

Place-Based Arts Education for Rural Revitalization: A Case of the “She” Ethnic Minority Theater in Ningde, China

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of China’s national rural revitalisation strategy, the protection and inheritance of ethnic minority cultures have become an important component of sustainable rural development. This study takes the “She” ethnic theatre in Ningde City, Fujian Province, as the research object. In the current new media era, it explores the combination of cultural heritage, community identity, and educational innovation as key elements in the theatre to construct a new model and path for art education based on regional characteristics. The theatre, based on traditional music, dance, and ritual performances of the “She” ethnic culture, plays a vital role as a living classroom, promoting experiential and participatory learning. This study employs qualitative research methods, comprehensively utilising field observations, semi-structured interviews, and literature analyses to collect and analyse data. This study explores new methods for the “She” ethnic theatre to integrate local culture into teaching practice, promote intergenerational learning and inheritance, and enhance students’ sense of ethnic identity. The results show that the theater is not only a creative and extensible educational space but also enhances community cohesion through cultural activities and promotes local tourism. Therefore, arts education grounded in regional characteristics has the potential to connect traditional education with community learning, promote individual development, and sustain cultural legacies. Future research should explore how to strengthen new models of local-based arts education and better integrate digital innovation, intergenerational transmission, policy support, and cross-regional comparisons so that rural communities become a dynamic system that links cultural sustainability, community identity, and rural revitalisation.

Keywords: “She” Ethnic Minority, Place-based Education, Arts Education, Identity, Rural Revitalization

Introduction

The “She” ethnic group is one of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities in China, established in 1956. They are mainly distributed in the four provinces of Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Guangdong. Ningde City in Fujian Province is the most important “She”-populated area in China, boasting the largest She population in the country. The “She” people call themselves “Shan Ha,” meaning “mountain people.” Historically, their ancestors lived in mountainous areas, leading agricultural lifestyles and engaging in hunting and farming activities. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the “She” people gradually interacted and integrated with the neighbouring Han and Hakka people, forming a diverse and unique cultural identity. Historical documents such as the “Taiping Huanyu Ji” and “Yuanhe Junxian Zhi” record that the “She” people originated from the Baiyue people of southern China and shared a common ancestor with the Yao and Zhuang ethnic groups. From the

Tang to the Qing dynasties, the “She” people migrated for centuries, settling in the southeastern coastal areas and some hilly regions and developing a unique and rich traditional culture, including language, crafts, and performing arts.

The traditional culture of the “She” ethnic minority has made significant contributions to the composition and inheritance of China’s intangible cultural heritage. National and provincial representative intangible cultural heritage projects include “She” ribbon weaving, traditional wedding customs, clothing making, the “Three-Three Festival”, ethnic medicine, silver forging, folk songs and storytelling, as well as ethnic activities such as the “Four-Eight Song Festival” Four-Eight Song Festival ‘and Yong’an Opera. Many cultural customs, especially song and dance performances and rituals, possess strong dramatic elements, showcasing the profound artistic sentiment inherent in “She” culture. The Ningde “She” Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe, founded in 1988, is a prime example of this remarkable traditional culture. As the only national-level professional art troupe named after the “She” ethnic minority, the Ningde “She” Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe has won over 50 national-level awards and over 100 provincial-level awards, including the “Advanced Collective Award for Cultural Work” from the Ministry of Culture. The “She” ethnic opera troupe has won numerous honors through participation in the China Arts Festival and high-level national competitions held by CCTV, making it an important vehicle for showcasing the traditional culture of the “She” ethnic group, demonstrating national pride, and promoting cross-cultural exchange.

“She” ethnic villages are generally located in remote mountainous areas with poor roads, underdeveloped infrastructure, and a relatively traditional economic development model. Despite possessing a rich cultural heritage, the influence of “She” culture is weak because of limitations in economic development. In China’s current strategy of vigorously developing rural revitalisation, cultural revitalisation, as one of the “five major revitalizations”, has become a key element in promoting sustainable social development. In ethnic minority areas, rural revitalisation means not only

economic development but also the revival of local knowledge, traditions, and cultural expression and output, thereby driving the overall development of living standards and improving the well-being of the people in local villages. However, the “She” people today face many challenges similar to those of other ethnic minorities, such as the interruption of intergenerational transmission and weakening of ethnic identity. These contradictions are exacerbated by modernisation, population migration, and the homogenisation of traditional culture in contemporary society.

