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Sports+Empowering Rural Revitalization: Research on the Living Inheritance of Yunnan Ethnic Traditional Sports and Rural Spatial Production: A Spatial Production Theory Perspective

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Abstract: China's rural revitalization policy has put sport to work as a development tool, but we still know surprisingly little about what sport actually does to the places where it is used. This paper looks at Yunnan, where ethnic minority communities have practiced traditional sports for generations, and asks how these practices shape the production of rural space. We draw on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and on fieldwork carried out between March 2023 and August 2024 in three sites: Shilin Yi Autonomous County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, and Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. Combining participant observation, 87 semi-structured interviews, and spatial documentation, we trace how each site produces space through spatial practice, institutional representations, and lived experience. Four mechanisms recur across the three cases, though in different combinations: ritual and recreational space become fused; embodied cultural practice is turned into a commodity; sports events connect communities across ethnic lines and across borders; and transmission spaces keep knowledge moving between generations. These mechanisms give villages a way to build spatial identities that hold out against homogenization, but they come with costs, above all the tension between commercialization and cultural authenticity. We argue that spatial production theory, rarely used in sports research, helps make sense of these trade-offs, and we draw out what the findings mean for protecting intangible cultural heritage within revitalization programs.

Keywords: Sports+; Rural Revitalization; Ethnic Traditional Sports; Spatial Production; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Yunnan; Lefebvre; Living Inheritance.

1. Introduction

Rural revitalization has been a national priority in China since 2017, and one question running through the policy debate is which local assets can drive development without erasing local distinctiveness. Sport has emerged as one candidate. The "Sports+" (Tiyu+) initiative treats sport as more than facilities and competitions: it asks sport to work together with tourism, cultural heritage, education, and health promotion, so that investment in one area carries the others along[1].

No province in China offers a better setting for this question than Yunnan. Twenty-five of the country's 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities live there, and their traditional sports — Yi wrestling and bullfighting, Dai dragon boat racing, Lusheng dancing, to name a few — have been practiced for centuries under very different ecological and social conditions[2]. These are not simply games. Each carries an entire cultural system: history, cosmology, social organization, and practical knowledge about the local environment[3].

What happens to rural space when traditional sports are mobilized for development? We approach this through three questions. How do these practices produce and reproduce space in the villages where they are held? What spatial changes follow when they become development resources? And how do villagers themselves deal with the pressure to commercialize what was once primarily a communal activity?

Most research on rural sport in China has asked instrumental questions — does it raise incomes, does it improve health — and has paid little attention to space[4]. Spatial production theory, meanwhile, has been applied widely to cities and, more recently, to rural tourism, but it has rarely been brought into conversation with sports research, especially in ethnic minority areas[5]. As a result, we lack a language for describing what happens to the physical and symbolic organization of a village when a wrestling ground becomes a ticketed venue.

We use Henri Lefebvre's production of space as that language. The study asks how the living inheritance of ethnic traditional sports produces rural space along the three dimensions of Lefebvre's triad — spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space)[6] — and it does so through three case studies chosen to cover different ethnic groups, landscapes, and development models.

The paper contributes in four ways, though the boundaries between them are loose. It connects sports research, heritage studies, and spatial theory, a combination that has been rare so far. It grounds the argument in three field sites in one of China's most diverse provinces. It names the specific mechanisms through which traditional sports reshape settlements, mechanisms that practitioners can actually work with. And it does not look away from the contradictions: heritage used as a development resource is heritage under pressure.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Spatial Production Theory and Rural Space

Henri Lefebvre published The Production of Space in 1974, and its central claim — that "(social) space is a (social) product" — still unsettles assumptions most of us make without noticing[6]. Space is not a container that social life happens to fill; it is made by social relations, and once made, it turns around and structures those relations[29]. Geographers, sociologists, planners, and anthropologists have all put the theory to work, and rural studies has taken it up more recently[7].

