

Research on the Protection of Cultural Landscapes and Tourism Development of the Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces)

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Abstract

The Silk Road, an ancient trade route, not only connected Asia and Europe but also served as a bridge for cultural exchange and integration between the East and the West. In the five northwestern provinces of China, the Silk Road carries a rich historical and cultural heritage and nurtures a colorful humanistic landscape. With the booming tourism industry, how to reasonably develop its tourism value while protecting these precious humanistic landscapes has become an urgent issue to be addressed. This paper will start from the current situation of the humanistic landscape of the Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces) and explore its protection strategies and tourism development models, in order to provide beneficial references for related fields of practice and research.

Keywords

Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces), Cultural Landscape, Heritage Protection, Tourism Development

1. Overview of Cultural Landscapes of the Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces)

1.1. Historical Background of the Silk Road

The Silk Road originated from ancient China's political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic activities, with silk trade as the primary medium, linking ancient China with foreign transportation, trade, and cultural exchanges (Zang, 2022). It started from Chang'an (now Xi'an), the political, economic, and cultural center of ancient China, passed through the Hexi Corridor, reached Central Asia, and then

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extended to West Asia and Europe. This route was not only a vital trade channel between ancient China and foreign countries but also a crucial bridge for cultural exchanges between the East and the West (Uberoi, 2016).

1.2. Richness of Cultural Landscapes

The Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces) is rich and diverse in cultural landscapes, encompassing multiple aspects such as history, culture, religion, and art. The following is a categorical overview of these cultural landscapes:

1) Historical and Cultural System

a) Ancient Ruins Culture: This primarily includes ancient cities and ruins, such as Dunhuang Ancient City, Loulan Ancient City, Yangguan, and Yumenguan. These ancient city ruins bear witness to the prosperity and changes of the Silk Road.

b) Ancient Tomb Culture: This focuses on tombs, such as the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor, the Tomb of the Hami King, and the Tomb of Xiangfei. These tombs are not only historical witnesses but also treasures of ancient architectural art.

c) Ancient Architectural Culture: This includes structures like grottoes, temples, and palaces, such as the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, the Terracotta Army of the First Qin Emperor, the Western Xia Imperial Tombs, and the Ta'er Monastery. These ancient buildings showcase the wisdom and craftsmanship of ancient artisans.

d) Political and Economic Culture: This includes representative cultural resources built in modern times, such as the Tang Paradise in Xi'an and the Jiuquan Space City. These attractions reflect the development of modern political and economic culture in the Silk Road region.

2) Religious Cultural System

The religious culture in the Silk Road region is diverse, with prevalent religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. Relevant religious cultural landscapes include Buddhist temples (e.g., Labrang Monastery), Taoist temples, and mosques. These religious buildings are not only spiritual havens for believers but also reflect the cultural diversity of the Silk Road.

3) Artistic Cultural System

The artistic cultural system of the Silk Road is rich and colorful, including various art forms such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance. The murals and sculptures of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang are outstanding representatives of this system, showcasing the artistic achievements and aesthetic pursuits of the ancient Silk Road.