In the face of the current challenging situation, the “She” ethnic theatre has been launched, proactively taking on the role of a symbolic space and physical representation that integrates education, art and community. The construction and operation of the theatre is not merely a cultural infrastructure project but also a process of educational transmission and cultural socialisation. Through this theatre, “She” people can reinterpret and express their cultural heritage in a more concrete, realistic, and performative form. The Ningde “She” ethnic theatre integrates traditional performing arts with modern educational practices. As a unique learning environment based on regional cultural characteristics, it combines cultural transmission, aesthetic experiences, and civic participation. Through workshops, festivals, and folk performances, the theatre provides young people and community members with opportunities to engage directly and closely with the intangible cultural heritage, transforming audiences into co-learners, participants, and co-creators.

Despite the increasing academic attention to rural revitalisation and intangible cultural heritage, few studies have explored how ethnic minority theatres can simultaneously function as cultural, educational, and community spaces within a region-based arts education model. Existing research lacks a systematic analysis of how such theatres, particularly the Ningde She ethnic theatre, integrate cultural heritage, identity building, and community engagement to promote sustainable rural development.

Grounded in experiential and constructivist theories, place-based education emphasises contextualised, community-based learning. This model places knowledge within local ecological,

cultural, and social realities, encouraging learners to explore identity and belonging through direct interaction with their surroundings. The “She” ethnic theatre fully integrates local minority traditional culture into arts education, transforming artistic practice into an educational medium and connecting students, teachers, and inheritors of cultural heritage within the theatre’s organizational framework. The “She” ethnic theater thus becomes a “living classroom”, in which cultural identity is not only taught but also manifested through shared performances, intergenerational dialogue, and hands-on experiences.

Theatre-based education supports rural revitalisation by fostering the development of cultural and tourism industries. The “She” ethnic theatre, as a multifunctional cultural space, attracts tourists and generates income and employment opportunities by hosting performances, exhibitions, and festivals, while simultaneously enhancing residents’ pride and community cohesion. With its dual function as an educational venue and economic catalyst, the theatre contributes to both the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and the achievement of sustainable rural development goals.

This study aims to analyse the “She” ethnic minority theatre in Ningde, using it as a regionally based model of arts education within the rural revitalisation framework. This study focuses on exploring new models and approaches for integrating local ethnic minority traditional culture into arts education practices, cultivating a sense of ethnic identity, and promoting cultural inheritance through learner and community participation, thereby achieving rural revitalisation. Specifically, the objectives of this study are: (1) to trace the traditional culture and historical development of the “She” ethnic group; (2) to investigate the function of the theatre as an educational and spatial platform for cultural dissemination; and (3) to analyse the educational and sociocultural impact of this model on learners and the wider community.

Literature Review

To begin with, the studies of ethnic minorities communities emphasize the significance of perceiving and empowering the local cultural

existence when it comes to the rural revitalization. The discursive sociocultural identities of the She ethnic townships are driven by the tourism sector, which demonstrates the need to build identities among the town residents, with the focus on the balance between culture conservation and economic growth via cultural commodification ([Youseaf et al., 2024](#)). The first aspect of place-based arts education is heavily dependent on such a balance, which grounds the learning in the immediate cultural and social context, thus strengthening the sense of community.

Secondly, education especially culturally relevant vocational and arts education is also a big contributor to rural development as it prepares the community members with skills that help in preserving culture as well as sustaining them economically. Increased vocational education in rural China has been reported to lead to rural regeneration, not only positive effects of local economies, but also social inclusion and development of local talents ([Wang et al., 2024](#)). Education in arts can be in line with these findings by sustaining arts forms by incorporating the indigenous theater culture such as that of the She minority and creating livelihood opportunities.

Thirdly, rural and minority-populated areas are areas where equal access to quality educational resources is important to the success of revitalization strategies. Research shows that too little supply of educational resources in ethnic minority areas is a frequent problem, which influences the ability to develop the rural territories ([Guo et al., 2020](#)). Place-based arts education that is aimed at minorities like the She can help bridge these gaps by offering culturally contextual learning that facilitates education and preservation of any cultural legacy.

