

Differentiated Paths and Digital Collaborative Mechanisms of the Integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage with Cultural Tourism and MICE Industry—A Comparative Study Based on Multiple Cases

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Abstract: The in-depth integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with the MICE industry and cultural tourism has become an important path to promote cultural inheritance and industrial upgrading, yet it currently faces challenges such as homogenized paths and insufficient technological empowerment. Based on the theories of industrial integration, cultural ecology, and collaborative governance, this paper constructs an analytical framework of “resources—paths—technology—collaboration—effectiveness.” Through a comparative study of multiple cases, including the Zhejiang ICH Exhibition, Chengdu International Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival, and Jilin Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival, it explores the differentiated integration paths and digital collaborative mechanisms of ICH cultural tourism and MICE. The study finds that differentiated paths rely on the triple coupling of ICH endowments, MICE positioning, and tourism market demand; digitalization provides support through efficiency, experience, and collaboration, while current obstacles include technology-content disjuncture and online-offline fragmentation. Accordingly, optimization strategies are proposed from the perspectives of content adaptation, scenario linkage, and talent cultivation, to facilitate the transformation of ICH cultural tourism and MICE integration from “formal integration” to “substantive integration.”

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage (ICH); Cultural tourism; Meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE); Differentiation; Digitalization; Collaborative mechanism; Industrial integration

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1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) serves as a living carrier of fine traditional Chinese culture, and its protection, inheritance, and innovative development are key issues in building a culturally strong nation. Leveraging

advantages in resource aggregation, communication, and exchange, the convention and exhibition industry has deeply integrated with cultural and tourism scenarios, creating a diversified platform for ICH activation featuring exhibition, trade, and experience, and emerging as a core vehicle for ICH to break through circles and connect with the market.

Existing relevant research still has shortcomings: it has not conducted systematic comparisons of integrated practices across conventions and exhibitions of different regions and types, making it difficult to present differentiated paths and adaptation logic. Against the backdrop of digital empowerment, discussions on the collaborative connections among multiple subjects are insufficient, and a mature collaborative mechanism framework has not yet been formed^[1]. Regarding prominent issues such as homogenized convention content, disconnection between technology and the cultural connotation of ICH, and inefficient collaboration of cultural and tourism resources, there is a lack of root-cause tracing through multi-case empirical studies, and no operable solutions have been proposed^[2].

Centering on the “high-quality integration of ICH, cultural tourism, and conventions/exhibitions”, this paper constructs an analytical model of “resource endowment — convention path selection — technological empowerment — subject collaboration — effectiveness optimization.” Following the logic of “theoretical combing — case analysis — path refinement — mechanism construction — value verification”, it selects typical cases such as the Zhejiang ICH Exhibition and the Chengdu International Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival, and conducts analysis using methods including literature research, case comparison, and in-depth interviews^[3].

The research aims to theoretically reveal the differentiated laws of integration between ICH and conventions/exhibitions, construct a subject collaborative mechanism under the digital context, and enrich the relevant theoretical system^[4]; in practice, it intends to refine scenario-based paths, providing references for various regions to address integration dilemmas and promote the living inheritance of ICH and the high-quality development of the convention and exhibition industry.

2. The tripartite integration of intangible cultural heritage, cultural tourism, and convention and exhibition: Logical core, practical paths, and theoretical foundations

The integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), cultural tourism, and conventions and exhibitions takes ICH as the core culture, conventions and exhibitions as the platform for resource aggregation and display, and tourism as the scenario carrier and consumption outlet. Through the functional inter-embedding and resource linkage of the three, an integrated model of “cultural inheritance – industrial empowerment – experiential consumption” is formed^[3]. In essence, conventions and exhibitions solve the problem of “fragmented communication” of ICH, while tourism realizes the “value transformation” of conventions and exhibitions, ultimately achieving the dual goals of the living inheritance of ICH and the upgrading of the cultural tourism industry^[5].

Within this integrated framework, the exploration of differentiated paths is particularly critical. Such paths are adaptive integration models formed based on the endowment of regional ICH resources, types of conventions and exhibitions, and characteristics of the tourism market^[3]. As ICH resources, exhibition positioning, and tourist demand vary across regions, a unified paradigm is prone to bottlenecks. Cases such as Zhejiang’s “Exhibition + Study Tour” and Chengdu’s “Festival + Cultural Tourism” demonstrate that the core lies in precisely aligning local characteristics with market demand.

Digital technology serves as a link to connect the information and resource chains of multiple stakeholders,

including governments, enterprises, ICH inheritors, and tourists, realizing the collaborative operation of digitalized ICH exhibition, intelligent convention and exhibition operation, and precise cultural tourism services ^[7]. This addresses the issues of “inefficient stakeholder collaboration” and “disconnection between technology and culture”, thereby enhancing integration efficiency.

