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# Xinjiang Regional Culture and Its Value in International Chinese Language Education

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**Abstract:** Integrating representative Xinjiang cultural elements—those projecting a positive national image, linking past and present with modern relevance, and bearing cross-cultural commonalities—into international Chinese education can strengthen cultural identity and learning motivation of Belt and Road Chinese learners, enrich the appeal of such education, spark curiosity about Chinese culture, showcase Xinjiang’s true image globally, promote the international dissemination of Chinese and Xinjiang stories, and advance the distinctive development of international Chinese education in Xinjiang.

**Keywords:** Xinjiang regional culture; International Chinese education; Cultural identity; The Belt and Road; Cultural dissemination

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## 1. Introduction

In July 2023, the Faculty Training Program for Core Courses of the Master of International Chinese Language Education, sponsored by the National Steering Committee for Graduate Education in International Chinese Education, was held at Beijing Language and Culture University. Centered on “Exploring New Paths for the Characteristic Development of International Chinese Language Education in Institutions of Higher Learning,” the program emphasized that international Chinese language education must highlight distinctive features, with regional cultural resources as a key driver for innovation and competitiveness.

Geographically, Xinjiang is a crucial gateway for the westward dissemination of Chinese culture, with ethnic groups sharing linguistic and cultural affinities with neighboring countries—an unparalleled advantage. As an envoy for cultural exchange with Belt and Road countries, exploring and utilizing Xinjiang’s regional cultural resources in international Chinese language education is imperative. This paper argues that leveraging such resources will facilitate the global dissemination of “Chinese stories” and “Xinjiang stories.”

## 2. The formation and characteristics of Xinjiang's regional culture

### 2.1. The formation of Xinjiang's regional culture

Regional culture denotes the time-honored, distinctive, functional cultural traditions of a specific area, embodying its ecology, folk customs, and habits <sup>[1]</sup>. Xinjiang's regional culture is a unique product forged by all its ethnic groups through long-term adaptation to the northwest borderland environment.

Geographically located in central Eurasia and China's northwest border, Xinjiang adjoins 8 countries, hosts 17 state-approved first-class ports, and acts as a golden gateway linking inland China to Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and Europe. Historically known as the Western Regions, it has maintained close ties with the Central Plains since the Metal Age and a 2,000-year integration with the motherland—from the Han Dynasty's Protectorate of the Western Regions to the Qing Dynasty's provincial designation and today's autonomous region. Its ethnic groups have evolved through differentiation and integration, forming an interconnected, symbiotic, pluralistic pattern that is an integral part of China's cultural heritage.

Ethnically, Xinjiang has long been a hub for multi-ethnic migration and integration; with the Uygur as the majority, it now accommodates all 56 Chinese ethnic groups, ranking among provincial-level regions with the most complete ethnic composition <sup>[2]</sup>. Religiously, it features the harmonious coexistence of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Taoism. As Zhang <sup>[3]</sup> pointed out, diverse religious scenarios—including different ethnic groups sharing one religion or a single ethnic group following multiple religions—facilitate inter-civilization mutual learning via linguistic and cultural exchanges.

### 2.2. The characteristics of Xinjiang's regional culture

Xinjiang's unique physical geography, time-honored history, diverse ethnic composition, and complex religious landscape make it one of the most representative regions of cultural diversity in China and worldwide. "Plurality" is the most distinctive feature of Xinjiang's regional culture <sup>[4]</sup>.

Firstly, Xinjiang's long history has left magnificent cultural relics, reflecting the diversity of its material culture. As a historic hub for the coexistence, integration, and development of multiple cultures and ethnic groups, its unique geographical and ecological conditions have preserved numerous, widely distributed relics from various periods. Official data shows that by 2017, Xinjiang had 9,542 recorded cultural heritage sites, including 6 World Cultural Heritage sites, 113 national-level and 558 autonomous region-level key cultural relics protection units. It also boasts 5 national historical and cultural cities, as well as multiple historical towns, villages, blocks, traditional Chinese villages, and characteristic ethnic minority villages <sup>[5]</sup>. World-renowned sites include the Kizil Grottoes, Jiaohe Ruins, Loulan Ancient City Ruins, Bezeklik Grottoes, and Astana-Karakhoja Ancient Tombs.

