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Content and Method of Studying Minority Traditional Villages and Dwellings Based on Cultural Geography

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ABSTRACT: It is of great significance to strengthen the research on minority traditional villages and dwellings for maintaining ethnic multicultural ecology and promoting the revitalization of rural culture. In ethnic minority villages and houses the urgency of the research and protection, this paper discusses the cultural geography for the applicability of the ethnic minority villages and residential research, from the cultural ecology, cultural diffusion, regionalization and integration, culture and landscape, space and place, the respect such as comprehensive mechanism illustrates the traditional residence in ethnic minority villages and cultural geography research content and the advantage. This paper probes into the methods of cultural geography to reveal the characteristic cultural connotation of minority traditional villages, which lays a foundation for deepening disciplinary research and protecting minority villages. Taking Yao nationality as an example, this paper puts forward the framework of minority villages and dwellings research, aiming to further promote the breadth and depth of minority villages and dwellings research.

KEY WORDS: ethnic minorities; cultural geography; traditional villages and dwellings; Yao nationality

1 Urgency and practical significance of research on traditional villages and residences of ethnic minorities

The history of the development of ethnic minorities in China is a continuous narrative of shrinking living spaces, as well as a narrative of ethnic integration, struggles, and reintegration. At a macro level, it is the irreconcilable ethnic contradictions that have historically given rise to nations [1]. However, in reality, many nations have integrated different ethnic groups. Therefore, when researching traditional villages and residences of ethnic minorities, it is essential to examine them through the lens of the laws governing human historical development. At a micro level, the production and daily life of various ethnic groups exhibit distinct regional, ethnic characteristics as

well as fusion elements. To understand traditional villages and residences of ethnic minorities, one must delve into multiple factors such as their regional environment, migration processes, spatial differentiations, cultural exchanges, and historical evolutions to discern the patterns of their formation and evolution. Historical evidence suggests that national stability, social harmony, and economic development accelerate ethnic integration. Conversely, lack of stability can lead to differentiation and the splintering of ethnic groups, evolving into distinct national entities or beliefs. Throughout China's history, separations and mergers have resulted in as many as several hundred ethnic groups, but at the time of the founding of the People's Republic

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of China, less than 100 remained. Subsequently, 56 ethnic groups were officially recognized and established. Under the mindset of agrarian culture and self-sufficient economy, ethnic groups have often found it challenging to transcend temporal and spatial constraints and restrictive modes of production. Post-Song Dynasty, minority groups, together with the Han Chinese, faced an accelerated pace of assimilation and differentiation under the impact and influence of the market economy, leading to a gradual dispersal of ethnic groups. In modern times, as urbanization, industrialization, and modernization have progressed, the fusion among different ethnic groups has continued to strengthen. However, there are risks to ethnic cultures becoming homogenized and losing their distinctiveness. In reality, without the protection and support provided by the state to ethnic minorities, their numbers would likely decrease further, aligning with the laws of social development [2]. Nevertheless, this trend is detrimental to the preservation of cultural diversity and the advancement of civilization.

In the current prosperous and stable national environment, encouragement and support for the development of ethnic minorities are emphasized. It is essential to enhance the research on tangible and intangible cultures of ethnic minority villages and residences, exploring their traditional cultural spaces, cultural characteristics, revealing their processes and laws of survival evolution, and inheriting the diversification of cultural features of ethnic minority villages and residences. This is conducive to promoting the revitalization of rural areas in ethnic minority regions, fostering a strong sense of cultural confidence, and consolidating the diverse and integrated multiculturalism of the Chinese nation. Currently, research on traditional villages and historic cultural villages of ethnic minorities tends to focus on individual cases of typical villages and residences [3-4], as well as comparative studies of villages of different ethnicities in the same region [5]. These studies mainly describe the public spaces, morphological characteristics, housing construction techniques, cultural values, spatial structures, and development planning of villages and residences [6-9], emphasizing on capturing the static

characteristics of rural and residential architecture itself and its environment, rare in the systematic and comprehensive investigation of one or several ethnic groups distributed across different provinces in terms of origin, migration, diffusion, cultural traits, and cultural delineation in the field of architecture studies. There is a lack of comprehensive research on the diffusion of cultural heritage, dynamic evolution, ethnic integration, and comprehensive mechanisms in ethnic minority villages. Furthermore, traditional villages and residential studies require broader spatial and temporal references to conduct comparative studies to its depth and breadth, otherwise it would be difficult to truly reveal their cultural significance and characteristics, thus constrain the development of the discipline. To address the aforementioned research gaps, it is necessary to move beyond traditional case study paradigms, gather enough sample materials, and establish a scientific foundation based on cultural geography. This approach helps identify spatial and cultural characteristics, cultural origins, differentiation, and evolution mechanisms, providing a more intuitive and manageable framework for classifying and exploring cultural dynamics and factors.

