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***Research paper***



# The Economic Value of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Tibetan Dance and Tourism in Shangri-La

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**Abstract**

This study explores the economic value of Tibetan dance as an intangible cultural heritage within the tourism economy of Shangri-La, located in the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, China. The objective is to examine the economic impact of preserving and disseminating Tibetan dance in Shangri-La by analyzing its role in promoting cultural tourism. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted between January and April 2024 across various cultural venues, public squares, schools, and festivals. Data collection methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photo documentation, and document analysis. Thirty-seven informants, comprising policymakers, performers, educators, and residents, were purposively selected to provide diverse perspectives. Thematic analysis revealed that Tibetan dance significantly contributes to the local economy in four key areas: its function as a tourist attraction and performance space, its role in employment and community engagement, contributions to education and skill development, and its impact on visitor experience and spending. However, challenges such as cultural commodification and concerns over authenticity were noted, indicating the need for community-led heritage management and policy support. The study concludes that Tibetan dance represents a sustainable model for integrating cultural heritage with economic development, offering insights for similar ethnically diverse and tourism-driven regions. Future research should explore digital preservation strategies and assess long-term socio-cultural impacts of tourism on heritage practices.

***Keywords***: *Tibetan dance, Intangible cultural heritage, Cultural tourism, Shangri-La, Sustainable development.*

## 1. Introduction

In the age of global mobility and cultural commodification, intangible cultural heritage has gained renewed attention for its intrinsic value and potential to drive sustainable economic development. In this context, “economic value” refers to the tangible benefits derived from heritage practices, including income, employment, and tourism-related revenue, within the framework of cultural economics (Meissner, 2021; Wasela, 2023). Among the diverse regions embracing this intersection of culture and economy, Shangri-La, nestled in the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, China, is a prime example. Home to rich Tibetan traditions, the region is renowned for its vibrant folk culture, particularly traditional Tibetan dance, which encapsulates centuries-old customs, religious symbolism, and community identity (Malik, 2024; Tang & Sornyai, 2023). Once confined to spiritual rituals and communal festivals, Tibetan dance has gradually transitioned into a dynamic economic resource, particularly within the growing cultural tourism sector. As travelers increasingly seek authentic, immersive experiences, Tibetan dance has become a centerpiece of cultural tourism in Shangri-La, offering both a window into Tibetan life and a source of sustainable community income (Dickie, 2023; Li et al., 2020; Shmushko, 2023).

Despite this growing visibility, the preservation of Tibetan dance remains challenged by the pressures of commercialization, demographic shifts, and modernization. Traditional forms of transmission, such as oral teaching by elder practitioners, are at risk of being disrupted due to rural outmigration and the declining interest among younger generations (Bouchard & Wike, 2022; Zhang & Moonsuwan, 2025). Concurrently, the rise in tourism has altered how dance is presented: performances are often shortened, stylized, or detached from their original cultural and religious meanings to cater to tourist preferences. While these changes have brought significant economic gains, they raise concerns over the authenticity and sustainability of Tibetan dance as an intangible cultural heritage (Bendix, 2018; Cisneros et al., 2020; Lu & Phanlukthao, 2024; Ping et al., 2024). These tensions highlight a key problem: how can Shangri-La harness the economic potential of Tibetan dance without compromising its cultural integrity?

The central objective of this study is to examine the economic impact of preserving and disseminating Tibetan dance in Shangri-La by analyzing its role in promoting cultural tourism. Through a qualitative case study grounded in fieldwork, interviews, and visual documentation, the research explores how Tibetan dance functions as both a cultural tradition and a marketable asset (Blommaert & Jie, 2020; Glegg, 2019; Olmo-Extremera et al., 2024). It investigates the mechanisms through which dance is preserved and taught, the platforms on which it is performed and shared, and the broader socio-economic benefits it generates for local communities. In doing so, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the balance between heritage conservation and economic development, and the degree to

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which this balance can be sustained in the face of changing market demands (Adanma & Ogunbiyi, 2024 Qu, 2023; Wang & Zheng, 2024).

