

Research on the Development of Cultural Tourism Resources in the Yichang Section of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River

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Abstract: The Yichang section of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River boasts abundant cultural resources and historical heritage. Thorough exploration and development of these cultural tourism resources, combined with the creation of a unique cultural tourism identity for this section, can not only invigorate the development of the region's tourism industry but also contribute significantly to cultural preservation and transmission. This study examines the development and current state of cultural tourism in the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River, focusing specifically on the Yichang section. Using the SWOT analysis method, it offers an in-depth analysis and proposes suggestions for cultural tourism development in this area, aiming to provide a reference for future tourism development strategies in the region.

Keywords: Three Gorges of the Yangtze River; Yichang; Cultural tourism; SWOT

Online publication: December 23, 2024

1. Introduction

In recent years, with strong national support for the cultural industry and the rapid development of tourism, cultural tourism has gradually become the preferred travel choice for many tourists. Through cultural tourism, travelers can broaden their knowledge, experience diverse cultural influences, and enjoy both the enrichment of their horizons and the satisfaction of their spiritual needs. However, as a historically renowned cultural tourism destination in China, the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River faces challenges such as outdated cultural tourism products, which fail to meet the evolving cultural demands of contemporary tourists.

2. Current research status of cultural tourism

2.1. Research status of cultural tourism in China

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China highlights the directive: "Promote

the deep integration of culture and tourism by shaping tourism with culture and showcasing culture through tourism.” This provides clear guidance and fundamental principles for the development of cultural tourism. Compared to the tourism industries in other countries, cultural tourism in China has developed relatively late. However, with rising economic levels and increasing spiritual needs, tourists are paying greater attention to the cultural and spiritual essence of their destinations. Cultural tourism, due to its unique connotations, has gradually become an indispensable aspect of travel.

As China’s cultural industry continues to emerge, explore, and transition, the tourism sector has moved from an imbalanced output to a more balanced one. In the post-pandemic era, industries are recovering, the economy is growing, living standards are improving, and both material and spiritual needs are being better met. Against this backdrop, the role of cultural tourism in driving societal development and the national economy has become increasingly prominent. In 2018, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism was established in China, leveraging government efforts to promote and support the integration of culture and tourism.

Currently, cultural tourism in China is in a developing stage, with significant room for improvement in promoting the integration of culture and tourism. Tourism infrastructure in the country remains underdeveloped ^[1], with an overall low level of development and marked spatial imbalances ^[2]. Culture has an intrinsic appeal, and deeply integrating culture with tourism can enhance this appeal and transform it into a tourism resource. The first step is constructing a cultural identity to strengthen its attractiveness ^[3]. For instance, red tourism ties individuals’ personal experiences with the national and ethnic fate, elevating cultural tourism to the realm of national and ethnic sentiments ^[4,5].

The second pathway involves enhancing the visibility and accessibility of culture ^[3]. Initiatives like the *Impression* series and the *Eternal Love* series combine traditional culture with regional characteristics, creating performance models centered on cultural presentation. Integrating unique regional culture into tourism products enhances participation, allowing tourists to experience local culture while enabling indigenous residents to engage in tourism development, which positively impacts targeted poverty alleviation ^[6]. Incorporating intangible cultural heritage into tourism products significantly boosts the competitiveness of regional cultural tourism ^[7].

The third pathway is commercializing cultural tourism products and extending industry chains to integrate culture and tourism ^[3]. For example, in Guizhou, ethnic minority villages have combined traditional sports culture with tourism to promote sports-related intangible heritage tourism, fostering and passing down ethnic culture while advancing cultural tourism development ^[8].

2.2. Research status of cultural tourism in the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River

The culture of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River represents a regional culture encompassing the material and spiritual wealth created by the area’s residents throughout history. The cultural tourism resources in the Three Gorges Reservoir Area reflect a rich blend of social culture, material civilization, and spiritual civilization created over time.