Secondly, Xinjiang's multi-ethnic and multi-religious context nurtures rich intangible cultural resources. As a vital Asia-Europe thoroughfare, it served as a bridge for Eastern-Western material and spiritual exchanges via the Silk Road, integrating the cultural essence of both sides. To date, 3 of its intangible heritage items are inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List and List of Intangible Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, along with 140 national-level projects, 3 national productive protection demonstration bases, and 112 national-level inheritors <sup>[6]</sup>. As a gathering place of diverse ethnic groups, languages, and religions, Xinjiang's intangible culture retains its pluralistic traits while advancing with the times.

## 3. Representative elements in Xinjiang's regional culture

Global promotion of Chinese culture is a core task of international Chinese language education, yet content selection for dissemination is critical. Existing cultural teaching research overlooks regional contexts, leaving unaddressed how to identify and integrate region-specific elements into instruction. This paper argues that incorporating Xinjiang's regional culture requires selecting representative tangible and intangible resources—those projecting a positive national image, connecting past and present with contemporary relevance, and embodying cross-cultural commonalities—while adapting

to disseminators' capacities and learners' needs.

### 3.1. Representatives of Xinjiang's material culture and natural resources

Xinjiang has distinctive material culture and natural resources, which not only embody China's image as a beautiful oriental country with magnificent landscapes, but also reflect its profound historical and cultural heritage. To date, it boasts 2 World Cultural Heritage sites and 1 World Natural Heritage site: the Xinjiang Great Wall Resources, inscribed on the World Cultural Heritage List with the Great Wall in 1987; the Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor (added in 2014), including Jiaohe Ruins, Gaochang Ruins, Beiting Ruins, Kizil Grottoes, Subashi Buddhist Temple Ruins and Kizilgaha Beacon Tower; and Xinjiang Tianshan, an independent World Natural Heritage site covering four sections—Tomur, Kalajun-Kurdening, Bayanbulak and Bogda <sup>[7]</sup>.

Beyond these inscribed sites, Xinjiang has many other well-known cultural relics, architectural complexes, ruins, and culture-laden natural resources. Currently, it has 189 cultural relic protection institutions at all levels and 93 museums under the cultural and relics system, forming a comprehensive protection network. By 2017, 8 archaeological projects in Xinjiang had been listed among the Top 10 New Archaeological Discoveries of China successively, such as the Niya Ruins, Yingpan Cemetery, Xiaohe Cemetery, Jin and Sixteen Kingdoms Brick-chamber Tombs on Youyi Road, Dongheigou Ruins, and Tongtiandong Cave Site. National treasure-level relics unearthed include the brocade armguard inscribed with "When the Five Stars Appear in the East, It Is Propitious for China" and the brocade quilt embroidered with "May the Lord and the Princess Live in Harmony for a Thousand Autumns and Ten Thousand Years, and Be Blessed with Prosperous Offspring." These are not only China's national treasures, but also global attractions.

### 3.2. Representatives of intangible cultural resources in Xinjiang

Xinjiang's rich ethnic cultural resources include numerous world-class and national intangible cultural heritage (ICH) items. Its folk literature, traditional music, dance, crafts, medicine, and customs reflect China's historical heritage, ethnic unity in diversity, and cultural harmony. These resources connect past, present, and future, serving as representative, universal cultural treasures integrable into modern life. **Table 1** lists some national-level human ICH items in Xinjiang.

