

# Research on the Industrialization Development Path of Intangible Cultural Heritage Tea Driven by Institutions — A Case Study of Enshi Prefecture, Hubei

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**Abstract:** The industrialization of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a dual proposition of cultural inheritance and economic development in the new era. Taking Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hubei as a typical case, this paper focuses on world-level tea ICH items including Enshi Yulu Tea Making Technique and Yihong Black Tea Making Technique, and systematically investigates the institutional logic, practical mechanism, and governance efficiency of local public sectors driving ICH industrialization. The study finds that Enshi Prefecture has adopted a four-in-one institutional driving model of “legislative protection, standard guidance, brand operation and digital empowerment,” and constructed a three-layer driving mechanism of “institutional supply, resource allocation and governance innovation,” forming a four-dimensional practical path of “spatial reconstruction, industrial integration, factor activation and subject cultivation.” The research reveals that institutional driving is a key variable for ICH industrialization in ethnic regions. Governments play a guiding role through institutional supply, resource allocation and governance innovation, yet risks of “de-ICH” must be guarded against, so as to dynamically balance cultural value and economic value under the coordination of “government-market-community.” This study provides replicable experience for the “Three-Tea Coordination” strategy and rural revitalization in ethnic areas.

**Keywords:** Institutional driving; Industrialization of intangible cultural heritage tea; Enshi Yulu; Yihong Black Tea; Cultural governance; Rural revitalization

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research background and problem statement

The protection of intangible cultural heritage is undergoing a paradigm shift from emergency protection to systematic protection, innovative development, and integrated utilization <sup>[1]</sup>. In 2022, “Traditional Chinese

Tea Processing Techniques and Associated Customs” was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, with Enshi Yulu Tea Making Technique and Yihong Black Tea Making Technique as core components, marking Enshi’s tea ICH entry into the world cultural map <sup>[2]</sup>.

Located in the hinterland of the Wuling Mountains, Enshi Prefecture is an inhabited area of ethnic minorities including Tujia and Miao peoples. It boasts 1 World ICH item, 16 national-level ICH items, 66 provincial-level items, 159 prefectural-level items, and 721 county-level items <sup>[3]</sup>. Among them, tea-related ICH occupies a core position, forming a complete tea ICH pedigree consisting of national-level Enshi Yulu Tea Making Technique (2008) and Yihong Black Tea Making Technique (2014), as well as provincial-level items such as Hefeng Yihong Tea and Laifeng Vine Tea. By 2023, the total tea garden area of the prefecture reached 1.8 million mu, with a comprehensive industrial output value exceeding 20 billion yuan. The tea industry covers 880 villages and increases the income of 830,000 tea farmers, with a per capita annual tea income of 7,771 yuan <sup>[4]</sup>.

Against the dual backdrop of abundant tea ICH resources and large industrial scale, this study focuses on the core research question: How can local public departments drive the transformation of “ICH tea” from traditional craftsmanship to modern industry through institutional arrangements? Answering this question is not only critical to realizing Enshi’s strategic goal of a 100-billion-yuan tea industry, but also offers universal reference for ICH industrialization in ethnic regions.

## **2. Theoretical foundation and literature review**

### **2.1. Definition of core concepts**

Institutional driving refers to the behavioral pattern in which government departments transform industrial development modes via institutional arrangements (laws, policies, and development plans), resource allocation (financial subsidies and project support), and governance forms (cooperation platform construction and performance evaluation system establishment). The institution-driven management model for ICH protection means local governments integrate cultural inheritance and development into regional economic development strategies.

Industrialization of ICH tea refers to the capitalization transformation process relying on traditional tea craftsmanship that covers the whole industrial chain, including tea garden bases, processing and production, brand marketing, and cultural tourism experience. Its uniqueness lies in balancing the authenticity of craftsmanship (cultural value) and large-scale product output (economic value).