The dimensions of policies are also important because sustainable rural education policies in China have the focus on rural orientation and the support of rural teaching staff, which is necessary to provide effective place-based educational programs ([Xue et al., 2021](#)). Positive policies will help to include She ethnic theater in the educational studies to promote cultural transfer and community participation.

Another element of the rural revitalization is the approach of preserving the cultural heritage by means of education and architecture. The case of traditional

villages in China preserving architectural heritage shows how the local culture, which includes some of the symbols of the ethnic minorities, can be preserved and incorporated into the development strategies (Xie et al., 2024). In like manner, introducing the She ethnic theater in school also strengthens cultural heritage in living form, that supplements physical conservation policies.

In addition, the rural revitalization strategies should take into account the historical development and the combination of various actors, including industry, culture, and ecology (Zhang et al., 2020). Education programs in place based arts using She ethnic theater as a core can therefore become part of a culturally rich and economically viable rural revitalization model, which is reflective of history and identity of the community.

Green entrepreneurship through digitally mediation also contributes to the rural revitalization process, in which innovation and change collide with cultural resources (Wang & Ye, 2024). The use of digital tools in She ethnic theater education would help to modernize and increase the scope of the theater, providing sustainable economic opportunities.

The importance of the use of specific interventions depending on the characteristics of the rural area is noted in an index system that assesses the potential of rural human settlement and development (Liu et al., 2022). The solution to both social and cultural aspects of the revitalization of the ethnic theater can be the location of She in the center of such development strategies.

Lastly, to sustain the tourism and cultural heritage promotion, it is important to comprehend and use the spatial morphological features of rural ethnic settlements, such as village planning and utilization of the public space (Sun et al., 2024). These spatial and cultural interactions can be improved through arts education, which incorporates the traditions of the She theater, which encourages the community-based tourism and regeneration.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods, focusing on the She ethnic minority's theatre in Ningde City. It delves into the important educational,

cultural, and social functions of theatres in rural revitalisation, exploring new models and approaches for arts education based on local education to enhance the She people's sense of ethnic identity and community participation.

Data were collected through literature reviews, fieldwork, and observations. Historical documents related to the She ethnic group were reviewed to construct a theoretical framework and analytical framework. Fieldwork was conducted in representative "She" villages in Ningde City, Fujian Province, including semi-structured interviews and participation observation. The interviewees included local government officials, educators, tourism professionals, theatre actors, villagers, and tourists. The participation of multiple stakeholders ensured a comprehensive understanding of the theatre's cultural, educational, and socio-economic functions.

Data collection for this study took place from January to August 2024 and involved 42 participants. Specifically, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including with six local government officials, five educators, four tourism professionals, eight theatre actors, and five villagers. Additionally, 14 tourists participated in brief on-site conversations and observational dialogues. All qualitative data were transcribed and thematically coded using inductive methods to identify recurring patterns related to cultural learning, ethnic identity, and community revitalisation issues. Multisource data validation enhances the credibility and validity of the findings.

By combining theoretical enquiry and ethnographic observation, this methodological design comprehensively understands the dual function of "She" ethnic minority theatre as an educational and cultural centre. This further clarifies the interrelationships between arts learning, cultural sustainability, and rural revitalisation, thus providing important insights for contemporary research on integrating arts education into community development in China's ethnic minority regions.

Results

Historical Development and Cultural Context of the "She" Ethnic Minority

The Historical Evolution of the "She" People

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the

lifestyle of the She people gradually shifted from a traditional semi-nomadic life to a stable, village-based settlement pattern. Later, influenced by the Qing government's "local administrative reform" policy, many She villages were either assimilated or forcibly absorbed into Han Chinese administrative systems, agricultural practices, and education systems. Fortunately, they have retained their unique language, etiquette traditions, and social customs. These precious cultural heritages are rooted in their long-standing worldviews and originate from their ancestors' creations. Modern "She" villages have developed a unique spatial layout, including terraced house construction and design, dedicated sites for worshipping the "Panhu" ancestor, and sites for seasonal sacrifices, which constitute the regional characteristics of this ethnic minority.

