

# Analysis of the Status Quo of Lanzhou Regional Cultural Soft Power

Yunfei Ma, Yuehua Yang

College of Communication, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu 730070

---

**Abstract:** Cultural soft power serves as an important part of urban comprehensive competitiveness. Lanzhou, by virtue of its distinctive geographical location, abundant historical and cultural resources, certain educational, scientific and technological strength and diverse tourism resources, presents unique urban culture. In the study herein, SWOT analysis is utilized, with an aim to investigate into the status quo of the regional cultural soft power of Lanzhou, and probe into the achievements and challenges of Lanzhou in constructing cultural soft power systematically, hoping to fully demonstrate its urban competitiveness.

**Keywords:** Lanzhou; Cultural soft power; SWOT analysis

---

## Introduction

The dual drive strategy by both hard power and soft power is crucial in the macro strategy of regional development. As the core driving force in the urban competition and sustainable development, soft power is indispensable for constructing the strength in urban competition. By right of its advantageous geographical location and abundant historical and cultural resources, Lanzhou enjoys distinctive cultural advantages.

### 1. The Development Foundation of Lanzhou Regional Cultural Soft Power

As a spiritual strength, cultural soft power, on the one hand, is generated relying on substantial elements such as hard power, and on the other hand, has the strength that cannot be replaced by hard power. Complementing each other, soft power and hard power drive the overall development of a city jointly<sup>[1]</sup>. Reasonably employing and strengthening the positive effect of cultural soft power to further enrich and develop the cultural connotation of Lanzhou is an important path to improve urban comprehensive competitiveness in promoting the urban construction in Lanzhou in the new era.

#### 1.1 Analysis of ecological environment and resources

Located in northwest China, central Gansu Province, and the bordering area of the Loess Plateau and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, Lanzhou has complicated and diverse topography, involving various forms such as basin, river valley, mountainous region and plateau, etc. In terms of climate characteristics, as it situates in the temperate semi-arid climate zone, it has the prominent characteristics of the continental monsoon climate, with the annual average temperature remaining stably at about 10.3°C, forming mild climate conditions that are suitable for human living. Built by rivers on places difficult for access, it is also called an “Iron City” in history, meaning its defense is as strong as iron. With the Yellow River running across the whole city from southwest to northeast, Lanzhou is divided into two parts. The urban spatial structure of “two mountains and a river” is thus formed by the river together with the White Pagoda Mountain in the north and the Gaolan Mountain in the south, giving rise to a unique urban landscape and cultural landscape.

#### 1.2 Regional geographical characteristics

The unique geographical environment of Lanzhou has laid a solid foundation for forming its location characteristics. Lanzhou, as the geometric center of China's land territory, is closely tied with the Central Plains, Southwest China, Qinghai-Tibet region, Central Asia, West Asia and other regions, enjoying the exclusive geographical advantage of “six connections” in northwest China<sup>[2]</sup>. Lanzhou has remained the important commercial town on the ancient Silk Road and the transportation hub connecting Central Plains with the Western Regions. Regarding railway transportation, Lanzhou-Lianyungang Railway, Lanzhou-Xinjiang Railway and Baotou-Lanzhou Railway converge in Lanzhou, establishing its position as a first-level node city in the economic zone of western Longhai & Lanxin. November 2024 witnessed the State Council's official approval of City Territorial Space Overall Planning of Lanzhou (2021-2035), which clarifies its status as an important central city and a national comprehensive transportation hub in western China<sup>[3]</sup> while further strengthening the hierarchy and status of Lanzhou in the national urban system. Lanzhou, as a key node of the New Silk Road Economic Belt, has become an important bridge of economic

cooperation and cultural exchanges between China and Central Asia, West Asia and Europe with the continuous deepening of the “Belt and Road” initiative, strongly promoting the economic and cultural interaction with neighboring countries and regions.