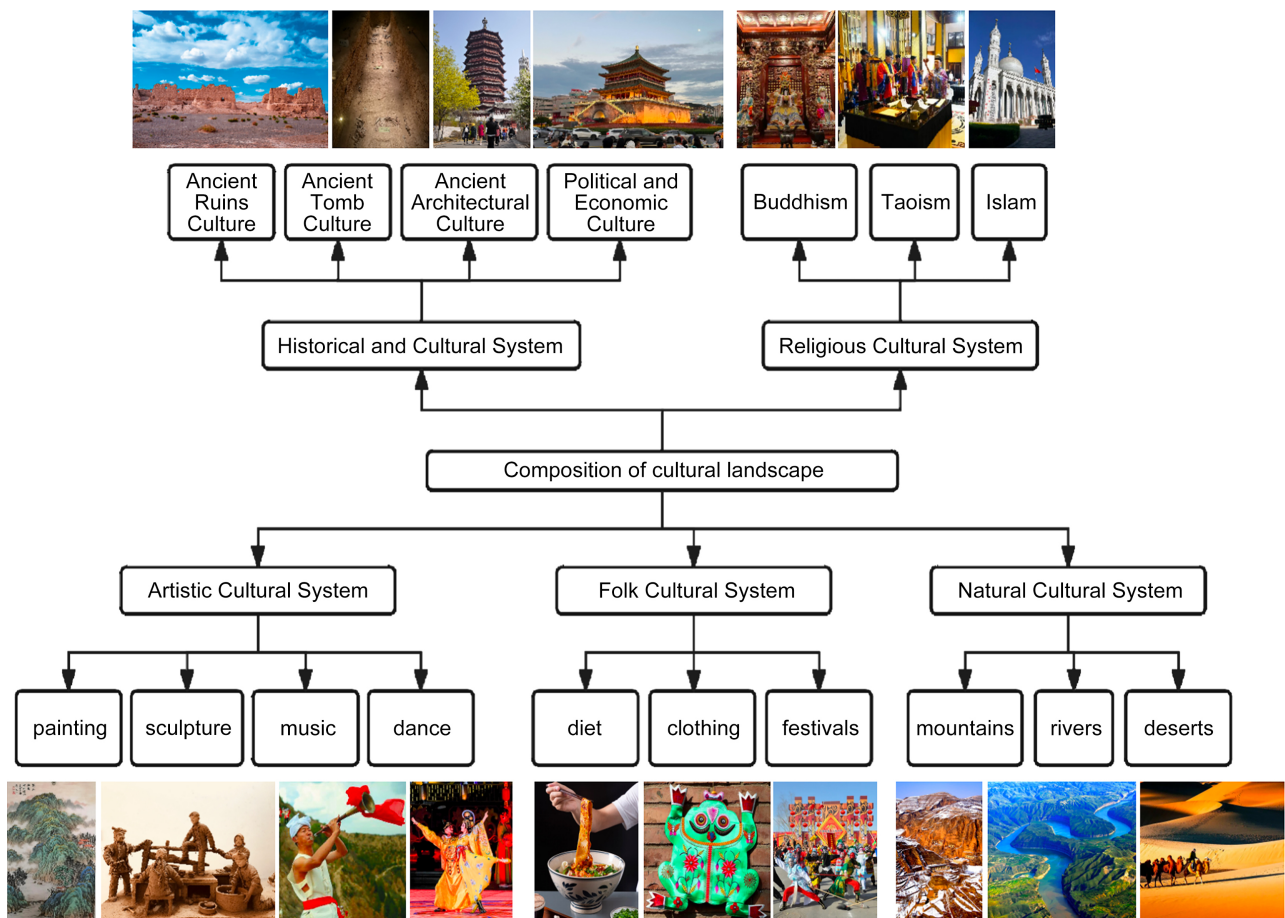
4) Folk Cultural System

The folk culture of the Silk Road region is unique, including customs related to diet, clothing, festivals, and marriage and funeral rituals. These folk cultural landscapes reflect the lifestyle and cultural traditions of the local people, such as the Uyghur dance in Xinjiang and the Tibetan clothing in Qinghai.

5) Natural Cultural System

The natural landscapes of the Silk Road region are unique and magnificent, including various landforms such as mountains, rivers, deserts, and grasslands. Natural attractions like Qinghai Lake Bird Island, Bayinbuluk Grassland, Tianchi Lake in the Tianshan Mountains, the Yadan Landform in Lop Nur, and the Flaming Mountains in Turpan add endless charm to the Silk Road. These natural landscapes not only have ornamental value but are also an important part of the local natural culture.

In summary, the cultural landscapes of the Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces) cover multiple aspects such as historical culture, religious culture, artistic culture, folk culture, and natural culture (Hong, 2014). These landscapes together form the rich and colorful cultural heritage system of the Silk Road, playing a significant role in inheriting and promoting the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation.



Composition of cultural landscape.

2. Current Status and Challenges of Cultural Landscape Protection and Tourism Development

2.1. Current Protection Status

1) Artistic Cultural System

In recent years, the Chinese government has highly emphasized the protection of cultural landscapes along the Silk Road, adopting various measures to strengthen protection efforts. On one hand, legislative measures have been taken to formulate and improve relevant laws and regulations, providing legal guarantees for cultural landscape protection; on the other hand, significant financial investments have been made to implement multiple cultural relic protection and restoration projects, effectively improving the preservation conditions of cultural landscapes.