3. Theoretical foundations

Originating from the context of the digital technology revolution, the theory of industrial integration emphasizes that different industries form new business formats through resource sharing and functional penetration. Its core logic is to “break industrial barriers and realize factor recombination and value upgrading” ^[8]. The three sectors of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), conventions and exhibitions, and tourism achieve functional superposition and value co-creation through “ICH providing the cultural core, conventions and exhibitions providing the platform link, and tourism providing the consumption scenario”, which perfectly fits the core framework of “resource integration – value co-creation” in industrial integration ^[1].

Cultural ecology theory focuses on the interactive relationship between culture and the environment, emphasizing that cultural forms must adapt to regional ecology and social conditions ^[6]. Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) possesses distinct regional characteristics, and its existence is deeply bound to specific natural and humanistic environments. Therefore, the integration of ICH, cultural tourism, and conventions and exhibitions must be grounded in local realities, matching the local cultural ecology and tourism market demand, and avoiding standardized development divorced from local contexts.

Collaborative governance theory focuses on the coordination mechanisms of multiple stakeholders, emphasizing the achievement of efficient governance through information sharing and the division of powers and responsibilities ^[9]. The integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), cultural tourism, and conventions and exhibitions is a complex, systematic project involving multiple parties such as governments, enterprises, inheritors, and tourists. Due to the divergent demands and varying powers and responsibilities of these stakeholders, the lack of an effective coordination mechanism can easily lead to poor collaboration and inefficient governance.

4. Literature review

Evolutionary trajectory and research gaps: Research in this field has evolved from exploring necessity to investigating implementation pathways. Early-stage research (2010–2015) primarily focused on the macro-level value of integration but fell short in conducting an in-depth analysis of regional adaptability and differentiated approaches. Mid-stage research (2016–2020) began to address technological applications; however, it failed to systematically reveal the internal mechanisms of multi-stakeholder collaboration, and disagreements persisted regarding the driving forces behind such collaboration. Recent research (2021–present), while emphasizing integrated frameworks and holistic process enablement, suffers from insufficient comparative multi-case studies, making it difficult to uncover patterns of differentiation. Furthermore, debates continue concerning the balance between technology and culture. In summary, three major gaps exist in the current body of research: a lack of systematic multi-case comparisons to uncover adaptability patterns; insufficient exploration into the internal mechanisms of digital collaboration; and weak empirical analysis of issues such as homogenization and low efficiency. These gaps constitute the starting point for this study.

5. The differentiated path and digital collaboration mechanism of the integration of intangible cultural heritage, tourism, and exhibitions: A comparative study based on multiple cases

The integration of intangible cultural heritage, tourism, and exhibition is a dynamic adaptation system relying on regional characteristics, functional requirements, and technical support. The core logic is to accurately match resource endowment and market demand through the “differentiated path”, and systematically break the bottleneck of implementation with the “digital mechanism.” The deep collaboration between the two is the key to achieving high integration ^[7].

5.1. The formation basis of the differentiation path

The differentiation path is shaped by the triple coupling of regional intangible cultural heritage endowment, exhibition function positioning, and tourism market demand. With craftsmanship as the core, Zhejiang has formed “exhibition, exhibition and sales, and research”, which has attracted more than one million citizens to participate in 14 years, and nearly 30% of intangible cultural heritage projects have achieved normalized production ^[3]; Jilin focuses on folk performances and special delicacies, creating a “festival experience tourism route.” The 5th Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival attracted more than 100,000 people in 5 days, with sales reaching more than 300,000 yuan ^[10]; Relying on multi-ethnic intangible cultural heritage, Chengdu has built a path of “international festivals, cultural tourism, and investment promotion.” The 7th International Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival attracted participants from more than 40 countries, and the contract value exceeded 14.2 billion yuan ^[11]. In terms of function, public welfare exhibitions focus on cultural protection. For example, the Lichuan Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum guarantees the dissemination of pure skills through digitalization ^[7]; Industrial exhibitions focused on value transformation, China Intangible Cultural Heritage Expo was upgraded to “digital transaction brand incubation”, and the sixth online transaction volume exceeded 8 million yuan ^[3]. The upgrading of tourism consumption demand promotes the expansion of the path to life-oriented, scene-oriented, and deep immersion.

5.2. Empowering role of digital mechanism

The digital mechanism provides core support from three aspects: In terms of efficiency, the whole process of the exhibition is optimized through tools such as H5 publicity, digital sign-in, and big data analysis. Lichuan Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum uses 25% of the operating cost and risk of errors and omissions to significantly improve operational efficiency ^[2, 7]; In terms of experience, with the help of AR, VR and other technologies to break the barriers of time and space, transform static intangible cultural heritage such as “dragon boat racing” into immersive dynamic experience, and enhance the audience’s sense of participation and cultural awareness ^[7]; In terms of collaboration, multiple subjects such as digital platform connections, enterprises, inheritors, and tourists have been built. Zhejiang’s “online intangible cultural heritage purchase” and Shandong’s “cloud exhibition hall” have successfully solved the problems of resource docking and cross-regional communication ^[7].

