

The Evolution Logic and Development Path of the Grand Canal Culture from the Perspective of Ethnic Interaction and Integration

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Abstract

The Grand Canal is not only a living cultural heritage with global influence, but also forms the cultural geographical coordinates of the evolution of Chinese civilization. From the Spring and Autumn Period to the Northern and Southern Dynasties, it was the early stage of the construction of the Grand Canal and the initial stage of ethnic exchanges and integration. During the Sui, Tang, Song, and Yuan Dynasties, the Grand Canal was fully connected, accelerating ethnic exchanges and integration. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it was the peak period of the Grand Canal and the deepening of ethnic exchanges and integration. The value implications of the Grand Canal culture are as follows: spatial ties promote national identity, cultural channels drive cultural innovation, and economic ties achieve mutual integration of livelihoods. The inheritance and development of the Grand Canal culture lies in the systematic protection of the heritage, the comprehensive display of culture, and the continuation of livelihood collaboration.

Keywords

Grand Canal; Grand Canal Culture; Ethnic Interaction and Integration.

1. Introduction

The historical evolution of the Grand Canal gradually gave rise to a magnificent water conservancy project that connected the north and the south, and deeply integrated into the evolution process of Chinese civilization. As a flowing heritage, the Grand Canal has developed a culture characterized by communication and integration, mutual assistance and sharing, and harmonious coexistence. The construction of the contemporary Grand Canal National Cultural Park aims to activate the contemporary vitality of this "cultural river" through systematic protection and innovative interpretation, and to construct a cultural narrative field that connects history and the present. [1] This process aims to profoundly reveal the political and cultural concepts of connecting water systems, promoting exchanges, and facilitating integration carried by the Grand Canal, as well as the great wisdom of ancient laborers and the simple ideal of common prosperity. Thus, it transforms the linear heritage space into a spiritual bond for ethnic interaction, communication and integration, and strengthening national identity.

2. The Evolution Logic of the Grand Canal Culture from the Perspective of Ethnic Interaction and Integration

In 486 BC, King Fu Chai of Wu began to dig the Han Canal in Han (now Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province) to march northward against the State of Qi. This is regarded as the origin of the Grand Canal. During the Qin Dynasty, in order to strengthen control over the entire country, they "Chisel through Changlong and cut off its straight path" in the Dantu area, and the southern

canal began to take shape. In the Western Han Dynasty, to transport grain to Chang'an (now Xi'an, Shanxi Province), they diverted the canal westward to the Central Plains and appointed "Captain of Yueqi School" and "Changshui Colonel", who were military talents of the Xiongnu and other ethnic minorities who had moved to the canal area in the Central Plains and later became elite troops of the imperial court. [2] In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the Uighur people moved southward, which led to a large number of ethnic minorities entering the Beiyun River Basin in Liaodong and Youzhou. During the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, in order to connect the rivers such as the Yaojiang River, Yongjiang River, Qiantangjiang River and Cao'ejiang River, the Zhe Dong Canal was excavated and renovated. After Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty came to power, he moved the capital to Luoyang and carried out Hanization reforms such as changing the official system and surnames, further integrating the Xiongnu and other ethnic minorities with the Han Chinese. The excavation and renovation of canals during this period not only served military and transportation needs, but also became an important space for the contact, cohabitation and integration of northern nomadic ethnic groups and the agricultural ethnic groups in the Central Plains. Geographically, it initially laid the foundation for the multi-ethnic unity pattern of the Chinese nation.

In the early 7th century AD, Emperor Yang of Sui Dynasty successively constructed the Tongji Canal and the Yongji Canal, dredged the Han River, and cleared the Jiangnan Canal. Eventually, a "Y"-shaped canal was formed, with Luoyang, the capital, as the center, extending northward to Zhuojun (now Beijing Tongzhou) and southward to Yuhang (now Zhejiang Hangzhou). At that time, the North-South Grand Canal for the first time connected the five major water systems of the Hai River, the Yellow River, the Huai River, the Yangtze River, and the Qiantang River, linking the regions of Central Plains, Yan Zhao, Guanzhong, Jianghuai, and Jiangnan. It not only strengthened the connections among various regions but also opened up an important passage for the second large-scale population migration in history. The series of enlightened ethnic policies implemented by the Tang Dynasty prompted a large number of northern and northeastern ethnic minorities, including the Xi, Turkic, Khitan, Mohe, Shiwei, Goguryeo, Silla, and Uyghur, to enter the area of the North Canal and settle there. The ethnic groups within the region further integrated. [3] Since the 20th century, 63 inscriptions of the Sogdian tombstones have been discovered in the Luoyang area. The identities of the tomb owners included nobles, merchants, and monks, all of whom reflect their extensive integration into the local social structure. [4]

