

The Cultural-Communication Mechanism of “University-plus” Social-Science Popularization — Based on Field Investigation in Multi-ethnic Communities in Xinjiang

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Abstract: Alongside population mobility and the development of an inter-embedded social structure, the interactions, exchanges and integration among all ethnic groups have permeated community life. Volunteer services for social-science popularization in universities integrate knowledge dissemination, youth participation and public-service attributes, providing a concrete field for observing how knowledge transforms into cultural communication. Based on field investigations conducted across multiple locations in Xinjiang in July 2026, this paper adopts semi-structured interviews and on-site observation to analyze the interactive process among universities, communities and public-cultural institutions. The study finds that “university-plus” social-science popularization fulfills cultural-communication functions through knowledge sharing, meaning negotiation and interactive connection. Its effective operation hinges on the coordination between professional knowledge and local knowledge, sustained university-local cooperation, and participatory communication. Accordingly, “university-plus” social-science popularization is not a simple downward diffusion of knowledge, but joint production of public meaning by university knowledge resources and grassroots cultural practices.

Keywords: “University-plus” social-science popularization; Cultural communication; Multi-ethnic community; Cultural interaction

Online publication: October 27, 2026

1. Raising the research question

Fei Xiaotong’s theory of “the pluralistic-integrated pattern of the Chinese nation” points out that the Chinese nation is a whole formed through long-term historical development ^[1]. In the course of interaction, exchange and integration, all ethnic groups are capable of generating shared cultural systems that transcend single-ethnic boundaries. Nevertheless, cultural consensus will not emerge automatically; it can only be realized through

proactive cultural interpretation ^[2]. However, mere co-presence does not guarantee mutual understanding. Superficial information-level contact does not equal shared meaning, and short-term interactions can hardly foster stable bonds ^[3]. Hence the question to be explained: within multi-ethnic communities, what kinds of knowledge can serve as cultural resources for mutual understanding, and how does knowledge enter communication to form relatively stable cultural ties. Volunteer services for university-led social-science popularization offer a practical window to observe this process. Its special feature lies in the concurrence of knowledge dissemination and face-to-face interaction: it involves both disseminated content as well as knowledge comprehension and joint activities. Accordingly, this paper analyzes the cultural-communication function and operating mechanism of “university-plus” social-science popularization.

2. Basic background of field sites

Fieldwork for this paper was mainly carried out in July 2026, covering Kashgar City, Taxkorgan Tajik Autonomous County and Urumqi in Xinjiang. Multi-ethnic communities in and around the Old Town of Kashgar served as the core field sites, while public-cultural institutions such as the Tax County Cultural Center and Urumqi Cultural Center acted as supplementary investigation locations. Semi-structured interviews and on-site observations were adopted. Interviewees included community cadres, staff of scenic spots and cultural institutions, and folk artisans. Major respondents were anonymized and coded (see **Table 1**). The Old Town of Kashgar functions both as a residential quarter and a tourist space, where residents, merchants, tourists, external entrepreneurs and returning college students engage in constant interactions. Communities such as Mustagh-Boyi carry out youth education and volunteer services relying on community public-cultural positions. The two cultural centers have accumulated practical experience in university training programs, public-welfare courses and cooperation with university teachers.

Table 1. Information of Interviewees

Code	Personnel Category	Interviewee	Research Site	Interview Date
SQ-01	Community cadre	Person-in-charge of Mustagh-Boyi Community	Kashgar	2026-07-22
SQ-02	Grassroots cultural worker	Staff of the New-Era Civilization Practice Station	Kashgar	2026-07-22
SY-01	Old-town merchant-cum-resident	Carpet craftsman	Kashgar	2026-07-24
SY-02	Old-town merchant-cum-resident	Wood-carving artisan	Kashgar	2026-07-23
JQ-01	Scenic-site manager	Staff of Kashgar Old-Town Scenic Area	Kashgar	2026-07-22
WH-01	Cultural-institution staff	Person-in-charge of county cultural center	Tax County	2026-07-21
WH-02	Cultural-institution staff	Person-in-charge of municipal cultural center	Urumqi	2026-07-09

3. Cultural-communication functions of “university-plus” social-science-popularization volunteer services

Social-science popularization is not simply condensing academic achievements for grassroots delivery; instead, it enables professional knowledge to enter public life and shape public understandings of history and culture. Within multi-ethnic communities, this process carries cultural-communication significance, which can be summarized into three progressive levels: knowledge sharing, meaning negotiation, and interactive connection.

3.1. Knowledge sharing: Enhancing public comprehensibility of local culture

Cultural communication first requires basic preconditions for mutual comprehension among subjects. Multi-ethnic communities boast abundant historical relics, traditional crafts, intangible-cultural-heritage resources and local memories. Rich resources, however, do not equate to sufficient public knowledge. Much cultural content is embedded in life experience, craft practice and local memory. Familiar to residents, its historical origins and cultural connotations may elude outside tourists and adolescents. Staff from the Kashgar Old-Town Scenic Area stated: “Patterns on earthenware and bronze artifacts are symbols of Chinese culture, yet our staff and inheritors struggle to articulate their origins and implications. Universities are needed to sort them out and convert them into accessible stories (JQ-01).” Interviews with artisans reveal that although carpet craftsmen integrate symbols such as the Great Wall and the Yellow River into their works, they lack interpretive capacity; wood-carving artisans likewise cannot adequately explain pattern connotations to tourists (SY-01, SY-02).