In modern times, with rapid social development and the deepening and expansion of social and ethnic integration, coupled with improved transportation and strengthened economic integration, the "She" people have increasingly frequent contact with the outside world, allowing for a greater understanding of "She" culture. The geographically mountainous lifestyle of the "She" ethnic group and its social organisation centred on kinship and sacrificial sites maintain a strong sense of ethnic cohesion. Since 1949, the Chinese government's ethnic policy support system has provided the She with substantial infrastructure investment, cultural recognition, and policy support. The establishment of "She" autonomous townships and She cultural groups marks a new stage in the She people's efforts to protect their ethnic identity and social heritage.

Since China launched its rural revitalisation strategy in 2018, Ningde County has continuously increased its support and investment in community policy, cultural preservation, tourism, and creative industry development, achieving remarkable results in each of these areas. Villages such as Shangjinbei, Houdun, and Ruiyun have revitalised their local cultural lives by integrating performing arts, tourism, and community education. The "She" ethnic theatre has become a model of regional innovation, integrating cultural heritage protection, art education, rural revitalisation, and sustainable development.

The Cultural Formation and Ethnic Characteristics of "She" Heritage

The indigenous culture of the "She" ethnic group is the result of long-term interaction and collaboration among natural geography, history, and cross-cultural factors. Their livelihoods have long depended on mountain, agricultural, and forest ecosystems, thus shaping a material culture based on the concept of "coexisting with the land." The "She" world view expresses reverence for nature through rituals, myths and aesthetic practices. This ecological intimacy is deeply rooted in the handicraft traditions, oral literature, and performing arts of the indigenous peoples.

Their language belongs to the Miao-Yao language family and lacks an independent writing system; however, its rich oral tradition is reflected in songs, blessings, and epics. The folk songs (locally called "Pan Ge") are poetic dialogues sung in antiphonal form, blending melody and moral sentiment into narratives. These songs are not merely entertainment but also carriers of social memories and community ethics.

Equally important are the "She" textile and embroidery traditions, which showcase "wearable history." Typical women's clothing, dyed in deep indigo and adorned with silver ornaments and embroidered phoenix or floral patterns, is a vibrant aesthetic text. The embroidered patterns symbolize virtues such as fertility, courage, and spiritual protection. These garments are passed down through matrilineal lines, making each piece an educational vehicle for intangible cultural heritage, passed down from generation to generation.

Rituals and festivals further embody the "She" ethnic minority's cultural identity through temporal memory. Important annual celebrations, such as the March 3rd Festival, the Pan Gou (a dog-like animal) sacrificial ceremony, and the Incense Dance, are collective reenactments of mythical ancestors and community unity. These activities integrate music, costumes, dance, and ritualistic storytelling, transforming village spaces into vibrant stages for cultural education and identity-building.

At the heart of their belief system are ancestor and totem worship, centred on the Pan Gou legend. Pan Gou is a sacred dog ancestor who symbolises

the harmonious unity between humanity and nature. The Pan Gou myth is both theology and a social contract: it defines kinship ethics, regulates the relationship between humans and the environment, and establishes the moral world of the “She” people on an ecological cosmology.

Therefore, the formation of “She” culture can be understood as an embodied educational philosophy: an oral, performative, and spatial process through which knowledge, identity, and community are transmitted across generations.

Cultural Identity Formation and Inheritance Mechanisms

The Logic of Cultural Identity Formation

The cultural identity of the “She” ethnic group is a multi-layered construction comprising mythological narratives, a sense of spatial belonging, and performative activities. The Panhu legend provides a mythological and historical foundation for the connection between the divine and human realms. During annual sacrificial ceremonies, the Panhu legend is repeatedly told, constantly reinforcing a shared sense of ancestral identity.

Spatially, the mountainous terrain of Ningde is the birthplace and development ground for the “She” people’s cultural identity. Ecological isolation fosters close kinship networks and strong regional identity. Villages are not only physical dwellings but also sacred spaces where the ancestral spirits reside. The layout of the houses, altars, and squares reflects a cosmic order in which humans, nature, and deities are interdependent.

The daily cultural practices of “She” people, such as festivals, folk songs, clothing, and rituals, constitute the micro-foundation for the formation of cultural identity. Through these year-after-year activities, cultural identity becomes concrete and emotional rather than abstract. Every wedding song, embroidery pattern, or incense-burning ceremony becomes a medium for social memory and cultural education, imparting moral values and a collective consciousness.

