



## Research Article

# Ethnic Festival Ritual Performance and Border Tourism Destination Image Shaping: A Case Study of the Jingpo People's Mu Nao Zong Ge in Dehong, Yunnan

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## Abstract

Ethnic festivals serve as core cultural tourism resources in border areas, and their ritual performances play a unique role in shaping tourism destination images. Taking the Mu Nao Zong Ge of the Jingpo people in Dehong, Yunnan as a case study, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of "ritual performance—cultural experience—image perception" and employs participant observation to examine the mechanisms through which Mu Nao Zong Ge's ritual performance shapes the border tourism destination image. The findings reveal four key mechanisms: first, spatial liminalization constructs a ritual field where everyday space is transformed into a space where the sacred and the secular interweave, offering tourists a border spatial experience distinct from inland areas; second, symbolic performance of bodily practices, through dancers' movements and ethnic costumes, constitutes a visual symbol system that strengthens tourists' intuitive perception of Jingpo culture; third, narrative reconstruction of collective memory, through epic chanting and ritual procedures, activates the ethnic group's historical memory, creating a dual intensification of cultural identity and image identity; and fourth, digital dissemination through social media and short-video platforms breaks through geographic boundaries, enabling cross-regional diffusion of the border tourism destination image. These four mechanisms work synergistically to transform Mu Nao Zong Ge from a traditional ethnic ritual into an iconic cultural symbol of the Dehong border tourism destination. This study provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding the relationship between ethnic festivals and border tourism destination images, and offers practical insights for the integrated development of culture and tourism in border ethnic areas.

## Keywords

Ethnic Festival, Ritual Performance, Border Tourism Destination Image, Mu Nao Zong Ge, Jingpo People, Digital Dissemination

## 1. Introduction

Border tourism destination image research has become an important topic in tourism geography [1-4]. With the deepening of the Belt and Road Initiative, China's southwestern bor-

der areas have increasingly become significant fields for tourism research [5, 6]. These border regions, characterized by their unique geographic locations, diverse ethnic cultures, and

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dynamic cross-border exchanges, have formed image attributes distinct from inland tourism destinations. However, existing studies have predominantly examined tourism destination image from a marketing perspective, with insufficient attention given to how ethnic festivals intrinsically shape destination images through ritual performance [7, 8].

Ritual performance, as a concentrated expression of ethnic culture, constitutes the core attraction of festival tourism [9]. Anthropological research has demonstrated that rituals construct specific social meanings and cultural identity through symbolic symbols, bodily practices, and collective participation [10]. Studies in tourism further indicate that tourists' participatory experiences in ritual performances not only influence their perception of destination culture but are also directly related to the generation and dissemination of destination images [11, 12]. In recent years, scholars have begun to pay attention to the "staged" phenomenon of ethnic festivals, exploring the relationship between authentic experiences and tourist satisfaction [13-15]; however, systematic analysis of how ritual performance shapes border tourism destination images remains insufficient.

Border tourism destination image possesses a dual nature: on one hand, it is an objective presentation of border geography and ethnic culture; on the other hand, it is a subjective perception formed by tourists through sensory experiences, emotional projections, and social construction [16, 17]. Mu Nao Zong Ge, as the most representative traditional festival of the Jingpo people, was inscribed on the first batch of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2006. Its large-scale dance scenes, the epic chanting of priests, and the colorful ethnic costumes provide an ideal case for studying the relationship between ritual performance and tourism destination image shaping [18]. The Mu Nao Zong Ge ceremony, featuring thousands of participants in collective dance, systematic ritual procedures, and rich cultural symbols, constitutes a complete cultural performance system that not only attracts numerous domestic and international tourists but has also become a core identifier of Dehong's border tourism destination image.

This study addresses the following research question: How does ethnic festival ritual performance influence the shaping of border tourism destination images? What are the underlying mechanisms?

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Site

Dehong Dai-Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture is located in western Yunnan Province, bordering Myanmar, and is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in China's southwestern border areas [19, 20]. The Jingpo people, one of Dehong's indigenous ethnic groups, have a long history and rich oral traditions. Their creation epic, "Mu Nao Zhai Wa" [21], records the group's origins, migration history, and cultural memory,

serving as the core text of Jingpo spiritual culture.