2 Applicability of cultural geography in researching traditional villages and residences of ethnic minorities

Drawing on theories from cultural geography and employing methods from the disciplines of architecture and planning, our team has conducted cultural geographical research on traditional villages and residences of the Hakka people in eight southern provinces of China. Through our studies focusing on village and residence types, historical evolution, cultural delineation, cultural landscape identification, and comprehensive mechanism research, we have achieved a series of significant advancements [10-16]. As our research scope broadens and our mechanisms deepen, we have gradually come to realize the importance and urgency of studying the culture of villages and residences of ethnic minorities, particularly the diffusion, integration, evolution process, and impact of Han Chinese and ethnic minority residential cultures within the context of ethnic integration which merit in-depth explora-

tion. Based on our research experience, by considering the distinctive characteristics of villages and residences of ethnic minorities, cultural geography demonstrates clear applicability in the study of traditional villages and residences of ethnic minorities: (1) the broadly-dispersed and small clustering nature of ethnic minority villages necessitates an analysis using broad coverage, diverse samples, and extensive data. Through comprehensive surveys, cultural geography treats ethnic minority settlements within a certain range as a holistic unit, enabling a comprehensive interpretation of the overall landscape of ethnic minority villages and the spatial differences and mutual influences among various residential cultures. This approach establishes the connection between ethnic residential culture and spatial and population subjects, facilitating a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the development patterns of traditional villages and residences of ethnic minorities. (2) The regional and ethnic characteristics of ethnic minority village and residential cultures are pronounced. When studying them, attention must be paid to the geographic environmental differences affecting the survival and migration of ethnic minorities, as well as to the inherent diversity within the ethnic groups themselves. The analytical framework of cultural geography that combines spatial and temporal elements is conducive to establishing links between various types of villages and residences, geographic environments, ethnic migrations, and cultural transmissions, integrating them into dynamic analysis and considerations of historical evolution. This approach establishes a multifaceted, multi-factor, cross-spatiotemporal analysis mechanism. (3) Cultural geography possesses distinct interdisciplinary characteristics. It can incorporate type differences emphasized by architecture, historical and cultural preservation concerns highlighted by planning disciplines, village organizational functions studied by sociology, and cultural changes examined by ethnology into a spatial and temporal analysis framework. By establishing a comprehensive analytical framework, cultural geography can reveal patterns and understand the essence at a greater scale, depth, and with more elements involved.

3 Content advantages of cultural geography in the study of traditional ethnic minority villages and residences

3.1 Research levels

As a sub-discipline of geography, cultural geography focuses on exploring the spatial characteristics of cultural phenomena, spatial patterns, and the relationship between culture and the environment. In the study of villages and residences, it can generally be divided into four levels of analysis: point, line, area, and volume (Figure 1). The “point” level focuses on studying the types and characteristics of typical villages and residences from the perspective of human-environment interactions, analyzing the factors such as natural, technological, and economic aspects that shape residential cultures. The “line (core)” level investigates the characteristics of the cultural origins of typical villages and residences and the pathways and patterns of migration, diffusion, and evolution from the place of origin. The study at the “area” level reflects spatial differences in the traits of residential cultures, the delineation of cultural areas, and the extraction of cultural landscape characteristics. The “volume” level establishes a comprehensive framework for analyzing the formation and evolution mechanisms of cultural areas and cultural landscapes from the aspects of natural, cultural, economic, technological, and political factors in the formation of village and residential cultures.

3.2 Research content and its advantages

(1) Conducting a comprehensive survey allows for a relatively complete entry of samples of villages and residences distributed in different regions, which is essential for revealing the patterns of formation and evolution of villages and residences on a larger scale. By conducting field surveys, collecting literature, using statistical yearbooks, satellite maps, remote sensing data, online databases, and other methods to obtain information on spatial location, site layout, topography, village morphology, public spaces, organizational functions, folk beliefs, residential forms, building materials, traditional techniques, decorative details of ethnic minority villages and residences, a basic analytical database can be established. These records

of cultural and historical information reflecting settlement environments, community patterns, residential forms, and components document ethnic minority group migrations, evolutionary trajectories, cultural dissemination, and his-

torical heritage. Only through today's big data research can comprehensive geographical and multi-factor sample information entry be achieved, leading to a relatively rigorous analysis process and reliable research conclusions.