Transformations and Challenges in Cultural Transmission

Traditional mechanisms for transmitting the

“She” ethnic culture rely on intergenerational transmission and community participation. Elders serve as oral historians, passing on their knowledge to younger generations through rituals, festivals, and handicrafts. However, modernisation and urbanisation have weakened these traditional systems. Young people’s exposure to mainstream modern culture, coupled with reduced dissemination and communication of the “She” language, has impacted traditional transmission methods of the language.

The implementation of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Program, while providing attention and financial support for “She” traditional culture, has also created certain contradictions in the community. One contradiction is the transformation of vibrant traditions into elaborately designed performances for tourism rather than for education. Some “She” artisans are addressing this challenge by establishing “Intangible Cultural Heritage Learning Centers”, where children and tourists can learn embroidery, singing, and dancing, thereby transforming preservation into education.

The rise of digital heritage activism offers promising new directions. Young “She” creators utilize short videos and social media to showcase traditional crafts, bilingual songs, and ritual scenes, transforming “She” cultural identity into a digital public space. This online medium allows dispersed community members, especially urban migrants, to reconnect with their cultural roots on an emotional and imaginative basis.

The Interplay between Identity and Inheritance: The Role of the “She” Theater

The She Ethnic Minority Theatre in Ningde City, as an important architectural carrier, vividly demonstrates spatial integration of ethnic identity and cultural inheritance. The theatre is not only a stage for artistic expression but also a classroom for community education and practice. The theatre’s circular seating, bamboo weaving structure, and landscape-style layout symbolise the local unique worldview and core values of inclusiveness, unity, and inheritance.

Within the architectural space of the theatre, intangible cultural heritage is redesigned, reinterpreted, and transformed. Through rich and engaging performances, art appreciation is transformed into tangible learning experiences and educational practice. Performances such as the “Ancestor Worship Dance”, the “Three-Three Song Festival”, and the “Phoenix Weaving Dance” are not only artistic but also educational. Local residents, learners, and tourists participate in the learning process by appreciating artistic performances, receiving art education, reflecting on the cultural stories and artistic connotations presented on stage, and deeply understanding and experiencing the culture. Through immersive experiences, learners allow cultural knowledge to be experienced, accepted, and inherited through various forms of interaction, strengthening ethnic identity through practice rather than mere talk.

Therefore, the She ethnic theatre serves as a cultural laboratory, becoming a new space where traditional art forms, local education, and community participation converge and are integrated. It transforms static preservation into a dynamic educational practice, enabling learners and the younger generation to understand and internalise their cultural heritage within a modern performance space.

Spatial and Functional Transformation of the “She” Ethnic Minority Theater

Spatial Construction: Visual Reinterpretation and Cultural Symbolism

The architectural design of the She ethnic theatre redefines the space. The stage is no longer merely a performance platform; it carries the functions of cultural output and art education. The spatial form of the theatre draws inspiration from ancestral halls, open courtyards, and circular stages, reflecting continuity in time and space. Materials such as bamboo, wood, and stone are sourced from local forests and quarries, further emphasising the natural and ecological principles of She culture.

The theatre’s interior design incorporates symbolic elements of the She ethnic group, such as tiger totems, phoenixes, and spiral cloud patterns, presented in various forms through textile banners,

stage backdrops, and lighting. These elements are not merely decorations but a symbolic educational language, conveying the unique world view of the She people to the audience through visual immersion. The predominantly blue colour scheme evokes the indigo of She women’s clothing, easily linking the theatre’s style to local traditional cultural characteristics.

The theatre embraces various forms of cooperation, striving to bring in and send out more people to experience the unique She ethnic culture. In addition to formal performances, the theatre hosts workshops, ceremonies, and academic exchanges. This multi-functionality makes it a cultural plaza that integrates education, culture, and tourism. As a landmark, it enhances the village’s visibility and strengthens the villagers’ cultural pride and sense of belonging.