### 1.3 Historical and cultural resources

Lanzhou enjoys a long history carrying a galaxy of cultural heritages, with the Yellow River civilization, the Silk Road civilization and the diverse national cultures blending together to create its unique cultural resources system. Statistics reveal that Lanzhou owns 10 national cultural relics protection units, 154 cultural relics protection units at or below the provincial level, 29 museums, 5 national intangible cultural heritage items, 35 provincial intangible cultural heritage items and 77 municipal intangible cultural heritage items<sup>[4]</sup>. Lanzhou and the Yellow River share correlation dependence, with which the Yellow River civilization has been deeply integrated into the daily life of local residents and become its spiritual support and cultural symbol. The Zhongshan Iron Bridge, the mother statue of the Yellow River, the Yellow River building and other landmark buildings, as well as the intangible cultural heritage such as the sheepskin raft and the water wheel, are all the concrete embodiment of the Yellow River civilization. Meanwhile, with Han, Hui, Tibetan, Dongxiang and many other ethnic groups settling in Lanzhou, their customs, traditional festivals and handicrafts reflect each other, which both greatly enriches the cultural heritage of Lanzhou, and fully demonstrates the openness and inclusiveness of the city.

### 1.4 Educational technology strength

Education, science and technology, and talent, as the basic and strategic support of modern countries, play the role of a land base while the high-quality development of education serves as the basis for the overall promotion of the three<sup>[5]</sup>. Recent years bear witness to the continuous implementation of education priority development strategy in Lanzhou with capital investment in the educational field strengthened constantly aiming to further optimize the allocation structure of educational resources, and then improve the quality of education. With regard to compulsory education, Lanzhou has newly build, reconstructed and expanded a batch of modern schools so that the enrollment rate and retention rate of compulsory education can reach a high level, laying a solid foundation for the subsequent talent training. Considering higher education, as an important national scientific research and education base, Lanzhou is home to numerous scientific research institutions. For instance, Lanzhou branch of Chinese Academy of Sciences and its subordinate research institute (including Institute of Modern Physics, Institute of Geology and Geophysics, Institute of Chemical Physics, etc.), Lanzhou Institute of Physics, etc., and the cluster of institutions of higher learning represented by Lanzhou University, Northwest Normal University, etc, have trained and sent a large amount of talents for the northwest region and even the whole country.

### 1.5 Tourism resources industry

Lanzhou possesses abundant and distinctive tourism resources, with the Yellow River Custom Tourist Line of Lanzhou as the most famous. Taking the Yellow River as the axis, the Line connects renown scenic spots such as Zhongshan Bridge, White Pagoda Mountain, the mother statue of the Yellow River and the ancient Yellow River ferry, etc. to form a tourist route integrating natural beauty and cultural heritage. It is praised by visitors from poles apart as “Lanzhou Bund” affectionately. Lanzhou has extremely abundant tourism resources. Currently, there are 47 tourist scenic spots of class A, including 10 of 4A class. It has created 2 key villages for rural tourism (Shangche Village, Langjie Village), 2 national night tour agglomeration areas (Lanzhou Old Street, Lanzhou Cultural Creative Industrial Park), 1 national tourism leisure block (Hekou Ancient Town), 1 national industrial tourism demonstration base (“Reader Impression” boutique Cultural Block), and 1 provincial tourist resort (Xinglong Mountain)<sup>[6]</sup>. This, besides enriching the cultural connotation of Lanzhou, vitalize its tourism industry.

Relying on its rich tourism resources, Lanzhou has developed a series of innovative tourism products and projects by further exploring the regional cultural characteristics, and actively promoting the deep integration of tourism, culture, agriculture, sports as well as other industries. These projects cover a wide range, including but not limited to fields such as Yellow River Night Tour, folk culture experience, agricultural products picking and hiking exploration, etc, which have greatly enriched the content and form of the tourism industry chain. Against this backdrop, the catering and accommodation industry of Lanzhou has ushered in new development opportunities. For instance, the Yellow River Food Ferry Culture and Tourism Street, with its unique charm, has attracted many domestic well-known food brands and local time-honored brands to settle in, providing tourists with a wide variety of catering choices.