The significance of this research lies in its interdisciplinary relevance and practical implications. Positioned at the intersection of cultural economics, tourism studies, and heritage management, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, cultural practitioners, and tourism developers (Bendix, 2018; Qiu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Understanding the economic value of traditional practices such as Tibetan dance is critical for regions like Shangri-La, where economic development depends heavily on cultural capital. This study contributes to broader discourses on how intangible heritage can be protected and revitalized through responsible tourism while enhancing local livelihoods (Choedup, 2015; Kinyondo & Magashi, 2017; Wasela, 2023). Furthermore, by documenting and analyzing local practices in Shangri-La, the research adds empirical weight to global conversations about sustainable heritage tourism. It offers a potential model for integrating culture and economy in other ethnically diverse and economically vulnerable regions.

## 2. Literature Review

The intersection of cultural heritage and economic development has become an increasingly important area of inquiry, particularly in regions where traditional practices remain deeply embedded in daily life. As cultural tourism emerges as a viable pathway for sustainable development, scholars have focused on the dual role of intangible cultural heritage as a medium of cultural identity and an economic asset. Tibetan dance, deeply rooted in religious belief and communal tradition, provides a compelling case for examining how heritage can be preserved and monetized simultaneously (Banda et al., 2024; Gaitenidis, 2025; Giglitto et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021). The body of research in this area reflects growing interest in how local traditions can adapt to modern tourism economies without losing their authenticity or social function.

One of the key themes in the literature is the recognition of intangible cultural heritage, such as music, ritual, storytelling, and dance, as both a source of cultural pride and an economic resource. Traditional dance, when presented in a tourism context, becomes a form of cultural capital that can attract visitors seeking immersive, authentic experiences. In regions like Shangri-La, where the tourism industry is increasingly intertwined with local traditions, Tibetan dance is a distinctive attraction that enhances visitor satisfaction and generates revenue (Cisneros et al., 2020; Li, 2024; Song et al., 2018). At the same time, this transformation from sacred tradition to performance art raises critical questions about ownership, representation, and sustainability.

The literature also explores the complex dynamics of commercialization. On one hand, heritage-based tourism can create new employment opportunities, revitalize declining traditions, and foster cross-cultural appreciation. Conversely, there is growing concern about diluting cultural meaning when sacred or community-based performances are modified for commercial consumption. The pressure to adapt traditions to tourist preferences can often lead to shortened performances, altered narratives, or even entirely new choreographies that stray from original forms (Bench, 2019; Mileva & Gesheva, 2025; Surata et al., 2024). Scholars have warned that such practices may contribute to cultural erosion, notably when the voices of local practitioners are excluded from decision-making processes.

Various institutional frameworks have been proposed to address these challenges, including government-led preservation programs, community-based management models, and the integration of heritage education into formal curricula. Digital technologies have also played a growing role in capturing and preserving intangible heritage, offering platforms for documentation, promotion, and online engagement. Recent studies emphasize integrating cultural economics and accounting methods to evaluate the multifaceted benefits of heritage tourism, particularly in preserving identity and enhancing community well-being. For instance, UNESCO's approach to valuing cultural capital aligns with the notion that heritage should be treated as a capital asset, facilitating a sustainability framework akin to natural capital. This perspective is supported by findings that heritage tourism can yield positive outcomes, such as economic gains and cultural rejuvenation, and negative impacts, including community fragmentation and cultural erosion. Moreover, innovative methodologies, including virtual and augmented reality, have enhanced visitor engagement while fostering local community involvement in heritage conservation (Brooks et al., 2023; Shuran et al., 2024). However, the case of Tibetan dance in Shangri-La reveals a unique set of conditions that require deeper examination. Here, dance is a tourist performance and a vital expression of local cultural life. The literature calls for more empirical research that quantifies the economic contributions of such practices, beyond anecdotal or symbolic value (Bastenegar, 2021; Georgios, 2018; Karmaker, 2025; Siliutina et al., 2024). This study responds to that gap by focusing specifically on the measurable economic impact of Tibetan dance in the tourism sector and its role in shaping sustainable regional development.

