Zhuang cultural protection and culture-tourism development; (2) support measures and effects for narrative transmission; (3) coordination strategies between place-spirit protection and tourism development

Sampling procedures

The study used purposive sampling, supplemented by convenience and random-intercept approaches where appropriate. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct knowledge of cultural transmission, design translation, educational interpretation, tourism communication, and policy support. This was especially important for cultural inheritors, university teachers, designers, tourism practitioners, and government-related personnel, whose perspectives were central to understanding both the internal structure of Zhuang cultural narratives and the external conditions affecting their transmission.

For the consumer group, online and offline questionnaires were administered to 400 respondents, and 60 additional interviewees were recruited through random intercepts in relevant field settings. This combination enabled the study to obtain both broader descriptive information and deeper narrative accounts of

cultural perception and experience. Because the study primarily aimed to generate analytically rich and context-sensitive findings rather than population-level generalizations, sample adequacy was judged in terms of coverage of key stakeholder groups and the recurrence of major themes across different data sources. (Table 2)

Data collection

Data collection was conducted through five main approaches.

First, semi-structured interviews were used across several participant groups to elicit perspectives on cultural narrative, place meaning, identity, tourism influence, and educational possibilities. Interview protocols were adapted to the role of each participant group. For example, cultural inheritors were asked about the meanings and transmission of myths, rituals, and symbols; university teachers were asked about academic interpretation and

pedagogical transformation; and tourism practitioners were asked about the communication of cultural narratives in tourism settings.

Second, participant observation was conducted to document embodied cultural practices, spatial settings,

and everyday interactions. This method was especially important for understanding how rituals, symbolic artifacts, and local spaces contribute to place spirit beyond verbal description alone.

Table 2. Age profile, cultural perception difficulties, and preferred products or experience forms among the consumer group.

Age group	Proportion	Core preference	The main difficulty in understanding the Zhuang culture	Preferred products/experience forms
18–24	25%	High visual appeal, strong interactivity, strong social-sharing value.	Limited understanding of narrative meanings, such as the symbolism of embroidered-ball patterns and the meaning of rituals.	DIY embroidered-ball kits; folk-photography check-in packages; blind-box ethnic-symbol souvenirs.
25–35	52%	Minimalist design, contextual fit for office or travel, lightweight cultural content.	Cultural narratives perceived as overly complex and disconnected from modern life.	Zhuang-themed office cultural products, such as patterned notebooks and bookmarks; portable short-format folk experiences, such as brief folk-song learning and simplified ritual experiences.
36–45	16%	In-depth cultural experience, collectability, and narrative completeness.	Lack of systematic interpretation of narrative background, including history and legend.	Workshops taught by intangible heritage inheritors; Zhuang-culture art installations; narrative picture-book gift sets.
46 and above	7%	Traditional experience, practicality, authenticity.	Concern that modern presentation forms deviate from cultural essence.	Classic embroidered-ball handicrafts; full-participation folk-ritual packages; traditional food gift sets.

Third, questionnaire surveys were administered to consumers, including residents and tourists, to identify patterns in cultural awareness, experiential expectations, and perceived barriers to understanding Zhuang culture. The questionnaire component provided a descriptive basis for comparing age-related differences in needs and preferences.

Fourth, case analysis was used for the group of cultural and spatial designers in order to examine how Zhuang cultural symbols and narrative elements are translated into modern design practice. This helped extend the study from cultural interpretation to questions of representation and educational usability.

Fifth, policy document review was conducted alongside interviews with government and industry organization personnel in order to examine the institutional context of cultural preservation, culture-tourism development, and potential educational support mechanisms.

Analytical dimensions and instruments

The study organized data collection and analysis around

six analytical dimensions: cultural narrative, place spirit, cultural identity, tourism-related symbolic transformation, educational transformation, and intersectoral collaboration.

- Cultural narrative referred to myths, rituals, symbols, legends, and inherited meanings embedded in Jiuzhou's Zhuang cultural practices.
- Place spirit referred to the emotional, symbolic, and lived meanings associated with local space.
- Cultural identity referred to recognition, belonging, participation, and identification with local Zhuang culture.
- Tourism-related symbolic transformation referred to the ways local culture is simplified, visualized, or re-packaged in tourism discourse.
- Educational transformation referred to the extent to which local cultural resources could be translated into curriculum, learning activities, aesthetic education, labor education, and heritage education.
- Intersectoral collaboration referred to the roles of schools, communities, cultural practitioners, tourism actors, and policy bodies in supporting cultural transmission.

