
Corridors and Workshops: A Narrative of Civilizational Mutual Learning Between the Spaces of the Ancient Shu Road and the Nodes of Ba-Shu Craftsmanship

Juecen Guo*

Sichuan Film and Television University, Chengdu 610000, Sichuan, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The ancient Shu Roads were not merely transportation routes traversing the Qinba Mountains, but also civilizational corridors that carried the flow of goods, migration of people, and transmission of craftsmanship. Along these routes, workshops specializing in Shu embroidery, bamboo weaving, and lacquer art functioned as cultural nodes. They not only served local communities but also participated in broader civilizational exchanges through the circulation of commodities and artisanal skills.

This paper adopts a “corridor–workshop” framework to explore the interactive relationship between linear spatial structures and nodal practices. It reveals the macro-level value of the Shu Roads in regional connectivity and structural integration, as well as the micro-level vitality of workshops in translating techniques and fostering cultural sharing. Through historical analysis, contemporary application, and international comparison, the study proposes a bidirectional narrative model of “coexistence between line and point,” illustrating how small workshops magnify civilizational effects along the corridor—embodying the idea of “small workshops, grand civilization.” The findings suggest that the Shu Road model combines openness with local innovation, providing not only practical strategies for the conservation and revitalization of Sichuan’s cultural heritage but also unique insights for articulating Chinese civilization within a global context.

Keywords: Shu Roads; Workshops; Civilizational Exchange

Online publication: February 26, 2026

1. Introduction

The Ancient Shu Road traverses the Qinba mountainous region, connecting the Sichuan Basin with the Guanzhong Plain, and has served as a vital political, economic, and cultural link in western China since ancient times. However, upon reviewing existing research, a tendency becomes evident: scholars often reduce the Shu Road to a military stronghold or a trade route, thereby confining their studies within the framework of “road history.” Does such a perspective overlook

the deeper value of the Shu Road as a network for cultural exchange? Can the cultural landscapes, folk crafts, and social practices along the Shu Road reveal the micro-mechanisms of cross-regional cultural mutual learning? These questions prompt us to examine the Shu Road from a more dynamic and multifaceted perspective.

In fact, the Shu Road not only facilitated the movement of people and goods but also shaped a unique cross-regional cultural symbiosis model. The craft workshops along the route, such as those for Shu embroidery, bamboo weaving, and lacquer art, not only formed the material foundation of local life but also served as important nodes for the dissemination of skills and aesthetic mutual learning. The craft practices in small workshops, through the Shu Road, enabled the absorption, integration, and innovation of technical and artistic concepts among ethnic groups, resulting in material cultural forms with regional compatibility. For instance, the lacquerware techniques of the Qin region at the northern end of the Shu Road and the bamboo weaving techniques of the Bashu region at the southern end merged in the Hanzhong area along the corridor, giving rise to a unique “lacquer-weaving” composite craft. This phenomenon vividly illustrates the micro-mechanisms of cultural mutual learning.

In the field of global heritage research, the focus is shifting from static remains to dynamic networks. The concept of “linear heritage” proposed by UNESCO particularly emphasizes the structural role of transportation corridors in cultural exchange. In the Chinese context, the Shu Road, as a typical example of mountainous linear heritage, derives its value not only from geographical connectivity but also from its cultural transformation capabilities—workshops along the route serve as micro-nodes that translate cross-regional skills and lifestyle aesthetics into sustainable material cultural carriers. This perspective inspires us to pose a core research question: How do workshops along the Shu Road achieve cross-regional cultural mutual learning and civilization dissemination through their role as spatial nodes?