2) Specific Protection Measures

a) Shaanxi Province: As the starting point of the Silk Road, Shaanxi boasts numerous important cultural heritage sites, such as the Weiyang Palace site of the Han Chang'an City, the Tomb of Zhang Qian, the Daming Palace site of the Tang Chang'an City, the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, the Small Wild Goose Pagoda, and the Xingjiao Temple Pagoda. These sites have been effectively protected and utilized through the implementation of protection and display projects and the enhancement of protection and management levels, ensuring the integrity and sustainability of the heritage (Li & Liu, 2019). Additionally, Shaanxi actively promotes the integration of culture and tourism by organizing various exhibitions, performances, and educational activities to help the public better understand and experience Silk Road culture.

b) Gansu Province: Gansu is a crucial passage of the Silk Road and home to world cultural heritage sites such as the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang and the Jiayuguan Pass. The protection of these sites has been highly prioritized, with protection projects and enhanced monitoring and early warning systems ensuring the safety and integrity of the heritage (Wang, 2021a). Besides, Gansu actively participates in international cultural exchanges and cooperation related to the Silk Road by hosting international academic conferences and exhibitions, strengthening cooperation and exchanges with countries and regions along the Silk Road.

c) Qinghai Province: Qinghai has made significant efforts in protecting the cultural landscape along the Silk Road. It has strengthened the census, registration, and archival work of the cultural heritage along the Silk Road, providing a scientific basis for protection work. At the same time, Qinghai focuses on integrating cultural heritage protection with ecological tourism, promoting local economic development and cultural inheritance through the development of the ecological tourism industry.

d) Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region: Ningxia has formulated detailed cultural heritage protection plans for the systematic protection and utilization of cultural heritage along the Silk Road. By organizing cultural lectures, exhibitions, and other activities, Ningxia has raised public awareness and recognition of Silk Road culture and its protection.

e) Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region: Xinjiang is home to numerous historical sites and cultural heritage along the Silk Road, such as the Ancient City of Jiaohe and the Ancient City of Gaochang. These sites have been effectively

protected and utilized through the implementation of protection projects and strengthened monitoring and management measures, ensuring the safety and integrity of the heritage. Xinjiang also focuses on integrating cultural heritage protection with cultural industry development by promoting the development of cultural tourism and creative cultural industries, thereby driving local economic development and cultural inheritance.

2.2. Challenges Faced

Firstly, the Silk Road sites in China are mainly located in five provinces: Shaanxi, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, and Xinjiang, which have significant geographical distances and great disparities. The attributes of each site are also different, creating substantial difficulties for overall content development, requiring coordination among multiple departments (Pu & Wang, 2022).

Secondly, the humanistic landscapes of the Silk Road (China section) are subject to dual pressures of natural erosion and human destruction. The intensification of global climate change and rapid expansion of tourism have caused irreversible damage to many historical sites. Some scenic spot plans lack in-depth environmental assessment and scientific demonstration, often adopting rough development models that encroach on valuable green spaces, damage original vegetation cover, and severely disrupt local biological habitats (Wang, 2021b). Driven by economic benefits, some developers have adopted predatory development strategies, causing large-scale damage to natural and cultural resources, ultimately leading to a sharp decline in the ecological health levels within protected areas.

Thirdly, funding gaps and technical bottlenecks also hinder the progress of protection work. The landscape maintenance and construction of the Silk Road area urgently require substantial funds. However, being located in remote western regions, far from economic centers, with narrow fundraising channels and weak economic foundations, long-term underinvestment in scenic areas is a significant issue. Despite recent increased support from government finance departments at all levels for scenic spots, the investment scale is still insufficient in the face of rapid tourism development.

Fourthly, insufficient publicity work leads to a superficial understanding of the humanistic landscapes of the Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces), failing to fully recognize its profound cultural value. Coupled with the scattered distribution of scenic spots along the route and low landscape connectivity, the tourism routes are lengthy and costly. Although large transportation conditions have improved, internal scenic spot road network construction lags, causing tourists, despite longing for beautiful scenery, to hesitate due to long travel distances, affecting overall tourism experience satisfaction.

Fifthly, before and after the Silk Road's application for World Heritage status, relevant departments attempted to develop route-type content products, such as Silk Road tourism routes. However, due to more focus on economic benefits and insufficient exploration of cultural connotations, the content products were single

and lacked cultural features, failing to form brand characteristics. As the enthusiasm for the Silk Road application for World Heritage status waned, related products gradually withdrew from public view.

