

Integration and Innovation: Collection Management of Ethnic Minority Museums

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Abstract

As the material carrier of the pluralistic unity pattern of Chinese civilization, the collections of ethnic minority museums are important cultural resources for building a community with a shared future for mankind. This paper systematically explores the current characteristics, practical challenges, and optimization paths of the collection in ethnic minority museums in the Chinese mainland region in three aspects: rational acquisition, scientific protection, and innovative utilization. The research found that the collection of the current minority museums has homogeneity, the protection technology is lagging behind, the utilization of the form is single, and so on. The framework of “value guidance-technology support-ecological symbiosis” should be established, which includes the rational collection and screening mechanism, the scientific protection system, and the innovation and utilization of the communication ecology, so as to provide theoretical reference and practical guidance for the revitalization and global sharing of the collection resources of the minority museums.

Keywords

Ethnic Minority Museum, Collection Management, Theoretical Integration, Practical Innovation

1. Introduction

In the long history of the development of the Chinese nation, each nation has created unique material and intangible cultural heritage, forming a “diversity in unity” pattern of civilization (Fei, 1989). Among them, with China’s 55 ethnic minorities as the core, various institutions that collect, research, and display their cultural relics and culture have basically formed the museum system of China’s

ethnic minorities (Zheng, 2025). Since the earliest collection of ethnic cultural relics by Sichuan University Museum in 1914, China's ethnic minority museums have gone through the embryonic period, foundation period, development period, and standardization period. In 1984, the Ministry of Culture and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission jointly issued the "Minutes of the National Conference on Ethnic Minority Cultural Relics", which for the first time systematically defined the positioning, tasks, collection scope and construction plan of the national ethnic museums. In 2025, China's National Cultural Heritage Administration issued the "Notice on Strengthening the Census and Protection of Cultural Facilities Including Memorial Halls and Museums Nationwide", designating ethnic museums as key targets in the Fourth National Cultural Relics Census, and specifying the requirements for investigating and protecting major ethnic cultural institutions established after 1949 (China's National Cultural Heritage Administration, 2025). Ethnic minority cultural relics with historical, artistic, and scientific value serve as material carriers for cultural heritage transmission (Qin, 1989). These relics encompass ethnic costumes, production tools, religious artifacts, ancient texts, and handicrafts, all characterized by distinct ethnic, regional, and scarcity features (Wang, 2007). These collections are not only the spiritual symbols of national identity, but also the important cultural ties to build a community with a shared future for mankind.

Scholars at home and abroad have discussed the governance of minority museums from different perspectives, and have achieved certain phased results. In the 1980s, some scholars defined the nature and task of the national museum and laid the theoretical foundation (Wu, 1985). Subsequently, studies on the collection and definition of cultural collections have explored the principles and methods for collecting ethnic cultural relics (Song, 2010) and analyzed the core issues in defining minority cultural relics (Wang, 2007). In the exploration of collection conservation techniques, the current status and countermeasures of ethnic cultural relics protection were analyzed (Li & Li, 2010), emphasizing that museum informatization should be prioritized in collection conservation. In promoting the revitalization and utilization of collections, the educational function of ethnic museums is emphasized (Gui, 2006), and the exhibition models of museums for ethnic minorities in Southwest China are analyzed. In general, the domestic researches focus on a single link or a single theory, and lack of systematic analysis of multi-theory integration. Foreign research tends to emphasize community-engaged technology applications, advocating that museums should transcend institutional control to establish collaborative collection models with indigenous communities (Lynch & Alberti, 2010). A case study on the indigenous communities of Palawan Island, Philippines, employed the "community-engaged collection" approach (Iskander, 2015). The continual growth of archaeological collections reflects the psychological form of hoarding recognized in individuals: the DSM-5 defines hoarding as "persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: p. 236). Research indicates the museum de-hoarding: return collections to indigenous communities rather

than retaining them in researchers' hands, and employ modern technologies to reduce collection hoarding, providing theoretical support for optimizing collection structures. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that virtual simulation technology can significantly enhance the dissemination of endangered cultures (Galeazzi et al., 2025). It is clear that the experience of foreign research in community participation and technology application is of great significance to our country.

The development of minority museums is facing multiple challenges, such as the tendency of "emphasizing collection but neglecting research", which leads to the storage pressure of collections and the waste of protection resources. The utilization of collections is limited to offline exhibitions, which fails to give full play to their cultural communication and social education functions. In this context, it is of great practical significance to explore innovative approaches for collection governance from a policy perspective by integrating cutting-edge theories such as the community with a shared future for mankind, de-hoarding, scientific governance, sustainable development, and virtual simulation.