The Three Gorges are renowned for their stunning landscapes and historical significance. Chinese scholars began detailed research into the cultural tourism development of the Three Gorges as early as the last century. With the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the unique natural and cultural landscapes of the area have attracted significant attention for tourism development. This project has provided unparalleled opportunities for the tourism industry in the Three Gorges region ^[9].

As the development of Three Gorges tourism progressed, academic research gradually shifted focus to the unique cultural tourism resources of the Yangtze River Basin. The aim has been to explore marketing strategies tailored to the region to expand the Three Gorges tourism market. Most of the scenic areas in the reservoir region are steeped in history and possess high cultural value. To establish a popular tourism brand, it is essential to enhance supporting infrastructure and increase promotional efforts ^[10].

2.3. Review of research status

The development of tourism in the Three Gorges began relatively early, and the region boasts abundant resources for cultural tourism development, including historical, cultural, and natural assets. Scholars have primarily focused on the development and utilization of culture in their research on cultural tourism. Existing studies on the Three Gorges cultural tourism have delved deeply into the development and preservation of culture and cultural heritage, demonstrating the potential of promoting and transmitting culture through tourism.

However, research on the promotion and marketing models for Three Gorges cultural tourism remains outdated. In 2023, a joint initiative by multiple departments introduced the *Three Gorges Cultural Relics Protection and Utilization Special Plan*. Cultural and tourism departments in Chongqing and Hubei collaborated to revive and invigorate Three Gorges tourism. Their plan focuses on upgrading the tourism framework, developing new tourism products and business models, and expanding the scale of attractions and resorts. While the government has made significant strides in advancing Three Gorges tourism, there is limited focus on marketing and promotional policies specific to cultural tourism in the region.

3. Overview of cultural tourism resources in the Three Gorges Reservoir Area (Yichang section)

3.1. Cultural tourism resources of the Three Gorges Dam

Yichang is home to the world's largest hydropower project—the Three Gorges Project. Leveraging the project, the Three Gorges Dam Tourism Area was established to showcase the construction process and hydraulic culture of this monumental undertaking. In 2007, the Three Gorges Dam was recognized as one of China's first 5A-level scenic areas. The project comprises the dam itself, a hydroelectric power station, and ship locks.

The Tanziling Scenic Area serves as an excellent observation point, offering a panoramic view of the Three Gorges Dam. Visitors can also see the double-line five-step ship locks, referred to as the “Fourth Gorge of the Yangtze River,” and enjoy the scenic beauty of the new city of Zigui in Yichang. Additionally, the area features the Three Gorges Experimental Dam Theme Park, a national 3A-level scenic area. Originally constructed to resolve significant technical challenges in the research, design, and construction of the Three Gorges Project, the experimental dam has since been transformed into a primary attraction within the theme park.

3.2. Cultural tourism resources of Ba and Chu cultures

The Three Gorges area is a confluence of Ba and Chu cultures, positioned at the intersection of these ancient civilizations. As a birthplace of Ba and Chu cultures, the region boasts a rich cultural heritage. The Yichang Museum's collection of yongzhong (bells) and bronze ding (cauldrons) represents significant archaeological discoveries in Chu culture, filling gaps in early Chu cultural studies.

The Xianglushi Cultural Site in the Changyang area along the Qingjiang River is considered crucial for exploring the origins of the ancient Ba people. The construction of the Gezhouba and Three Gorges hydro

projects prompted extensive archaeological rescue excavations, revealing a comprehensive picture of Neolithic archaeological culture in Yichang. The region's cultural continuum—from Chengbeixi Culture, Daxi Culture, and Qujialing Culture to Shijiahe Culture—illustrates the evolutionary trajectory of early gorge civilizations.

3.3. Military cultural resources

The Three Gorges' unique topography has made it a strategic military location throughout history. Many of China's unification wars were won by securing the key military position of the Three Gorges, paving the way to national dominance. The region's continuous military history, spanning over 2,000 years, has profoundly influenced the material and spiritual lives of its people, giving rise to distinctive regional cultural elements.