Interview outlines, observation guides, and questionnaire items were all developed according to these dimensions. To enhance credibility, the study used triangulation across interviews, observations, questionnaire data, case materials, and policy texts.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic interpretation. Questionnaire data from the consumer group were used for descriptive statistical analysis, particularly to summarize age distribution, preference patterns, and major difficulties in cultural understanding. These results supported the identification of educational entry points for different audience groups.

Interview records, observation notes, case materials, and policy texts were analyzed through thematic coding. In the first stage, the materials were coded according to recurring references to myths, rituals, symbols, spatial meanings, experience needs, and identity-related expressions. In the second stage, these codes were grouped into broader themes concerning the generation of place spirit, the formation of cultural identity, and the effects of tourism-oriented symbolic representation. In the third stage, the findings were interpreted from an educational perspective in order to identify possible pathways for transforming Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture into local curriculum resources, heritage education content, aesthetic education activities, and school–community collaborative practice.

This analytical process allowed the study to move from cultural description to relational explanation and finally to educational application.

Ethical considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary. Before interviews, surveys, or observations involving identifiable individuals were conducted, the purpose of the research was explained and consent was obtained. The study involved no harmful intervention. In reporting the findings, the researcher sought to respect local cultural contexts and to avoid unnecessary disclosure of personally identifiable information. The research was conducted as a non-invasive cultural and educational investigation based on field inquiry.

RESULTS

Participant profile and data sources

The study drew on multiple sources of evidence, including

interviews, participant observation, questionnaire data, case materials, and policy-related documents. In total, the field investigation covered six participant groups: Zhuang cultural inheritors and practitioners, university teachers in relevant disciplines, cultural and spatial designers, consumers (residents and tourists), tourism practitioners, and government or industry organization personnel. Among these groups, the consumer sample included 400 questionnaire respondents and 60 interviewees, providing both descriptive and interpretive evidence for understanding cultural perception, place experience, and identity-related expectations.

The use of multiple participant groups made it possible to examine Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture from the perspectives of transmission, interpretation, design translation, tourism representation, institutional support, and cultural consumption. This multi-source structure also enhanced the credibility of the findings through triangulation across different forms of data.

Core narrative resources of Jiuzhou's Zhuang Culture

The findings indicate that Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture is grounded in a set of interrelated environmental, linguistic, ritual, architectural, and livelihood-related characteristics that together sustain its narrative continuity and local distinctiveness. Rather than being defined by a single cultural symbol, Jiuzhou represents a composite cultural setting in which natural geography, everyday life, oral tradition, ritual activity, and built form interact to produce a durable system of meaning.

At the environmental level, Jiuzhou is situated within a karst landscape zone, which provides an important ecological and symbolic background for local cultural life. According to local geographical records and remote-sensing-based estimation, approximately 85% of the surrounding area is characterized by karst landforms. This environmental setting is not only a physical condition of settlement, but also a cultural source of myth, spatial imagination, and symbolic attachment. At the level of livelihood, rice-based farming historically constituted the dominant family production pattern, accounting for an estimated 78% of households during the period of strongest traditional continuity. This suggests that local cultural life was long embedded in an agrarian rhythm that reinforced seasonal rituals, communal labor, and inherited forms of practice.

Linguistic continuity also remains a major feature of Jiuzhou's Zhuang cultural setting. Based on a 2020 local sample survey of ethnic language use, approximately 92% of households in the core villages of Jiuzhou reportedly used the Zhuang language as their primary language of family communication. This high degree of language retention indicates that oral cultural transmission remains deeply rooted in everyday interaction. In addition, local

belief systems continue to display strong continuity. Field-based folklore summaries suggest that approximately 95% of villages retain forms of polytheistic belief and nature worship, showing that ritual cosmology remains an active component of cultural life rather than merely a symbolic residue.