To answer the aforementioned questions, this paper adopts an analytical framework of “corridor-workshop” and attempts to construct a “bidirectional narrative” theory: on the one hand, it grasps the civilizational integration function of the Shu Road from a macro perspective; on the other hand, it analyzes the cultural translation practices of workshops from a micro level. Methodologically, it breaks down the disciplinary boundaries between transportation history, craft history, and cultural exchange history, providing practical references for the living protection of cultural heritage in Sichuan—such as by reconstructing the stratification process of “craft geography” along the Shu Road and reassessing the key role of contemporary intangible cultural heritage workshops in the protection of cultural routes. From a broader academic perspective, the workshop clusters along the Shu Road resemble micro-docks in the river of civilization, receiving technological surges from upstream and sending out innovation ripples downstream. This perspective not only reveals the local value of Bashu crafts but also highlights their active role in cross-civilization dialogue, offering a new dimension for interpreting the historical heritage of the “Belt and Road” initiative and contributing an operable Chinese case study to global research on cultural mutual learning.

2. The History and Value of the Shu Road as a Cultural Corridor

2.1. Formation and Strategic Functions of the Shu Road

The origins of the Shu Road can be traced back to the pre-Qin period, with its embryonic form taking shape during the Warring States period and becoming a national strategic corridor connecting the Guanzhong region and Ba-Shu by the Qin and Han dynasties. During the reign of King Huiwen of Qin (316 BCE), Sima Cuo’s conquest of Shu marked the formal incorporation of the Shu Road into the central dynasty’s transportation system. The Shu Road served not only as a path for military conquest but also as a political artery for the central government to control the southwestern frontier. The construction of the “Five-Foot Road” and the “Baoxie Road” during the Han dynasty supported not only the military deployment of Emperor Wu’s campaigns against the southwestern tribes but also the northward transportation of grain from Ba-Shu, providing logistical support for the long-term war against the Xiongnu^[1]. By the Tang and Song dynasties, the function of the Shu Road gradually shifted from military dominance to a composite economic and cultural corridor. During the Tang dynasty, the establishment of the “Jiannan Circuit” made the Shu Road a core channel for the tea-horse

trade: Sichuan tea was transported along the Jinniu Road to the northwest in exchange for warhorses from the Tibetan and Dangxiang tribes, forming a trade network spanning agricultural and pastoral civilizations. The “Monopoly on Sichuan Tea” system during the Song dynasty further strengthened this network, transforming towns along the route such as Lizhou and Xingyuan Prefecture into regional commercial hubs. Notably, during this period, the Shu Road was no longer merely a channel for goods; technologies and crafts also spread along the route. For example, the well salt extraction techniques of Ba-Shu during the Tang and Song dynasties were introduced to the Guanzhong region via the Shu Road, driving innovations in northern salt production.

2.2. Cultural and Spatial Characteristics of the Shu Road

As a typical mountainous linear heritage, the Shu Road exhibits distinct spatial and cultural features. Its ecological adaptability is reflected in engineering forms such as plank roads and cliff-side paths, which respond to the challenges of the vertical terrain of the Qinba Mountains. For instance, the Baoxie Plank Road utilized wooden cantilevers to span canyons, enabling passage through treacherous terrain and reflecting the ancient people’s wise response to the natural environment. Along the Shu Road, cliff inscriptions (such as the Thirteen Inscriptions at Shimen in Hanzhong), post station ruins (such as the Jianmen Pass Post), and fortress structures (such as Jiameng Pass) form historical sedimentary layers from the Qin and Han to the Ming and Qing dynasties, reflecting the political demands and technological capabilities of different eras. Additionally, the Shu Road is a ribbon-like space where diverse cultures interweave: the phenomenon of “dialect islands” persists along the route, such as the Hanzhong dialect, which combines elements of the Guanzhong accent and Sichuan-Chongqing tones, indicating linguistic fusion brought about by population movements. Religious dissemination also relied on the Shu Road; during the Tang dynasty, Buddhism spread southward, and the Tang-era art of the Thousand-Buddha Cliff Grottoes in Guangyuan fused Chang’an-style influences with local Ba-Shu elements. The Shu Road exists not only as a transportation facility but also as an important field for social interaction and cultural mutual learning, with its spatial form carrying multilayered historical experiences and civilizational exchanges.