The book's best-known tool is the spatial triad. Spatial practice is perceived space: the material space of routine, work, and daily movement. Representations of space are conceived space: the orderly versions of space produced by planners, officials, and experts, backed by institutional power. Representational spaces are lived space: space as inhabitants actually experience it, thick with symbolism and memory[6,8]. The three are moments of one process, not three kinds of place, which is what makes them useful for fieldwork: each can be observed, and the friction between them is where the interesting things happen. Recent empirical work has applied the same triad to public space with comparable three-dimensional operationalizations[28].

Rural researchers came to this framework later than urban ones, but the fit is good. A village is no more a fixed backdrop than a city is, and both are being remade by policy, capital, and everyday practice[9]. Cloke showed early on how the countryside was packaged as a commodity for urban consumers[10]. Halfacree then gave the field a workable three-part scheme — rural locality, representations of the rural, and everyday rural lives — that maps closely onto Lefebvre's triad and has been widely used since[11].

In China, the production of space has become a common lens for studying village change, especially where urbanization and tourism arrive quickly[12,13]. Song and Kim's comparison of traditional villages across several regions identified six properties — local distinctiveness, experiential narrativity, collective practicality, resilient regeneration, cultural symbolism, and shared connectivity — that help explain why some villages absorb commercial pressure better than others[12].

2.2. Ethnic Traditional Sports as Living Heritage

"Living inheritance" (huotai chuancheng) has become the governing idea in Chinese intangible cultural heritage policy, and it marks a real change in thinking[27]. The older model kept heritage behind glass; the newer one insists that intangible heritage — traditional sports included — survives only if people keep practicing it, so conservation has to mean integration into contemporary life[14,15].

Yunnan's traditional sports make a strong case for this model, if only because of scale. Yi Yong-jun's inventory counted more than 400 distinct activities among the province's minorities, from wrestling and horse racing to archery, dragon boat racing, and various dance-sport forms[2]. What they share is a tight fit with local life: a distinct ethnic character, strong regional belonging, long histories, and several jobs done at once — exercise, entertainment, social contact, cultural expression[16].

Their importance goes well beyond recreation. Techniques, rituals, and settings store knowledge — about the cosmos, about the local ecology, about history and social rules[3]. The Yi Torch Festival makes the point: wrestling, bullfighting, horse racing, and communal dance all sit inside an agricultural ritual cycle that expresses Yi cosmology and holds the community together[17,18]. Dai dragon boat racing works similarly, embedding Buddhist cosmology, water worship, and community governance in a competitive event[19].

2.3. Sports+ Policy and Rural Development

Sports+ is the most systematic attempt yet to put sport to work for rural development in China. It grew out of the convergence of national sports policy with the rural revitalization strategy, and it explicitly encourages sport to merge with agriculture, tourism, culture, and education[1,20]. The policy documents are notable for one thing: they acknowledge that rural sport, particularly in ethnic minority areas, has cultural qualities that development can use — and they assume preservation and development will reinforce each other.

This is not how rural sports policy always read. Between 1949 and 1977, sport in the countryside was framed as serving production and defense — physical training for labor capacity and military readiness[21]. The reform era gradually widened the frame, adding cultural and equity concerns. Sports+ goes further by naming sport a development catalyst in its own right[1].

For all its policy prominence, Sports+ has been studied surprisingly little. What exists is mostly quantitative — participation rates, facilities built, revenue generated — and says little about what the initiatives do to the look, meaning, and use of village space[4]. That gap is widest for ethnic traditional sports, where preservation, commerce, and spatial change collide.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Table 1. Conceptual framework: the spatial triad applied to ethnic traditional sports and rural revitalization

Spatial Dimension	Analytical Focus	Key Questions	Indicator Categories
Spatial Practice (Perceived Space)	Material practices and spatial configurations	How do traditional sports practices physically organize and transform rural spaces?	Infrastructure, land use, activity patterns, participation structures
Representations of Space (Conceived Space)	Institutional codifications and planning discourses	How do policy, planning, and market logics conceptualize and codify traditional sports spaces?	Policy frameworks, planning documents, marketing representations, commodification strategies
Representational Spaces (Lived Space)	Experiential dimensions and symbolic appropriations	How do local inhabitants experience, symbolize, and appropriate traditional sports spaces?	Emotional attachments, symbolic meanings, identity construction, everyday practices

To analyze these collisions we combine spatial production theory with heritage studies and sports development research, and we organize the analysis around the triad. Table 1 sets out the framework: each dimension of the triad is matched with an analytical focus, guiding questions, and indicator categories relevant to traditional sports.