**Table 1.** National-level human ICH items in Xinjiang

Category	Representative Human ICH (Item No., Name, Code)
Folk literature	Uyghur Dastan (I-71), Kazakh Dastan (I-72), Manas (I-25), Jangar (I-26), Gesar (I-27), Tales of Afanti (I-148), etc.
Traditional music	Xinjiang Hua'er (II-20), Uyghur Muqam Art (II-70), Mongolian Long-Song (II-3), Kazakh Dombra Art (II-132), Kirghiz Komuz Art (II-133), etc.
Traditional dance	Tajik Eagle Dance (III-41), Uyghur Sanam (III-96), Xibe Beren Dance (III-95), Kazakh Kara Jorghhan (III-111), etc.
Traditional opera	Xinjiang Quyi (V-30), Kazakh Aytes (V-45), Kazakh Tyermey (V-96), etc.
Traditional sports, games & acrobatics	Uyghur Dawaz (VI-5), Mongolian Bök (VI-16), Tajik Polo (VI-37), Kazakh Horse Racing (VI-43), etc.
Traditional fine arts	Kazakh Jigege Grass Weaving (VII-54), Uyghur Branch Weaving (VII-55), Ethnic Embroidery (VII-79/81/82/133), etc.
Traditional craftsmanship	Uyghur Molded Pottery (VIII-6), Karez Digging (VIII-236), Uyghur Atlas Silk Weaving (VIII-109), Nang Making (VIII-160), etc.
Traditional medicine	Uyghur Traditional Medicine (IX-21), Kazakh Traditional Medicine (IX-23), etc.
Folk customs	Tajik Water Diversion & Sowing Festival (X-28), Uyghur Dolan Meshrep (X-49), Tajik Wedding, Ethnic Costumes (X-100/108/144), etc.

Xinjiang's ICH features diverse forms, rich connotations, and distinct ethnic traits. Developing these into daily-life products enhances their protection and inheritance. Integrating them into international Chinese education—exploring their connotations and linking traditional crafts with modern education, art, and technology—not only safeguards ICH but also expands the influence of Chinese cultural communication.

#### **4. The role of Xinjiang's regional culture in international Chinese language education**

Regional culture is a key component of international Chinese language education, guiding cultural teaching and fostering learners' cultural identity and understanding of Chinese culture. Xinjiang's rich, diverse culture is highly appealing—its integration into such education drives the distinctive development of international Chinese education in Xinjiang, refines China's image, enables the world to understand China authentically and comprehensively, and expands the influence of Chinese cultural communication.

##### **4.1. Enhancing learners' cultural identity and stimulating learning motivation**

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging to a group, formed when members share common historical traditions, culture, and folk customs<sup>[8]</sup>. Regional culture plays a vital role in fostering this identity, and its value in international Chinese language education cannot be underestimated. For international students in China, the regional culture of their host location holds inherent allure. Learning about local culture deepens their understanding and recognition of Chinese culture, broadens their grasp of its connotations, and fosters a sense of belonging to the local community and its culture. This effectively alleviates cross-cultural anxiety, such as navigating differences in festival celebrations or identifying commonalities in dietary habits.

Though Xinjiang's regional culture and the cultures of Belt and Road countries have distinct developmental paths, they share broadly similar natural and humanistic conditions. Many of these countries exhibit cultural similarities and differences with Xinjiang in ethnicity, language, religion, and traditional customs. For instance, Islam—one of Xinjiang's major religions—is also widely practiced in Belt and Road nations. Several ethnic groups indigenous to Xinjiang (Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Tatars, Uyghurs, Uzbeks) reside in border areas and share mutually intelligible languages with Central Asian peoples, enabling seamless communication. These cultural commonalities and distinctions not only enhance learners' cultural identity but also inspire their enthusiasm for further studying the Chinese language and culture. Thus, fully exploring Xinjiang's regional cultural resources is highly valuable for promoting the distinctive development of international Chinese language education.