The continuity of cultural practice is also reflected in the built environment and the ritual calendar. Historical building survey data indicate that approximately 65% of residences in the protected area of Jiuzhou Old Town retain features associated with traditional stilted

architecture. Meanwhile, cultural assessment reports suggest that about 88% of villages continue to preserve major annual folk rituals, including activities such as dragon-related sacrificial ceremonies and the “Nihun Festival,” in relatively complete form. Together, these findings show that Jiuzhou’s Zhuang culture is sustained through a combination of environmental rootedness, linguistic continuity, ritual vitality, and architectural persistence.

These core characteristics are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Statistical summary of the core characteristics of Jiuzhou’s Zhuang culture.

Dimension of cultural characteristics	Specific manifestation	Data/proportion	Data source/basis
Geographical environment	Proportion of area characterized by karst landforms.	Approx. 85%	Estimated based on Jingxi local gazetteers and remote-sensing interpretation.
Traditional livelihood pattern	Proportion of households historically based on rice farming.	Approx. 78% (during the peak period of traditional continuity)	Inferred from local gazetteers and historical agricultural statistics.
Language use	Proportion of households using Zhuang as the main language of family communication.	Approx. 92% (in Jiuzhou core villages)	Based on a 2020 local sample survey of ethnic language use.
Belief system continuity	Proportion of villages retaining polytheistic beliefs and nature worship practices.	Approx. 95%	Summarized from folklore fieldwork materials.
Retention of traditional architecture	Proportion of residences preserving characteristics of stilted architecture.	Approx. 65% (within the Jiuzhou Old Town protected area)	Based on historical building survey data from local housing and construction authorities.
Vitality of folk rituals	Proportion of villages preserving major annual folk rituals in relatively complete form	Approx. 88%	Based on the cultural department reports on living heritage transmission.

Taken together, the results suggest that Jiuzhou’s Zhuang culture should be understood as a living cultural system whose narrative resources are embedded not only in oral and ritual forms, but also in geography, language use, livelihood patterns, and traditional architecture. These features provide the cultural foundation upon which place spirit and cultural identity are further generated.

Mechanisms of place spirit formation

The analysis further indicates that the place spirit in Jiuzhou is generated through a multi-layered process in which cultural narratives continuously assign, reinforce,

and reinterpret the meanings of natural space, ritual practice, symbolic form, and collective memory. In this sense, place spirit does not arise from physical location alone. Rather, it is formed through the repeated interaction between cultural narration and lived spatial experience, a mechanism that corresponds with theoretical discussions of genius loci, place authenticity, and place memory (Jivén and Larkham, 2003; Lewicka, 2008; Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

One important mechanism is the cultural attribution of natural landforms. In some local narrative contexts, specific mountains or natural sites are interpreted as places associated with ancestors or spiritual presence. Myths, folk songs, and oral traditions transform natural

space into a carrier of cultural meaning, thereby anchoring collective memory in the local landscape. Through this process, geography becomes more than environment; it becomes a meaningful spatial reference for belonging and remembrance.

A second mechanism is the place-based enactment of folk ritual. Ritual activities such as the regular celebration of the “San Yue San” song fair are repeatedly performed in specific public spaces. Through such recurring practices, places are not only used but culturally activated. The repetition of ritual participation in fixed locations strengthens emotional attachment, reinforces shared symbolic meaning, and deepens participants’ sense of local belonging. Ritual, therefore, functions as a bridge between cultural memory and spatial experience.

A third mechanism is the spatial embodiment of cultural symbols. Abstract cultural values are translated into perceivable spatial signs through decorative motifs,

architectural elements, symbolic objects, and culturally marked gathering spaces. This process makes otherwise intangible values visible and experienceable. As a result, place spirit is not transmitted solely through verbal explanation, but also through spatial forms that can be inhabited, recognized, and remembered across generations.

A fourth mechanism is the dynamic construction of a network of meaning. The findings suggest that the place spirit in Jiuzhou should not be understood as a static and unchanging essence. Instead, it is continually reconstructed through cultural memory, collective narration, and renewed interpretation in changing social contexts. This dynamic network allows the place spirit to remain culturally active even as tourism, modernization, and new forms of representation reshape the local environment.

These mechanisms are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Analysis of the mechanisms through which place spirit is generated in Jiuzhou’s Zhuang culture.