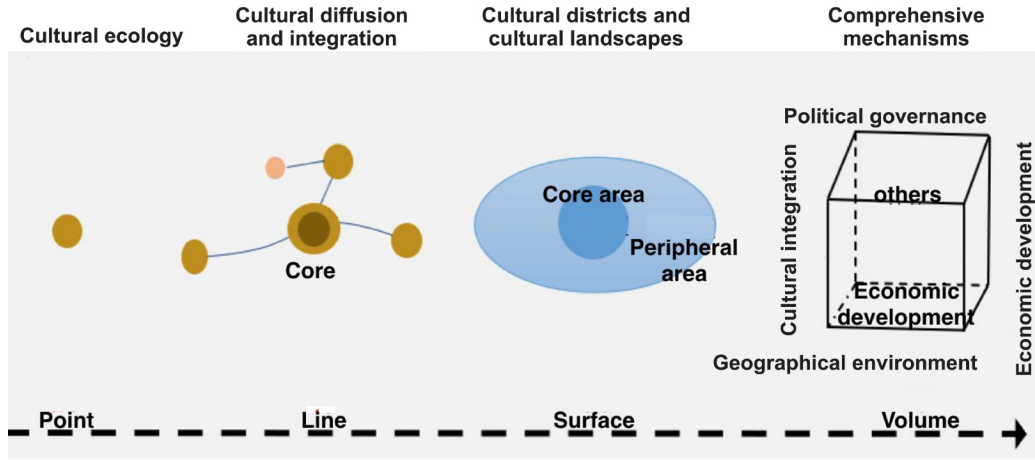


Figure 1 Levels of research on ethnic minority villages in cultural geography

(2) Cultural ecology establishes different cultural modes of habitation for different environments and ethnic groups by elucidating the process of human-environment interactions. Cultural ecology advocates studying the rules governing the emergence, development, and variation of culture from the interactions among various factors in the entire natural and social environment where humans exist, focusing on the study of the interaction between culture and the environment. By establishing systematic connections between ethnic residential culture and regional environment, cultural ecology reveals the territorial characteristics of ethnic groups and the ethnic characteristics of regions. For example, cultural eco-

logical studies can effectively explain the differences and formation processes of villages and residential areas of the same ethnic group in different regions, as well as the landscape differences of villages and residences of different ethnic groups in the same region (Figure2). It shows how humans adapt to different environments and create cultural patterns with unique appearances under certain productivity conditions. For instance, how the Yao ethnic group in northern Guangdong utilizes mountainous environments to create a harmonious coexistence residential pattern under certain farming conditions, maintaining a good dynamic relationship between Yao villages and the environment (Figure 3).

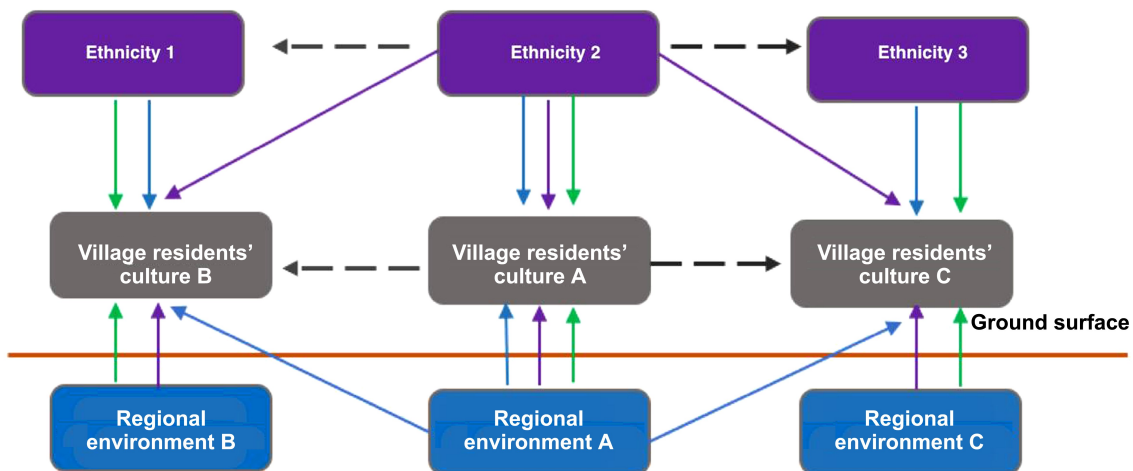


Figure 2 Relationship between regional environment, ethnicity, and village dwelling culture