The series of innovative achievements in ship lock technology, embankment engineering, etc. made by the Northern Song Dynasty laid a solid foundation for the navigation of the canal at the technical level. During the Southern Song Dynasty, the Zhe Dong Canal, as an extension channel of the Yangtze River Economic Belt to the Maritime Silk Road, played a crucial role. During the Yuan Dynasty, the capital was moved to Dadu (now Beijing), and the political center of the country shifted northward. In the 20th year of the Yuan Dynasty, the Yuan Emperor ordered the Minister of the Military Department, Aolu Chi, to start digging a canal from Rencheng, guiding the Wen, Guang and Si rivers northward. One of its branches reached Xucheng Anshan and connected to the ancient Ji River (the Great Qing River) course, passing through Dong'e to Lijin and entering the sea. In the 26th year of the Yuan Dynasty, "Officials such as DaEr, Shangshu Zhang Kongsun, and Langzhong Li Chuxun were ordered to excavate and connect the river, and a water monitoring station was established in Jingdezhen (now Zhang Qiu)." [5] After the route adjustment, the Yuan Dynasty Grand Canal became the culmination of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, truly achieving the integration of the political center and the economic center of the country. Due to the Hui people living in Tongzhou, they mostly relied on the canal boats for a living, engaging in transportation industries such as loading and unloading of grain ships and merchant ships, and some people engaged in traveling merchants and street vendors. [6] The population of Zhenjiang Road was 610,000, among which the "foreign residents"

households" reached 3,845, including Mongols, Hui people, Yili Kewen, Khitan and other ethnic groups, reflecting the mixed population structure characteristic of the canal cities at that time. [7]

Based on the ancient canal of the Yuan Dynasty, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, continuous renovations and repairs were carried out, and many new and renovated sections of canals and waterworks facilities were constructed. The Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal remained fully open for a long time, truly becoming the main transportation artery of the country. "After the Jingnan Rebellion", the Grand Canal became the only transportation line connecting the capital and the Jiangnan region. [8] The convenient transportation brought by the canal made Huai'an a salt production base, while Yangzhou was the only direct connection between the Yangtze River main stream and the Grand Canal in the north, and river and waterway transportation enabled the distribution of grain and salt across the country. Grain and salt industries attracted groups such as Huizhou merchants and Hui people to migrate to the Huai-Yang region. They recompiled their family genealogies and established ancestral temples, further promoting the diversified development of the social structure of the cities along the canal. [9]

The evolution process of the Grand Canal during the Spring and Autumn Period to the Ming and Qing Dynasties indicates that the canal was not only a water conservancy project but also a crucial link that connected the Yangtze River Basin and facilitated ethnic exchanges and integration. From King Fuchai of Wu's initial construction of the Han River Canal to connect the Yangtze and Huai rivers, to the deep connection of the North-South Grand Canal in the Sui and Tang Dynasties with the prosperous areas in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, and then to the continuous operation of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal relying on the Yangtze River system. Each time the river course was reformed and connected, it led to the migration and mixed settlement of the population along the canal, constantly reorganizing the social structure. Cities like Yangzhou, Zhenjiang, and Hangzhou, where rivers converge, became core hubs for ethnic interactions. These historical facts collectively reveal that the Grand Canal, while meeting the needs of national transportation and military operations, objectively shaped a shared living area and economic network among ethnic groups, promoting their gradual transition from occasional contact to stable cohabitation, from economic dependence to cultural interpenetration.