##### **4.2. Boosting the appeal of international Chinese language education and sparking curiosity in exploring Chinese culture**

Currently, cultural courses in international Chinese language education—whether for teacher training or international student cultural experiences—predominantly focus on ancient, traditional, and nationally universal Chinese cultural elements. Cultural activities typically revolve around Central Plains culture, including Tai Chi, Tai Chi Sword, Peking Opera, paper-cutting, Chinese chess, calligraphy, ink painting, seal carving, tea art, and iconic cuisines like dumplings, noodles, hot pot, and the Eight Cuisine Styles. Most cultural course materials for teacher training emphasize a chronological grasp of China's cultural development rather than an in-depth analysis of specific topics. Minority cultures are only briefly touched upon, leaving many valuable regional cultural resources underexplored and underutilized in practice. Despite years of development in international Chinese language education, cultural activities remain dominated by these conventional elements, resulting in a lack of regional cultural integration in both teacher training and student instruction<sup>[9]</sup>.

Xinjiang's regional culture is exceptionally diverse, boasting distinctive traditional music, dance, fine arts, and craftsmanship. In recent years, supported by the China ICH Inheritor Training Program (jointly launched by the Ministry of

Culture and Tourism, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security), various ICH training programs in Xinjiang have flourished. For example, since 2016, the Xinjiang Intangible Cultural Heritage Research Center at Shihezi University has organized training on eight national-level ICH items, including Uyghur embroidery, Kazakh felt and cloth embroidery, Uyghur molded pottery, Uyghur block-printed cloth, Uyghur and Kazakh branch weaving, Xinjiang folk opera, and Tajik eagle dance, cultivating a large number of core personnel for Xinjiang's ICH inheritance and development. As a key institution for international Chinese education in Xinjiang, Shihezi University has integrated regional culture into its professional training and international student curricula via culturally distinctive practical activities, advancing the distinctive development of international Chinese education in the region. This initiative not only enriches the connotations of international Chinese cultural communication but also enhances the appeal of cultural courses and activities, sparking students' curiosity to explore Chinese culture and boosting their passion for academic and language learning.

### **4.3. Showcasing Xinjiang to the world and facilitating international communication of Chinese culture**

At the 2016 Symposium on Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi emphasized: "We must promote people-to-people bonds, carry forward the Silk Road spirit, advance inter-civilizational exchange and mutual learning, attach importance to people-to-people and cultural cooperation, strengthen public communication, highlight the initiative's tangible outcomes, and boost academic research, theoretical support, and discourse system development."

Cultural exchange is the foundation of people-to-people bonds, fostering mutual respect and showcasing China's profound history and splendid culture.

In recent years, overseas anti-China forces have spread false narratives to smear Xinjiang. Integrating Xinjiang's regional culture into international Chinese education via Chinese language communication channels can effectively promote its magnificent landscapes and contemporary achievements, presenting a vivid image of Xinjiang as a united, harmonious, prosperous, progressive, stable, and ecologically sound region under socialism with Chinese characteristics. This dispels international prejudices, strengthens people-to-people bonds among Belt and Road countries<sup>[10]</sup>, and facilitates the global dissemination of Chinese culture.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Chinese nation and all global nations share a common spiritual and cultural home. Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative and the drive for distinctive international Chinese education, integrating regional culture—with Xinjiang's culture as a typical representative—into teaching and delivering in-depth cultural instruction advances the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind. Therefore, regardless of the "going global" or "bringing in" approach, international Chinese education must tap into the spiritual core of Xinjiang's regional culture to foster learners' cultural identity and confidence. As an integral component of Chinese culture, Xinjiang's regional culture not only serves as the emotional anchor, spiritual home, and driving force for its own development and dissemination but also enriches the connotations of Chinese cultural communication. Going forward, by pooling resources and leveraging technological strengths to transform Xinjiang's cultural gems into high-value dissemination products, international Chinese communication can effectively promote the distinctive development of international Chinese education and expand the global influence of Chinese cultural communication.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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