## 2. SWOT Analysis of Lanzhou Regional Cultural Soft Power

Strength(S)	Weaknesses(W)
1. The superior geographical location and convenient transportation are conducive to cultural exchange and dissemination. 2. Rich historical and cultural resources provide profound heritages and materials for the cultural industry. 3. The cultural industry has begun to take shape, with benign growth trend.	1. The integration and development of cultural resources are insufficient, leading to less-desired utilization of some cultural resources. 2. Unsatisfactory cultural innovation ability, lacking influential cultural brands. 3. Inadequate regional attraction and the serious outflow of high-end brain drain restrict the further development of the cultural industry.

Opportunities(O)	Threats(T)
1. Cultural exchanges and cooperation are deepened in the context of globalization. 2. Policy support and capital investment provide new opportunities for the cultural industry. 3. The “culture +” integrated development model is promoted and applied to create a new cultural industry ecology.	1. The homogenization competition intensifies, and the urban cultural characteristics are not obvious. 2. Restriction of economic development pressure on the cultural industry. 3. Rapid development and intensified competition of cultural industries at home and abroad.

### 3. Achievements of Lanzhou Regional Cultural Soft Power Construction

Lanzhou has achieved remarkable results in constructing its regional cultural soft power in Lanzhou by virtue of its important regional advantages, abundant historical and cultural resources, increasingly prosperous cultural industry situation, as well as the dual drive of policy guidance and market mechanism.

#### 3.1 Urban connotation significantly enhanced

Lanzhou is committed to implementing the strategy of “cultural Lanzhou”, insisting on the development concept of humanistic guidance, cultural benefit for the people, urban conservation and industrial promotion, and gradually improving the degree of urban civilization. Meanwhile, its modern volunteer service system is towards maturity, with the volunteer service team presenting the characteristics of specialization, diversification and socialization. By the present stage, there are 760, 000 real-name registered volunteers, accounting for 17.17% of the permanent resident population, as well as 4, 541 volunteer service groups and 30, 781 volunteer service activities. Volunteer service has become the new symbol of the city, reflecting its humanistic spirit and responsibility. On this basis, Lanzhou further integrates resources, innovation to build civilization practice characteristic brand projects in the new era, namely “college alliance”, “hospital alliance”, “enterprise alliance” and “civilized unit alliance”, forming the new pattern of volunteer service “resource sharing, collaborative innovation”, which further enhances its cultural connotation and social service and opens up a new situation for the civilization practice of Lanzhou in the new era<sup>[7]</sup>.

#### 3.2 Booming cultural industry

The cultural industry is booming in Lanzhou. Specifically, the cultural tourism industry has become the key force to promote the rapid growth of Lanzhou cultural productivity. 2023 witnessed its domestic tourism revenue hitting 64.94 billion yuan, up 337.9%, accounting for 18.62% of its GDP. Lanzhou, aiming at promoting the high-quality development of the cultural industry, dives deep into the advantages of local resources, creating a series of emerging business forms such as “culture + tourism”, “culture + transportation” and “culture + business”, which has injected strong impetus into the diversified development of the cultural industry. In addition, Lanzhou has increased its support for cultural and creative industrial parks, and actively cultivated local cultural brands. In this context, Publishers Group was selected as the national cultural and technology integration demonstration base, Lanzhou Creative Culture Industrial Park was rated as the national cultural industry demonstration base, and “1929 Herbal World” industrial tourism area was included in the second batch of national industrial tourism demonstration base. Besides, Lanzhou also introduced the “High Quality Development Three- year (2024-20260) Action Plan for Lanzhou Beef Ramen Industry”, aiming to build Lanzhou beef ramen into a cultural symbol with distinctive regional characteristics through technological innovation, brand building and cultural connotation exploration, and provide strong support for the upgrading and development of the cultural industrial chain.