Dimension of place-spirit formation	Specific manifestation	Cultural elements	narrative	Description of the generative mechanism
Cultural attribution of natural landforms	Specific mountains are interpreted as sites inhabited by ancestral spirits	Myths, folk songs, and oral traditions		Narrative practices transform natural space into a carrier of cultural meaning and a spatial anchor for collective memory
Place-based enactment of folk ritual	Regular performance of the “San Yue San” song fair	Folk rituals and festival activities		Ritual repetition in fixed places reinforces emotional attachment and a sense of belonging among participants
Spatial embodiment of cultural symbols	Abstract cultural values are converted into perceivable spatial symbols	Spatial symbolism and cultural signs	and	Narrative practice materializes abstract cultural values into spatial forms, allowing place spirit to be activated and reshaped across generations
Dynamic construction of a network of meaning	Place spirit is continually reconstructed through cultural narration	Cultural memory and collective narrative	and	Place spirit is not static but dynamically formed through an evolving network of meanings that are repeatedly reinterpreted in transmission

Overall, the results show that the place spirit in Jiuzhou emerges from the interaction of natural landscape, ritual repetition, symbolic spatialization, and collective narrative. This confirms that place spirit is best understood as a culturally mediated and narratively sustained structure of meaning rather than as a purely physical or static characteristic of place.

Consumer perceptions and age-based differences

The consumer data revealed clear age-related differences in cultural preferences, barriers to understanding, and preferred forms of participation. These differences are important because they indicate that the educational and communicative transformation of Jiuzhou’s Zhuang culture cannot rely on a single mode of presentation.

Younger participants aged 18–24 tended to prefer highly visual, interactive, and socially shareable forms of cultural engagement. However, this group also showed the greatest difficulty in understanding the deeper meanings of narrative symbols, such as embroidered-ball patterns and ritual significance. Participants aged 25–35 emphasized contextual fit with modern daily life and preferred lightweight forms of cultural content, although they often perceived traditional narratives as too complex or too distant from contemporary experience.

By contrast, participants aged 36–45 expressed a stronger interest in complete narrative interpretation, collectable cultural products, and in-depth cultural experience. Participants aged 46 and above placed the greatest value on authenticity, practicality, and fuller participation in traditional rituals, while also expressing concern that modernized cultural presentations might distort the cultural essence.

Overall, the consumer findings indicate that cultural transmission and educational transformation should be differentiated according to audience characteristics. The results also suggest that a major challenge lies not in cultural visibility alone, but in the gap between symbolic recognition and narrative understanding.

Integrated relationship among cultural narrative, place spirit and cultural identity

The findings indicate that cultural narrative, place spirit, and cultural identity are linked through a progressive and mutually reinforcing mechanism. Cultural narrative provides the symbolic and interpretive foundation of local meaning; place spirit translates this narrative foundation into lived and emotionally meaningful spatial experience; and cultural identity emerges when individuals recognize, participate in, and internalize these meanings as part of their own understanding of self and community. This mechanism is consistent with prior studies that link place memory, place identity, and emotional attachment with the development of cultural belonging (Lewicka, 2008; Semken and Freeman, 2008).

At the same time, the relationship is not linear in a narrow sense. Cultural identity can also reinforce participation in cultural practices and encourage renewed engagement with local narratives, thereby strengthening the continuity of place spirit. This reciprocal dynamic is especially important in contexts where culture faces pressures from tourism simplification, commercialization, and symbolic abstraction.

Figure 4 presents the integrated mechanism identified in this study.



Figure 4. Mechanism of interaction among cultural narrative, place spirit, and cultural identity (drawn by the author).

This integrated mechanism shows that the preservation of local culture depends not only on keeping symbols visible but also on maintaining the narrative integrity and

participatory depth through which place and identity remain connected.

Implications for educational transformation

The results also reveal that Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture possesses considerable potential for educational transformation. The identified narrative resources—especially symbolic artifacts, ritual practices, oral traditions, and place-based cultural meanings—can be translated into local curriculum, school-based curriculum, heritage education, aesthetic education, and practical learning activities. This finding is in line with research showing that local curriculum, ICH education, and heritage education can cultivate cultural awareness, creative inheritance, and identity development when they are grounded in learners' lived contexts (Anwar and Sukirman, 2024; Ott et al., 2015; Shih, 2022; Yan and Li, 2023).

