

Exploring High-Quality Development Pathways for Litang County's “August 1st International Horse Racing Festival” in the Context of Rural Revitalization

Bin Zheng^{1,a,*}

¹Sichuan Minzu College, Kangding, China

^a345971145@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: The “August 1st International Horse Racing Festival” in Litang County has become a vibrant cultural emblem showcasing the ethnic folk traditions of the Kham region. As a unique ethnic sports and cultural event in Ganzi Prefecture, the festival has evolved into a premier brand event integrating horse racing competitions, traditional cultural displays, and leisure tourism. However, under the powerful impact of modern sports, horse racing has gradually declined. This article employs literature review, expert interviews, and field research to analyze the current development status of Litang County's “August 1st Horse Racing Festival” within the context of rural revitalization. It proposes feasible development pathways, aiming to provide valuable insights and references for the preservation and advancement of intangible cultural heritage in western Sichuan.

Keywords: Rural Revitalization, Horse Racing Festival, Ethnic Sports, Traditional Culture

1. Introduction

The Horse Racing Festival, as a comprehensive grassland celebration, encompasses activities spanning traditional cultural performances, equestrian and athletic competitions, trade fairs and specialty product exhibitions, investment promotion negotiations, and tourism resource promotions. Currently, with policy support, traditional ethnic minority sports events are experiencing new development opportunities. Simultaneously, the rapid growth of economies and tourism in Western Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces, coupled with rising public demand for diverse sporting events and multi-tiered fitness and leisure activities, has collectively fueled the prosperity of these competitions. As the Western Sichuan Horse Racing Festival continues to deepen and evolve, it has established a comprehensive platform integrating athletic competition, cultural performances, tourism promotion, and economic collaboration, significantly enhancing its scale effects and brand value. Litang County in Ganzi Prefecture is situated in an economically underdeveloped ethnic region characterized by isolated transportation, extremely poor geographical conditions, and particularly harsh climatic conditions, resulting in relatively lagging overall economic development. Limited government investment, especially at the county level, and inadequate supporting facilities that reduce repeat visit rates have, to some extent, hindered the development of Litang County's “August 1st Horse Racing Festival.” This paper focuses on the current development status of Litang County's “August 1st International Horse Racing Festival” in Ganzi Prefecture. It explores the challenges encountered in the festival's preservation and transmission, aiming to provide new insights and approaches for safeguarding and perpetuating horse racing festivals in western Sichuan. This effort contributes to the development of intangible cultural heritage projects and the promotion of traditional ethnic sports culture.

2. The Historical Origins of Litang's “August 1st International Horse Racing Festival”

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Generations of nomadic tribes living on the grasslands are known for their bravery and generosity. Their bond with horses runs deep—horses are both their nature and their livelihood. Immersed in this

cultural atmosphere, a unique horse racing culture with distinct ethnic characteristics gradually took shape. Residents of the grasslands often gather for horse races during their leisure time. Horse racing events frequently appear as themed activities in folk festivals, serving as an important cultural symbol in the festive customs of ethnic regions.