3. The Value Implications of the Grand Canal Culture from the Perspective of Ethnic Interaction and Integration

3.1. Spatial Bond: Formation of National Identity across Regions and Ethnic Groups

The Grand Canal connects the Yangtze River, the Yellow River, the Huai River and other river basins through artificial waterways. On this basis, through the long-term national system of transportation by water, people from different regions and ethnic groups gradually formed a sense of belonging to the same political community in their daily production and life.

Zhenjiang Road in the Yuan Dynasty, located at the confluence of the Grand Canal and the Yangtze River, had a population of 610,000, and the "foreign-resident households" numbered 3,845, including Mongols, Hui people, Yili Kewen, Khitan and other ethnic groups. These ethnic groups lived, paid taxes and abided by local laws along the Grand Canal for a long time, and their daily lives were closely related to the political order of the Yuan Dynasty. On the transportation route along the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal, the escort officials, boatmen and river workers from different ethnic groups jointly dealt with practical problems such as floods, storms and river siltation; the Yangtze River ports, Grand Canal docks and river-side associations became public spaces where various ethnic merchants made contracts and resolved disputes.

This path of identity construction based on the practice of coexistence with rivers and lakes is more enduring than simple political propaganda. The flowing space formed by the Grand Canal's linkage with the Yangtze River has transformed the macro concept of the state into infrastructure that the people along the river and the lake can see and use every day. In the coexistence across river basins, this deepens the common sense of nationhood among all ethnic groups.

3.2. Cultural Corridors: Integration and Innovation of Ethnic Cultural Elements

The Grand Canal connects the Yangtze River water system, providing a channel for the free flow and mutual combination of cultural elements such as languages, beliefs, skills, and diets of different ethnic groups. This cultural interaction is not the assimilation of one culture by another, but a mixed cultural form with the characteristics of rivers, formed while maintaining the boundaries of each ethnic group.

Mazu was originally a sea god worshipped along the coastal areas of Fujian. It passed through the Zhejiang Eastern Canal and the Jiangnan Canal and entered the Yangtze River, and also moved northward to North China. It was accepted by the Yangtze River boatmen and the canal laborers. In places where rivers converge, such as Yangzhou and Zhenjiang, there emerged common worship temples of Mazu. The operas, delicacies, and handicrafts of the Yangtze River basin spread northward along the canal, and northern folk customs were also introduced to the south through waterways. Various ethnic cultures mutually learned from each other.

These cultural integration achievements should not be regarded merely as artificial creations, but rather as naturally formed through long-term daily contact along the river channels. The cultural corridor formed by the interweaving of the Grand Canal and the Yangtze River proves that multiple ethnic groups coexisting does not have to be based on eliminating differences; differences themselves can become resources for cultural innovation.

3.3. Economic Links: Historical Foundation of Multi-Ethnic Livelihood Cooperation and Integration

The Grand Canal is a major commercial artery connecting the north and south and connecting the Yangtze River basin, integrating the livelihood methods of different regions and ethnic groups into a commercial network. The canal is deeply connected with the Yangtze River water system. Grain, silk, cotton goods, and salt products from the south pass through the Yangtze River and head north, while materials from the north arrive in the south for distribution. Along the canal, people of various ethnic groups have long collaborated in areas such as canal transportation, salt transportation, wharf loading and unloading, and handicrafts, forming an economic interlocking structure.

During the Yuan Dynasty, the Hui people living in Tongzhou mostly relied on ships on the canal to make a living, engaging in industries such as grain ships and merchant ships loading. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the close combination of canal transportation, salt transportation, and Yangtze River shipping attracted a large number of Hui people to settle in areas along the river. In major towns where rivers converge, such as Yangzhou, Zhenjiang, and Nanjing, ethnic merchants expanded north-south trade along the river channels and mutually benefited and coexisted.

The economic interlocking structure is the result of industrial division of labor brought about by the linkage of the Grand Canal and the Yangtze River. Each ethnic group carried their unique skills and experiences and used them locally in the daily transactions at the canal docks. This mutually beneficial and shared cooperative relationship provided a material basis for the long-term cohabitation of multiple ethnic groups, making the areas along the Grand Canal and the Yangtze River a model of cross-ethnic economic cooperation in history.