3. Strategies for Cultural Landscape Protection

3.1. Strengthening the Legal and Regulatory Framework, Clarifying Protection Responsibilities

First, a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework must be established and improved to provide solid legal guarantees for the protection of cultural landscapes. Special protection regulations for Silk Road cultural heritage should be formulated and improved, clarifying the responsibilities and obligations of governments at all levels and relevant departments in cultural heritage protection to ensure that protection work has legal grounds and follows established guidelines. At the same time, efforts to combat illegal activities should be intensified to create an effective deterrent mechanism.

3.2. Increasing Financial Investment and Improving Protection Facilities

Protecting the cultural landscapes of the Silk Road requires significant financial investment. The government should establish a special protection fund to support the restoration, maintenance, and monitoring of cultural heritage (Li & Di, 2023). Social capital should be encouraged to participate in cultural heritage protection, forming a diversified funding mechanism. Additionally, international cooperation and exchanges with research institutions should be strengthened to introduce advanced technologies and experiences, employing high-tech methods for monitoring and restoration, such as using drones for regular inspections and 3D printing technology to replicate artifacts, reducing intervention with the originals, and enhancing the technological and professional level of protection work. Protection facilities should also be improved, such as establishing cultural heritage protection monitoring stations and installing surveillance equipment to increase the technological and intelligent level of protection work (Wang, 2016).

3.3. Enhancing Public Awareness and Increasing Participation

Cultural heritage protection relies on the broad participation and support of the public. Various channels and forms should be used to strengthen publicity and education, raising public awareness of the value and protection of Silk Road cultural heritage. Public venues such as museums, libraries, and cultural squares can be used to hold exhibitions, lectures, and performances related to Silk Road culture, popularizing relevant knowledge to the public and allowing them to closely experience and understand the charm of cultural heritage. New media platforms such as social media and short videos can be utilized to expand the reach of publicity and attract the attention of more young people. Public participation in protection activities should be encouraged, such as becoming volunteers or par-

ticipating in supervision and reporting, creating a positive atmosphere for societal protection.

3.4. Strengthening Literary Research and Promoting Academic Cooperation

The literature of the Silk Road has a long history and is rich in creation, forming an important part of the Chinese literary landscape. It has made a significant contribution to the development of ancient Chinese literature. The creation of Silk Road-related literature has made the West and the Silk Road important subjects in ancient Chinese literary writing, expanding the imaginative space of Chinese literature westward and providing possibilities for the redrawing of the Chinese literary map and the exploration of new perspectives in literary research. The authors of Silk Road literature are also adept at using diverse and delicate brushstrokes to depict the colorful human landscapes of the West, forming a cultural landscape belt with the dual axes of the Steppe Silk Road and the Oasis Silk Road, greatly enriching the literary landscape along the Silk Road. Furthermore, studying Silk Road literature helps us understand the diversity of literary genres, the richness of expressive techniques, and the unique and complex mental journeys of westward travelers in ancient Chinese literary works. Research is an important support for cultural heritage protection. Efforts should be intensified to invest in the study of Silk Road cultural heritage, supporting domestic institutions and scholars in conducting in-depth archaeological excavations, historical research, and cultural interpretations. At the same time, strengthening exchanges and cooperation with foreign academic institutions is essential to jointly promote the academic research and development of Silk Road cultural heritage. Through the transformation and application of research results, scientific evidence and technology can be provided for the protection and utilization of cultural heritage.

4. Exploring Tourism Development Models

4.1. Ecotourism Model

Ecotourism emphasizes the protection of the natural environment and cultural heritage (Pu et al., 2018). In developing tourism along the Chinese section of the Silk Road, promoting the ecotourism model is crucial. Scientific planning and management measures should be adopted to reduce the negative impact on cultural landscapes, such as implementing visitor limits and reservation systems in places like the Mogao Caves and building eco-friendly parking lots and facilities around ancient city sites.

4.2. Cultural Tourism Model

Cultural tourism is a tourism activity with culture as the theme, aiming to allow tourists to deeply understand the history, culture, and local customs of the destination (Li, 2015). In the tourism development of the Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces), the historical sites, cultural relics, and folk culture along the Silk Road

should be comprehensively sorted and integrated to form a cultural tourism resource system with distinct characteristics, creating unique cultural tourism products. For example, educational tourism projects themed on the Silk Road can be developed; cultural festivals, folk performances, and handicraft making experiences that are highly interactive and participatory can be launched. The Silk Road revealed the historical exchanges among Central Plains agricultural civilization, grassland nomadic civilization, and oasis civilization of the Western Regions, reflecting the process of exchange, conflict, compatibility, and integration of different cultures, conveying the spirit and values of the Chinese nation through this route. Therefore, the Silk Road can develop route-type content similar to pilgrimage routes, using historical Silk Road elements as breakthroughs, seeking cultural creative designs that reflect the achievements of multi-ethnic integration and cultural exchange, while creating cultural tourism products that meet the needs of modern consumers, expressing the historical mission of the Silk Road and inheriting the cultural genes of the Silk Road (Zhao et al., 2018).