2.3. Contemporary Expressions of the Shu Road

Entering the 21st century, the cultural value of the Shu Road has garnered renewed attention and interpretation^[2]. In 2015, the Shu Road was included in the Tentative List of China’s World Cultural Heritage Sites, with the Sichuan-Shaanxi section, along with the Micang Road and Yinping Road, forming part of the heritage application system, emphasizing its global significance as an “ancient super-engineering” project^[3]. Meanwhile, practices integrating culture and tourism along the Shu Road have gradually emerged, such as the “Ancient Shu Road + Baihua Stone Carving Workshop” experience project launched in the Guangyuan section, which combines linear heritage with craft nodes to achieve living heritage transmission. Digital presentations have also provided new possibilities for the study and dissemination of the Shu Road. Through GIS and 3D modeling, scholars have reconstructed the historical changes in the Shu Road’s transportation network and developed a digital Shu Road platform to visualize the spatial distribution of cultural resources along the route. Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Shu Road has been assigned a new role in international cultural exchange. Research on its material transfer chains with the Silk Road and the Tea-Horse Road provides mountainous transportation case studies for Eurasian civilizational exchanges. The 2023 “International Forum on Shu Road Culture” further positioned it as the “Eastern version of the Alpine Cultural Route,” promoting transnational heritage dialogue and endowing the Shu Road with contemporary global significance.

2.4. The Structural Function of the Corridor in Cultural Mutual Learning

As a cultural corridor, the value of the Shu Road lies not only in its geographical connectivity but also in the interaction between nodes and routes along the way. The Tang dynasty’s system of “one post station every thirty li” established stable material distribution points along the Shu Road, where workshops gathered around post stations met the living needs of traveling merchants and also spread crafts to the northwest regions through these traders. The mobility of crafts along the

route provides empirical evidence: the “shading needle” technique of Shu embroidery evolved into the “straight needle” style of “Qin embroidery” after being introduced to the Guanzhong region, while the color system of New Year paintings in Fengxiang, Shaanxi, also influenced folk paintings in northern Sichuan via the Shu Road, demonstrating the corridor’s function in translating cultural elements^[4]. Additionally, the bamboo weaving craft in the southern section of the Shu Road absorbed the warp-weft reinforcement techniques of northern willow weaving, forming “porcelain-bodied bamboo weaving,” which became a standard for packaging exported porcelain during the Qing dynasty. This indicates that the Shu Road was not only a conduit for technological dissemination but also a catalyst for local knowledge and innovation. The interaction between its linear space and craft nodes constructed a structural framework for cross-regional cultural mutual learning.

Through historical combing/review and spatial analysis, this chapter establishes the triple value of the Shu Road as infrastructure for cultural mutual learning: first, its geographical connectivity breaks the stereotypical narrative of the “difficulty of the Shu Road,” highlighting its cross-regional integration function; second, the post stations and workshops along the route serve as cultural nodes, facilitating localized innovation in crafts and ideas and showcasing cultural hybridization; finally, contemporary research on the Shu Road, along with cultural tourism and digital practices, provides viable models for living heritage protection, offering references for the management of linear heritage sites along the Belt and Road. Understanding the macrostructural characteristics of the Shu Road lays the foundation for the subsequent micro-level study of workshops along the route, enabling the cultural practices of workshops to be viewed as the operational logic of “cultural cells” within the corridor system.