4. The Path for the Transmission and Development of the Grand Canal Culture from the Perspective of "Three Interactions" of Ethnic Groups

4.1. Heritage Protection: Systematically preserve the cultural relics of the shared canal culture of the Chinese nation

Conduct a comprehensive investigation, registration, and graded protection of the material remains that witness the "Three Interactions". Include immovable cultural relics (such as mosques, docks, guildhalls, old neighborhoods) in the list of Grand Canal Cultural Heritage Protection, carry out specialized restoration, and update the list based on new archaeological discoveries. Especially for some damaged cultural relics that only remain as ruins, conduct on-site protection of the original remains based on scientific archaeological excavation, display the historical content of ethnic interaction and integration through signboards, and clearly define the protection scope to avoid the destruction of the original space of the relics due to urban construction and land development. For movable cultural relics (such as tomb inscriptions, family genealogies, contracts, commercial ledgers), conduct digital collection and database construction to ensure traceability. Special attention should also be paid to the collection of oral histories in the areas, recording and preserving the family memories of old boatmen, Hui merchants, and descendants of Manchu watermen.

4.2. Cultural Display: Build a narrative system for the history of the common life of the Chinese nation

Establish museums and exhibition halls with "The Common Life of the Chinese Nation" as the main thread, and integrate the relevant content into daily education and training. Currently, the display of Grand Canal culture mainly focuses on the canal transportation projects, water conservancy technologies, and the southern tours of emperors. The content related to ethnic interaction and integration is insufficient. Add special exhibition halls such as "The Grand Canal and Ethnic Interaction and Integration" and "The Ethnic Stories of the Grand Canal" in the museums of cities along the Grand Canal, mainly exhibiting physical exhibits such as bilingual inscriptions, household registration books, and contracts; develop school-based courses on the "Three Interactions of Ethnic Groups" for primary and secondary schools, including stories of ethnic migration along the canal, multi-language place names, and characteristic cuisine; support towns along the canal to regularly or irregularly carry out community cultural activities, encouraging multi-ethnic residents to participate together, and exploring more tangible and personal interaction memories.

4.3. Economic Cooperation: Continuously carry forward the traditional cross-ethnic livelihood cooperation of the canal

Build characterized towns along the canal, preserve and support the joint operation of multiple ethnic groups, open up food streets that integrate other ethnic-specific cuisines such as halal food, and jointly develop "Canal Scenery" products that incorporate canal memories; organize cross-ethnic workshops to inherit traditional canal skills, providing space for joint creation of Manchu paper-cutting and Han Chinese New Year paintings, and Hui ethnic leather arts and Han Chinese bamboo weaving; encourage merchants of all ethnic groups along the canal to jointly apply for intangible cultural heritage projects or brands, continuously maintaining the cooperative relationship based on economic benefit sharing, truly realizing the transformation of the historical cross-ethnic economic interpenetration into a sustainable livelihood model in the contemporary era, and making the "Three Interactions of Ethnic Groups" not only imprinted in cultural heritage but also integrated into real life.

5. Conclusion

The Grand Canal was first dug during the Spring and Autumn Period and has been in existence for over 2,000 years. Its cultural significance goes far beyond being merely a water conservancy project. From the perspective of ethnic interaction and integration, the Grand Canal connects the Yangtze River water system and runs through the north and south, serving not only as a waterway that spreads across the living space of the Chinese nation, but also as a historical field that carries out diverse social interactions such as migration, settlement, and mutual learning of beliefs. From the opening of the Han Canal in the Spring and Autumn Period, which connected the Huai and Jiang regions and initiated initial exchanges among various ethnic groups, to the large-scale population movement and mixed settlement along the canal and Yangtze River waterways during the Sui, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, and then to the deep intermingling of various ethnic groups in the river hub towns during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the evolution logic of Grand Canal culture clearly demonstrates that the Chinese nation gradually formed a shared spatial presence, mutual economic interdependence, and cultural integration. This is our collective memory that we cannot forget, and it is also a profound foundation for realizing the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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