Figure 3 Harmonious coexistence between Nangang Yao village in northern Guangdong and its surrounding environment

(3) Cultural geography mapping visually illustrates the traces of cultural diffusion and integration of ethnic minority villages and residences, enabling the exploration of the paths and modes of cultural diffusion of ethnic villages and residences. It delineates the paths and processes of ethnic cultural spatial evolution, revealing the laws of residential cultural diffusion and its impacts. For instance, in Yao villages (Figure 4, Figure 5), the Yao communities in southern Hunan, due to close interactions with the Han ethnic group and being situated on flat land, have been greatly influenced by the Han culture, resulting in courtyard-style residential houses. On the other hand, the Yao communities in northern Guangdong are more secluded and located in remote mountainous areas, leading to the development of a typical row house-style residential architecture. Conducting such studies horizontally benefits the preservation of the cultural characteristics of ethnic minority villages and residences in the context of ethnic integration, while vertically providing strategies for the inheritance of cultural heritage in ethnic minority villages and residences amid rapid urbanization and rural revitalization.

(4) Cultural geography's comprehensive study of traditional ethnic minority villages and residences contributes to the scientific delineation of cultural areas. The zoning of village and residential cultural areas is a spatial unit divided based on the differences in prevalent cultural traits in different regions, where the cultural elements of villages and residences in the same area, along with the landscape reflecting their cultural characteristics, exhibit consistent features. Due to regional variations in ethnic cultures, cultural geography enables a direct comparison of the types of villages and residences, cultural landscapes, internal patterns, and cultural traits of the same ethnic group in

different regions or different ethnic groups in the same region. Through mapping and overlay analysis, distinct cultural areas can be delineated, and cultural core areas and peripheral areas can be scientifically identified based on typical cultural traits and concentration levels. Additionally, analyzing the dynamic evolution of cultural area structures helps in understanding the factors driving cultural evolution.



Figure 4 Residential courtyard of Yao People in Jianghua, Hunan



Figure 5 Linked row houses of Yao People in northern Guangdong

In the same geographical region, the differences in the landscapes of villages and residences of different ethnic groups can be explored to investigate the gradient relationship of ethnicity and cultural dissemination in ethnic fusion. For example, in the same region of Southeastern Guizhou Province, the Dong and Miao villages exhibit starkly different cultural characteristics (Figure 6, Figure 7). Dong villages are nestled among mountains and rivers, characterized by a marine influence with predominant public buildings, while Miao villages are often situated in high mountain valleys, lacking public structures and showcasing mountainous features.

Furthermore, cultural geography's historical perspective allows for the direct verification of village historical

changes through the analysis of village and residential landscapes across different time periods.



Figure 6 Village environment of Dong ethnic group in Qiandongnan, Guizhou



Figure 7 Village environment of Miao ethnic group in Qiandongnan, Guizhou

(5) Cultural geography through the study of the evolution of different residential cultural patterns, extracts internalized, fixed, and typical cultural landscapes and traits, which are beneficial for enhancing local cultural construction and inheriting excellent ethnic cultures in urban and rural development. Cultural traits serve as significant markers that distinguish one culture from another and are essential criteria for the delineation of village and residential cultural areas. By visually mapping out the major cultural landscape elements of villages and residences, cultural geography reveals the spatial aggregation and differences of a few typical cultural landscape elements. By identifying the differences between cultural landscapes in core areas and edge areas, comparing the roles of cultural landscapes in areas of ethnic fusion, deducing the historical evolution of typical regional cultural landscapes, cultural geography extracts representative cultural traits of ethnic villages and residences.

For example, Yao villages across generations have temples dedicated to the Pan King and often feature sing-

ing pavilions, while Dong villages typically include drum towers and covered bridges. When planning and designing in ethnic minority regions and creating regional identities, consideration should be given to the cultural traits of villages and residences in minority areas. This involves integrating the cultural characteristics of ethnic villages and residences into the development of material and spiritual civilization.