Yichang, renowned as the "Land of the Three Kingdoms," is featured in 36 stories from the classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. It is also the site of numerous ancient Three Kingdoms battlefields. The Xiaoting Ancient Battlefield Scenic Area, one of the "New Ten Scenic Spots of the Three Gorges," holds significant historical and cultural value. Battles such as the "Battle of Xiaoting" (also known as the Battle of Yiling), the "Battle of Jiangguan" during Yang Su's campaign against Chen, and the "Battle of Suoqiao" during the Western Jin's conquest of Wu all occurred in Yichang. These historic battlefields offer a wealth of cultural and historical insights.

3.4. Intangible cultural heritage resources

Due to the migration and integration of ethnic groups in the Three Gorges area, the region's cultural exchanges and interactions over millennia have given rise to a vibrant and diverse cultural landscape. Numerous intangible cultural heritage items have emerged from this development.

National-level intangible cultural heritage includes the legends of Wang Zhaojun, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Qu Yuan legends. The traditional music heritage known as "Jingchu Ancient Songs" includes Xingshan folk songs, Changyang mountain songs, and Wufeng Tujia mulberry drum music. Traditional food and crafts include Tujia cured sausage making, the "Ten Bowls and Eight Plates" cooking technique, and the Tujia ancestral worship rituals.

The diverse categories of intangible cultural heritage in Yichang enrich the region's cultural landscape and create favorable conditions for the growth and development of tourism in the Yichang section of the Three Gorges Reservoir Area.

4. SWOT analysis of cultural tourism development in the Yichang section of the Three Gorges

Building on a detailed understanding of the cultural tourism resources in the Yichang section of the Three Gorges, a SWOT analysis is applied to explore the development of cultural tourism in the area. The aim is to identify effective recommendations for the region's cultural tourism resource development.

4.1. Strengths

- (1) Geographic advantages: The Three Gorges stretch approximately 200 kilometers from Baidi City in Fengjie, Chongqing, to Nanjin Pass in Yichang, Hubei, forming the most spectacular natural gallery along the Yangtze River. The longest gorge within the Three Gorges, Xiling Gorge, lies entirely in Yichang, spanning about 66 kilometers, and is renowned for its rapids and challenging waterways.

Yichang, often called the “Gateway to the Three Gorges,” is a transportation hub in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River and a crucial node city in the region. As a key port city in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, Yichang possesses excellent deep-water shoreline resources and serves as a vital waterway connecting eastern and western China. Additionally, Yichang is at the intersection of China’s major east-west railway lines and functions as a key railway hub. The city has developed an extensive network of expressways, enhancing regional connectivity.

- (2) Convenient transportation and high accessibility: The Yichang section of the Three Gorges boasts well-developed and convenient transportation infrastructure, significantly improving accessibility. Visitors can save commuting time and effort, facilitating easier access to the destination. This convenience increases tourist flow to the area, stimulating the local tourism industry. Furthermore, improved transportation fosters regional tourism collaboration, enabling resource sharing, joint market development, and collective brand building, which benefits Yichang and surrounding areas.

4.2. Weaknesses

- (1) Scattered tourism resources: The Yichang section of the Three Gorges Reservoir Area offers abundant cultural tourism resources, but their geographic dispersion poses challenges. The vast coverage and length of the Yichang section mean its resources are not concentrated in a single area. For example, the Three Gorges Dam, the world’s largest hydropower project, is in Sandouping Town, Yiling District, Yichang City. The 5A-level Three Gorges Family Scenic Area, which showcases traditional Three Gorges culture and natural scenery, is located along the Xiling Gorge. Meanwhile, the Qu Yuan Hometown Cultural Tourism Area in Zigui County preserves rich Qu Yuan and Dragon Boat Festival heritage, offering visitors insights into Qu Yuan’s culture and spirit. The Qingjiang Gallery Scenic Area in Changyang Tujia Autonomous County is an essential hub for Tujia culture. The scattered locations complicate itinerary planning, increase commuting times, and make it harder to meet tourist expectations. Additionally, the decentralized resources hinder unified promotion and management, increasing operational difficulties and costs, which slows tourism development.
- (2) Insufficient promotion: The cultural tourism products in the Yichang section of the Three Gorges lack strong branding and promotion. While general tourists show interest in the “Three Gorges” narrative, they are less familiar with the historical and cultural heritage behind it. Current tourism marketing primarily highlights natural scenery and cruise experiences, with limited promotion of the rich historical and cultural background. Visitors remain largely unaware of the Three Kingdoms relics, Qu Yuan heritage, and Dragon Boat Festival traditions in Yichang. Moreover, the cultural tourism model predominantly focuses on sightseeing, with limited cultural immersion or experiential products, resulting in weak branding and insufficient promotional efforts.