Mu Nao Zong Ge (meaning "joyful gathering and dancing" in the Jingpo language) is the grandest traditional festival of the Jingpo people, held annually on the 15th and 16th days of the first lunar month. According to legend, Mu Nao Zong Ge originated from the dance of the sun god and was transmitted to the human world by the Jingpo ancestor Ning Guanwa, who imitated the dances of birds. Traditionally, the festival was presided over by tribal chiefs and served multiple social functions including worshipping the gods, praying for good harvests, and uniting the ethnic group. After 1950, Mu Nao Zong Ge gradually evolved from a religious ritual activity into a platform for ethnic cultural performance, and in 2006, it was inscribed on the first batch of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List [18].

### 2.2. Ritual Structure and Performance Process

The Mu Nao Zong Ge ceremony consists of multiple components forming a complete ritual performance structure. Before the ceremony begins, the priest chants the "Mu Nao Zhai Wa" epic, tracing the group's origins and praying for blessings from the heavens. Subsequently, two lead dancers wearing hornbill hats and holding long knives lead thousands of dancers into the dance ground. The dancers wear traditional Jingpo costumes—women adorned with silver ornaments and men carrying long knives—and proceed along specific dance routes guided by the Mu Nao Shidong (a ceremonial pillar). The dance formations present geometric patterns such as sun spirals and concentric circles, symbolizing the Jingpo people's understanding of nature and the cosmos.

The climax of the ceremony is the collective dance, during which thousands of dancers move and spin in synchronized rhythm, creating a spectacular scene. The interweaving sounds of drums, gongs, flutes, and the dancers' shouts generate a powerful ritual atmosphere. The entire ceremony lasts for several hours or even throughout the night, during which participants gradually enter a state of "communitas" [22], where individual identity dissolves into collective movement, replaced by a sense of group belonging that transcends the everyday.

### 2.3. Research Methods

This study employed participant observation as the primary data collection method. The research team conducted field investigations in Longchuan County and Yingjiang County of Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province on two occasions: February 2023 (during the Mu Nao Zong Ge festival) and February 2024. The research team fully participated in the preparation, performance, and subsequent activities of Mu Nao Zong Ge, systematically documenting ritual procedures, participant behaviors, and the on-site atmosphere. Additionally, relevant literature, public reports, and tourist shared content on online platforms were consulted as supplementary materials.

Field notes and observation records were systematically organized, and thematic analysis was employed to identify core categories. To enhance the reliability and validity of the research, triangulation was applied by cross-verifying observation records with literature and official information, forming a comprehensive understanding of the ritual performance process.

## 2.4. Analytical Framework

Based on the theoretical review, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of "ritual performance—cultural experience—image perception" to systematically examine the internal logic between ethnic festival ritual performance and border tourism destination image (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Theoretical integration framework.

| Theoretical Source                                  | Core Concept                              | Positioning in the Analytical Framework                                        | Key Function                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Durkheim (1912) [23]                                | Collective effervescence                  | Mechanism of ritual generating collective emotional energy                     | Emotional integration and identity reinforcement         |
| van Gennep (1909) / Turner (1969) [22, 24]          | Liminality / Communitas                   | Transitional and egalitarian features of ritual space                          | Transformation from everyday to sacred experience        |
| Zhang et al. (2025) [25]                            | Everyday transformation / Rhythm analysis | Mechanism of festival breach of everyday structures                            | Liberation from alienated everyday to liminal experience |
| Goffman (1959) [26]                                 | Impression management / Performance       | Conscious presentation of image by cultural producers                          | Active construction of destination image                 |
| Schechner (1988) [27]                               | Performance process                       | Transformation from traditional ritual to tourism performance                  | Staged presentation of cultural products                 |
| Crompton (1979) / Baloglu & McCleary (1999) [8, 28] | Destination image (cognitive-affective)   | Conceptualization and multi-dimensional structure of tourism destination image | Explaining pathways of image formation                   |
| Zhang et al. (2023) [7]                             | Image evolution / Threshold effect        | Festivals as mega-events driving image evolution                               | Macro factors to micro adjustment mechanisms             |

The first dimension is ritual performance. Drawing on Turner's [22] liminal theory and Edensor's [29] tourism performance theory, ritual performance is deconstructed into three levels: spatial setting, bodily practice, and narrative expression. Spatial setting focuses on the physical boundaries and symbolic meanings of the ritual field; bodily practice focuses on dancers' movements, costumes, and sensory expression; narrative expression focuses on the cultural information conveyed through ritual procedures and epic chanting.