2. The Challenges of the Collection Management in the Minority Museum

2.1. Acquisition Challenges: Scale and Structural Imbalance

With the importance of the national cultural heritage protection, the collection scale of the minority museums continues to expand. For instance, since its opening in 1995, the Yunnan Ethnic Museum has collected nearly 50,000 pieces (sets) of ethnic cultural relics (Liu, 2025); the "Memory in Hands" Museum in Guizhou has gathered over 6000 exquisite items, including batik and embroidery, through more than two decades of field research (Zhou, 2025). Moreover, the channels for collecting evidence have become increasingly diverse, including field surveys, social donations, legal recovery, and community collaboration (Gong, 2010). The collection development mode of "quantity over quality" has strengthened the evaluation index of the collection quantity of some museums, which leads to the storage pressure of excessive collection, which is contrary to the sustainable development concept and is not conducive to the long-term development of museums. For instance, multiple museums in Southwest China have prioritized collecting Miao silver ornaments, resulting in resource waste (Yu, 2004). According to estimates, based on the ratio of the number of exhibited collections to the total number of collections, the exhibition rates of China's central, provincial, and municipal-county level museums were 1.29%, 4.52%, and 25.00%, respectively (Li, 2021). A significant number of artifacts remain stored in warehouses for extended periods, not only occupying storage space but also increasing conservation costs. Moreover, some non-valuable items waste limited conservation resources (Martin, 2025). Relatively speaking, the collection of minority museums is more severe because of the influence of various factors. The value judgment bias, which prioritizes material artifacts over intangible cultural heritage items, and favors exquisite

collections while neglecting ordinary folk objects, thus overlooking the historical context and cultural significance of these collections (Qin, 2001), leads to a high degree of subjectivity and arbitrariness in the recruitment process. Traditional collection processes are predominantly museum-dominated, with indigenous communities having limited influence in selecting artifacts and defining their value. This results in some collections being detached from their original cultural contexts, leaving their stories and significance undocumented. In conclusion, the scale effect of solicitation influences the rationalization of solicitation structure.

2.2. Protection Challenges: Technological Diversity and Regional Development Imbalance Coexist

The collection protection technology of the museums of ethnic minorities in China has been transformed from the traditional physical protection to the diversified protection. In terms of hardware facilities, some large museums such as the Yunnan Nationalities Museum and the Xizang Autonomous Region Museum (2007) have established temperature and humidity-controlled storage rooms, cultural relic restoration laboratories, and are equipped with professional conservation equipment. In terms of conservation techniques, the approach integrates traditional restoration methods with modern technology. For instance, the restoration of Jiانشui purple pottery employs a “traditional patching and modern reinforcement” technique, which preserves the original craftsmanship while enhancing the artifact’s stability. In digital preservation, some museums have implemented 3D scanning and digital archiving of collections. For instance, the Textile and Apparel Museum at Henan Polytechnic University utilized 3DsMax and CLO3D software to create virtual simulation models of textile and apparel artifacts (Zhang et al., 2025), achieving digital preservation of these collections. But from the overall balance, the problem of uneven regional development is very prominent. First, regarding conservation measures, the lack of unified standards has resulted in inconsistent methods and technical parameters among museums, leading to uneven conservation quality of collections (Song, 2011). The funding primarily relies on government allocations, which are insufficient to sustain long-term conservation efforts and technological R&D (Li & Li, 2010). Secondly, in terms of technical protection, some collections of ethnic minorities are made of fragile materials, such as ancient books in Dongba script of Naxi nationality, which require extremely high preservation environment, and traditional protection techniques are difficult to solve the problems of aging, fading and deformation of these collections. Thirdly, in cross-regional collaboration, the lack of technical exchanges and resource sharing among different regions and museums leads to the waste of conservation resources (Lei & Pan, 2012).

2.3. Utilization Challenges: Lack of Value Transformation and Rich Form

The collection of the museums of minority nationalities in China has been transformed from the traditional static exhibition to the diversified communication.

First, offline exhibitions are being upgraded with a focus on immersive scenarios, interactivity, and storytelling. By recreating traditional production settings and establishing interactive zones, they enhance audience engagement (Liu, 2025). Second, the development of cultural and creative products has gained momentum, with some museums introducing collections-based merchandise such as Miao silver jewelry inspired by their traditional designs and Dai script-inspired stationery featuring palm-leaf manuscripts, effectively translating cultural heritage into economic value. Third, the educational role of museums has been strengthened through public outreach initiatives like lectures, workshops, and cultural immersion programs to disseminate ethnic cultural knowledge (Gui, 2006). Fourth, digital utilization has been initiated. Some museums have leveraged official websites, WeChat public accounts, and short video platforms to disseminate collection introductions and exhibition details, thereby expanding their reach. However, the problem of insufficient value transformation of the collection is still prominent. The so-called collection value transformation is the process and achievement of transforming the intrinsic historical value, artistic value, scientific value and cultural value of the collection into the public perception, social service, social benefit and public value through the research and interpretation, exhibition and communication, educational activities and cultural and creative development. The fact that most museums for ethnic minorities are located in remote areas with poor transportation has limited their accessibility (Peng, 2008). Moreover, the public's limited understanding of ethnic minority cultures and lack of initiative to explore them result in the limited social impact of these collections (Gui, 2006). Furthermore, since the descriptions and interpretations of the collections are predominantly in Chinese, the absence of versions in minority languages and foreign languages hinders understanding by both local communities in ethnic regions and international audiences (Galeazzi et al., 2025). In addition, the development of cultural and creative products and digital communication of the collection of the minority museums are in urgent need of interdisciplinary professionals, but most museums lack relevant talent reserves, which reduces the influence of the collection and restricts the in-depth utilization of the collection.