Functional Transformation: From Performance Venue to Cultural-educational Platform

Originally a performance venue for the Ningde She ethnic minority song and dance troupe, the theatre was later renovated and upgraded by the local government in response to the national rural revitalisation strategy and an evolving social situation. The theatre’s functions have been expanded, and it now serves as a multifunctional centre integrating cultural education, tourism, and community governance.

As a “living classroom”, the theatre hosts weekly cultural heritage workshops for students from nearby schools, covering traditional singing, embroidery, and silverware-making. Local artisans collaborate with educators to design experiential modules that allow learners to create handicrafts and participate in rituals. This region-based teaching method ensures that people’s understanding of cultural heritage extends beyond static knowledge to include vivid experiences.

From an economic perspective, the development of the theatre has significantly boosted local cultural tourism and creative industries, improving people’s spiritual and material standards of living. Today, the region has developed hotels, ethnic restaurants, and handicraft markets, forming a comprehensive cultural tourism system that supports local residents’

livelihoods. While attracting tourists through performances, it also boosts the sales of agricultural products and handicrafts. This “performance + production + participation” model creates a virtuous cycle between cultural education and economic revitalisation.

At the level of social function, the theatre, as the centre of local life, integrates leisure, conversation, and discussion, becoming an important venue for social consultation and community connections. Villagers hold wedding celebrations, collective decision-making meetings, and other activities. Community participation facilitates community governance, enhances villagers’ sense of ownership, and improves their autonomy. Therefore, the She ethnic theatre transcends its function as a building, promoting cultural resilience and strengthening the ethnic identity.

Reconstruction of Cultural Identity: Revitalizing Ethnic Confidence

The educational and performance functions of She ethnic theatre help build local ethnic identity, especially among young people. Through participatory performances, the younger generation learns in a fun and engaging way, not only appreciating but also rediscovering their traditional ethnic cultural heritage, thus enhancing their national pride and identity. Many people once thought these traditional cultures were outdated, but after learning and experiencing them, they discovered their shining qualities, viewing them as artistic treasures and resources for building their self-identity.

By transforming traditional cultural customs into artistic performances and using these performances to reinforce educational practices, the theatre effectively illustrates the connection and transmission process between culture, art, and education. Singing ancestral songs, wearing traditional costumes, and participating in rituals in public spaces enhance self-awareness. Performers become cultural educators, and the audience becomes co-learners. This process of learning through performance blurs the lines between art and education, transforming cultural transmission into an active form of self-expression.

Digital recording and live streaming of theatre activities extend the cultural influence of the “She”

ethnic theatre beyond the local area. This identity, realised through digital media, enables cross-regional “She” youth groups (including urban migrants) to reconnect with their homeland and achieve a shared awareness of cultural heritage through technology.

The Integration Mechanism of Space, Function, and Identity

The She ethnic theatre conveys a synergy between its architectural and performance spaces (form), functions (education and tourism), and identity (cultural heritage and a sense of belonging). Its spatial design inherits traditional culture, its artistic performances transform cultural heritage into educational practices, and its social functions connect space to daily life.

The theatre has transformed from a functional and symbolic building into an increasingly vibrant cultural ecosystem. This aligns with the principles of sustainable development and endogenous cultural revitalisation, with the community as both creators and beneficiaries of cultural innovation. The flourishing development of the She Ethnic Minority Theatre relies not only on external funding or administrative resources but also on the initiative of local residents, community participation, and intergenerational exchange, ensuring the authenticity and adaptability of the culture.

Summary

This study demonstrates that the Ningde She Ethnic Minority Theatre is not merely an architectural space but also a crucial material carrier for promoting rural revitalisation through artistic performance, educational practices, and socio-cultural development. Its educational value lies in reviving traditional art as a learning method, its cultural value lies in its tangible and performative identity recognition, and its social value lies in rebuilding community cohesion.

The She Ethnic Minority Theatre offers a new learning paradigm: through local cultural learning, artistic performance, and participatory practice, intangible cultural heritage is absorbed by learners and transformed into a vital, endogenous driving force for personal and community development.

The theatre constructs a cultural ecosystem in which cultural heritage, education, and sustainable economic development coexist. It showcases how local knowledge systems can provide insights into contemporary rural revitalisation education models and offer lessons for the development of other ethnic minority communities in China and around the world.