(6) The emerging cultural geography emphasizes the study of micro-cultural spaces in villages and residences, which can enhance the cultural and local identity of these communities. While big data surveys and statistical methods excel in identifying patterns within large samples, they often overlook individual differences since the real world does not conform to the ideal “rational actor” model. The frequent degradation of historical cultural heritage in urban and rural development fundamentally reflects a lack of recognition of the value of cultural heritage. Research on ethnic minority villages and residences needs to explore the rules of “space” from a macro perspective while also focusing on the formation of micro-level “local” culture. It is essential to transform the abstract, specific, and eternal “space” into concrete, heterogeneous, and changing “places”, emphasizing the process through which “space” becomes “place”. This approach highlights the connections between “space” and the environment, residents, specific affairs, establishes relationships between “space” and “people”, and fosters a sense of local identity.



Figure 8 Utilization of newly-built drum tower in a Dong village

For instance, in Dong minority areas, when constructing new drum towers, some villages blindly pursue aesthetics, grandeur, and luxurious decorations (Figure 8). They may build elaborate drum towers at the entrances of

villages without considering the usage needs of the villagers and the function of the drum tower. This results in the loss of the significance and purpose of the drum tower, creating a cultural space that starkly differs from traditional drum tower spaces (Figure 9). Naturally, the villagers would not identify with such cultural spaces.



Figure 9 Utilization of an old drum tower in a Dong village

(7) The theories and methods of cultural geography provide a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the cultural characteristics, differentiation, evolution, and formation mechanisms of ethnic minority villages and residences, incorporating elements from nature, economy, culture, technology, and politics. The survival of ethnic minorities in a certain region typically spans centuries, and the establishment, settlement, development, and evolution leading to a “fixed” settlement pattern are the combined results of various factors. The natural environment is a significant influencing factor that manifests in specific housing patterns, for example, climatic conditions can affect the construction methods of houses, while topography can influence the choice of building materials and structures. However, Tomkins argues that climate and environment are just one of many factors that influence human production and life; the primary determinants are cultural beliefs, attitudes, and traditions.

When studying ethnic minority villages and residences, it is essential to establish a comprehensive analytical framework. Cultural ecology in cultural geography emphasizes the relationship between residential culture and nature, while cultural diffusion and integration focus on the impact of economic development and cultural blending. Cultural landscape analysis encompasses the driving force of technological progress and the regulation of ritual systems. The delineation of cultural regions embodies a

synthesis of natural environment, ethnic culture, economic development, administrative boundaries, and technical standards. By analyzing traditional ethnic minority village and residence types, spatial distributions, and landscape variations from multiple perspectives of nature, economy, culture, technology, and politics, cultural geography facilitates the creation of a comprehensive analytical framework.

4 Research methods for cultural geography of traditional ethnic minority villages and residences

Taking Yao ethnic minority traditional villages and residences as an example, the Yao people are mainly distributed in several provinces such as Guangxi, Hunan, Guangdong, Guizhou, and Yunnan [17-18]. By accurately locating Yao villages on the map, it is evident that existing Yao villages are mainly found on both sides of the Nanling mountains and the Dayao mountain area. Yao villages are more concentrated on the southern side of Nanling than the northern side, and Yao villages with fewer populations in Guangdong, Guizhou, and Hunan are located near the border with Guangxi [19]. Observing the distribution of numerous existing Yao villages, it is clear that the vast majority of Yao villages are clustered in mountainous areas, with few settlements on plains or at the foot of mountains impacting flat lands. However, historical records and genealogical analyses indicate that a significant number of Yao ancestors settled on flatlands. The explanation for the predominance of Yao villages in mountainous areas today is often attributed to historical ethnic conflicts, oppression, and migration, while underestimating or even neglecting the role of cultural integration, cultural assimilation, and assimilation itself. Some Yao ancestors who inhabited flatlands had more frequent interactions and closer cultural integration with Han and other ethnic groups, gradually assimilating into the Han ethnicity.

Therefore, using the Yao people as a case study, integrating cultural geography theories with architectural methods, focusing on the cultural landscapes of Yao villages and residences (Figure 10), exploring the types of cultural characteristics using cultural ecology and cultural traits, investigating spatial variations in Yao residential culture through cultural diffusion and cultural zoning, ex-

aming the dynamic evolution of Yao residential culture through evolutionary forces and processes. This approach aims to address core issues such as the formation process, spatial differentiation characteristics, and evolution patterns of traditional ethnic minority villages and residences, in order to understand the characteristics and evolution

mechanisms of traditional ethnic minority villages and residences. It seeks to reveal the evolving trends of Yao traditional villages and residences under the backdrop of cultural integration, providing insights for the inheritance of Yao traditional village characteristics and cultural revitalization.