3. Workshops as Nodes of Civilization: Craftsmanship and Dissemination

3.1. Historical and Social Functions of Workshops

The craft workshops along the Shu Road, such as those specializing in Shu embroidery, bamboo weaving, and lacquer art, have long served as vital supports for local economic and cultural exchanges. Many of these workshops formed a network of relay stations along the Shu Road, meeting local production and daily needs while facilitating the transmission of craftsmanship and cultural interactions. For instance, Shu embroidery workshops in Chengdu and Mianyang were documented as early as the Han Dynasty, flourishing during the Tang and Song dynasties alongside the trade in Shu brocade. Their products were transported northward via the Shu Road to Chang’an, becoming imperial tributes and treasured collectibles among scholars. In the Dazhou and Bazhong regions at the southern foot of the Qin Mountains, where *Neosinocalamus affinis* bamboo thrived, a sophisticated technique of bamboo weaving over porcelain forms emerged, exported via the Micang Road to Hanzhong and the Guanzhong region to meet diverse regional demands for daily life and trade. Lacquer art workshops at the northern end of the Shu Road integrated decorative techniques from both the Qin and Ba regions, developing a unique Qin-Ba lacquerware style that influenced northern Sichuan lacquer art as it spread southward along the Shu Road. These workshops were not merely production units but also hubs of social relations. During the Qing Dynasty, the bamboo weaving workshops in Jianzhou adopted a dual “family-guild” structure: families handled primary processing, while guilds set unified prices and coordinated external sales, tightly integrating local livelihoods with long-distance trade and highlighting the workshops’ pivotal role in the socioeconomic network.

Beyond production, workshops embodied social structures and cultural orders. Through them, local communities not only obtained daily necessities but also engaged in cross-regional economic interactions and cultural dissemination, forming a stable chain of “production-distribution-consumption.” This enabled the simultaneous development of economic activities, craftsmanship inheritance, and cultural identity along the Shu Road.

3.2. Cultural Value of Workshops

The cultural value of workshops along the Shu Road primarily manifests in craftsmanship inheritance and aesthetic mutual learning. Prolonged exchanges have led to stratified development in techniques: the “shading needle” technique

in Shu embroidery blends Central Plains flat embroidery with Miao embroidered cross-stitch, creating a gradient effect of realism and abstraction; the “intertwining lotus pattern” in Guangyuan white marble carvings inherits the elegance of Tang Dynasty Chang’an stone carvings while incorporating the dynamic curves favored in Bashu folk art, becoming a visual symbol of regional cultural identity. Workshops shape cultural identities through material production. For example, vermilion-and-gold lacquer boxes crafted by Qing Dynasty lacquer workshops in Yangxian, Shaanxi, were dubbed the “Qin-Ba Golden Caskets” by European merchants for their “black ground with vermilion and gold painting” style, serving as important conduits for Western perceptions of Eastern craftsmanship. Workshops not only sustain craftsmanship but also function as microcosms of cultural mutual learning, transmitting local cultural connotations to broader spaces through daily production and material symbols.

Workshops also serve as hotbeds for cultural innovation. Craftsmanship continuously integrates new techniques, aesthetics, and uses through long-term exchanges and improvements, forming cultural symbols with local characteristics. For instance, lacquer art, bamboo weaving, and embroidery products along the Shu Road meet both daily and market demands while embodying regional identity and cultural symbolism. The cumulative effect of this micro-level cultural production has fostered a unique cultural ecosystem along the Shu Road, reflecting the underlying mechanisms of cultural mutual learning.

3.3. Contemporary Transformation and International Dissemination of Workshops

Since the 21st century, traditional workshops along the Shu Road have undergone triple transformations: branding, cross-disciplinary design, and digitalization. Some Shu embroidery workshops have collaborated with modern luxury brands, incorporating traditional patterns into apparel design; lacquer workshops have developed lacquer plates themed around the “Belt and Road Initiative,” serving as diplomatic gifts and cultural promotion tools. Digital platforms have empowered traditional craftsmanship: livestream sales on platforms like Douyin have enabled bamboo weaving workshops to achieve monthly sales exceeding one million yuan, while 3D scanning technology has established a database of lacquerware patterns, providing data support for creative design. The combination of online and offline dissemination methods has enabled small workshops to gain differentiated recognition and commercial value in the global market.