### **2.2. Theoretical basis**

The theory of national cultural governance holds that the state optimizes the allocation of cultural resources and integrates social values through cultural systems and cultural projects <sup>[5]</sup>. Enshi Prefecture takes tea ICH protection as a prefectural development strategy, embodying the unification of instrumental rationality and value rationality in cultural governance. According to Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory, cultural capital exists in three mutually convertible forms: embodied form (craftsmanship of inheritors), objective form (tea products), and institutionalized form (ICH lists) <sup>[6]</sup>. The agricultural industrial chain theory points out that the tea industry inherently features integration of primary, secondary, and tertiary industries <sup>[7]</sup>.

## 2.3. Literature review

Existing studies have discussed the rationality of industrialization, the construction of protection systems, and ownership of rights, yet they pay insufficient attention to political factors<sup>[8–10]</sup>. Gao Ziyue et al. conducted a systematic analysis on government functions in ICH industrialization, and research on tea ICH has explored the interaction mechanism between tea heritage and regional development without integrated analysis from the institutional driving perspective. This paper fills the above gaps by systematically elaborating the mechanism, path, and policy effects of institutional driving.

## 3. Institutional driving mechanism of tea ICH industrialization in Enshi Prefecture

Institutional driving refers to the behavioral pattern through which local public departments guide industrial development by institutional supply, resource allocation, and governance innovation. Based on cultural governance theory and government function theory, this chapter systematically elaborates the three-layer driving mechanism for tea ICH industrialization in Enshi.

### 3.1. Institutional supply: Construction of a hierarchical institutional system

Institutional supply serves as the basic mechanism of institutional driving. Enshi Prefecture has built a four-level linked institutional system covering national, provincial, prefectural, and county levels, translating macro guidance into micro operational rules (**Table 1**).

At the national level, the Wuling Mountains Cultural and Ecological Protection Experimental Zone (2014) puts forward the holistic protection concept of “protecting people, objects and living contexts.” At the provincial level, the *Regulations of Hubei Province on Promoting the Development of Tea Industry* (2021) is China’s first provincial special regulation on the tea industry. At the prefectural level, a four-in-one governance framework has been established, targeting the construction of 10 inheritance bases, cultivation of 100 inheritors and income growth for 10,000 tea households. At the county level, differentiated management is implemented for core and extended tea-producing areas.

**Table 1.** Hierarchical structure of institutional supply for tea ICH in Enshi Prefecture

| Level       | Core Institution                                                                             | Functional Orientation                                            | Key Innovation                                                      |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| National    | Wuling Mountains Cultural and Ecological Protection Experimental Zone (2014)                 | Provide legitimate foundation and resource mobilization framework | Holistic protection focusing on people, objects and living contexts |
| Provincial  | <i>Regulations of Hubei Province on Promoting the Development of Tea Industry</i> (2021)     | Enhance institutional binding force                               | China’s first provincial tea industry regulation                    |
| Prefectural | Three-Year Action Plan for High-Quality Development of Tea Industry                          | Refine operability and quantify development targets               | Four-in-one governance framework                                    |
| County      | Administrative Measures for Geographical Indication Protection, Territorial Spatial Planning | Localized implementation and differentiated management            | Classified control of core and extended production zones            |

### 3.2. Resource allocation: Fiscal funds and project-based operation

Resource allocation is the core means of institutional driving. In accordance with Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory, fiscal funds are transformed into tea ICH capital through embodied, objective, and institutionalized

