

# Research on Holistic and Systematic Protection of Folk Activities during Lantern Festival in Ganjiang River Basin under the Perspective of Linear Cultural Heritage

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**Abstract.** As a vital tributary of the middle and lower Yangtze River, the Gan River traverses Jiangxi Province from north to south, connecting historic cities like Ganzhou, Ji'an, and Nanchang to form a distinctive "linear cultural heritage" spatial pattern. The traditional Lantern Festival celebrations in the basin integrate diverse cultural elements including rituals, performances, competitions, and culinary traditions, embodying the collective memory and regional identity of local communities. However, accelerated urbanization, modern lifestyle pressures, and the fragmented approach to intangible cultural heritage preservation have led to challenges such as ritual simplification and transmission gaps in some traditional practices. By examining the Lantern Festival through the lens of linear cultural heritage, exploring comprehensive and systematic preservation strategies not only provides theoretical references for coordinated heritage protection in the basin but also offers a vivid case study for cultural innovation within the Yangtze River Economic Belt.

**Keywords:** Linear Cultural Heritage; Ganjiang River Basin; Lantern Festival; Holistic Protection; Systematic Protection.

## 1. Introduction

As a vital category in cultural heritage studies, linear cultural heritage has emerged as a focal point in international conservation and research due to its unique ability to transcend geographical boundaries while preserving historical continuity. The concept traces its origins to the late 20th century, evolving into a systematic framework through theoretical developments like "cultural routes" and "heritage corridors." In 1987, UNESCO designated the "Camino de Santiago de Compostela" as a World Heritage Site, marking the first explicit recognition of linear heritage's significance. The 1994 draft of the "Charter for Cultural Routes" formally defined "cultural routes" as "linear assemblies of tangible and intangible cultural traces left by human migration, trade, and religious dissemination." Since the 21st century, terms such as "heritage corridors," "linear heritage [1]," and "cultural landscape belts" have proliferated, though their names differ, all referring to clusters of cultural heritage demonstrating spatiotemporal continuity [2] and multidimensional value. In Chinese academic discourse, Wang Jinghui (2002) pioneered the concept of "linear cultural heritage," defining it as "linear or [3] belt-like cultural remains spanning specific regions under particular historical conditions." [1] Scholar Shan Jixiang (2009) further emphasized its "dynamic nature and living transmission characteristics," asserting that linear cultural heritage encompasses not only physical remains but also intangible elements like folk customs and traditional crafts. [1] Scholars like Zhou Xiaofeng have further posited: "In essence, linear cultural heritage constitutes not only a specific heritage category but also a comprehensive conservation philosophy and methodology, encompassing distinctive heritage tourism models." [2] corridors, and national cultural parks, forming a systematic network that integrates natural and cultural elements while preserving tangible and intangible heritage. In tourism development, linear cultural heritage resonates with cultural routes, scenic paths, and heritage trails, enabling scenic routes to effectively utilize heritage resources along their courses, thereby creating a virtuous cycle between conservation and tourism. Through the integration of cultural routes, heritage corridors, and scenic paths, this approach establishes a holistic conservation philosophy.

However, current research still reveals a series of issues that cannot be overlooked. Most studies remain focused on individual sites or specific nodes, lacking a holistic and systematic understanding of heritage value. This is particularly evident in linear cultural heritage spanning administrative regions, where varying conservation standards and measures across different areas severely hinder the advancement of comprehensive and systematic protection efforts. Given this context, establishing a unified conceptual framework for holistic value cognition has become a foundational research priority and essential support for promoting integrated preservation of linear cultural heritage. The folk Lantern Festival activities in the Gan River Basin also exemplify this need.

## **2. Linear Cultural Connotation of Folk Activities in Ganjiang River Basin during Yuanxiao Festival**

As the mother river of Jiangxi Province, the Gan River Basin has nurtured a rich cultural heritage of Lantern Festival traditions. From the swaying lantern shadows at Nanchang's Tengwang Pavilion to the Nuo dance parades in Ji'an's Meipo Ancient Village, from the Hakka Lantern Festival celebrations in Ganzhou's Songcheng to the fireworks festivities in Yichun's Wanzai, these living traditions have become vital bonds maintaining regional cultural identity. However, in the digital age, traditional folk customs face challenges such as aging participants, limited dissemination methods, and insufficient innovation. The rapid development of artificial intelligence technology offers new possibilities for the creative transformation of these traditions. Originating in the Tang and Song dynasties and evolving through the Ming and Qing periods, the core function of the Gan River Basin's Lantern Festival has transformed from its original purpose of "expelling evil and attracting blessings" to "community cohesion." Its cultural essence can be summarized in three aspects.