Litang is known as “Letong,” meaning “mirror-like grasslands.” With its vast terrain and lush pastures, this region has become a cradle for horsemen. Litang is also hailed as the “Horse Riding Capital.” Due to its high altitude, Litang's grasslands reach their peak abundance in July and August. Each year on the morning of August 1st, as the rising sun bathes the grasslands, a vast tent city emerges across the open plains, marking the commencement of the largest and most carnival-like horse racing festival in western Sichuan. In 1964, the government designated August 1st as the fixed date for this festival, hence its name, the “August First Horse Racing Festival.” [1] Originally intertwined with religious rituals at Changchunqiongkele Monastery, it evolved into a folk event blending religion, sports, and culture. Its fixed timing stems from Litang's natural conditions where August grasslands yield “lush pastures and robust horses.” The Litang August 1st Horse Racing Festival traces its origins to the folk June Pilgrimage Festival, boasting over 400 years of history. Historically, on the third day of the sixth lunar month—when wildflowers bloom and grasslands flourish—Changchunqiong'er Monastery held the Kora Pilgrimage following centuries-old traditions. Horse racing stood as one of its most captivating highlights[2]. The Litang August Horse Racing Festival stands as one of the most representative traditional celebrations in the Kham region. In 2008, it was included in the Sichuan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage List. By 2025, it had been selected for the third batch of the “Intangible Heritage Sichuan · Hundred Cities, Hundred Arts” intangible heritage brand projects, launching the “Daya” brand. It has become the core vehicle for the horse racing cultural industry on the western Sichuan plateau. Its core lies in preserving nomadic culture, equestrian skills, and community cohesion through activities like competitive horse racing (including endurance races and equestrian events) and the Guozhuang dance.

2.2 Types of Horse Racing at Litang's “August 1st Horse Racing Festival”

2.2.1 Racehorse Events

Primarily divided into short-distance speed races and long-distance endurance races. These are endurance-based competitions testing stamina over extended distances. For speed and endurance races, horses with a shoulder height of 136 cm or below are classified as ponies, while those above 136 cm are considered full-sized horses. These races primarily test the horse's speed and stamina, involving a gallop where the horse's front and hind legs alternate in a rapid, coordinated motion.

2.2.2 Pacing Horses

Historically known as “noble horses,” pacing horses were once reserved exclusively for the nobility and chieftains, who possessed the means and status to raise them. Compared to racehorses, trotters offer smoother, faster, and more enduring performance. Both rider and horse can sustain extended periods of movement at remarkable speeds. Trotters with a shoulder height of 138 cm or below are classified as ponies, while those above 138 cm are full-sized horses. Trot racing is a highly technical competition, evaluating the stability and speed of the horse's sideways gait.

2.2.3 Equestrian Arts

Equestrian arts blend human skill with the horse's innate abilities, requiring speed, endurance, and mastery of reins. Equestrian performances captivate audiences through riders' posture, grace, and difficulty levels, showcasing feats like the horse belly hide, horseback handstand, flying archery, and khata retrieval.

3. The Practical Challenges Facing the Development of Litang County's “August 1st Horse Racing Festival” in the Context of Rural Revitalization

3.1 The Continuous Weakening and Loss of Horse Racing Culture

On October 18, 2017, the report to the 19th CPC National Congress explicitly stated the need to “promote the innovative development of China's fine traditional culture, endow it with new contemporary connotations and modern forms of expression, enhance the cultural confidence of the people, and make Chinese culture a powerful spiritual support for the nation as it strides toward the

future” [3]. Throughout societal evolution, horse racing activities—characterized by high public participation and enduring historical continuity—have fostered a unique cultural system integrating competitive, ceremonial, and social cohesion functions, becoming a vital foundation of secular culture. As an outstanding ethnic culture in China, horse racing traditions have gradually declined due to shifts in lifestyle, the penetration of cultural globalization, and transformations in the traditional pastoralist way of life.

3.2 Discontinuity in Project Succession and Shortage of Specialized Talent

With economic development, social transformation, and accelerated urbanization, the number of horses has declined year by year. Coupled with young people increasingly drawn to modern sports, the skills of older generations of athletes are fading into obscurity, leading to a gradual decrease in horse racing successors. Simultaneously, the high demands of horse racing on both horses and venues have plunged its succession into significant difficulties. As lifestyles evolve, increasing numbers of people choose to seek employment in cities, resulting in fewer young people in Litang County engaged in horse breeding and racing. This has caused a severe shortage of talent for the county's “August 1st Horse Racing Festival.” Surveys indicate that in recent years, both the number of participants and spectators at the festival has been steadily declining, hindering the dissemination of horse racing culture.