## 3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate the economic impact of Tibetan dance preservation and dissemination within the context of cultural tourism in Shangri-La. Conducted between January and April 2024, the fieldwork focused on key public spaces, cultural festivals, dance training programs, and tourism-related events (Blommaert & Jie, 2020; Gai et al., 2024; Glegg, 2019; Olmo-Extremera et al., 2024; Qiu et al., 2024). The intent was to observe firsthand how Tibetan dance functions as a cultural asset and economic driver in community and tourism settings.

### 3.1 Data Collection

To capture the complex dynamics of Tibetan dance and its economic implications, the following four data collection methods were employed:

- Participant Observation: Researchers attended and engaged in Tibetan dance events at public squares, schools, and festivals, noting the interactions between performers, community members, and tourists.
- Semi-Structured Interviews: A range of stakeholders were interviewed to gain diverse perspectives on the cultural and economic value of Tibetan dance.
- Photo Documentation: Visual evidence was collected to support findings, and several photographs are presented as figures in the Results section.
- Document Review: Government plans, tourism policies, and cultural preservation initiatives were examined to contextualize the findings.

Following data collection, thematic analysis was applied to identify how Tibetan dance influences tourism-related income, community employment, education, and visitor satisfaction.

### 3.2 Population and Sampling Groups

The study used purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of a diverse range of voices from cultural, governmental, educational, and community sectors. A total of 37 individuals participated in the study, categorized into three groups: key informants, casual informants, and general informants. These participants were selected based on their direct or indirect involvement with Tibetan dance and tourism development in Shangri-La, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Overview of Sampling Groups

| Informant Category | Description |
|---|---|
| 5 Key Informants | Experts in dance education, cultural heritage, and policymaking |
| 14 Casual Informants | Individuals involved in performance, tourism, education, and administration |
| 18 General Informants | Community residents, amateur performers, and domestic and international tourists |

### 3.3 Data Analysis

All collected data, interviews, field notes, photographs, and policy documents were analyzed using thematic coding. The main themes were developed around four economic dimensions:

- Tourism-Related Income: Examining the direct and indirect revenue generated from dance-related tourism activities.
- Community Employment: Analyzing job creation through performances, training programs, and cultural festivals.
- Cultural Education: Assessing the integration of dance into formal and informal educational settings.
- Visitor Satisfaction: Exploring how cultural performances enhance the tourism experience.

By triangulating these qualitative data sources, the study offers a comprehensive view of how intangible cultural heritage, in the form of Tibetan dance, contributes to sustainable economic development through tourism in Shangri-La.

## 4. Results

The findings from the fieldwork conducted in Shangri-La examine how Tibetan dance is an economic asset through its integration with the region's cultural tourism. The analysis focuses on four key areas: its function as a tourist attraction and performance space, its role in employment and community engagement, contributions to education and skill development, and its impact on visitor experience and spending. These findings are drawn from participant observation, informant interviews, and visual documentation.

### 4.1 Dance as a Tourist Attraction

Tibetan dance is a powerful draw for visitors seeking authentic cultural experiences in Shangri-La. From ritual dances to spontaneous community performances, the presence of dance enhances the region's cultural vitality. Field observations confirmed that scheduled dance events are often included in tourist itineraries, drawing crowds to formal and informal venues. Figure 1, which depicts foreign tourists joining a traditional Guozhuang dance, illustrates how these interactive performances captivate and involve international guests.
Designated performance venues, particularly Moonlight Square and Sifang Street, function as cultural stages and key economic nodes. These popular spaces host regular dance events and act as gathering points for tourists and locals. Their strategic placement in urban areas has transformed the surrounding environment into commercial hubs, with nearby restaurants, cafés, boutique hotels, and souvenir shops benefiting from concentrated foot traffic. Field observations noted up to a 30% increase in sales for local businesses on performance nights. These venues also attract food stalls, musicians, and artisans, contributing to a lively atmosphere and multiplier effects within the local economy.