Discussion

A case study of the Ningde She Ethnic Minority Theater reveals that arts education based on regional characteristics has become a new model and path for promoting rural revitalisation in the new era, which is a new model and path for promoting rural revitalisation. This model integrates education, culture, and community, incorporating tourists, residents, learners, and administrators into a vibrant social ecosystem through immersive experience. The She Ethnic Minority Theatre is a modern educational ecosystem and cultural infrastructure. This innovative teaching method transforms traditional performing arts into interactive teaching practices, effectively stimulating learners' enthusiasm and initiative, enabling them to develop a sense of ethnic identity with ethnic minorities, and enhancing community cohesion and social creativity.

Place-based Arts Education and Cultural Pedagogy

The "She" ethnic minority theatre embodies a place-based education model that emphasises learning rooted in local culture, ecology, and life experiences. Unlike traditional schooling, which often abstracts knowledge from its social context, "She" ethnic minority theatre transforms the place itself into a vibrant classroom. Here, learning is achieved through participatory practices such as singing ancestral songs, making traditional costumes, or performing ritual dances.

The educational model proposed in this study clearly defines the connections and interactions between learners, teachers, and their environment. In this model, elders, artisans, and performers become co-educational disseminators, while learners play the roles of apprentices and cultural inheritors. This transmission model fosters a stronger teacher-learner

relationship and clarifies learners' identities within the community. This model not only preserves traditional culture but also innovatively develops local wisdom into engaging and relevant curriculum content, empowering minority groups to exercise their cultural autonomy and better define and disseminate traditional culture.

Theater as a Cultural-spatial Learning System

From a spatial anthropological perspective, the "She" ethnic theatre embodies a transformation from physical space to cultural space, and ultimately to a learning space. The theatre's architectural style, particularly its circular enclosed space, ancient patterns, and indigo colour scheme, beautifully corresponds to Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) concept of spatial habit: space as a material manifestation of collective values and symbolic order. In this spatial environment, culture is not a static display but rather an immersive experience for learners, allowing for deep engagement, emotional connection, and interaction.

In this sense, theatre is a space that combines performance appreciation with education. Designed with a symmetrical coding approach, it uses local elements and cultural symbols to showcase the She ethnic group's world view. By engaging audiences, residents, and learners in the performance, it fosters interaction, transforming every rehearsal, festival, or public performance into an educational experience. Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience effectively demonstrates that the viewer's understanding stems from creative interaction with the environment and community. Therefore, She ethnic theatre provides a space with a strong sense of belonging, deeply integrating artistic performances with participatory teaching practices.

Cultural Identity, Youth Engagement, and Digital Mediation

This study also demonstrates that drama-based education achieves cultural identity by transforming cultural transmission from passive memorization to active re-creation. Through participation in performances and craft workshops, young people rediscover ancestral traditions and use them as dynamic resources for self-expression. Wenger's

concept of “community of practice” provides a systematic explanation for this approach, arguing that learning is a socialised process rooted in the construction of collective meaning.

The She ethnic group’s theatre case study keeps pace with social and technological developments, utilising digital media technologies and other means to promote and develop its culture within the Internet context. Local young people are learning and using short video and live streaming platforms to extend traditional culture beyond physical space, creating a digital ethnic landscape (Appadurai, 1996). In this digital landscape, cultural identities are constantly being reinterpreted and redefined. Digital communication methods have eliminated geographical realities and generational barriers; traditional culture is no longer outdated or old-fashioned but rather a valuable cultural heritage in the new era. Driven by digitalisation, the cultural charm of the She ethnic group has been revitalised. The effects of digital communication can significantly enhance the influence of She culture on national and international stages. This suggests that when community culture is driven by digital narratives, digital media can become a new form of participatory arts education that combines traditional bodily experiences with contemporary media technologies.

Community Empowerment and Sustainable Rural Revitalization

In She ethnic communities, theatres play a dual role: they are both local economic catalysts and platforms for community governance. By integrating artistic performances, tourism, handicraft workshops, and educational activities, the theatres offer a diverse range of experiences, creating new sources of income while simultaneously strengthening cultural cohesion and promoting outwards cultural dissemination. Sen’s concept of capacity expansion aptly illustrates this view: development refers to enhancing people’s ability to live meaningful lives within their cultural context.