4.3. Opportunities

- (1) Government support: The Yichang municipal government has emphasized cultural tourism development, establishing mechanisms for government guidance, departmental collaboration, vertical coordination, and market-driven operations. Increased government investment has focused on exploring cultural heritage, developing regional specialties, and integrating tourism resources to promote Yichang’s Three Gorges tourism comprehensively. For instance, the Yichang Municipal Bureau of

Culture and Tourism has responded to proposals such as “Enhancing Research and Promotion of Three Kingdoms Culture to Establish a Cultural Tourism City.” This includes advancing research and creation related to Three Kingdoms culture, increasing promotion efforts, and enhancing the cultural brand’s visibility. The goal is to establish Yichang as a renowned national and international cultural tourism destination, thereby boosting cultural tourism development.

- (2) Growing tourism demand: Following the reclassification of COVID-19 as a “Class B” disease in 2023, domestic tourism demand has surged. Both central and local governments have strengthened cultural tourism promotion and marketing. In the first quarter of 2023, domestic tourism revenue reached 1.3 billion yuan, a 69.5% increase compared to the same period in 2022. With vast growth potential in the tourism market, the gradual fading of the pandemic’s impact, and rising domestic tourism enthusiasm, Yichang can seize this opportunity to accelerate the development of cultural tourism.

4.4. Threats

(1) Homogenized competition: Cultural tourism resources in the Yichang section face competition from neighboring areas with similar offerings. For instance, the Chongqing section of the Three Gorges Reservoir Area boasts significant cultural tourism attractions. Baidi City in Fengjie County has a rich military culture as a historical battleground, while Wushan County showcases the Tusi culture with its unique language, customs, and attire. Similarly, the Enshi City segment of the Three Gorges features the Wild Three Gorges Scenic Area, blending natural and cultural elements of Tujia heritage. Homogenized competition may lead to overlapping tourism images, potentially diluting the unique appeal of the Yichang section. This could lower tourists’ perceptions and evaluations of Yichang, hindering efforts to build its cultural tourism brand. Modern tourists increasingly seek diversity and uniqueness in cultural tourism products, and excessive homogenization may result in decreased satisfaction due to a lack of novelty.

5. Recommendations for cultural tourism development in the Yichang section of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River

By studying history, the unique characteristics and value of Yichang’s culture can be identified, providing essential materials and inspiration for cultural tourism development. The folk culture of the Yichang section is exceptionally rich. Cultural elements such as Xingshan folk songs, Yichang Sizhu (a form of traditional string and wind music), Qinglin Temple riddles, and Xiabaoping folk tales have been included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage listings. By exploring these aspects of folk culture, one gains a deeper understanding of the local people’s lifestyles, values, and traditional culture, adding greater cultural depth to cultural tourism.

The preservation and restoration of Yichang’s cultural relics and historical sites can better showcase its history and culture to visitors, enhancing their sense of cultural identity and belonging. Strengthening the branding and distinctiveness of the Yichang tourism sector can increase its recognition and appeal, reducing homogenized competition with neighboring regions. Additionally, fostering collaboration and exchange with nearby cities can promote the development of cultural tourism, enabling resource sharing and complementary advantages. Developing innovative and differentiated cultural tourism products and services can meet the growing demand for diverse cultural tourism experiences among visitors.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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