**Fig. 1:** Foreign tourists dancing Guozhuang
**Source:** The Researcher, from fieldwork in February 2024

Such participatory opportunities transform dance from a passive cultural exhibit into an engaging, shared experience. Tourists witness cultural expression and become a part of it, creating memorable moments and fostering deeper cultural appreciation. Interviews with local performers and tourism operators revealed that these events are often monetized through donations, ticket sales, or integration into guided tours, supporting the local economy. Local government officials confirmed the inclusion of these venues in regional tourism policies due to their dual cultural and economic importance. Figures 2, 3, and 4 depict the vibrant performance scenes and spaces in Moonlight Square and Sifang Street, reinforcing their centrality to Shangri-La's cultural tourism infrastructure.



**Fig. 2:** Moonlight square in Dukezong ancient town, Shangri-La City
**Source:** The Researcher, from fieldwork in February 2024



**Fig. 3:** Square dance at Sifang Street in Dukezong Ancient Town
**Source:** The Researcher, from fieldwork in February 2024



**Fig. 4:** Square dance scene
**Source:** The Researcher, from fieldwork in February 2024

## 4.2 Community Participation and Employment

Tibetan dance is a cultural tradition and a source of income for community members. Elderly and youth participate in dance activities during festivals and community events, allowing for intergenerational transmission and creating employment opportunities. Figure 5 captures a vibrant circle dance involving locals and tourists, a typical scene in Shangri-La's public squares during peak tourist seasons.



**Fig. 5:** Tibetan locals and tourists dancing in a circle to the Guozhuang dance
**Source:** The Researcher, from fieldwork in February 2024

For many residents, especially students and part-time workers, participating in dance performances provides supplementary income and fosters a sense of pride and cultural ownership. Artisans and costume makers also benefit from the demand for traditional performance attire. Interviews with residents confirmed that some families rely on income from cultural performances, especially during high-traffic tourism periods. Additionally, these events often coincide with the sale of locally made handicrafts, snacks, and beverages, creating a multiplier effect on the local economy.

### 4.3 Cultural Education and Skill Development

Integrating Tibetan dance into formal and informal education systems reflects its growing role in shaping future employment and cultural identity. Figure 6 captures a moment of interaction between students and a researcher discussing the cultural significance of Tibetan dance. Several schools and community centers have introduced Tibetan dance classes as part of their extracurricular or arts curriculum, aiming to cultivate cultural literacy and performance skills.



**Fig. 6:** Researcher discussing Tibetan dance with students
**Source:** The Researcher, from fieldwork in February 2024

Students enrolled in such programs gain cultural knowledge and acquire practical skills that enhance their employability in the tourism sector. Training programs and workshops led by experienced performers prepare youth for roles as tour guides, dance instructors, or cultural ambassadors. Informants expressed that participating in these programs had increased their confidence and provided them with a more straightforward career path in the local cultural economy. Local education officials emphasized dance education's value in promoting cultural continuity and economic self-reliance among youth.

### 4.4 Experiential Tourism Enhancing Visitor Satisfaction

One of the most significant findings is the shift from passive to experiential tourism. Figure 7 shows tourists actively participating in traditional Tibetan dance as part of a cultural activity. These hands-on experiences are now regularly offered by local tour operators who combine performances with workshops where tourists learn basic dance movements and the cultural stories behind them.