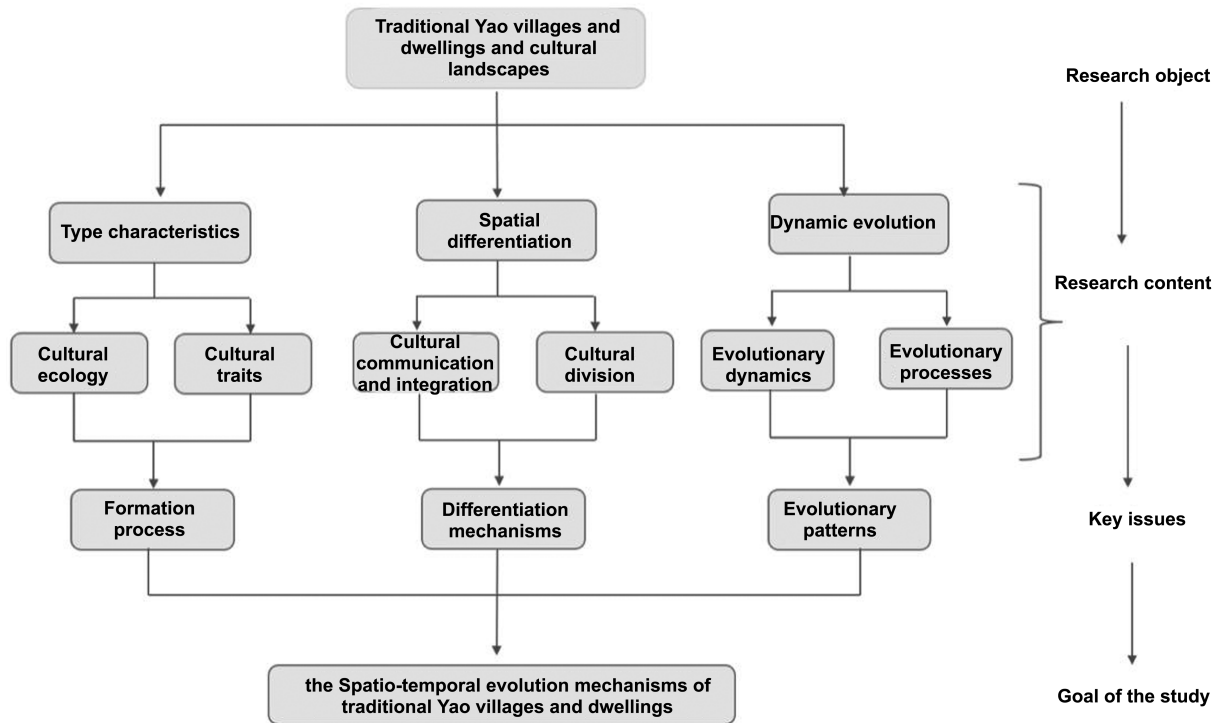


Figure 10 Research framework of traditional Yao ethnic village and residential cultural geography

Conclusion

Traditional settlements and residences are one of the largest historical and cultural carriers of human society, reflecting the relationship between people and land with distinct regional and cultural characteristics. Ethnic minority villages and residences possess their own uniqueness, being inherent in the agrarian civilization. In the process of modern social development, the evolution of these ethnic minority villages has been increasingly influenced by external factors. Research on traditional ethnic minority villages and residences should not only consider their specific geographical locations in relation to human and environmental interactions but also incorporate them into comparative studies of cross-cultural exchanges. It should analyze the formation of residential culture in a historical context and focus on the historical evolution during social changes. Cultural geography, using ethnic minority villages and residences as cultural landscapes, examines the re-

lationship between residential culture and the natural geographical environment from a cultural ecology perspective. It explains the pathways and spatial processes of residential culture dissemination from the perspective of cultural diffusion, identifies ethnic cultural characteristics from the standpoint of cultural traits, examines the evolution of residential culture from the perspective of cultural landscape changes, and comprehensively interprets the mechanisms of the formation and evolution of residential culture from the angle of cultural zoning. By comprehensively applying cultural geography, the understanding of ethnic residential cultural patterns can be deepened, existing research outcomes can be integrated, and research on ethnic minority villages and residences can be advanced on a larger scale and deeper level.

Figure and table sources

Figures 1-10 in this paper are all self-drawn or self-cap-

tured by the author..

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