3. The Path of Collection Management in Minority Nationality Museum

3.1. Establishing a Rational Collection System

Firstly, the concept of “diversity coexistence” is established. The collection should break through the limitation of region and nationality, not only pay attention to the collection of the minority nationality in China, but also collect the cultural relics of the relevant nationality overseas through international cooperation, and build a collection system of the national cultural heritage across the border. Meanwhile, it is essential to emphasize the diversity of collections by incorporating artifacts from various ethnic groups, historical periods, and categories, thereby fully demonstrating the integrated yet pluralistic evolution of Chinese civilization (Fei,

1989).

Secondly, we should establish a screening mechanism of “value priority”. Develop a scientific appraisal system for collection value, conducting comprehensive evaluations across four dimensions: historical, artistic, scientific, and cultural value. Implement rational disposal of redundant, duplicated, or non-preservation-worthy items, adopting a “de-hoarding” approach that respects the perspectives of indigenous and other descendant communities (Krystiana, 2025). For instance, the exhibition “On the Move: Reframing Nomadic Pastoralism”, which was the flagship exhibition organized by the National Museum of Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, featured a collaborative selection of artifacts by museum staff, external experts, and community representatives, all guided by the principle of “value first,” showcasing the cultural heritage of the Gulf region (Alexandra, 2025). The collection structure will be optimized through reallocation to other museums in need, donation to community cultural centers, and lawful auction. In fact, we could learn from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the United States, which divested some of its redundant collections to raise funds for the preservation and research of its precious collections.

Thirdly, the collection mechanism of “multi-party participation” should be improved. The first measure is to establish a standardized collection process, including preliminary research, value assessment, lawful collection, and archiving, to ensure the standardization of the collection work (Song, 2012). The second measure is to enhance community engagement by adopting the “community collaborative collection” model from the Honeyman Museum in the UK, where ethnic minority members participate in selecting, authenticating, and documenting the context of artifacts to ensure their authenticity and integrity. Thirdly, we should broaden the collection channels, enrich the collection sources by means of international cooperation, private donation and digital collection. For instance, 3D scanning technology is employed to digitize rare artifacts scattered across the public, which not only safeguards the originals but also expands the museum’s digital collections (Zhang et al., 2025).

3.2. Establishing a System Protection Framework

Firstly, we should improve the protection mechanism of “standardization and coordination”. We should establish unified protection standards, and issue special protection technical specifications and operation guidelines for different materials and types of minority collections, so as to ensure the scientific and standardized protection work. Based on the “Cultural Relics Protection Law of the People’s Republic of China” (2025 Revised Edition), the “Management Measures for the Protection of Collections in Ethnic Minority Museums” has been formulated, which clarifies the responsibilities, technical requirements, and assessment standards for protection. It is necessary to strengthen collaborative governance by establishing a cross-regional and cross-institutional conservation cooperation network, integrating the resources of research institutions, universities, and museums to jointly

develop conservation technologies and cultivate talent. For example, the “Alliance for the Protection of Ethnic Minority Cultural Heritage” was established to share protection equipment, technological achievements, and human resources. We should improve the funding mechanism and construct a diversified funding mode of “government leading, social participation and market operation”, and encourage enterprises and foundations to participate in the collection protection work.

Secondly, the protection strategy of “combining preventive maintenance with necessary repair” should be optimized. Adhere to the principle of “protection first, prevention first”, shift the focus of protection work from passive repair to active prevention. The Internet of Things technology is routinely utilized to monitor the preservation environment and condition of collections in real time, enabling timely detection and resolution of potential issues. The principle of “minimum intervention” is adopted to preserve the original information and craft features of the collection to the greatest extent in the process of restoration, and to avoid the secondary damage caused by excessive restoration.