### **2.1 Spatial Distribution of Watershed Correlation**

The folk traditions of the Gan River basin during the Lantern Festival exhibit a spatial pattern characterized by "the main stream as the axis and tributaries extending outward." In the upper reaches of Ganzhou, the Hakka lantern displays stand out, such as Yudu County's "Tea Basket Lantern" which blends agricultural rituals with migration memories. The midstream Jishan area features grand "Luling Temple Fairs," while Taihe County's "Centipede Lantern" connects coastal villages through water performances. The lower reaches of Nanchang and Jiujiang, influenced by Gan-Po culture, showcase folk customs like "Stool Dragon" and "Lotus-Picking Boat" that blend water village characteristics with urban street life. Along the tributaries Yuan River and Xinjiang, village traditions such as Yichun's "Three Stars Drum" and Shangrao's "Bridge Lantern" interact with the main stream's folk customs through commercial exchanges. Cultural phenomena like the Nuo dance and ancestral temple rituals exemplify this tradition. The "Bamboo Horse Dance" in Nanfeng Nuo, performed through masked rituals to ward off evil and seek blessings, profoundly reflects reverence for nature and ancestors. In Ganzhou's ancestral temple ceremonies, the "Three Sacrifices Offering" ritual expresses devotion to deities through specific sacrificial combinations. These practices not only embody ancient people's awe of supernatural forces but also internalize the "harmony between heaven and humanity" cosmology into regional cultural DNA through intergenerational rituals. In Ji'an's Meipo Ancient Village, intricate Nuo opera mask carvings and calligraphic couplets in ancestral halls create symbolic intertextuality, collectively forming a "divinity-ancestry-humanity" spiritual trinity. During the Lantern Festival blessings in Yichun's Wanzai area, villagers parade with custom "blessing lanterns" adorned with Bagua patterns and New Year prayers, expressing both reverence for natural laws and hopes for family prosperity and bountiful harvests. This ritualization of abstract beliefs into tangible activities strengthens community cohesion while subtly perpetuating the cultural identity and historical memory that bind its members across generations.

## 2.2 Historical Stratification of Cultural Connotation

From a historical perspective, folk traditions preserve cultural memories across different eras. The "Nuo ritual for warding off evil" from the Pre-Qin period (symbolized by the bronze masks in Xingan County's modern Nuo dance) and the "joint celebration by officials and commoners" during the Han-Tang dynasties (originating from Tang Dynasty Buddhist rituals at Nanchang's Shengjin Pagoda Temple Fair) exemplify this heritage. The Song-Yuan period's "immigrant integration" saw Hakka ancestors blend Central Plains lantern art with indigenous shamanic practices, while the Ming-Qing era's "merchant guild culture" thrived through Linjiang Town's "Medicine Guild Temple Fair," which facilitated the spread of folk crafts. These cultural layers have been preserved through Lantern Festival activities, forming a "living historical text" that continues to thrive.

Among these, lantern artistry serves as the core medium of Lantern Festival traditions. Ji 'an's "Carp Lantern" and Ganzhou's "Tea-Picking Lantern" integrate bamboo weaving, paper-cutting, and painting techniques, with their designs deeply rooted in folk tales like "Carp Leaping the Dragon Gate" and "Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea". These lanterns not only dazzle with vibrant colors and diverse forms but also reveal the artisans' ingenuity and profound understanding of traditional culture in every detail. For instance, Ji 'an's "Carp Lantern" symbolizes auspiciousness and progress through its lively carp design, where intricate paper-cutting techniques recreate the fish's scales, preserving its vitality while adding unique artistic charm. Ganzhou's "Tea-Picking Lantern" ingeniously incorporates tea-picking scenes into its design, blending painting and bamboo weaving to vividly portray farmers' hard work, allowing viewers to appreciate the lanterns while immersing themselves in the rich rural atmosphere and cultural heritage. Nanchang's "Lotus Lantern" skillfully employs silk binding and candlelight projection technology to transform the moral image of "remaining untainted despite mud" into a tangible visual symbol. Pingxiang's "Rice Ear Lantern" uses three-dimensional woven rice ears and golden decoration to vividly depict the agricultural civilization's yearning for harvest. These lanterns not only carry cultural memories through craftsmanship aesthetics but also construct a philosophical realm of "harmony between heaven and humanity" through dynamic parades and spatial narratives. Wuyuan's "Board Dragon Lantern" features a hundred-joint dragon procession through streets, with its scales layered with colored paper, creating a flowing river of light under moonlight and candlelight. This not only echoes the auspicious meaning of "the dragon moving majestically" but also strengthens regional identity through collective lantern dance rituals.