As horse racing activities in Ganzi Prefecture continue to develop, the shortage of professional talent has become increasingly evident. Most horse racing practitioners are local township residents, and the majority lack formal professional training. Their skill levels and overall competence vary widely, and their knowledge of horse racing is often unsystematic and incomplete. The vast majority of practitioners rely on personal experience for activities such as horse selection, breeding, training, and competition, resulting in low levels of specialization. [4]. As physical capabilities decline with age, many high-level equestrian athletes are unable to participate in training and competitions. Compounded by the scarcity of young people willing to engage in horse racing, this has led to a severe shortage of elite equestrian athletes. Current talent development faces two major contradictions: First, traditional skills like horse training and riding techniques face the risk of being lost with the departure of practitioners. Second, there is a significant gap in modern event management talent, with few high-level athletes possessing the capability to compete.

3.3 Insufficient Promotion and Lack of Influence

Located in the Hengduan Mountains, Ganzi Prefecture in Sichuan Province boasts rich cultural and natural tourism resources shaped by its unique geography and historical context. However, the prefecture has fallen short in developing high-quality sporting events. Litang County's “August 1 Horse Racing Festival” lacks a scientifically sound communication strategy, resulting in low dissemination efficiency, disorganized operations, and inconsistent standards—all undermining its positive external impact. The event relies heavily on traditional offline activities (such as horse racing performances and cultural shows) and regional media coverage, with no new media matrix in place. Although the 2025 Horse Racing Festival utilized short video clips for dissemination, it failed to generate sustained topic momentum, falling far short of the nationwide exposure achieved by the Xichang Marathon, where registration slots sold out within two days. Compared to the Nagqu Horse Racing Festival's multidimensional promotion strategy combining short videos, live streaming, and regional cultural tourism alliances, Litang underutilizes youth-oriented platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, missing opportunities to reach potential audiences. Additionally, promotional efforts focused primarily on the horse racing competition itself, with insufficient interpretation of cultural symbols like the “King Gesar Epic” and “Horseback Faith.” For instance, the connections between the horse racing festival and the Kora pilgrimage or blessing ceremonies were not deeply explored, weakening its cultural distinctiveness. The Nagqu Horse Racing Festival successfully transformed culture into tangible tourism products through immersive experiences like “Black Tent Intangible Cultural Heritage Experiences” and “Gesar Epic Rap Performances,” while Litang has made fewer such attempts.

3.4 Low Brand Recognition and Lack of Distinctive Brand Effect

In December 2016, the National Tourism Administration and General Administration of Sport of China issued the “Guiding Opinions on Vigorously Developing Sports Tourism,” emphasizing the need to fully leverage China's sports tourism resources, promote deep integration between tourism and sports,

and cultivate and expand sports tourism enterprise clusters [5].

Lithang County leverages its “Hometown of Chinese Horse Racing Culture” brand to systematically advance sports-tourism integration. As Ganzi Prefecture's most distinctive ethnic traditional sports event, the Lithang “August 1st Horse Racing Festival” has seen growing domestic influence in recent years through expanded scale and enhanced activities. However, it lacks a prominent tourism brand to drive its development, preventing it from becoming a renowned sporting event. Surveys indicate that visitors primarily attend the Litang “August 1 Horse Racing Festival” as spectators. Limited tourism products and insufficiently enriched tourism content have weakened market competitiveness. During their visits, tourists experience low participation levels and subpar engagement, leading to visitor attrition. Despite holding the title of “Hometown of Chinese Horse Racing Culture,” the festival has yet to develop a distinctive slogan akin to “Xichang Marathon—Running Flame.” Visitor perception remains confined to “spectating,” failing to establish a comprehensive brand identity encompassing “cultural immersion, ecological experience, and folk interaction.”