The consumer findings further suggest that educational transformation should be differentiated by learners' age, familiarity with local culture, and preferred forms of engagement. For younger learners, more interactive and visually accessible entry points may be effective, while older learners may benefit from fuller narrative interpretation, cultural workshops, and experience-based participation. Digital and interactive methods may be useful for broadening access to ICH education, but they should support rather than replace the living cultural contexts of community practice (Cozzani et al., 2017).

The inclusion of university teachers and cultural practitioners in the study also indicates that school–community collaboration may serve as a viable pathway for integrating local ethnic culture into educational settings. Such collaboration corresponds with place-based education, which stresses learning through local environments, community participation, and situated experience (Gruenewald, 2003; Semken and Freeman, 2008; Yemini et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings support the view that Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture should be approached not only as an object of heritage display but also as a living educational resource capable of fostering cultural understanding, place attachment, and identity formation.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of the main findings

The present study examined Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture through the interconnected lenses of cultural narrative, place spirit, cultural identity, and educational transformation. The findings suggest that Jiuzhou's cultural continuity is sustained not by isolated heritage symbols alone, but by a broader narrative system composed of geography, language use, ritual practices, traditional architecture, symbolic artifacts, and collective memory. This indicates that local culture should be understood as a living structure of meaning rather than as

a static collection of visible customs, which is consistent with the broader understanding of heritage as active cultural practice (Smith, 2006).

A second major finding concerns the formation of place spirit. The study shows that the place spirit in Jiuzhou emerges through the interaction of natural landscape, ritual repetition, spatial symbolism, and collective narration. In other words, the meaning of place is not simply given by the physical environment; it is culturally produced through repeated acts of interpretation, participation, and remembrance. This helps explain why culturally marked spaces in Jiuzhou continue to function as meaningful sites of attachment even under conditions of tourism development and social change.

A third important finding is that cultural identity depends not merely on the visibility of ethnic symbols, but on the integrity of narrative meaning and the depth of participation. The consumer findings reveal that many participants can recognize cultural symbols while still lacking access to their deeper meanings. This suggests a critical distinction between symbolic exposure and meaningful cultural understanding. The study therefore supports the view that cultural identity is strengthened when individuals are able not only to see cultural forms, but also to interpret, experience, and participate in the narratives that sustain them.

Connections with relevant scholarship

These findings are broadly consistent with scholarship on cultural narrative, which emphasizes that local culture is constituted through stories, memory, symbols, and repeated practices rather than through material forms alone. The present study extends this line of inquiry by showing that in Jiuzhou, narrative resources are distributed across both tangible and intangible cultural elements and are embedded in everyday village life. This reinforces the idea that narrative is not a secondary layer added onto culture, but one of the core mechanisms through which culture is preserved and made meaningful (Smith, 2006; Song et al., 2019; Wang and Li, 2025).

The findings also resonate with research on place spirit and place-based meaning. Previous studies have argued that places become meaningful through emotional attachment, symbolic interpretation, lived experience, authenticity, and memory (Jivén and Larkham, 2003; Lewicka, 2008; Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The results of this study support that perspective while adding a stronger emphasis on ritual and collective narration as mechanisms of spatial meaning-making. In Jiuzhou, place spirit is generated not only by environmental distinctiveness, but by the cultural practices that repeatedly activate and reinterpret that environment.

In relation to cultural identity, the study confirms that identity is not formed solely through discourse or abstract

affiliation. Rather, it develops through symbolic recognition, emotional attachment, participation in shared practices, and access to collective memory. The current findings contribute to this literature by clarifying the mediating role of place spirit: cultural narratives become identity-supporting not simply because they exist, but because they are spatially and emotionally experienced as part of a meaningful local world. In educational settings, such identity construction also depends on supportive learning relationships and students' needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, which have been linked with school-related subjective well-being (Tian et al., 2016).

Finally, the study contributes to scholarship on heritage education, place-based education, and local curriculum by demonstrating that local ethnic culture can function as an educational resource when its narrative integrity is preserved. Existing educational research often emphasizes the use of cultural materials in curriculum design, but less often explains how cultural narrative, place meaning, and identity formation are structurally connected. The present study addresses this gap by integrating cultural interpretation with educational transformation. The present study addresses this gap by integrating cultural interpretation with educational transformation, building on prior work concerning local curriculum, culturally responsive education, collaborative ICH intervention, heritage education in universities, and systematic developments in place-based education (Anwar and Sukirman, 2024; Ott et al., 2015; Shih, 2022; Yan and Li, 2023; Yemini et al., 2025).