The second dimension is cultural experience. From the perspective of tourist experience, drawing on Sheller and Urry's [30] new mobilities paradigm, cultural experience is divided into three levels: sensory experience, emotional experience, and cognitive experience. Ritual performance triggers multi-level cultural experiences for tourists by creating a unique perceptual context.

The third dimension is image perception. Drawing on the findings of cognitive psychology and tourism image research [8, 28], the effects of ritual performance are examined from three levels: cognitive image, affective image, and overall image. The cultural experiences triggered by ritual performance are ultimately transformed into tourists' image perception of

the border tourism destination.

The three dimensions form a progressive relationship of "performance → experience → perception": ritual performance is the foundation of cultural experience, cultural experience is the mediator of image perception, and image perception is the ultimate effect of ritual performance. At the same time, image perception feeds back into the design and improvement of ritual performance, forming a virtuous cycle.

## 3. Theoretical Foundation

### 3.1. Ritual Performance and Tourism Experience

Ritual studies have a long tradition in anthropology. Durkheim [23] pointed out that ritual is a key mechanism for the reproduction of collective consciousness, through which social members strengthen their sense of belonging to the community. Van Gennep [24] proposed the theory of "rites of passage," dividing rituals into three stages—separation, liminality, and aggregation—laying the foundation for understanding

the structural function of rituals. Turner [22] further elaborated on the concept of "liminality," noting that the liminal phase is a state of "anti-structure" in which everyday social hierarchies and norms are temporarily suspended, and participants enter a state of equality and *communitas*. This theory has been widely applied in tourism experience research, with scholars pointing out that tourism itself possesses liminal-like characteristics, as tourists depart from everyday life routines and enter an extraordinary experiential state [25, 31].

Ethnic festival ritual performance, as a special form of cultural expression, possesses both the sacredness of ritual and the entertainment of tourism. On one hand, rituals retain the core of traditional religious culture and ethnic memory; on the other hand, in response to the demands of the tourism market, ritual performance has undergone a process of "staged" transformation [10]. Goffman's [26] dramaturgical theory provides a perspective for understanding this process: ritual performance is like a performance on a social stage, where participants present carefully orchestrated actions in the front stage while retaining their everyday authentic state in the back stage. Schechner [27] further pointed out that performance behavior has a restorative character, reactivating past cultural practices through repetition and reenactment. This tension between the sacred and the secular, tradition and modernity, constitutes the unique charm of ethnic festival ritual performance.

### 3.2. Border Tourism Destination Image

Tourism destination image research began in the 1970s. Crompton [8] pointed out that destination image is the sum of tourists' beliefs, ideas, and impressions of a destination, and is a key factor influencing tourism decision-making. Baloglu and McCleary [28] built on this to construct a "cognitive-affective" binary model, suggesting that destination image consists of cognitive evaluation and affective evaluation dimensions. Zhang et al. [7] used qualitative meta-analysis to reveal the dynamic evolution patterns of destination images across different stages. In recent years, scholars have begun to pay attention to the constructive nature of destination image, pointing out that image is not a passively received result but a process co-constructed by multiple actors including tourists, destination residents, and media [25].

Border tourism destination image has special attributes that distinguish it from general tourism destinations. First, border location endows destinations with a unique "border" imagery, where cross-border mobility, cultural integration, and geopolitics constitute special symbolic resources for image formation [16, 32]. Second, border areas are often ethnic minority concentrated regions, where rich ethnic cultural resources provide favorable conditions for differentiated destination image shaping [18, 33]. Third, the dissemination of border tourism destination images is deeply influenced by macro factors such as national policies and international relations, presenting dynamic evolutionary characteristics [17, 34].

## 4. Results: Four Mechanisms

### 4.1. Spatial Liminalization—From Everyday Space to Ritual Field

Mu Nao Zong Ge's ritual performance begins with spatial liminalization, transforming everyday geographic space into a ritual field where the sacred and the secular interweave, offering tourists a unique border spatial experience [25].

*Ritual transformation of physical space.* Mu Nao Zong Ge is typically held in village squares or dedicated Mu Nao Zong Ge grounds. Before the festival, organizers erect the Mu Nao Shidong—two wooden pillars approximately 20 meters high, decorated with symbolic motifs including sun patterns, moon patterns, and plant and animal designs, topped with a hornbill model. The Mu Nao Shidong serves not only as the visual center of the ritual space but is also regarded by the Jingpo people as a passage to the spirit world. Field observations revealed that the process of constructing the Mu Nao Shidong is itself a spatial ritual: the priest presides over the ceremony, scattering rice as a blessing while participants circle around, thereby "sanctifying" the ordinary square into a space imbued with religious significance.