In niche international markets, Shu Road crafts exhibit unique cultural dissemination potential. Japan’s “Mingei Revival” movement admires the wabi-sabi aesthetics of Shu Road lacquerware, while European artisan communities regard northern Sichuan bamboo weaving as a paradigm of Eastern ecological design. Through cultural storytelling and targeted marketing, small workshops not only facilitate product circulation but also build bridges for cross-cultural exchanges. By inheriting traditional craftsmanship while engaging in innovative practices and market expansion, contemporary workshops have become important nodes for expressing Chinese civilization externally.

3.4. Interactive Mechanisms Between Workshops and the Shu Road

The relationship between workshops and the Shu Road embodies the energy flow between “points and lines.” Raw materials, techniques, and aesthetics circulate along the corridor: lacquer from southern Shaanxi travels southward via the Tangluo Road to supply Chengdu lacquer workshops, while northern Sichuan bamboo weaving techniques spread to Gansu and evolve into the “honeycomb structure” of Linxia wickerwork. Simultaneously, workshops carry cultural narratives: the “Zhang Fei Patrolling the City” motif in Shu embroidery originates from Three Kingdoms legends along the Shu Road, while the “Qin-Ba Rainbow Bridge” design in Hanzhong rattan weaving workshops echoes the bridge architecture of the Shu Road. The creative interpretations at these micro-nodes support macro-level cultural mutual learning, forming observable technical and cultural networks that mutually generate value between the linear space of the Shu Road and workshop nodes in historical and contemporary practices.

This interaction reveals that corridors and workshops are not merely linked by transportation and production but also constitute a bidirectional flow mechanism of culture and technology. Each workshop, like a cell in a civilization network, forms a dynamic symbiotic relationship with the Shu Road through raw material supply, technical exchanges, aesthetic

practices, and cultural narratives. It is this “point-line” interaction that renders the Shu Road not only a geographical passage but also a vital platform for cultural flow and mutual learning.

4. Symbiosis Between Lines and Points: The Vital Fabric of Shu Road Civilization

4.1. Macro-Micro Interactions Between Corridors and Workshops

As a linear space, the Shu Road’s function in cultural dissemination is not uniformly distributed but relies on nodes such as post stations, market towns, and workshops to form pulsatile diffusion. In this system, the corridor acts as a cultural vessel, while workshops serve as capillary ends. These nodes enable the transmission, blending, and reorganization of techniques, materials, and cultural concepts along the route.

Spatially, the Shu Road exhibits a hierarchical structure of “main trunk-branches-nodes.” For example, the Jinniu Road from Chang’an to Chengdu during the Tang Dynasty featured post stations every thirty li, often accompanied by official or private workshops such as coin-casting, weaving, and lacquer art workshops. The Guangyuan white marble carving workshop, located near post stations along the Cuiyun Corridor, not only provided decorations for merchants and travelers but also became an important carrier of cultural dissemination. Through this pulsatile network, materials, techniques, and cultural information could rapidly circulate across regions, forming traceable cultural paths.

Socially, workshops function as both production units and cultural intermediaries. During the Song Dynasty, lacquer workshops in Lizhou (present-day Guangyuan) provided daily lacquerware for local residents while customizing portable lacquer boxes for traveling merchants, such as Shu Road travel stationery cases, facilitating the conversion between material needs and cultural tastes. In Jianzhou (present-day Jiange), bamboo weaving workshops adopted a dual “family-guild” structure, with families handling primary processing and guilds setting unified prices and coordinating external sales, tightly integrating local livelihoods with long-distance trade. Macro-micro interactions demonstrate that the realization of linear heritage value depends on nodes’ ability to receive, transform, and release spatial energy; without these micro-workshops, the Shu Road’s cultural dissemination could not achieve deep localization and cross-regional integration.