#### 3.3 Evolving urban IP cultivation

Lanzhou dives deep into the Yellow River culture, the silk road culture, national culture, red culture, ecological culture and other cultural resources to persist in developing cultural industry innovation, shaping the cultural brand image of “the shore of the Yellow River is also charming”, which gives full play to the advantage of cultural resources agglomeration, center radiating and driving action of the provincial capital city, and gives priority to the high-quality development of the cultural undertakings and cultural industry. Taking cultural tourism consumption into consideration, it is striving to extend the overall cultural tourism consumption scene by carefully creating cultural tourism IP such as “Lanzhou Yellow River Chorus” and “The Yellow River Cultural and Leisure Capital of China”, and promoting 10 “fast forward and slow travel” theme tourist routes and 8 “fireworks in Lanzhou” theme tourist routes”. Its strong innovation ability is also shown in the cultural and creative fields. For instance, in “Ode to the Yellow River · Plentiful Lanzhou”, the profound history and culture of Lanzhou is presented in a new form by skillfully using 3DMapping, light show, multimedia fusion and micro-performing arts and other modern technological means. The “Lanxiaowu” and “Lanxiaobo” cultural and creative series products launched by Lanzhou Museum are also under the spotlight. These cultural and creative products integrate the history and culture of Lanzhou with modern design concepts, carrying both aesthetic value, collection value and practical value.

### 3.4 Continuously spreading regional influence

The development of cultural industry and the deepening construction of cultural soft power has turned the cultural radiation effect of Lanzhou apparent gradually, attracting many a domestic and foreign tourists to visit, and effectively enhancing Lanzhou's image and popularity. 2023 witnessed it receiving 90 million domestic tourists, an increase of 197.3% over the previous year, and 36,000 inbound tourists, an increase of 1,095.5%, of which 20,000 were foreign tourists and 16,000 were compatriots from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan<sup>①</sup>. To further enhance the international influence of Lanzhou culture, it has implemented the cultural strategy of "going out", highlighted its unique cultural characteristics, vividly told the cultural stories of Lanzhou, and continuously enhanced its cultural confidence by carefully creating cultural name cards with high recognition, such as "a bowl of noodles (Lanzhou beef ramen), a bridge (Zhongshan Bridge), a river (the Yellow River), a book (Reader), a drama (Great Dream in Dunhuang)", holding a series of cultural activities such as Lanzhou International Marathon, Yellow River Cultural Tourism Festival and Music Festival along the Yellow River, as well as international cultural and arts festival tours such as "Empty Sea", "Great Dream in Dunhuang" and "Flying to the Sky". In the 2024 List of "Overseas Influence of Chinese City Brands", Lanzhou is ranked the 38th in China.

## 4. Problems and Weaknesses in Constructing Lanzhou Regional Cultural Soft Power

Recent years bear witness to the significant strengthening of Lanzhou's cultural soft power, which, however, is still notably left behind by developed regions, especially when compared with Xi'an and Chengdu, both of which are important cities in western China.

### 4.1 Lack of urban characteristic positioning and cultural innovation vitality

In the current development of urban culture, Lanzhou fails to highlight its cultural characteristics while developing its urban culture currently, weakening its urban attraction. In its urban planning, it has demolished and reconstructed some ancient buildings and traditional dwellings, which makes the urban cultural space homogeneous. Taking Lanzhou Old Street as an example, although its original intention is to inherit and carry forward the local culture, the excessive commercial development and the ancient architectural style similar to other regions lead to the loss of its original regional characteristics.

A large number of similar cultural products are dominant in the cultural industry, failing to deeply dive into the cultural essence of Lanzhou itself, but diverging to its weak market competitiveness. Besides, scanty effective brand planning and communication strategy make it difficult for these cultural resources to form a strong brand effect, thus limiting to further improve Lanzhou's cultural soft power.