## 2.3 The Shared Nature of Folk Symbols in the River Basin

Despite significant regional variations, the basin shares common cultural symbols: lanterns serve as central carriers, with "dragon lanterns" symbolizing ethnic unity upstream and "fish lanterns" representing bountiful harvests downstream. Rituals typically follow three phases—"inviting deities, processions, and sending off deities"—reflecting the philosophy of "harmony between heaven and humanity." Musical melodies are rooted in the Gan dialect, with southern Jiangxi's "Xingguo Mountain Songs" and central Jiangxi's "Ji'an Tea-Picking Opera" mutually inspiring each other during Lantern Festival performances. These shared symbols form the "implicit bonds" of cultural identity within the basin. Traditional activities like the "Hundred Families Feast," "Lantern Riddle Guessing," "Eating Yuanxiao," and "Drinking San Deng Wine" serve not only as festive entertainment but also as social glue. The "Hundred Families Feast" breaks down family barriers through shared cuisine, bringing neighbors together at tables to strengthen emotional connections. "Lantern Riddle Guessing" sparks community interaction through collective puzzle-solving, fostering a relaxed atmosphere of knowledge sharing. All ages participate, enhancing communication and reinforcing community bonds through the riddle-solving process. The round shape of "Eating Yuanxiao" symbolizes reunion, reinforcing the "sharing the same river" cultural identity during communal dining. "Drinking San Deng Wine" uses alcohol as a medium to resolve daily conflicts during post-processional gatherings, achieving

emotional reconciliation through shared drinking rituals. Together, these elements create a community network of "people united by customs," elevating Lantern Festival activities beyond mere celebrations to tangible expressions of regional cohesion.

### **3. Existing Problems of Folk Activities in Ganjiang River Basin during Yuanxiao Festival**

The Gan River basin in Jiangxi Province is renowned for its vibrant folk traditions. Through centuries of interaction with rivers and seas, the region has developed diverse seasonal festivals rooted in water culture, such as the Lantern Festival and Dragon Boat Festival. These celebrations have nurtured the growth of musical genres including wind and percussion music, folk songs, and traditional operas, accumulating a rich legacy of folk art. These traditional musical forms have endured and flourished precisely [4] because they embody folk rituals. As the ancient text states: their essence [5] of public sentiment and collective aspirations. The Jiangxi people's profound reverence for water, deeply rooted in the region's mountainous terrain and dense waterways, is vividly reflected in their folk beliefs. Along the Gan River, temples like Xuzhenjun (True Lord of the River), Shuifu Laoye (Lord of the Water Palace), Chujun (Heir Apparent) Temple, Xianniang (Immortal Maiden) Temple, and Longwang (Dragon King) Temple dot the landscape. The ritual music accompanying these beliefs naturally exhibits remarkable diversity. As noted: "Undoubtedly, the 'field'—a cultural space where music emerges—plays a crucial role in shaping musical meaning." Here, 'field' specifically refers to river basins, corridors, and passages. However, years of field research have revealed three major challenges facing the Lantern Festival traditions in the Gan River basin.

#### **3.1 Fragmented Protection Leads to the Rupture of Cultural Genes**

The current preservation framework operates in silos based on administrative divisions, lacking coordinated mechanisms across river basins. Take Ganzhou's Hakka Lantern Festival as an example: while it has been recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage, its neighboring Ji' an "Centipede Lantern" faces extinction due to inadequate conservation efforts. Meanwhile, Nanchang's "Shengjinta Temple Fair" has become overly commercialized, losing its traditional ritual essence and severing cultural ties with Jiujiang's downstream "Yanshuiting Lantern Festival." With limited reach, these cultural traditions struggle to attract external attention, resulting in diminishing influence that further hampers their dissemination and inheritance.

#### **3.2 The Loss of the Main Body and The Intergenerational Gap**

The brain drain among youth has resulted in an aging workforce of cultural inheritors, with the average age of lantern-making artisans in upstream villages exceeding 65. In midstream regions, the "Intangible Cultural Heritage in Schools" initiative remains largely superficial, focusing on performances rather than deepening cultural education. Downstream cities' Lantern Festival celebrations, heavily government-driven, see low public participation, creating a "government enthusiasm, public apathy" dynamic. Younger generations, either working away from home or shifting interests, show diminishing engagement with traditional activities, leaving skills like Nuo Dance and lantern-making without successors. Some traditional venues face risks of occupation or destruction due to urban planning or neglect, severely limiting event spaces. Outdated performance formats and content, lacking innovation, struggle to attract modern audiences—especially younger generations—gradually losing market vitality.