4.2. Technical Interpretation at Workshop Nodes

The history of the Shu Road is essentially a history of technical interpretation, with core mechanisms including cross-regional allocation of raw materials, adaptive technical improvements, and localized cultural innovations. For example, raw lacquer from Yangxian, Shaanxi, was transported via the Micang Road to Sichuan, providing high-quality materials for Chengdu lacquer workshops and spurring techniques like “carved silver sheen.” Qing Dynasty records indicate that local craftsmen combined lacquer layers with silver wire to create lightweight, exquisite lacquer boxes, which became portable stationery and gifts for merchants. Neosinocalamus affinis from northern Sichuan was transported northward via the Yinping Road to southern Gansu, facilitating hybridization between bamboo and wicker techniques, such as the “bamboo-wicker composite basket,” which met agricultural needs and entered the Guanzhong region as tributes. Similarly, the color-blending technique of Shu embroidery spread to the Qin region, where northern craftsmen adjusted the gradient embroidery to “sectioned needlework” to accommodate coarser silk threads, retaining a sense of layering while adapting to material properties—a testament to technical adaptability and creative reengineering.

Workshops also play a crucial role in shaping cultural symbols. The Guangyuan white marble carving workshop incorporated dynamic Bashu folk curves into the Tang Dynasty stone carving tradition, creating a unique “intertwining lotus pattern” that became a regional cultural identifier and spread along the Shu Road to merchants and officials, enhancing local identity. The “Zhang Fei Patrolling the City” series by Chengdu Shu embroidery workshops combined Three Kingdoms folk tales with local customs, serving not only as crafts but also as media for cultural storytelling. These cases illustrate how workshops along the Shu Road, through localized technical adaptations, granted new life to foreign cultural elements, achieving civilizational “interpretation and recreation.”

4.3. Cultural Routes and Workshop Revitalization Practices

In the 21st century, the “corridor-workshop” model has found vivid expression in cultural heritage conservation and revitalization practices. First, in cultural route integration, Sichuan’s “Shu Road World Heritage Tentative List” bundles ancient post roads with intangible cultural heritage workshops for bonded declaration. For example, Mianzhu New Year painting villages along the Cuiyun Corridor offer year-round painting experiences, allowing visitors to complete a piece from paper preparation to drying, intuitively grasping the traditional technique’s process and cultural connotations. The Guangyuan white marble carving workshop is included in study tours, where visitors not only observe carving but also participate in preliminary carving, experiencing the fusion of technique and history. In Hanzhong, Shaanxi, the “Plank Road-Lacquer Art” route enables visitors to hike ancient roads, harvest lacquer trees, make lacquerware, and appreciate finished products, presenting a vivid picture of lacquer culture’s production and dissemination.

Second, workshop industrialization and digitalization have expanded their cultural influence. Chengdu Shu embroidery workshops have collaborated with luxury brands to incorporate traditional patterns into modern apparel design, creating the “Silk Road Embroidery” series; digital twin technology reconstructs Qing Dynasty Shu Road merchant routes, allowing visitors to view historical workshop scenes—such as merchant scheduling, material trading, and craft demonstrations—through AR glasses. These methods have not only extended the lifecycle of traditional crafts but also shaped new cultural values in modern consumption and educational contexts.

Internationally, small workshops have entered global niche markets through targeted cultural storytelling. For example, Shu Road lacquer workshops collaborated with Turkish Iznik pottery workshops to design lacquer plates integrating Central and West Asian elements; the Cittaslow (International Slow City) organization incorporated Shu Road workshops into its global artisan slow-life network. Through these practices, micro-workshops have leveraged the corridor’s historical and cultural symbols to participate in international cultural exchanges, transforming from local production units to globally recognized entities.