**Fig. 7:** Tourists participating in activities
**Source:** The Researcher, from fieldwork in February 2024

Interviews with tourists highlighted the appeal of these participatory experiences, which provide deeper engagement than typical sightseeing. Such activities often lead to extended stays, higher expenditure, and increased word-of-mouth promotion. Tour operators noted that packages including cultural experiences such as Tibetan dance consistently receive higher satisfaction ratings from tourists. These experiential programs help differentiate Shangri-La from other destinations, enhancing its competitiveness in the tourism market.

Additionally, these activities offer local communities a platform to showcase their heritage in a dignified and self-representative manner. Informants from community cultural centers explained how these programs have helped to rekindle local interest in traditional dance while simultaneously building bridges between cultures. The success of such initiatives has prompted calls for further investment in infrastructure, marketing, and training to support the expansion of experiential tourism.

The economic impact of Tibetan dance in Shangri-La can be understood through multiple dimensions that reflect its integration into the local tourism and cultural ecosystem. Figure 8 summarizes the four major areas Tibetan dance contributes to the regional economy: tourist attraction, community employment, education development, and experiential tourism. These domains encompass direct and indirect economic benefits, including increased visitor spending, income opportunities for performers and artisans, skill-building through educational initiatives, and enhanced visitor engagement that fosters longer stays and repeat visits. This thematic framework highlights how cultural performance preserves heritage and supports sustainable economic development within local communities.

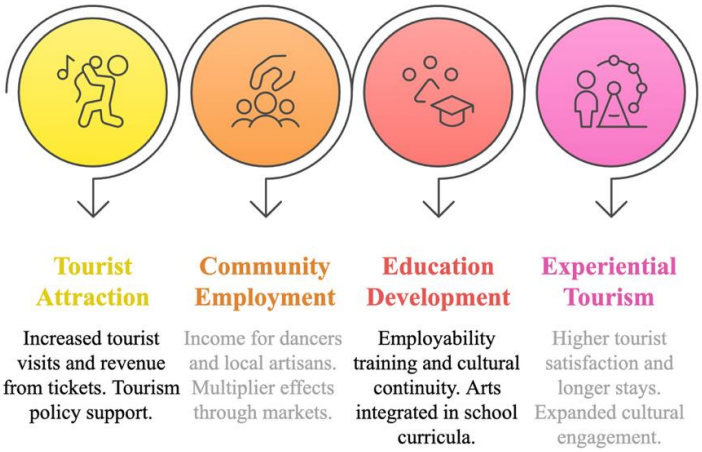



**Fig. 8:** Economic Contributions of Tibetan Dance in Shangri-La

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Tibetan dance in Shangri-La has become a multifaceted driver of cultural tourism and local economic development. Consistent with prior research on intangible cultural heritage as a symbolic and material asset (Meissner, 2021; Kim et al., 2021), the findings show that Tibetan dance contributes directly to income generation, employment, education, and tourism satisfaction. Observational data and stakeholder interviews confirm that Tibetan dance is a means of preserving identity and an interactive heritage experience adapted to meet tourist demand. These findings affirm the dual function of cultural heritage as both a means of safeguarding tradition and a generator of economic value (Giglitto et al., 2022; Wasela, 2023). Additionally, this matches recent updates in cultural economics that highlight how we can evaluate intangible cultural assets using both market measures (like income and jobs) and non-market values such as identity, community strength, and cultural preservation, providing a more complete assessment for heritage policymakers (Zhang & Moonsuwan, 2025).