*Characteristics and functions of the liminal space.* The ritual field during Mu Nao Zong Ge exhibits typical characteristics of liminal space [22]. First, spatial boundaries are clearly marked: colored flags are placed around the dance ground to demarcate the sacred area, and non-participants are required to maintain an appropriate distance. Second, the order within the space differs from everyday life: daily social hierarchies are replaced by the role divisions of the ritual, with the priest, lead dancers, and ordinary dancers each performing specific ritual roles. Third, the perception of time within the space is altered: hours of continuous dance and a ceremonial process spanning from day to night create a "ritual time" detached from the rhythm of daily life. Upon entering this liminal space, everyday rules and constraints are temporarily suspended, replaced by an open and interwoven experiential state [22, 25].

*Superimposition of border geographic meaning.* Dehong's unique border location adds a distinctive dimension of meaning to Mu Nao Zong Ge's ritual space [16, 32]. The participation of cross-border Jingpo groups (the Kachin people from Myanmar), the convergence of Chinese and Myanmar tourists, and the vitality of border trade and cultural exchange make Mu Nao Zong Ge's ritual space not only a stage for ethnic cultural performance but also a microcosm of border social relations [16, 35]. As tourists experience the ritual, they gradually perceive the openness and inclusiveness of the border region, forming an image perception of Dehong as a place of "ethnic integration and border accessibility."

This spatial liminalization provides the specific field for the unfolding of bodily practices. As tourists enter this ritual space, their bodies become infected by the ritual atmosphere, transforming from onlookers into participants, thus moving into the scope of the next mechanism.

#### 4.2. Symbolic Performance of Bodily Practices—Visual Symbols and Sensory Experience

The core of Mu Nao Zong Ge's ritual performance is the collective dance involving tens of thousands of people. The bodily practices of the dancers—including movements, costumes, and expressions—constitute a complex system of symbolic signs that profoundly influence tourists' perception of the destination image at visual and sensory levels [29].

*Ritualized bodily expression.* The dance movements of Mu Nao Zong Ge possess strict normativity and symbolic significance. The lead dancers hold long knives, moving steadily and powerfully along specific routes, while the ordinary dancers follow, swaying side to side and stepping forward and backward in unison. These seemingly simple dance movements actually embody the Jingpo people's understanding of cosmic order: the dance routes imitate the trajectory of the sun, and the rotating formations symbolize the cycle of life. Field observations revealed that tourists initially stand at the edges of the dance ground as spectators, but are soon infected by the lively atmosphere and spontaneously join the dance procession, shifting from "gazing" to "participating," and from passivity to activity. This bodily participation deepens tourists' immersion, providing them with a profound experience that transcends the sensory level [29, 36].

*Cultural narrative of costume symbols.* Jingpo traditional costumes constitute the most intuitive visual symbols of Mu Nao Zong Ge. Female dancers wear black or dark blue embroidered jackets paired with red tube skirts, silver hair ornaments, multiple layers of silver necklaces, and colored bead belts; male dancers typically wear white button-down shirts and black trousers, carrying long knives at their waists. Each costume element carries specific cultural meanings: silver ornaments symbolize wealth and light, the long knife represents courage and strength, and the color red signifies good fortune and passion. As tourists watch the ritual performance, these visual symbols are rapidly captured and encoded, forming an intuitive impression of Jingpo culture. In tourist shares on online platforms, some users mentioned specific details such as "the crisp sound of silver ornaments colliding," "sunlight reflecting off long knives," and "bright red tube skirts," reflecting the prominent role of visual symbols in tourists' memory.

*Synergistic effects of sensory experience.* Mu Nao Zong Ge's ritual performance engages tourists' multiple senses: visually, the dancers' movements, costumes, and the painted Mu Nao Shidong constitute a rich visual tapestry; auditorily, the interweaving of drums, gongs, flutes, and chanting creates a powerful rhythmic soundscape; tactilely, the physical contact between dancers and the hand-holding dance movements convey warmth and closeness; olfactorily, the scent of ritual incense mixed with the crowd's smell creates a unique olfactory memory. The synergistic stimulation of multiple senses renders tourists' emotional experiences richer and more enduring [37, 38].