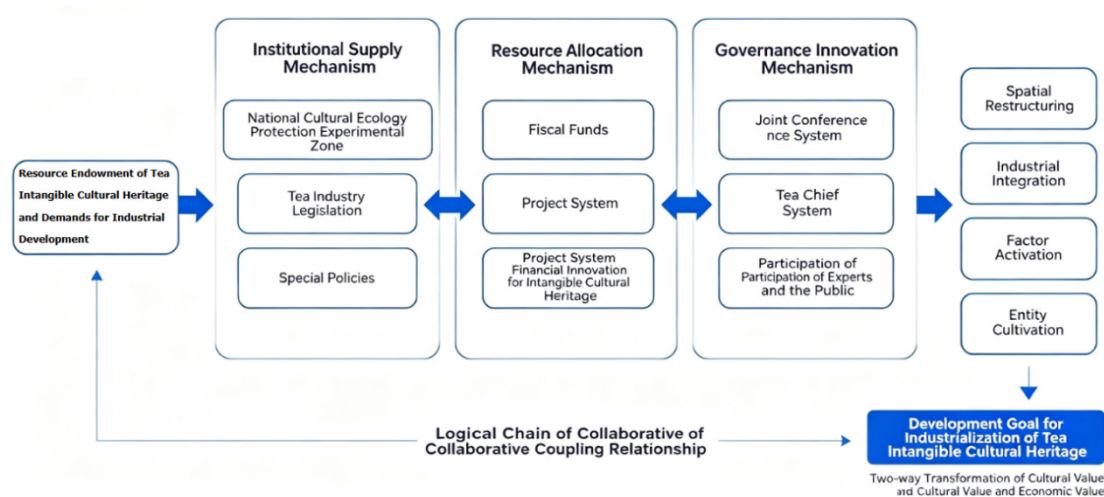
forms. In 2023, the prefectural special fund for the tea industry reached 230 million yuan, 30% of which was allocated to ICH protection, distributed through a combination of factor-based allocation and project-based funding. Project carriers fall into three categories: infrastructure projects (35 million yuan for the Enshi Yulu Inheritance Museum), inheritor training projects (500,000 yuan subsidies for national-level inheritor studios), and industrial integration projects (30%–50% reward subsidies based on investment volume). The interest rate of “ICH loans” is reduced by 20%, with 120 million yuan issued in 2023.

### 3.3. Governance innovation: Coordination mechanism and multi-stakeholder participation

Governance innovation guarantees the efficiency of institutional driving. A prefectural tea industry joint meeting mechanism was established in 2019, presided over by the vice prefect in charge and attended by departments of culture and tourism, agriculture and market supervision, with quarterly coordination conferences to address major issues. In 2022, a four-tier tea chief system (prefecture-county-township-village) was modeled after the river chief system, incorporating ICH protection into assessment indicators accounting for 15% of the total tea industry evaluation score. An expert advisory group of 12 specialists, including researchers from the China Tea Research Institute, was recruited, adopting a chief expert system with Yang Shengwei serving as the chief expert for Enshi Yulu.

### 3.4. Coupling mechanism of the three layers

The above three layers form a coordinated coupling system of interrelated and interactive institutional supply, resource allocation, and governance innovation (**Figure 1**). Institutional supply establishes rule frameworks and grants legitimacy to resource allocation; resource allocation translates institutional intentions into material carriers; governance innovation optimizes institutional planning through feedback adjustment. Interconnected and mutually reinforcing, the three layers jointly constitute the institutional driving dynamic system for tea ICH industrialization.



**Figure 1.** Schematic diagram of coupling mechanism

## 4. Practical paths of tea ICH industrialization in Enshi driven by institutions

The institutional driving mechanism is translated into industrial practices through specific paths. Based on agricultural industrial chain theory and cultural capital transformation theory, this chapter illustrates the four-dimensional path system of “spatial reconstruction, industrial integration, factor activation and subject cultivation.”

### 4.1. Spatial production path: Reconstruction of tea cultural geography

Space acts as the carrier and industrialization field of tea ICH. Enshi Prefecture realizes productive transformation of cultural spaces through planning guidance and landscape construction. The spatial layout of “One Core, Three Belts” is defined in the *Enshi Prefecture Tea Cultural Space Protection Plan (2021-2035)*: one core (Enshi Yulu Cultural Industrial Park covering 1,200 mu, receiving 850,000 tourists in 2023), Yihong Black Tea Cultural Belt, Vine Tea Cultural Belt and Selenium-rich Tea Industrial Belt. The “Tea Wharf” block in Shizhou Ancient City restores the Qing Dynasty scene of tea-salt trade; the Wujia Platform Tribute Tea Tourist Area has been upgraded to a 4A-level scenic spot. The Fengxiangpo Dong Ethnic Cultural Village integrates tea ICH with Dong Grand Songs and local architecture, with 65% of villagers participating in inheritance activities.