4. Strategies for High-Quality Development of Litang County's “August 1 Horse Racing Festival” in the Context of Rural Revitalization

4.1 Strengthening the Protection and Transmission of Horse Racing Projects as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage represents the cultural wealth created and accumulated by all ethnic groups over centuries, serving as a treasure of global civilization. Protecting and transmitting this heritage is crucial for preserving the uniqueness of ethnic cultures and safeguarding the diversity of world cultures. The Litang August 1 Horse Racing Festival evolved from the folk June Pilgrimage Festival, boasting over 400 years of history and designated as a Sichuan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage item. Horse racing events included in the provincial intangible cultural heritage list should leverage national special funds for intangible cultural heritage protection to advance apprenticeship training, skill transmission, and cultural exchange. Efforts must be made in research, preservation, inheritance, and promotion. Additionally, events like National Fitness Day should be utilized for exhibitions and publicity. Integrating traditional equestrian skills (such as horse belly hiding, khata picking, and horseback archery) with modern competition, the event leverages professional management by the Horse Racing Association and the construction of a standardized racetrack to elevate competition standards. Using horse racing as a catalyst, it activates the breeding, training, and trading of horses, as well as the cultural tourism consumption chain. This drives income growth for herders and rural revitalization, promoting the integration of “culture + sports + tourism” across multiple sectors. Continuously enhance public cultural service capabilities by shifting from merely organizing cultural events to managing cultural development. Encourage social participation in cultural construction and management, advance the social adoption system for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects, and explore new pathways for “living transmission” of ICH through voluntary partnerships between ICH projects and enterprises.

4.2 Strengthen Training for Horse Racing Successors and Professionals

Sports administrative departments at all levels (from national to county/district) should organize multi-tiered, diverse training programs to provide systematic learning opportunities for the public. Concurrently, accelerate the establishment of a professional think tank for Sichuan's horse racing sector and create a model platform for talent exchange. Systematically enhance the professional competence and skill levels of horse racing industry personnel through a “competition-based training” model, organizing skill competitions and on-the-job training to stimulate innovative vitality among talent. Simultaneously establish a “Horse Racing Talent Database” to enable dynamic talent management and targeted cultivation. Collaborate with institutions like Sichuan Minzu College and Southwest Minzu University to establish horse racing industry colleges or specialized programs (referencing the Guangzhou Sports Vocational College and Tianlu Equestrian Club partnership model), offering courses in horse training, event management, equine healthcare, and more to promote a closed-loop “curriculum-training-employment” development pathway. Introduce an industry mentor system (e.g., the Ganzi Prefecture Master Teacher Studio mechanism) where seasoned practitioners guide hands-on skills. Leverage existing platforms like the Provincial Youth Sports Federation to pilot horse racing project management training programs. Integrate think tanks into the framework of the “Star Selection

Plan for Outstanding Competitive Talent in Sichuan Province,” linking it with the “Key Project Mini-Highland” cultivation model to form a closed-loop system of “training-selection-think tank support.” The government promotes the “1+1+1” mentor-apprentice pairing model, in which experienced practitioners guide newcomers, and establishes venues such as intangible cultural heritage workshops and training centers to foster a multi-generational workforce comprising senior, middle-aged, and young artisans. The government utilizes scenario-based teaching methods, such as “horseback field studies,” to strengthen practical transmission of skills. The government is also promoting the integration of secondary and higher vocational education and piloting “competition-oriented order-based classes.”