#### 4.3. Narrative Reconstruction of Collective Memory—Temporal Crossing and Cultural Identity

Mu Nao Zong Ge's ritual performance is not only a bodily dance but also a narrative performance. Through the priest's chanting of the creation epic, the historical reproduction of ritual procedures, and orally transmitted traditions, Mu Nao Zong Ge achieves a narrative reconstruction of collective memory, enabling tourists to undergo a temporal crossing from the modern era into the historical and cultural world of the Jingpo people [23].

*Epic chanting and memory activation.* The ritual begins with the priest chanting the "Mu Nao Zhai Wa" epic [21]. In the prolonged chanting, the Jingpo people's creation myths, ethnic migrations, and heroic deeds are presented one by one. For Jingpo participants, the epic chanting awakens deep ethnic memories and strengthens identity; for tourists, although most do not understand the Jingpo language, the rhythmic and solemn quality of the chanting creates a cultural atmosphere that transcends language. In related shares on online platforms, some tourists have expressed this feeling, describing the ancient chanting as evoking a sense of awe beyond ordinary experience.

*Ritual procedures and historical reproduction.* The ritual process of Mu Nao Zong Ge is not arbitrary but strictly follows traditional procedures. From the opening ceremony, priestly chanting, lead dancing, collective dance, to the closing ritual, each segment corresponds to important events or cultural concepts in Jingpo history. For example, the dancers' formation following the "sun pattern" simulates the route of ancestral migration; the long knives held by the lead dancers symbolize the power to protect the ethnic group; and the collective dance recreates scenes of the Jingpo people overcoming difficulties and celebrating harvests. This ritualized historical reproduction leads tourists to unconsciously enter the historical narrative of the Jingpo people during participation, forming a cognitive empathy with Jingpo culture [23, 39].

*Reproduction of memory.* It is noteworthy that the collective memory of Mu Nao Zong Ge is not a fixed "tradition" but a dynamic process of selection, reorganization, and reproduction in the tourism context [10]. To meet the demands of the tourism market, certain segments of Mu Nao Zong Ge have been simplified or adjusted, while other elements have been emphasized or highlighted. For instance, ceremonies traditionally spanning several days have been condensed to one day or half a day, certain religiously oriented segments have been downplayed, while visually impactful collective dance has been extended and pushed to a climax. This reproduction of memory is not simple "distortion" but represents the adaptive transformation of traditional culture in a modern context. In this process, tourists serve both as recipients of collective memory and as co-creators of new memory narratives.



#### 4.4. Digital Dissemination and Image Diffusion—From On-site Experience to Online Communication

The popularization of social media has profoundly changed the way tourism destination images are communicated. Mu Nao Zong Ge's ritual performance is no longer limited to on-site participants and traditional media coverage but has achieved leapfrog diffusion through digital channels including short videos, live streaming, and social sharing, breaking through the geographic constraints on the visibility of border tourism destinations [40, 41].

*Visual impact of short-video communication.* The spectacular scale of Mu Nao Zong Ge naturally matches the communication characteristics of short videos. Thousands of dancers moving in unison, colorful ethnic costumes, and powerful drum music constitute highly visually impactful short-video content. On platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, short videos related to Mu Nao Zong Ge have accumulated considerable viewership. Research indicates that short videos can effectively stimulate viewers' destination imagination and travel intentions by enhancing visual symbols and creating emotional resonance. Based on tourist feedback on online platforms, some tourists indicated that they first learned about Mu Nao Zong Ge through short-video platforms and were attracted by the large-scale collective dance, subsequently developing a desire to visit Dehong.

*Emotional contagion through social sharing.* On-site tourists typically share their experiences on social platforms such as WeChat Moments, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu after participating in Mu Nao Zong Ge. These shared posts often include photos, videos, and emotionally charged textual descriptions. These personalized, emotionally charged shares are more persuasive and infectious than traditional advertising, generating a word-of-mouth communication effect [41, 42]. In online posts related to Mu Nao Zong Ge, some users described experiences of sharing their on-site videos on social platforms and receiving significant attention and inquiries.

*Synergistic effects of decentralized communication.* The decentralized nature of digital communication gives the image diffusion of Mu Nao Zong Ge a multi-node, viral characteristic. Many participants and viewers can become communication nodes, with each share and like triggering a new communication cycle. This mode of communication not only expands the visibility of Mu Nao Zong Ge but also continuously generates and reshapes its image significance in the decentralized communication process. The Mu Nao Zong Ge image that tourists encounter on social media is often a collage of multiple narratives and diverse perspectives, which in turn enriches the cultural connotation and image layers of Mu Nao Zong Ge.