### 4.2 Lagging cultural industry and weak sustainable development ability

Cultural industry is an important means to transform cultural potential advantages to cultural competitiveness, as well as an important carrier to enhance cultural soft power<sup>[8]</sup>. Compared with the cultural industry in developed cities in China, the development level of cultural industry in Lanzhou needs to be further improved. Statistics suggest that there were 6,113 cultural enterprises in Lanzhou in 2021 and the added value of the cultural industry was only 9.546 billion yuan, accounting for 2.95% of Lanzhou's GDP, which is significantly lower than the national average level, reflecting a great imbalance between the investment and income of cultural industry in Lanzhou. Meanwhile, lacking large cultural enterprises cause insufficient competitiveness of the cultural industry, making it difficult to form the cultural industry agglomeration effect with national influence. Besides, there are also deficiencies in the development and innovation of cultural and creative products. Factors such as high-quality cultural innovative products in short, immature development of new business forms restrict the innovation ability and market competitiveness of Lanzhou in cultural industry.

### 4.3 Deficiency in high-quality higher education resources and serious brain drain

Promoting cultural soft power and developing high-quality education are a reciprocal process<sup>[9]</sup>. Lacking in high-quality higher education resources, especially those related to the cultural and creative industries, Lanzhou faces difficulties in talent team building, while inadequate professionals constrain the depth and width of cultural innovation and development, making it hard to lift cultural competitiveness of the city. The List of National Institutions of Higher Learning released on the official website of the Ministry of Education in 2024 show that there are 3,117 institutions of higher learning in China, among which only 22 situate in Lanzhou, ranking 25th among the provincial capitals (capitals of the autonomous region), followed by only Urumqi, Hohhot, Yinchuan, Haikou, Xining and Lhasa, with a significant gap with Xi'an, ranking 7th and Chengdu, ranking 9th. On the other hand, the lack of talent attraction gives rise to serious brain drain, making it difficult to form a stable talent team. In recent years, the "battle for talents" in all provinces and cities across the country has become more and more fierce. Most cities have attracted a large number of talents by lowering the threshold of household registration and providing subsidies for employment and entrepreneurship. According to the report "2024 City Talent Attraction Ranking in China" jointly released by Zhaopin and Zepelin Macro, Lanzhou ranked 92nd, which undoubtedly further intensified the outflow of cultural and creative talents, and has a serious constraint on the cultural innovation and development of Lanzhou.

## References

- [1] Huang Y.W. Elements and Paths of Cultural Soft Power. Chongqing Social Sciences, Issue 10, 2016, pp. 81-87.
- [2] Lanzhou Culture and Tourism Bureau. Focus on transportation, breakthrough in six lines, promoting Lanzhou Cultural tourism to a new leap. 2022.
- [3] www.gov.cn. Approval of City Territorial Space Overall Planning of Lanzhou (2021-2035) by the State Council. 2024.
- [4] Lanzhou Culture and Tourism Bureau. The development of cultural tourism in Lanzhou. 2024.
- [5] Zhang X.W. High-quality development of education: theoretical pedigree examination and strategic needs investigation. China Higher Education Research, Issue 8, 2023, pp.19-26.
- [6] Data source: The Information Office of the People's Government of Gansu Province. Gansu province held a press conference on the integrated development of cultural and tourism in Lanzhou. 2023.
- [7] Lanzhou Civilization Office. Lanzhou: Creating four "alliances" to draw a new chapter of civilization practice in the new era. 2024.
- [8] Zhang G.Z. & Liu C.L. Cultural soft power improvement in the new era. Studies On Marxism, Issue 9, 2020, pp. 82-90.
- [9] Liu Y.D. Cultural soft power and building China into an educational power-China's practice in an international comparative perspective. Educational Research, Issue 45, 2024, pp.15-29.

---

**Project:** This paper is the phased achievement of Lanzhou philosophy and social science project "Research on Lanzhou Urban Culture IP Cultivation and Regional Cultural Soft Power Promotion Strategy" (project approval No.: 24-B17)