Educational implications

One of the most important implications of this study is that Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture should be treated not only as an object of heritage protection or tourism display, but also as a living educational resource. The results indicate that local cultural elements such as embroidered-ball symbolism, folk songs, ritual practices, oral traditions, and culturally meaningful spaces can serve as rich entry points for local curriculum and school-based curriculum development. These resources are especially valuable because they combine cognitive, affective, aesthetic, and practical dimensions of learning.

For heritage education, the findings suggest that effective transmission should move beyond static explanation or symbolic exhibition. Students need opportunities to encounter local culture through narrative interpretation, embodied participation, and place-based experience. This means that educational design should not rely only on introducing cultural facts, but should also help learners understand why specific rituals, symbols, and places matter within a broader cultural system. Previous studies of ICH education and technology-supported heritage learning support this emphasis on

experiential, collaborative, and contextualized pedagogical design (Cozzani et al., 2017; Ott et al., 2015).

For aesthetic education and labor education, the study highlights the value of material cultural forms such as embroidered balls and traditional craft-related practices. These forms provide concrete opportunities for students to connect artistic appreciation with making, symbolism, and intergenerational cultural continuity. At the same time, the age-based differences found among consumers suggest that cultural education should be differentiated according to learners' levels of familiarity, interpretive needs, and preferred modes of engagement. Interactive and visually accessible activities may be more suitable for younger learners, whereas deeper narrative interpretation and workshop-based experiences may be more effective for older learners or more culturally experienced participants.

The study also points to the importance of school-community collaboration. Because the cultural meanings examined in this research are rooted in local practice rather than in textbooks alone, meaningful educational transformation requires cooperation among schools, cultural inheritors, local residents, designers, and cultural institutions. Such collaboration can help ensure that local culture enters education not as simplified decoration, but as a context-rich and participatory form of learning that supports cultural identity formation.

Limitations and transferability

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a single case site, Jiuzhou in Jingxi, and therefore does not aim to produce universal claims applicable to all ethnic cultural settings. The findings should be interpreted primarily as context-sensitive insights derived from one culturally distinctive locality.

Second, some of the descriptive proportions reported in the study are based on local records, historical materials, remote-sensing estimation, field-based summaries, or sampling-based reports rather than on fully standardized large-scale statistical measurement. These data remain useful for identifying broad cultural patterns, but they should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Third, although the study has a strong educational orientation, it focuses mainly on the educational transformation potential of local culture rather than on the measured outcomes of a specific classroom intervention. As a result, the study can propose pedagogical pathways, but it cannot yet determine the comparative effectiveness of different instructional models in producing measurable learning outcomes.

Fourth, the consumer data include both residents and tourists rather than students alone. This broadens the interpretive value of the study in relation to cultural communication and public engagement, but it also means that direct conclusions about school learners should be

made carefully and ideally supplemented by future school-based empirical research.

Despite these limitations, the study retains transfer value for similar contexts. Its findings may be relevant to other ethnic villages, heritage-rich localities, and educational settings seeking to integrate local cultural resources into curriculum, identity education, and school–community collaboration. What may be transferable is not the exact content of Jiuzhou's cultural forms, but the analytical framework linking cultural narrative, place spirit, cultural identity, and educational transformation.

Conclusion

The broader significance of this study lies in its attempt to connect cultural interpretation with educational application. The findings suggest that the future of local ethnic culture does not depend solely on preservation, display, or tourism visibility. More fundamentally, it depends on whether cultural narratives remain understandable, inhabitable, and teachable across generations. When local culture is reduced to visual symbols alone, its educational and identity-forming power becomes weakened. When it is transformed into curriculum, practice, and shared learning experience, however, it can continue to function as a living source of belonging and cultural confidence.

For this reason, the present study argues that Jiuzhou's Zhuang culture should be approached as both a cultural heritage system and an educational resource system. Its myths, rituals, symbols, crafts, and place-based meanings are not only worthy of documentation but also suitable for integration into local curriculum, heritage education, aesthetic education, and community-based learning. In this sense, the study speaks to a broader issue beyond Jiuzhou itself: how local culture may continue to live not merely by being preserved, but by being learned, practiced, and meaningfully transmitted.

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