Traditional patterns may be displayed and intangible-heritage crafts may be observed, yet without clarifying their historical roots, cultural connections and place within the evolution of Chinese culture, audiences may only gain superficial impressions of ethnic characteristics. Universities excel at collating documentary materials, conducting historical verification and organizing theoretical frameworks for local cultural materials, and conducting public translation via stories and case studies. Social-science popularization thus achieves not mere accumulation of facts, but the comprehensibilization of cultural information.

Urumqi Cultural Center offers public-welfare courses for diverse age groups, most taught by university faculty whose teams are regular cooperating partners of the center (WH-02). Public-cultural spaces serve as physical venues for cultural activities and knowledge exchange, as well as carriers of social relations and cultural ethos ^[4]. Social-science popularization should not rely solely on short-term lecture tours to rural areas. It can also reach grassroots communities through public venues such as cultural centers and community platforms. Grassroots public-cultural development advocates university youth and professional volunteer forces to deliver regular public-cultural services via grassroots-cultural carriers, linking professional knowledge, youth volunteer resources and public-cultural spaces ^[5]. Fragmented local and specialized cultural resources are thereby transformed into publicly shareable knowledge for diverse actors.

3.2. Meaning negotiation: From unilateral interpretation to collaborative interpretation

Knowledge sharing addresses the question “can we understand”, yet cultural communication further raises “how do we understand”. If cultural dissemination remains confined to cataloging external features such as costumes, artifacts and song-and-dance performances, even when actors possess identical information, divergent knowledge backgrounds and life experiences may yield disparate interpretations of cultural meaning. The deeper function of social-science popularization lies in situating specific ethnic and local cultures within the overall developmental course of Chinese culture, revealing common connections behind divergent knowledge. Grassroots personnel in the Old Town of Kashgar voiced this demand: “We hope universities can provide historical-literature resources and expert support to help narrate Chinese-culture stories embedded in local intangible heritage and old-town culture.” (JQ-01)

This demand goes beyond ordinary tourism-knowledge supply or cultural-and-creative design; it calls for professional interpretation of the relationship “local culture — Chinese culture”. Meaning interpretation, nevertheless, ought not become one-sided reading of local culture imposed by universities. During intangible-heritage-data collection, the director of Tax County Cultural Center observed that cultural

knowledge divorced from local languages and living contexts easily suffers meaning erosion:

“Mechanical literal translation loses cultural connotations. Qualified interpreters must master both Tajik and Chinese, comprehend the cultural logics of folk customs, handicrafts and music, and guide inheritors to recount craft histories in full.” (WH-01)

Knowledge is generated and applied within concrete contexts, and its comprehension cannot be separated from local experience and specific situations^[6]. Effective social-science popularization therefore calls for collaborative interpretation: university teachers and students contribute historical documents, theoretical sorting and knowledge-organizing capabilities, while local inheritors and cultural workers contribute linguistic resources, local memories and practical experience. The two bodies of knowledge mutually calibrate one another through interaction^[7]. The “plus” in “university-plus” does not mean university knowledge overrides grassroots knowledge, but connects professional knowledge with local knowledge. In this way, social-science popularization preserves the specificity of each ethnic culture while uncovering the historical logic of their joint contribution to the formation and development of Chinese culture, advancing cultural communication from recognizing differences toward understanding interconnections.

3.3. Interactive Connection: Transforming One-way Knowledge Dissemination into Participatory Cultural Communication

Cultural communication differs from general cultural dissemination in that interactions form between disseminators and recipients. If social-science popularization remains at the model of “experts lecture, audiences listen”, its function remains mere information transfer. To realize cultural-communication potential, knowledge dissemination must evolve into joint activities. Participatory-communication theory emphasizes that the core of communication is not efficient information delivery, but joint construction of meaning and formation of social bonds through shared practical engagement among communicating actors^[8].

The New-Era Civilization Practice Station of Mustagh-Boyi Sub-district combines lectures with artistic performances, extending activities to community courtyards and scenic-area lanes. Parent-child activities feature on-site volunteer instruction encouraging joint participation of parents and children. The “Junior Docent” project organizes primary-school pupils on weekends and summer vacations to learn the history of Kashgar Old Town, before providing tourist services and cultural explanations, forming a chain of “learning-transformation-narration”. The community person-in-charge noted:

“The community has set special service slots for returning college students to tutor adolescents, and collective activities guide young people to participate in grassroots services voluntarily.” (SQ-01)

This creates foundations for university youth to engage at the grassroots level. “University-plus” can embed activities such as historical narration, cultural-experience workshops and sharing of community-research findings within volunteer services, transforming university students from ordinary service providers into knowledge translators and interaction organizers. Knowledge sharing, meaning negotiation and interactive connection thus constitute a progressive process: from “comprehensibility” to “relational interpretation”, onward to “organized interaction”.