4.4. Two-way Interaction Between Workshops and Corridors

The Shu Road and workshops have formed a close symbiotic relationship: the corridor provides cross-regional connectivity and resource allocation, while workshops undertake the functions of technological innovation and cultural translation. Workshops along the route accept external techniques and adapt them locally, giving new life to external cultures, while the corridor disseminates innovative achievements to broader regions through its node network. Taking the Jianzhou Bamboo Weaving Workshop as an example, its “hexagonal weaving technique” was introduced to the Linxia region in Gansu by trade caravans and evolved into the local “honeycomb structure,” demonstrating the re-creative capacity of techniques in different environments.

The micro-practices of workshops and the macro-layout of corridors support each other, enabling the flow of civilization to be both directional and locally adaptive. This interaction extends beyond material production to cultural narratives. The “Three Kingdoms Stories” embroidery in Shu embroidery and the “Qinba Wind and Rain Bridge” design in the Hanzhong Rattan Weaving Workshop all embody the specific manifestations of historical events, geographical environments, and folk memories in micro-workshops, which then spread through the Shu Road to become important components of regional culture.

The relationship between the Shu Road and workshops can be likened to “strings and frets”: the corridor is the vibrating string, while the workshops are the frets that determine pitch. Only through precise coordination can they produce a symphony of cultural mutual learning. The macro-micro perspective reveals that the Shu Road is not just a transportation project but also a cultural network; workshops are not just production units but also active nodes for cultural dissemination. This “corridor-workshop” symbiotic model provides a paradigm for the study of Chinese-style linear heritage and offers an operational reference for global cultural exchange and intangible cultural heritage revitalization practices.

Through a comprehensive presentation of historical cases, technical narratives, and modern applications, the central position of workshops in the Shu Road civilization network is highlighted as both nodes of skill inheritance and carriers

of cultural symbols. The creative practices of micro-workshops and the spatial organization of macro-corridors jointly construct the civilization texture along the route, enabling Shu Road research to transcend the road itself and enter the realm of deep interpretation of civilization texture.

5. International Comparison and Expression of Chinese Experience

5.1. Comparison of Linear Heritage and Workshops from a Cross-Civilization Perspective

From international cases, the interaction modes between linear heritage and workshops along the route vary. The road system of the Inca Empire (Qhapaq Ñan, inscribed as a World Heritage site in 2014) and the Shu Road are both mountainous linear heritage, but they differ significantly in functional logic and cultural integration: the Inca roads radiated from Cusco and were primarily used for military deployment and tax collection, displaying strong imperial control attributes, with Tambos (inns) along the route focusing on material reserves and craft activities limited to simple pottery making; the Shu Road, on the other hand, had a networked structure, emphasizing not only military functions but also commercial circulation, skill dissemination, and folk innovation, such as the “tea-horse trade” during the Tang and Song dynasties, which gave rise to “commercial workshops,” and the formation of specialized workshop clusters around post stations, such as Guangyuan Baihua Stone Carving and Chenggu Lacquerware. The comparison reveals that the uniqueness of the Shu Road lies in the expansion of corridor functions by the self-organization of civil society, while the Inca roads more reflect standardized management under centralization.

Similar differences are observed in East Asian lacquer art. Japanese Kanazawa lacquer art (Wajima Nuri) formed a closed, iemoto (head family) inheritance system under the protection of the Kaga Domain nobility, with slow technical changes; lacquer art along the Shu Road, due to the constant flow of merchants and travelers, continuously absorbed techniques from southern Shaanxi, the Chu region, and Tibetan areas, displaying cross-regional hybridization characteristics. Contemporary transformations also differ greatly: Kanazawa lacquer art maintains its orthodoxy through “Traditional Craftsman” certification, while Shu Road lacquer art workshops (such as Chengdu’s “Qicai Workshop”) actively cross boundaries with modern design, developing lacquer art electronic accessories, daily necessities, etc., highlighting the mobility gene endowed to crafts by the corridor.