4.3 Enhance Event Promotion and Expand Horse Racing Festival Scale

The government should make full use of platforms such as folk festivals and major ethnic sports competitions to collaborate with Sichuan Satellite TV, Kangba Satellite TV, Ganzi Prefecture Television, as well as newspapers and online media. At the same time, it should utilize multimedia platforms—such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and WeChat Official Accounts—to attract the attention of tourists and participants, encouraging more people to get involved. This will help more people understand the spirit of Litang County’s horse racing and allow them to personally experience the joy it brings. The government should vigorously promote the Litang August 1st Horse Racing Festival, elevating Litang County’s “August 1st Horse Racing Festival” to national and international prominence. The government uses horse racing to increase local residents’ income and drive local economic development. By leveraging the influence of internet celebrities like Ding Zhen Zhen Zhu, media coverage (such as Sina Finance), and short-video platforms (featuring videos of galloping horses and equestrian performances), the government has boosted online visibility, reinforced the “City in the Sky” cultural tourism brand, and elevated the local festival into an international cultural tourism IP, helping Litang—the “World’s Highest City”—gain national recognition. The government has partnered with Douyin and Bilibili to produce the “Cloud Horse Racing Diary” live-streaming series, focusing on behind-the-scenes stories such as jockey training and intangible cultural heritage crafts; it has also launched the “Litang on Horseback” challenge to encourage users to create creative videos. Using “City in the Sky • Horse Racing Litang” as its brand, the government reinforces its messaging through visual symbols like “Ten Thousand Horses Galloping” and “Picking Up a Khatag on Horseback,” while expanding its international influence by integrating with IPs such as the Poetry Festival.

4.4 Aligning with High-Level Domestic and International Horse Racing Competitions to Create Premium Sporting Events

Horse racing is a traditional ethnic sport. On one hand, it can be promoted outwardly, where sports can serve as a thematic focus for numerous other sectors—such as sports media, sports film and television, sports cultural and creative industries, and sports-themed dining. On the other hand, it can be introduced inwardly, where the “Sports Plus” model unlocks boundless possibilities—Sports Plus Tourism, Sports Plus Wellness, Sports Plus Culture, Sports Plus Events, and more. Other industries can transform and cross over into the sports sector, continuously innovating the “Sports Plus” development model to cultivate new sports tourism formats. Encourage and support Litang County to leverage its regional characteristics, actively explore and develop distinctive sports, and strive to establish sporting events with local traditional flair. For example, the government could organize monthly horse racing events from May to October each year, featuring multi-level races ranging from 3,000 to 10,000 meters. This would attract riders and top-quality horses from provinces and regions such as Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and Gansu, thereby establishing a mechanism to attract a steady flow of visitors. In the short term, the government could bolster the international lineup through prize money and participant recruitment strategies; in the medium term, it could optimize scheduling and service quality; and in the long term, it could build an ecosystem integrating “racing IP, cultural tourism, and industry.”

5. Conclusions

As a distinct ethnic cultural phenomenon, Litang County’s “August 1st Horse Racing Festival” is not only a product of social production and practice but also a cultural memory symbol for the ethnic group. As a vital component of China’s National Intangible Cultural Heritage, its development relates to the preservation of traditional ethnic sports and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, while also

serving as a key means for local residents to achieve prosperity. Therefore, the high-quality development of Litang County's "August 1st Horse Racing Festival" must be guided by culture as its soul, ecology as its foundation, industry as its driving force, and governance as its framework. Through a three-pronged approach of "intangible cultural heritage revitalization + technological empowerment + inclusive sharing," the festival must continuously refine and innovate to elevate its horse racing IP from a folk activity to a catalyst for rural revitalization. The development path for Litang County's "August 1 Horse Racing Festival" under rural revitalization can be summarized as follows: First, we will strengthen the protection and transmission of horse racing as an intangible cultural heritage, deeply explore its cultural significance, enhance the interaction and participation between the tourism industry and intangible cultural heritage projects, and promote the development of intangible cultural heritage tourism at Litang County's "August 1 Horse Racing Festival." Second, we will prioritize the cultivation of professional talent and increase dedicated funding to provide intellectual support for horse racing activities. Third, we will intensify promotional efforts, attract investment, and raise the event's profile. Fourth, we will establish a new development framework by actively aligning with high-level horse racing competitions both domestically and internationally, forming a high-caliber horse racing team, and expanding the scale of the horse racing festival, striving to create a distinctive ethnic sports event brand for Ganzi Prefecture.

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