The point of the framework is to force attention onto the relationships among material change, institutional ordering, and lived experience, rather than treating any one of them as the whole story. It also gives us a way to locate contradictions — above all the one between what commercialization demands and what authenticity requires.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

We chose a multiple case study design because the question — how space is produced around traditional sports — cannot be answered by measuring a few variables. Case study logic suits process questions: it lets institutional change, physical transformation, and lived experience be examined together, in context, and it allows theory to be refined against evidence rather than merely illustrated[22].

3.2. Case Selection

Three sites were selected on purpose, not randomly, to cover a range of situations: Shilin, Dali, and Xishuangbanna differ in ethnic composition, dominant sports, tourism intensity, and landscape. All three had active programs linking traditional sports to development, and all three could be reached for repeated fieldwork. The main characteristics of the three sites are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of the three case sites

Site	Ethnic Group	Primary Sports Activities	Development Model	Tourism Intensity
Shilin Yi Autonomous County	Yi (Sani branch)	Wrestling, bullfighting, torch festival games, horse racing	Heritage tourism + festival economy	High
Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture	Bai	Rattle stick dance, dragon boat racing, Raosanling festival sports	Cultural ecotourism + community development	Medium
Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture	Dai	Dragon boat racing, peacock dance-sport, martial arts, water festival games	Ethnic tourism + transboundary cultural exchange	Medium-High

3.3. Data Collection

Fieldwork ran over eighteen months, from March 2023 to August 2024. We used four methods, chosen because each picks up a different dimension of the triad:

Semi-structured in-depth interviews: We talked with 87 people in total — 32 village residents and sports practitioners, 24 government and heritage-administration staff, 18 tourism business operators, and 13 scholars and coaches. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, in Mandarin or in local languages with translation where needed.

Participant observation: We attended 14 sports events — wrestling meets, bullfighting tournaments, dragon boat races, and festivals — and took field notes on how space was arranged and used: where people gathered, how audiences moved, what happened where and in what order.

Document analysis: We collected policy documents, planning reports, tourism strategies, heritage registration files, and promotional material. These show how institutions conceive the spaces, a dimension we could not get at through observation alone.

Spatial documentation: We photographed venues, sketched maps, and logged GPS tracks around sports grounds to record configurations, land use, and movement patterns on the ground.

3.4. Data Analysis

Analysis moved back and forth between the data and the framework. We began with deductive codes taken from the three triad dimensions but allowed unanticipated codes to emerge, following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure[23]. Field notes, transcripts, and documents were coded together, and the three cases were then compared to separate what generalizes from what is site-specific [24].

4. Results

4.1. Spatial Practice: Material Transformation of Rural Space

The three sites have been changed by traditional sports in ways that are unmistakable but quite different from each other. We take the three dimensions of the triad in turn, then compare mechanisms across cases.

Shilin shows the most concentrated transformation. The Torch Festival and its wrestling and bullfighting have been commercialized heavily, and the county has built infrastructure to match: a permanent wrestling arena with seating for 3,000, dedicated bullfighting stadiums, and festival performance plazas. Land that used to grow crops or serve as threshing ground now hosts ticketed events.

Land use around the venues has shifted accordingly. About 12 hectares of farmland near the village have gone to tourism uses since 2015 — parking, souvenir markets, small hotels. Villagers are ambivalent, and said so. One elderly wrestling instructor put it plainly: "The wrestling ground used to be the village threshing floor, where everyone gathered naturally. Now it is a stadium with ticket booths and seating areas. The wrestling is still here, but the space has become different[25]."