#### **3.3 Cultural Alienation under the Impact of Modernization**

Urbanization has transformed the spatial context of folk traditions. The development of Zhangjiang New District in Ganzhou has eliminated traditional lantern parade routes, while short video platforms have reduced cultural performances to "traffic symbols." Folk crafts like the "Da

Huangyuan Rice Cake" ritual in southern Jiangxi have been simplified into trendy social media check-in activities. Commercialization has homogenized temple fair stalls, with traditional crafts (e.g., Ji'an bamboo lanterns) being replaced by mass-produced goods. Many events still adhere to outdated formats like "stage performances and incense rituals," lacking integration with modern lifestyles and failing to meet public demands for interactive experiences. The repetitive content and forms of some folk activities, lacking substantial innovation for years, have caused audience fatigue and declining participation enthusiasm. The absence of modern technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality during events further diminishes their appeal and dissemination. The three major challenges facing Lantern Festival celebrations in the Gan River Basin have eroded their cultural integrity. Compounded by inconsistent policies and standards across administrative regions, implementing comprehensive strategic reforms remains difficult.

#### **4. Constructing an Integrated and Systematic Protection Path for Folk Activities of Lantern Festival in Ganjiang River Basin**

The Lantern Festival celebrations in the Gan River Basin, steeped in profound historical and cultural heritage, serve as a vital bond connecting local communities and their cultural identity. However, these traditions now face multiple challenges including fragmented preservation, dwindling cultural inheritors, and the pressures of modernization, all of which have severely undermined their holistic and systematic integrity. To effectively safeguard this precious folk cultural legacy, it is imperative to develop a scientific, practical, and systematic approach to preservation. This will not only revive the traditional splendor of the Gan River Basin's Lantern Festival but also ensure its sustainable development.

##### **4.1 Spatial Dimension: Building a Coordinated Protection Network for the Basin**

First, we should dismantle existing policy and standard barriers between administrative regions to establish unified and forward-looking protection plans and action guidelines. Through cross-regional communication and coordination mechanisms, different areas along the Gan River basin can reach consensus on protecting Lantern Festival folk traditions, forming a collaborative synergy. Second, building a digital information-sharing platform is crucial. By leveraging modern information technology, we can integrate historical documents, video materials, and event procedures related to Lantern Festival activities across the basin into a centralized platform, enabling resource sharing and exchange. This not only facilitates comprehensive information access for local protectors but also provides rich materials for academic research, fostering scholarly collaboration. Third, establishing a cross-regional protection fund is essential. Funds should be raised through government allocations and social donations specifically for the preservation, research, inheritance, and promotion of Lantern Festival traditions in the Gan River basin. The fund's use must be transparent and accountable, ensuring every penny is spent where it matters most to provide solid financial support for the activities' protection and development. Additionally, encouraging joint event organization is vital. While maintaining regional cultural characteristics, cross-regional collaborations such as joint parades and exhibitions should be organized. This approach not only amplifies the scale and influence of events but also promotes cultural exchange and integration among regions, further strengthening the cohesive nature of Lantern Festival traditions in the Gan River basin.

##### **4.2 Cultural Dimension: Activating The Mechanism of Living Inheritance**

Strengthening the cultivation and support of inheritors is the primary task to activate the dynamic inheritance mechanism. Establishing a comprehensive recognition and support system for inheritors, providing them with necessary living security and creative conditions, encourages their inheritance activities and nurtures new generations of inheritors. Simultaneously, setting up an inheritance reward fund to commend and reward those who make

outstanding contributions in inheritance work, thereby stimulating their enthusiasm. Building a shared digital platform for intangible cultural heritage across the basin enables resource interoperability. Upstream regions can leverage the Hakka Cultural Ecological Protection Zone to conduct "master-apprentice" training programs; midstream areas can collaborate with universities (such as Jinggangshan University) to offer folk creative design courses, integrating traditional symbols into modern cultural products (e.g., "Shakong Lantern" IP derivatives); downstream cities can organize "Lantern Festival Culture Events" featuring folk performances and academic forums, enhancing public engagement.