4.3. Smart Tourism Model

Smart tourism is a new type of tourism that uses modern information technology to enhance the quality of tourism services and the tourist experience (He & Hua, 2023). It is mainly built around six elements: food, accommodation, transportation, sightseeing, shopping, and entertainment. Through smart tourism platforms, tourists can achieve the informatization, online, and intelligent functions of these six elements. In the development of tourism along the Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces), we should actively promote the construction of smart tourism by building a unified smart tourism service platform. This platform integrates various functions such as ticket booking, hotel accommodation, restaurant recommendations, and transportation inquiries, enabling one-stop access to and services for tourism information.

Through this platform, I can categorize and tag various tourism resources, distinctive enterprises, and products in the Silk Road (Northwest Five Provinces) area, and assign them a unique identification number for easy scanning and search inquiries. It also provides dropdown menu recommendations. When tourists focus on specific tourist spots, they can check the exact location on the map and access more information through a dedicated page containing text entries, images, and videos by scanning a QR code with their phone. Additionally, the map section integrates the functions of traditional tourist maps, brochures, and enterprise databases, and is designed with data locations of various tourist attractions, travel route planning, and tourism service facilities to meet tourists' needs for information inquiries, product reservations, and itinerary planning.

Furthermore, we provide tourists with convenient online consultation, complaint handling, and emergency rescue services to enhance their satisfaction and sense of security. At the same time, we use big data to analyze tourists' behavior and needs, providing precise support for the development of tourism products

and market marketing.

5. Balancing and Coordinating Cultural Landscape Protection and Tourism Development

5.1. Establishing the Concept of Sustainable Development

In the process of protecting cultural landscapes and developing tourism, the concept of sustainable development should always be upheld. Adhering to the principle of protection first and reasonable development ensures that tourism activities do not cause irreversible damage to cultural landscapes. At the same time, promoting local economic development and social progress through tourism development achieves a win-win situation for cultural landscape protection and tourism development. As the Fourth Industrial Revolution continues to advance, science and technology have been applied to various fields. Some cultural heritage sites have leveraged digital technology, offering VR and AR experiences that allow people to directly feel the original charm of the heritage at the site, attracting many visitors. In China, similar technologies have been used in films, performances, games, and many other fields. By combining these advanced technologies with the restoration of cultural prototypes of heritage sites, we can not only enhance the visual display of cultural heritage and deepen people's understanding and knowledge of Silk Road sites but also ensure the continuous preservation of cultural heritage without damaging the original structures.

5.2. Strengthening Planning Guidance and Scientific Management

"Tourism sets the stage, and the economy performs" has always been the main objective of tourism development in various countries and regions. Therefore, formulating a scientific and reasonable tourism development plan and a cultural landscape protection plan is key to achieving a balance and coordination between protection and development. The plan should fully consider the characteristics and protection requirements of cultural landscapes, as well as the demands and development trends of the tourism market. At the same time, strengthening the supervision and management of plan implementation ensures the effective execution and implementation of the plan.

5.3. Promoting Community Participation and Benefit Sharing

The protection of cultural landscapes and tourism development cannot be separated from the participation and support of local communities. Actively promoting community involvement in the tourism development process allows communities to become beneficiaries of tourism development. Establishing benefit-sharing mechanisms motivates community residents to actively participate in the protection of cultural landscapes and tourism services, forming a virtuous cycle of protection and development.

6. Conclusion

The Silk Road, spanning the five provinces in Northwest China, carries profound historical and cultural deposits and contains rich cultural landscapes. With the rapid development of tourism, protecting this precious cultural heritage while realizing its tourism value has become a top priority. This study aims to better achieve the protection and sustainable development of the Silk Road's cultural landscape through the following measures: strengthening legal protection, increasing financial input, raising public awareness, promoting scientific research, and actively exploring tourism development models. These efforts are intended to provide new ideas for the protection of cultural heritage and the tourism development of other cultural routes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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