Dali took a different route. Rather than one flagship venue, several villages have built small facilities for rattle stick dance and dragon boat activity. The pattern is dispersed, which reflects both lower tourist pressure and a deliberate policy choice favoring community-scale development over centralized commercialization.

Xishuangbanna's configuration is shaped by the Dai people's cultural ties to Tai communities in Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. Dragon boat facilities line the Lancang (Mekong) River, forming a string of connected riverside venues rather than a single hub. Space here is produced as a network.

4.2. Representations of Space: Institutional Codification and Commodification

Turning from practice to representation: policies, plans, and marketing materials each contain particular versions of what these sports spaces are for. We read these as conceived space and looked at how they mediate between what happens on the ground and what development logic expects.

Policy documents speak of traditional sports as resources (ziyuan). The Yunnan Provincial Sports Bureau's Sports+ implementation guidelines, for example, call them "valuable cultural resources with significant development potential" that tourism can "activate"[26]. Framing heritage as a resource sounds neutral, but it quietly makes economics the default lens.

Registration and classification systems codify these spaces in a second way. Intangible cultural heritage registration demands a fixed record — origins, technical specifications, performance contexts, transmission lineages — and the record becomes the authoritative version. Informants were blunt about the side effect: the process, several said, has produced "frozen" versions of their sports.

Marketing selects for spectacle. Promotional material for the Shilin Torch Festival shows wrestling and bullfighting at their most dramatic and largely leaves out the agricultural rituals and ancestral observances that used to precede them. The conceived space of the festival, in other words, is smaller than the lived one.

4.3. Representational Spaces: Lived Experience and Symbolic Appropriation

The third dimension is the hardest to observe but the one villagers talked about most: what these spaces mean to the people who use them daily, and how they hold onto that meaning as the surroundings change.

Attachment to sports spaces runs deep even where transformation has been drastic. Older residents in particular link the venues to memory — community gatherings, rituals, learning from parents and grandparents. A 78-year-old former champion in Shilin called the wrestling ground "the heart of our village": "even when the stadium was built and everything became commercial, the old people still gather there in the mornings. The space remembers us, and we remember it[25]."

These spaces also do identity work, which matters in a society where minority cultures are often marginal. Young wrestlers in Shilin describe what they do in terms of pride and continuity. "When I wrestle, I am Sani," a 19-year-old competitor told us. "This is our space, our tradition. Even with all the tourists watching, we know this belongs to us[25]."

We also found quieter forms of negotiation. In Dali, women who perform rattle stick dance for tourists keep a separate, uncommercialized version for village ritual occasions — two versions of the practice, in the same place, on different days. One venue, two spaces.

4.4. Spatial Production Mechanisms

Stepping back from the three cases, we can name four mechanisms that recur, though with different strengths in each site (Table 3).

Ritual-recreational spatial fusion. In all three sites, ritual and recreation occupy the same ground: religious observance, agricultural ritual, and ancestor commemoration share space with competition and entertainment. The result is multifunctional space — sacred, social, and economic at once.

Commodification of embodied cultural practices. Once a sport becomes an economic resource, its space is pulled into market circuits — tickets, viewing fees, sponsorship, and the businesses that cluster around venues. This changes not only who can enter but what the place is for.

Inter-ethnic spatial connectivity. Large events connect local communities to outsiders: officials, media, investors, and — in Xishuangbanna — participants from across the Mekong region. Dragon boat racing there produces genuinely transboundary space.

Generational spatial continuity. Training areas, preparation spaces, and the informal spots around formal venues are where transmission happens: elders demonstrating, youth practicing. These in-between spaces turned out to matter as much as the arenas themselves.

Table 3. Cross-case comparison of spatial production mechanisms

Mechanism	Shilin (Yi)	Dali (Bai)	Xishuangbanna (Dai)
Ritual-recreational fusion	High (Torch Festival integration)	Medium (separate ritual/performance)	High (Water Festival integration)
Commodification	Intensive (ticketed events)	Moderate (voluntary donations)	Moderate (sponsored events)
Inter-ethnic connectivity	National tourism	Regional tourism	Transboundary (Mekong region)
Generational continuity	Moderate (ICH training programs)	Strong (village-based transmission)	Moderate (school programs)

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

For theory, the triad earns its keep: it let us describe sports-based rural development in one vocabulary across three very different sites, and the moments where the three dimensions disagreed with each other were exactly where the interesting findings sat. Material, institutional, and experiential spaces never quite align, and the misalignment is not noise — it is the mechanism.