### 4.2. Industrial integration path: In-depth integration of tea, culture and tourism

Industrial integration serves as the primary way to realize value appreciation of tea ICH. Tea ICH + Tourism: Spaces featuring “Yulu Tea Break” and “Yihong Tasting” are set up in Enshi Grand Canyon and Tenglong Cave, receiving 1.2 million tourists with sales of 86 million yuan in 2023 <sup>[11]</sup>. Premium tourist routes such as “Root-seeking Tour of Enshi Yulu” have been launched. Tea ICH + Research and Study: 12 research and study bases have been accredited with customized courses for different educational stages, generating revenue exceeding 50 million yuan in 2023. Tea ICH + Rural Revitalization: The model of “Company + Cooperative + ICH Workshop + Farmers” is implemented in Wujia Platform Village, with 8 ICH workshops driving over 300 tea households to achieve an average annual income increase of 24,000 yuan. Bajiao Dong Township has established the Enshi Yulu Industrial Consortium, incorporating 12,000 tea farmers into the industrial chain.

### 4.3. Factor activation path: Transformation of cultural capital

Element activation serves as a key link in converting the intangible cultural heritage value of tea into economic value. The capitalization of tea culture based on the “Six Elements” covers catering (oil tea soup and tea-themed feasts), accommodation (35 tea-themed farm stays with prices 40% higher than ordinary homestays), transportation (special tourist bus routes for tea tourism), sightseeing (scenic upgrading of tea plantations), shopping (e-commerce live-streaming bases with a sales volume of 450 million yuan in 2023), and entertainment (tea art performances). Blockchain traceability enables a unique code for each tea cake, driving a 30% premium on product prices. The “Enshi Tea Intangible Cultural Heritage Cloud Platform” has 12,000 registered users and has delivered 2,300 sessions of remote guidance.

### 4.4. Subject cultivation path: Construction of inheritor groups

Inheritors are the core subjects of tea ICH. The “Inheritor Training Program” has been implemented with a training base built relying on the China Tea Research Institute, offering training courses divided into three

modules: craftsmanship inheritance, industrial operation and cultural literacy. A total of 286 inheritors were certified in 2023. Inheritors enjoy preferential policies including 50% rent reduction for housing, dedicated medical channels and honor incentives: the title of “Enshi Tea ICH Master” is awarded every two years with a 100,000-yuan bonus. Enterprises founded by inheritors receive tax reductions, loan interest subsidies and land security support.

## **5. Effect inspection and reflection on difficulties of the institutional driving model**

### **5.1. Development achievements**

The ICH list system and protection level have been upgraded, forming a complete hierarchical system including 2 World-level, 2 national-level and 8 provincial-level tea ICH items. The inscription on the World ICH List in 2022 marked a historic breakthrough. A full-coverage protection network consisting of 15 inheritance museums, 42 ICH workshops and 28 inheritance bases has been constructed. The integrated protection model of “Tea Mountain-Tea Village-Tea City” has been cited as a typical case by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. In 2023, the comprehensive output value of the tea industry hit 22 billion yuan, with tea ICH-related products accounting for 35% of total output. Per capita annual tea income reached 7,771 yuan, a 42% increase compared with 2020. The brand value of Enshi Yulu stands at 2.25 billion yuan.

### **5.2. Practical dilemmas**

Excessive and inadequate performance of government functions, administrative interference in micro-management of business operations, insufficient efforts to protect core craftsmanship, and some enterprises simplifying production processes and lowering product quality have led to the risk of delinking tea heritage from intangible cultural heritage. 15% of Enshi Yulu tea fails to meet geographical indication standards, 30% of intangible cultural heritage experience activities related to tea are more form than substance, the average age of inheritors is 58 years old with only 22% under 50, and techniques such as shaping and glazing are on the verge of being lost. The digital divide is reflected in the fact that people aged 60 and above account for 65% of the total population, yet their participation rate in live-streaming e-commerce is less than 20%.