4. Operating mechanisms for the cultural-communication function of social-science popularization

No simple causal link of “one lecture → improved outcomes” can be established between social-science

popularization and cultural-interaction effects. Knowledge sharing, meaning negotiation and interactive connection are better understood as conditional mechanisms shaping public understanding, cultural interpretation and social bonds. Whether they translate into stable communicative outcomes depends further on factors such as interaction sustainability, participatory equality and local contexts.

First, knowledge sharing furnishes cognitive foundations for collective perception. Fieldwork reveals a prominent phenomenon of “symbol familiarity paired with connotative aphasia”. Grassroots actors are familiar with cultural symbols including traditional patterns and handicraft techniques, yet lack systematic interpretations of their origins, evolution and inter-ethnic integration trajectories. Through historicized and relational knowledge organization, university-led social-science popularization situates scattered cultural phenomena within historical developmental threads, enabling participants to shift from identifying discrete divergent symbols toward connected, holistic comprehension.

Second, meaning negotiation supplies interpretive frameworks for cultural understanding. Knowledge backgrounds, life experiences and interaction modes shape cultural understandings of different actors. Through collaborative interpretation, social-science popularization illustrates that ethnic cultures are not isolated from one another, but have mutually influenced each other throughout long-term migration, production, trade, art-making and social life. Understandings of local culture can thereby be situated within broader historical-cultural contexts. Its purpose is not erasing differences, but offering relational interpretations that accommodate both diversity and commonality.

Third, interactive connection delivers communicative experiences for social bonding. Knowledge and cultural interpretation foster understanding of interconnections, yet stable bonds must be validated through real-world exchanges. Jointly attending lectures, experiencing intangible heritage, undertaking community services and conducting collaborative research can transform abstract histories of inter-ethnic communication-integration into perceptible, participatory and empathetic lived experiences. Within regular interactions, participants build collective experiences of “co-existence, co-construction and co-sharing” via equal dialogue and mutual assistance, furnishing social-relational underpinnings for cultural interaction.

“University-plus” social-science popularization does not directly produce outcomes through knowledge indoctrination. Instead, via knowledge sharing, meaning negotiation and interactive connection, it supplies cognitive, meaning-based and social-relational prerequisites respectively for public comprehension, cultural interpretation and social bonding. This expands our functional understanding of university-run social-science popularization: universities’ vital resources lie not merely in volunteer manpower, but in capacities for knowledge production, professional interpretation and public translation. When professional knowledge merges with local knowledge and enters grassroots public-cultural spaces, social-science popularization shifts from downward knowledge diffusion toward the publicization of local culture and joint meaning-making. Field materials simultaneously reveal practical boundaries: although local universities enjoy geographical proximity, in-depth cooperation remains insufficient; some external universities fail to feed back research outputs after field investigations. Grassroots cultural workers report heavy routine workloads and shortages of professional personnel for systematic excavation of local cultural narratives. The director of Tax County Cultural Center holds that short-term university social-practice cycles are too limited for thorough cultural documentation (JQ-01, SQ-02, WH-01). “Universities entering grassroots areas” does not equal “universities embedding themselves within grassroots areas”.

From a practical perspective, “university-plus” social-science popularization therefore requires more stable university-local collaborative relationships. The long-term development of university-led

social-science-popularization volunteer services hinges on constructing in-depth cooperation mechanisms featuring complementary strengths and resource-sharing between universities and local authorities, resolving real-world dilemmas including short-term practice cycles and disconnected research outputs^[9]. Stable university-local cooperation sites should be established, relying on New-Era Civilization Practice Stations, communities, and cultural centers, integrating university knowledge resources into daily grassroots activities. Feedback and public-translation mechanisms for research outputs ought to be built, converting findings into locally reusable explanatory texts, courses or digital resources, ending the pattern where “research ends and materials are archived”. Collaborative interpretation between university faculty-students and local cultural workers-inheritors should be strengthened. Usage of outputs, interaction frequency and continuity of cooperation shall be incorporated into volunteer-service evaluation criteria. What merits attention for “university-plus” social-science popularization is not the immediate effect of one-off knowledge diffusion, but whether professional knowledge can be transformed into sustained participation through shared understanding and interpretation, genuinely realizing the transition from one-way knowledge output toward two-way cultural communication^[10]. In this manner, university-led social-science popularization becomes a practical mechanism for grassroots cultural interaction.

Funding

2024 Xinjiang Autonomous Region “Tianshan Talents” Social-Science Popularization Research Talent Project, “Research on the Construction of ‘University-plus’ Social-Science Popularization Volunteer-service System in Xinjiang” (Project No. KPRC2024001); Project Information: Special Entrusted Project (Survey & Research Type) of National Scientific Research Platform, Xinjiang University.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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