The study also extends spatial production theory into territory it has rarely visited. Applications of the theory in rural research have mostly concerned agriculture, tourism, and conservation[9,12,13]. Sport, we found, produces space through performance and the body, which gives the process a rhythm and a visibility that static heritage forms do not have.

There is also a lesson for heritage studies. If living inheritance is a spatial process — and our evidence says it is — then safeguarding cannot stop at registering techniques and naming bearers. The settings matter: a wrestling style preserved on paper but displaced from the ground where it was learned is not, in the lived sense, preserved.

5.2. Tensions and Contradictions

The tensions are not side effects; they are built into the model. The deepest one is between commercialization and authenticity. Commodification brings money that can fund preservation, but it also rebuilds the spatial context — stands, gates, commercial zones. In Lefebvre's terms, exchange value

starts to crowd out use value, and the tourist gaze reorganizes the venue around spectatorship [6]. Recent tourism research has identified such cultural distortion as a distinct risk category at destinations undergoing rapid commercialization [30].

Access stratification follows. Once entry depends on purchasing power, the people with the deepest historical claim to these spaces — elders, knowledge holders, poorer households — can find themselves outside what they built. Whatever sport once did for communal cohesion is weakened accordingly.

5.3. Policy Implications

What follows for policy? First, heritage protection for traditional sports has to mean more than listing the practices. Transmission is tied to place, so protection should cover the grounds, festival routes, and gathering sites that make performance possible[14].

Second, villagers need to be inside spatial planning, not just consulted after decisions. Venue siting, commercial development, event formats — communities that co-decide these manage to keep development aligned with local priorities.

Third, the Dali arrangement deserves attention: parallel commercial and non-commercial versions of a practice, sharing one site. It is imperfect, but it lets a community engage the market without letting the market define the practice.

Fourth, event-driven connectivity is an asset in its own right. The cross-border networks that dragon boat racing sustains in Xishuangbanna should be treated as infrastructure-worthy, not as decoration on a tourism spreadsheet.

6. Conclusion

We set out to understand how the Sports+ initiative empowers rural revitalization by examining what ethnic traditional sports do to rural space. The short answer: they remake it. Across Shilin, Dali, and Xishuangbanna, sport has altered physical landscapes, drawn new institutional maps over them, and continued to carry memory and identity for the people who live there.

Four mechanisms organize the process: ritual-recreational fusion, commodification of embodied practice, inter-ethnic connectivity, and generational continuity. They combine differently in each site, but all four appear everywhere, which suggests they are worth looking for in other settings too.

None of this is cost-free. The same commercialization that funds preservation can hollow out the practices being preserved; access stratifies; generational change cuts both ways. The villages we studied navigate these tensions daily — policy should at least not make the navigation harder.

6.1. Limitations

Several caveats apply. One province, three sites: generalization to other ethnic minority regions is limited. Eighteen months is long enough to see processes but not their outcomes. We concentrated on public, visible sports; private or restricted practices may work differently. And interviews through translators inevitably lose some nuance.

6.2. Future Research

The natural next step is comparison: other ethnic minority regions of China, and neighboring countries with similar traditions, would test the framework's reach. Longitudinal work would show whether the four mechanisms survive policy and tourism cycles. Gender needs its own study, since the costs and benefits of these spaces are unlikely to be evenly shared. Finally, the ecological dimension — these sports depend on specific environments — connects this research to sustainability questions we have only touched.

Traditional sports will keep being pulled into revitalization programs, because they work: they gather people, attract visitors, and carry identity. The argument of this paper is that how they are pulled in matters. Space is where the costs and benefits become visible, and spatial production theory gives both researchers and planners a way to see them.

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