To drive innovative development in folk cultural activities, we should preserve their core elements while adapting to modern aesthetic preferences and cultural consumption trends. For instance, integrating cutting-edge technologies could create immersive cultural experiences that attract younger participants. Alternatively, implementing a "generational inheritance + cross-sector innovation" strategy through the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Mentorship Program" would empower young inheritors to establish cultural studios.

Strengthen the education and popularization of folk culture. Integrate the Lantern Festival traditions of the Gan River Basin into school curricula through courses, lectures, and exhibitions, helping students understand local heritage and fostering cultural pride. Meanwhile, leverage community platforms to promote folk culture awareness, enhancing public recognition and conservation consciousness for these traditions.

#### **4.3 Social Dimension: Building a Multi-stakeholder Governance System**

First, we need to establish a collaborative mechanism led by the government, involving social participation, and operating through market mechanisms. The government should play a leading role by formulating relevant policies, providing financial support, and strengthening supervision to ensure the correct direction of folk activity preservation and development. At the same time, we should encourage active participation from all sectors of society, including enterprises, social organizations, and experts, to form a collective effort. Second, we should promote the establishment of the Ganjiang River Basin Lantern Festival Folk Culture Protection and Development Alliance. This alliance can consolidate folk cultural resources across the basin, facilitate information sharing and experience exchange, jointly organize folk cultural activities, and enhance overall influence. Through such alliances, we can also strengthen cultural exchanges and cooperation with other regions, broaden perspectives, and absorb advanced practices. Third, we should emphasize the role of communities in folk culture preservation. Communities are crucial carriers of folk cultural heritage, and residents should be encouraged to actively participate in organizing and conducting folk activities to strengthen their cultural awareness and conservation consciousness. A shared digital platform for intangible cultural heritage should be built across the basin to achieve resource interoperability. Additionally, upstream regions can leverage the Hakka Cultural Ecological Protection Zone to conduct "master-apprentice" training programs. Midstream regions could collaborate with universities (such as Jinggangshan University) to offer folk creative design courses, integrating traditional symbols into modern cultural products like "Shakong Lantern" IP derivatives. Downstream cities should host "Lantern Festival Cultural Events" featuring folk performances and academic forums to enhance public engagement. Meanwhile, community resources like cultural activity rooms and public squares can be utilized to organize folk culture exhibitions and lectures, increasing public awareness and participation in folk culture while stimulating community vitality and market dynamism. A "community-led" protection model can also be implemented, such as the establishment of the "Villagers Intangible Cultural Heritage Council" in Taihe County, which is responsible for organizing folk activities and managing funds. Finally, social capital can be introduced to participate in cultural and tourism integration projects, such as the "Lantern Festival Folk Experience Tour" developed in Meipo Ancient Village, Ji' an, where villagers earn income through performances and handicraft sales, forming a virtuous cycle of "protection—utilization—

feedback." Furthermore, efforts should be made to strengthen cross-regional cultural identity by hosting the "Ganjiang Basin Lantern Festival Culture Week" and organizing mutual visits and performances of folk teams from cities along the river. Activities like "Youth Basin Cultural Study Tours" can be conducted to enhance a sense of regional belonging through "Retracing the Ganjiang Folk Routes." Additionally, new media platforms (TikTok, Bilibili) can be utilized to spread the "Ganjiang Lantern Festival Stories," fostering a cultural community along the basin.

## 5. Conclusion

This conservation model not only demonstrates respect for traditional culture and its inheritance, but also serves as a robust safeguard for cultural diversity. In today's increasingly globalized world, the preservation and development of the Lantern Festival folk activities in the Gan River Basin have provided valuable references and models for other regions. At the same time, we must recognize that protecting folk culture is a long-term and complex process requiring sustained efforts and continuous investment from governments, society, and academia. Only through such collaborative efforts can we ensure this "flowing cultural heritage" shines with renewed brilliance in the new era. The Lantern Festival folk activities in the Gan River Basin exemplify "flowing cultural heritage," where their linear characteristics necessitate a shift from isolated approaches to "watershed collaboration" and "systemic governance." By establishing spatial networks, activating cultural genes, and promoting multi-stakeholder governance, we can achieve "living inheritance" and "sustainable development" of folk traditions. Future research should further explore the application of digital technologies in folk preservation (such as virtual cultural experiences in the metaverse) and investigate synergistic mechanisms between basin folk customs, ecological conservation, and economic development, ultimately providing the "Gan River Solution" for the protection of linear intangible cultural heritage.

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