*Online reshaping of spatial image.* Digital communication not only disseminates the image of Mu Nao Zong Ge but also reshapes the overall image of Dehong as a border tourism destination in online space. Searching for "Dehong tourism" in search engines reveals that content related to Mu Nao Zong

Ge occupies a prominent position; searching for "Mu Nao Zong Ge" on Xiaohongshu yields numerous travel guides, check-in recommendations, and experience shares. This online spatial image reorganization elevates Mu Nao Zong Ge from a festival activity to an iconic cultural symbol of the Dehong border tourism destination. Tourists establish a certain "pre-experience" and "horizon of expectation" through online platforms before visiting, which in turn influences their perception and evaluation during the on-site ritual experience.

## 5. Discussion

The four mechanisms described above are not independent of each other but are interrelated and synergistic. Spatial liminalization provides a specific field for bodily practices, which in turn reinforce the sense of spatial liminality through sensory experience. Narrative reconstruction of collective memory endows bodily practices with cultural meaning, transforming dance from mere physical movement into a historical performance. Digital communication converts on-site experiences into online communication, achieving cross-temporal and cross-spatial image diffusion. Together, these four mechanisms form a complete chain from "presence to experience to memory to communication," driving Mu Nao Zong Ge's transformation from a traditional ethnic ritual into an iconic cultural symbol of the border tourism destination.

To assess the explanatory power of these four mechanisms, a preliminary comparison can be made with other ethnic festivals. The Dai people's Water-Splashing Festival also possesses a strong ritual sense and participation, but its spatial liminalization focuses more on the purification and carnival of water, with bodily practices emphasizing the interactivity of the "splashing" action. The Wa people's Wooden Drum Festival constructs collective memory and ethnic identity through drumming and dance. This comparison reveals that while the specific pathways through which ethnic festival ritual performance shapes tourism destination images vary according to festival characteristics, the "performance—experience—image" three-dimensional framework has general applicability, and the four mechanisms may present different combinations and emphases across different festivals.

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects. First, it constructs a "ritual performance—cultural experience—image perception" analytical framework, providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding the relationship between ethnic festivals and tourism destination images. Second, it identifies four mechanisms through which ritual performance shapes border tourism destination images, revealing a complete pathway from ritual practice to image generation. Third, it incorporates border location factors into the analysis, expanding the theoretical boundaries of tourism destination image research. At the practical level, this study offers insights for the integrated development of culture and tourism in border ethnic areas: it is essential to fully explore the cultural connotations of ethnic festivals, moderately

innovate while protecting traditions, enhance tourist experiences by optimizing ritual performance design, and expand image communication through digital platforms.

## 6. Conclusions

Taking the Mu Nao Zong Ge of the Jingpo people in Dehong, Yunnan as a case study, this paper constructed a three-dimensional analytical framework of "ritual performance—cultural experience—image perception" and examined the mechanisms through which ethnic festival ritual performance shapes border tourism destination images. The findings reveal that four mechanisms—spatial liminalization, symbolic performance of bodily practices, narrative reconstruction of collective memory, and digital dissemination image diffusion—work synergistically to transform Mu Nao Zong Ge from a traditional ethnic ritual into an iconic cultural symbol of the border tourism destination. This process is not a one-way cultural export but a negotiation of meaning and co-creation of image involving multiple actors including tourists, community residents, local government, and media.

This study has several limitations. First, the research primarily employed participant observation, which, while capable of revealing mechanism details in depth, lacks direct data from the tourist perspective. Future research could combine quantitative and qualitative methods such as questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews to empirically test the effects of the four mechanisms from the tourist perception dimension. Second, this study focused on a single case of Mu Nao Zong Ge; future research could adopt multi-case comparative studies to test the general applicability of the analytical framework and the four mechanisms. Third, the analysis of digital communication was primarily based on publicly available social media content without deeply tracking communication pathways and audience feedback; future research could employ network analysis methods to more precisely characterize the network structure and influence mechanisms of digital communication.

Overall, ethnic festival ritual performance, as an important pathway for shaping border tourism destination images, has become increasingly prominent in the context of cultural and tourism integration. How to fully leverage the image-shaping function of ritual performance while protecting the authenticity of ethnic culture, achieving a positive interaction between cultural heritage preservation and tourism development, remains a critical issue for future research and practice.

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## Author Contributions

**Renjuan Luo:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

**Ruoping Yang:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

**Fen Lu:** Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing

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## Data Availability Statement

All relevant data are within the paper. Field notes and observation records are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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