Thirdly, we should construct a double protection system of “digitalization and materialization”. We actively promote the digital preservation of collections by employing technologies such as 3D scanning, high-definition photography, and digital modeling to conduct comprehensive and high-precision digitization, thereby establishing digital archives. Efforts are made to carry out virtual restoration, using computer technology to simulate the original state of the collection, and to restore severely damaged items that cannot be physically repaired, providing support for research and exhibition. Vigorously promote the construction of digital resource libraries, integrate the digital collections of national minority museums across the country, achieve interconnectivity and shared utilization, build the “China Minority Digital Museum” platform, centrally display the digital collections of various museums, and provide access channels for global researchers and the public.

3.3. Establishing an Ecological Utilization System

Firstly, we should build an international and diversified communication pattern. Based on the ecology, the different species will form a sustainable ecological symbiosis system through long-term interaction, mutual dependence, mutual benefit and win-win, and stable coexistence. Strengthen international exchanges and cooperation, actively participate in international museum exhibitions, cultural heritage forums and other activities, hold special exhibitions of ethnic minority cultures, and promote the collections to the world. Build a “global sharing” digital communication platform, use virtual simulation technology to create cross-border virtual exhibition, so that the global audience can enjoy the charm of minority collections without leaving home, effectively improving the attention of endangered culture. To advance multilingual communication, we should transform language into tangible entities that can be collected and preserved (Sarah, 2025). This involves incorporating minority languages and foreign language versions into ex-

hibition descriptions and digital resources, breaking down linguistic barriers to foster mutual understanding and cultural recognition among audiences from diverse countries and ethnicities.

Secondly, we should innovate the form of “immersive and interactive” utilization. The virtual museum utilizes software like Unity3D to create a 3D exhibition space, where visitors can enjoy an immersive experience through VR devices or mobile computers, enabling interactive and three-dimensional displays of the collections. The interactive experience project leverages AR technology, allowing visitors to scan artifacts with their smartphones to access dynamic details like historical context and craftsmanship, or even interact with virtual ethnic artisans. We will advance digital research and education by opening digital collection repositories to provide global researchers with academic resources, while developing online courses and study programs to expand social education coverage.

Thirdly, we should construct the value transformation mechanism of “culture, economy and society”. We will deepen the development of cultural and creative products, explore the cultural connotation and artistic elements of the collections, and cooperate with designers and enterprises to develop practical, innovative and culturally relevant products, forming a complete industrial chain of “research and development-production-sales”, and develop the special collections of the minority museums into high-end handicrafts and daily necessities to meet the needs of different consumers. Promote the integrated development of “museum and community”, integrate the museum into the community cultural construction, carry out folk activities, handicraft training, etc., promote the living inheritance of national culture, realize the benign interaction between cultural protection and community prosperity, and realize the ecological closed loop of “protection is inheritance”. Similarly, taking advantage of the fact that temporary exhibitions are happening more often than permanent re-displays, they can be more in tune with current events, thoughts, and ideas, and therefore more responsive to societal needs (Alexandra, 2025). The mechanism of benefit sharing should be established, and part of the collection development should be used for the protection and development of ethnic minority areas, so as to stimulate the enthusiasm of local people to participate in the cultural protection.

4. Conclusion

Through the “value-driven, technology-supported, and ecosystem-symbiotic” approach to minority museum collection management, this initiative achieves systematic integration across artifact acquisition, preservation, and utilization. It fills the theoretical gap in comprehensive collection governance for minority museums, provides a new theoretical perspective to address industry challenges like structural imbalances and resource waste, and offers practical solutions for revitalizing and globally sharing minority museum collections. Simultaneously, it enriches the theoretical and practical dimensions of cultural heritage governance and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. However,

there are still some limitations, such as insufficient exploration of the differentiated governance characteristics of museums in different regions, scales, and ethnic groups, as well as a lack of quantitative research. Additionally, further studies are needed to deepen the policy implementation and practical safeguards for the governance of collections in ethnic minority museums. To this end, in alignment with the contemporary trends of cultural heritage preservation and the development of ethnic minority museums, it is essential to conduct differentiated and refined research by category, establish a quantifiable evaluation system for collection governance effectiveness, deepen studies on the rights, responsibilities, and benefit-sharing mechanisms among governance stakeholders, explore new technological applications and risk prevention in digital-era collection governance, conduct international comparisons and cross-cultural governance research, and examine policy-driven frameworks for collection governance support systems. These efforts will provide valuable references for future research and practical exploration.

In general, the collection management of minority museums is a systematic project with cultural, technical and social aspects, and its core is to realize the living inheritance and value maximization of the collection resources. Future research and practice must consistently uphold the core principle of Chinese civilization's unity in diversity, integrating international cutting-edge concepts with local practices. Through collaborative innovation across multiple disciplines, stakeholders, and technologies, we should continuously refine the governance system for museum collections. This will enable minority museum collections to serve as vital cultural bridges for preserving ethnic heritage, strengthening national identity, and building a community with a shared future for mankind. Ultimately, this approach will drive the creative transformation and innovative development of ethnic cultural heritage in the new era.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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