### **5.3. Underlying contradictions**

The above difficulties reflect three fundamental conflicts: the dynamic adjustment conflict between public governance logic and market logic, the balance conflict between cultural protection and economic development, and the coordination conflict between government leadership and social participation.

## **6. Optimization paths and institutional suggestions for tea ICH industrialization**

### **6.1. Improve institutional design**

Formulate the *Regulations of Enshi Prefecture on the Protection of Tea Intangible Cultural Heritage*, establish hierarchical and classified protection standards, and adopt differentiated management modes for “core craftsmanship protection zones” and “industrial expansion zones”<sup>[12]</sup>. Build an access and exit system for tea ICH industrial service providers with qualification certification and dynamic evaluation mechanisms<sup>[13]</sup>.

## 6.2. Innovate governance mechanisms

Establish a joint law enforcement system integrating market supervision (geographical indications), culture and tourism (ICH protection) and agriculture (quality safety) to severely punish false ICH marketing. Give play to the self-regulatory role of the Tea ICH Protection Association and set up tea farmer councils to participate in industrial planning and decision-making, realizing multi-stakeholder co-governance of governments, markets, communities and tea farmers <sup>[14]</sup>.

## 6.3. Guard against development risks

Construct a three-dimensional monitoring and early warning index system covering craftsmanship inheritance degree, cultural authenticity and economic contribution rate for regular assessment. Set up a special fund for tea ICH digitalization and carry out digital training programs for elderly inheritors to achieve full 5G coverage in rural tea areas.

## 6.4. Promote high-quality development

Build standardized demonstration bases for Enshi Yulu steaming green craftsmanship training, adopting flexible inheritance with “unchanged core techniques and optimized auxiliary links” <sup>[15]</sup>. Promote courtyard tea workshops where inheritors provide regular on-site guidance for farmers to realize craftsmanship inheritance without leaving villages or farmland. Expand tea cultural research and study routes, upgrade tea science and technology, and form a virtuous cycle where the tea industry feeds back cultural inheritance.

# 7. Conclusion and prospect

## 7.1. Main conclusions

Taking tea ICH in Enshi as a case, this paper systematically analyzes the mechanism and paths of institution-driven ICH industrialization. Three core conclusions are drawn:

First, institutional driving is a key variable for ICH industrialization in ethnic regions. Enshi Prefecture has built a complete institutional driving system via the four-in-one model of “legislative protection, standard guidance, brand operation and digital empowerment.”

Second, the Enshi tea ICH model features institutional priority (China’s first provincial tea industry regulation plus special prefectural ordinances), spatial reconstruction of tea cultural geography under the “One Core, Three Belts” layout, in-depth integration of tea, culture and tourism, and multi-stakeholder co-governance coordinated by government, market and community. Third, institutional driving must guard against excessive government intervention. Problems including government offside/absence, de-ICH risks and digital divide indicate the necessity of establishing a dynamic balance mechanism between protection and development.

## 7.2. Research contributions and limitations

**Contributions:** This paper introduces the institutional driving perspective into ICH industrialization research and enriches practical experience of ethnic regions centered on tea ICH.

**Limitations:** Field surveys were mainly conducted from 2023 to 2024, requiring long-term tracking research on the sustained effects of institutions.

### 7.3. Future prospect

Five major trends will characterize the industrialization of Enshi tea ICH from 2026 to 2030: institutionalization (promotion of independent special legislation), digitalization (AI tea-making assistance and metaverse tea spaces), daily-life integration (tea ICH embedded in daily consumption), integrated new formats (tea health care and tea exhibitions), and internationalization (global communication of World ICH tea craftsmanship). Governance by local public sectors shall further emphasize coordination between market mechanisms and social participation, ultimately realizing the creative transformation and innovative development of tea intangible cultural heritage.

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### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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