5.2. Chinese Experience: From Local Practice to Global Discourse

Shu Road research offers unique Chinese experience for global heritage protection and cultural exchange. Firstly, Shu Road practices embody hierarchical protection of living heritage: not only focusing on the ancient road itself but also emphasizing workshops communities and ecological resources along the route, such as combining the restoration of ancient plank roads with the maintenance of raw material forests for bamboo weaving workshops nearby, achieving holistic protection of “corridor ecology + workshop community.” Secondly, the layering of workshop techniques provides micro-evidence for cultural mutual learning, such as the coexistence of Tibetan-style gilding and Han-style painting in lacquer art, confirming the exchange and fusion of intangible cultural heritage in daily production.

The implications of Shu Road experience for international heritage research include: redefining the constituent elements of “cultural routes,” emphasizing that the living continuity of production systems along the route should be an evaluation criterion; expanding research methods for cultural mutual learning, understanding cultural exchange from the daily craft interpenetration of non-elite classes; proposing internationalization strategies for Chinese discourse, refining the “corridor-workshop” model as the “Corridor-Atelier Nexus,” and demonstrating the interconnected value of culture, ecology, and economy in conjunction with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Agricultural Heritage framework.

5.3. Global Significance of Mountain Civilization

Research on the Shu Road and workshops along the route breaks the binary narrative of “civilization center-periphery”

and highlights the innovative potential of mountain corridors. Its experience has universal value: in resilience design, the construction of plank roads in mountainous environments and the moisture-proof techniques of bamboo weaving provide references for heritage protection under climate change; in grassroots globalization, workshop-driven cultural mutual learning provides a folk supplement to the “Belt and Road” narrative; in the transmission of non-written knowledge, the cross-generational inheritance of techniques sets an example for the protection of endangered intangible cultural heritage. The Shu Road experience reminds the world that cultural dialogue occurs not only in ports and palaces but also in ancient roads connecting mountains and seas and workshops illuminating life, which is an important contribution of China to the global heritage discourse system.

6. Conclusion

The Shu Road is not just a mountainous ancient road connecting Sichuan and Shaanxi but also a civilization texture of “line and point” symbiosis: workshops along the route serve as nodes, carrying skill inheritance, cultural symbol shaping, and social network construction, supporting ancient commerce and cultural exchange, and also revitalizing in the contemporary era through branding, digitization, and international dissemination. The corridor endows workshops with mobility and openness, while workshops nourish the corridor with cultural depth and technological innovation, forming a circular mechanism of “micro-nodes driving macro-civilization.” Through comparison with international cases and analysis of Chinese practices, the value of mountainous linear heritage lies not only in the preservation of physical space but also in the continuity of living crafts, community participation, and cross-regional exchange. The Shu Road experience provides a “top-down and bottom-up” practical demonstration for global heritage protection: it reminds us that the resilience and innovation of civilization often lie in those seemingly small yet vibrant workshops, and true cultural dialogue stems from the precise interaction between points and lines and the continuous connection between history and the present.

Funding

This paper is a phased achievement of the research project “Community Video Practice and the Construction of Local Cultural Identity: Taking Sichuan Folk Handicrafts as an Example (Project No.: MZMS2025010)” funded by the Sichuan Ethnic and Folk Culture Research Center, a key research base for social sciences in Chengdu in 2025.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Shan JX, 2006, Preliminary Discussion on the Protection of Large-scale Linear Cultural Heritage: Breakthroughs and Pressures. *Southern Cultural Relics*, (3): 82-86.
- [2] Sun QX, 2008, A Study on the Evolution of the Jinniu Ancient Road. *Journal of Chengdu University (Social Science Edition)*, (1): 2-5.
- [3] Fu WJ, 2009, On the Protection of the Jianmen Shu Road Cultural Route (Part II). *China Famous Cities*, (12): 18-24.
- [4] Ke XG, Zhu LP, 2014, The Ancient Shu Road and Its Cultural Dissemination and Penetration in the Upper Reaches of the Han River. *Journal of Northwest University (Natural Science Edition)*, 44(6): 1009-1012.

Publisher’s note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.