5.3. Synergy obstacles and breakthrough directions

At present, there are outstanding obstacles such as the disconnection between technology and content, the separation of online and offline, and the shortage of compound talents ^[2, 5, 13]. Breakthroughs need to focus on three aspects: content adaptation, designing exclusive digital solutions according to intangible cultural heritage types, such as crafts and folk customs ^[7]; Scenario linkage to build a closed loop of “offline core experience and online extended service” ^[3]; Talent cultivation, establish a collaborative training system of “university inheritors”, and

cultivate professionals with both cultural literacy, exhibition ability and digital skills in a targeted manner.

6. Theoretical responses and practical implications of integration pathways

Through case analysis, this study reveals differentiated pathways and digital coordination mechanisms for integrating intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with cultural tourism and exhibitions. This chapter situates the findings within an academic framework to address two core questions: first, how the conclusions engage with existing theories; second, what profound insights they offer for industry practice.

6.1. Theoretical dialogue: Deepening consensus and integrating frameworks

The research conclusions engage in effective dialogue with existing theories. The proposed differentiated pathway selection represents a refined extension of the “physical + virtual” resource coordination framework^[7]. For instance, performing arts-based ICH aligns with the “high-frequency, strong-interaction” urban performance model, resonating with the instant-conversion logic of cultural tourism consumption scenarios. Conversely, traditional craft-based ICH suits the “deep-experience, slow-immersion” workshop model, echoing the curatorial concept of “reintegrating traditional crafts into daily life”^[3]. This indicates the industry has progressed from the “resource integration” phase to a “value reconstruction” stage grounded in distinctive characteristics^[1].

Regarding digitalization, this study endorses the perspective of “using technology as an immersive experience tool” and continues the dual-track integration approach^[2,7]. Its incremental contribution lies in proposing an integrated “value-cycle ecosystem” framework that systematically addresses the “geographical constraints” of intangible cultural heritage — digitalization expands the elastic space for releasing intangible cultural heritage value by connecting offline experiences with online dissemination, consumption, and community interaction^[13].

6.2. Risk assessment: Balancing technological empowerment and cultural authenticity

During the digital transformation, vigilance is needed against the dilution of cultural authenticity. Overemphasizing form innovation and traffic may reduce intangible cultural heritage to hollow symbols. Thus, digitalization serves as a “tool”, while the living transmission and interpretive essence of intangible cultural heritage remain the “way.” The fundamental goal of technological application should be to tell ICH stories more vividly and profoundly. Sustainable integration should enable ICH to showcase its unique characteristics on modern platforms, rather than losing its essential identity in the process.

6.3. Practical guidance: From path selection to system construction

The “differentiated pathways” model developed in this study serves as a “decision navigation system”, helping project stakeholders select suitable tracks based on resource endowments to transition from homogeneous competition to distinctive operations.

The interpretation of the “digital synergy mechanism” guides practitioners to transcend tool-centric perspectives, enabling top-level design from the perspective of a “value co-creation ecosystem.” This approach integrates the tactile quality of offline experiences with the fluidity of online collaboration while proactively mitigating risks of cultural distortion.

The deep-seated foundation for integrating intangible cultural heritage with tourism and exhibitions stems from reverence for and commitment to cultural authenticity. This principle not only guides technological and managerial innovation but also serves as a critical prerequisite for ensuring the sector’s sustained and healthy

development.

7. Conclusion

This comparative multi-case study reveals that high-quality integrated development of ICH with cultural tourism and MICE adheres to a core logic of dynamic adaptation between “differentiated paths” and “digital collaborative mechanisms.” Differentiated paths, sculpted by the triple coupling of regional endowment, functional positioning, and market demand, chart the “direction” for integration. Digital mechanisms furnish the essential “support” for implementation through three-dimensional empowerment in efficiency, experience, and collaboration. Ultimately, the “quality” and depth of integration are determined by the ability of these two elements to overcome obstacles—such as the technology-content disconnect, channel segregation, and talent gaps—and achieve genuine synergy. Future research and practice should, on the basis of deepened comparative analyses across diverse contexts, focus on developing quantifiable models for assessing collaborative mechanisms. Throughout this pursuit, the protection and transmission of cultural authenticity must remain the central, unwavering concern, thereby truly guiding the integration of ICH, cultural tourism, and MICE from a “symbolic” toward a “substantive” and sustainable future.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Xin He was responsible for overall coordination and task assignment, managing the writing progress, and drafting the abstract and keywords. Feixue Li was responsible for drafting the introduction section. Yuling Ouyang was responsible for writing the logical core, practical paths, and theoretical foundation of the tripartite integration of intangible cultural heritage, cultural tourism, and exhibitions. Jiamin Hong was responsible for compiling and drafting the literature review section. Yingling Ou was responsible for drafting the section on differentiated paths and digital collaboration mechanisms for the integration of intangible cultural heritage, cultural tourism, and exhibitions. Yayi Yang was responsible for writing the section on theoretical responses and practical implications of the integration paths. Zhanhao Liang was responsible for drafting the conclusion section and standardizing the format and layout of the paper.

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