The theatre’s community-participatory management model fosters collaboration among villagers, the local government, and academia. It embodies Chambers’ concept of endogenous development, where rural revitalisation is not imposed

externally but is driven by the community itself. The evolution of She ethnic theatres from “performance venues” to “cultural display and education platforms” reflects a shift in rural governance paradigms: culture is no longer marginalised but is central to sustainable development. Thus, culture is a crucial tool for social innovation.

Educational and Policy Implications

The development model of the She ethnic minority theatre has multifaceted impacts on education. First, the She theatre model emphasises the necessity of integrating educational practice into culture and performance, linking schools with community institutions such as theatres, museums, and cultural heritage centres to establish shared, long-term development goals and jointly promote rural development. Second, the theatre innovatively employs participatory teaching methods, making teaching more vivid and engaging, fostering closer interaction among learners, and enhancing learning effectiveness. Third, the theatre model suggests that teachers should focus on combining theory and practice, especially gaining a deep understanding of local traditional culture and professional knowledge. Ideally, local cultural inheritors should participate in the development of teaching content to ensure accurate presentation of minority culture and ethics.

The development of the She ethnic community requires policy support and guidance. This study advocates interdepartmental cooperation among the education, culture, and tourism departments to implement various policies comprehensively and continuously. For example, establishing a funding framework for “heritage learning” projects can institutionalise and normalise the educational function of rural cultural spaces. Moreover, investing in digital infrastructure, such as community Wi-Fi, digital archives, and bilingual content development, can ensure equitable participation and intergenerational transfer among residents and learners.

Conclusion

The Ningde She Ethnic Minority Theater presents a new regionally based model of arts education, effectively integrating cultural preservation, community learning, and rural revitalisation into a

sustainable social ecosystem. The theatre transforms the traditional performance space into an interactive learning environment, serving as both a centre for art appreciation and cultural exchange and a vibrant and engaging classroom, making the transmission of cultural heritage more experiential, participatory, and relevant to students. This new model of arts education reshapes the identity of the She people, enhancing social cohesion and ethnic identity through hands-on community participation and further promoting local economic development through integration with cultural tourism and creative industries. The fusion of space, art, and education transforms rural revitalisation from simple economic recovery into a process of cultural renewal and community empowerment, providing a replicable model for other ethnic minority regions seeking to balance tradition and modernity within the broader context of sustainable cultural development in China.

While this study provides valuable insights into a new regional arts education model for the Ningde She Ethnic Theatre, its findings are limited by the qualitative sample size, single-case study design, and short fieldwork time, and may not fully reflect the long-term changes or differences among She ethnic communities. Future research should conduct longitudinal and cross-regional comparative studies employing mixed research methods and explore how digital media, intergenerational transmission, and policy mechanisms further shape the educational and cultural functions of ethnic minority theatres in rural revitalisation.

Suggestion

This study demonstrates that the She ethnic group's education model, characterised by regional arts education, is crucial for sustainable cultural development. Schools, cultural institutions, and local governments should collaborate to develop localized curricula, teacher training programs, and experiential learning projects that integrate She performing arts, language, and customs. Simultaneously, a multi-tiered talent development mechanism should be established, including youth clubs, apprenticeships, and professional certifications for cultural inheritors. To further enhance the vitality and influence of She culture, priority should be given to developing

community governance and innovation using digital media. A participatory management committee comprising cultural practitioners, village chiefs, educators, and youth representatives should be established to ensure equitable benefit sharing. Furthermore, integrating digital tools, such as short videos and digital archives, and immersive technologies, such as VR/AR, will open new channels for cultural learning and cross-regional dissemination.

We must adhere to the principle of “protection first”, guiding policy support, promoting the integration of culture and tourism, and strengthening long-term policy support through interdepartmental cooperation. Cultural tourism models should emphasise authentic experiences, small-scale participation, and heritage interpretation rather than commercial performances, ensuring that cultural value is not sacrificed for economic gain. Local governments, universities, and cultural enterprises should work together to build a comprehensive support system that includes funding, infrastructure maintenance, professional consultation, and international exchange platforms so that the She ethnic theatre can become a long-term driving force for cultural revitalisation, educational innovation, and rural revitalisation.

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