A key point of convergence with the literature is the commodification of tradition. Like what Bendix (2018) and Cisneros et al. (2020) observed in other cultural tourism contexts, this study finds that transforming Tibetan dance from ritual to stage performance has facilitated economic gain while risking cultural dilution. Dance performances are often shortened, stylized, or recontextualized for commercial appeal, consistent with concerns Mileva and Gesheva (2025) raised about authenticity loss. This underscores the tension between economic incentives and cultural integrity, a trade-off that scholars like Bench (2019) describe as a negotiation between “sacred meaning” and “spectacle.” Rather than viewing commodification as inherently harmful, this study adopts a nuanced position: community-led adaptations of Tibetan dance, such as selectively altering choreography or context, reflect strategic agency in shaping how culture is shared and consumed. This aligns with Bendix’s (2018) notion of "cultural mediation," where authenticity is not fixed but continuously redefined through dialogue between tradition bearers and tourism markets. However, unlike more pessimistic accounts highlighting irreversible erosion, the fieldwork in Shangri-La indicates a dynamic negotiation between tradition and innovation, where communities actively adapt their practices without entirely abandoning cultural significance. This resonates with the work of Bouchard and Wike (2022), who stress the agency of local actors in preserving tradition amid change.

Educational integration of Tibetan dance further reinforces the positive socio-economic role of heritage. Dance instruction in schools and workshops supports cultural learning and employment pathways, an outcome aligned with Georgios' (2018) and Karmaker’s (2025) studies on the value of heritage in shaping youth engagement and vocational opportunities. The linkage between skill development and employment in the cultural sector is promising, suggesting a replicable model for other heritage-rich regions facing youth outmigration and economic vulnerability.

Nonetheless, the commercialization of Tibetan dance is not without contradictions. While increased tourism income benefits many local stakeholders, some informants expressed concern over who controls the narrative and profits of cultural heritage. The literature suggests that equitable governance structures and participatory cultural planning are necessary to avoid exploitative outcomes (Giglitto et al., 2022; Gaitenidis, 2025). This highlights the need for community-led tourism models and government support to ensure fair representation and benefit distribution.

The dynamics observed in Shangri-La reflect a broader global challenge faced by heritage-rich tourism regions, such as Bali and Rajasthan, where the interplay between economic development and cultural preservation is evident. In Bali, cultural tourism has generated economic benefits but has also led to the commercialization of sacred ceremonies, altering traditional practices and risking cultural dilution (Surata et al., 2024). Similarly, Rajasthan's folk dances, staged for tourists, create income yet prompt concerns over the erosion of ritual meaning (Wasela, 2023). Both cases illustrate the tension between commodification and authenticity, as tourism often necessitates a constructed cultural reality that caters to tourist expectations while attempting to maintain local identity.

In conclusion, the study affirms that Tibetan dance is a potent symbol of identity and a viable economic asset in Shangri-La's cultural tourism landscape. The results support theoretical claims that intangible cultural heritage can simultaneously sustain cultural memory and promote economic development when managed responsibly (Qiu et al., 2022; Choedup, 2015). The study contributes to ongoing debates about the balance between heritage conservation and economic utility, proposing that authenticity can be maintained through community negotiation rather than rigid preservationist models. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of cultural tourism on community well-being and heritage authenticity, investigate digital preservation strategies (Siliutina et al., 2024), and conduct comparative studies with other minority regions undergoing similar transformations. Studies should integrate quantitative approaches, such as economic impact assessments, visitor spending surveys, and time-series analysis of tourism revenue, to complement qualitative insights. In addition, digital preservation technologies, such as blockchain-based certification for dance practices, may help protect heritage authenticity while facilitating wider dissemination. Lastly, cultural accounting frameworks, such as satellite accounts for culture, can support more rigorous

tracking of tangible and intangible economic benefits over time. Sustainable cultural tourism must balance economic benefit and cultural integrity, a challenge that requires continuous dialogue among stakeholders, researchers, and local communities.

## 6. Ethical Considerations

This study fully adhered to ethical research standards, emphasizing informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and participant confidentiality. All informants voluntarily participated, with verbal consent obtained before interviews and observations. Identities were anonymized to protect privacy. The researcher respected local customs, ensuring that interactions during dance events and festivals were non-intrusive and community-approved. No cultural practices were misrepresented or exploited.

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