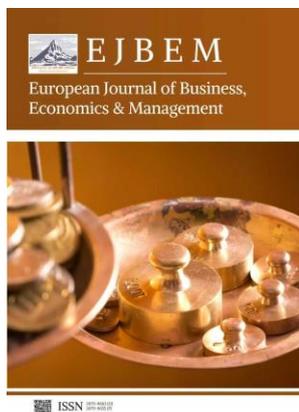




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Empowering Traditional Tourism through the Activation and Utilization of Intangible Cultural Heritage: New Trends, Mechanisms, and Optimization Paths

Sihai Wu ^{1,*} and Qiong Wu ^{2,†}



¹ Fujian Zuimei Rural Tourism Investment Co., Ltd., Xiamen, 361005, China

² Xiamen Sanwuqiu Cultural Tourism Development Co., Ltd., Xiamen, 361005, China

* Correspondence: Sihai Wu, Fujian Zuimei Rural Tourism Investment Co., Ltd., Xiamen, 361005, China

† These authors contributed equally to this work

Abstract: As a living carrier of China's excellent traditional culture, Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH") embodies the historical memory, cultural genes, and spiritual codes of the nation. Its activation and utilization are deeply intertwined with tourism development, creating a relationship of mutual empowerment. With the deepening integration of culture and tourism and the iterative upgrading of consumer demands, the traditional tourism industry is undergoing a profound transformation: from "sightseeing-oriented" to "experience-oriented," from "singular" to "diversified," and from "traffic-oriented" to "value-oriented." As a core resource possessing cultural, experiential, and unique characteristics, ICH not only injects vibrant cultural connotations into traditional tourism-resolving the dilemma of "homogenized landscapes"-but also drives innovation in business formats, quality improvement, and value reconstruction. Based on the core connotation of ICH activation, this paper systematically analyzes the new changes and characteristics of tourism development in the new era. It focuses on elaborating the empowering role of ICH in traditional tourism, analyzes existing problems in current integrated development through practical cases, and proposes targeted optimization paths. This study aims to provide theoretical references and practical insights for promoting the high-quality development of both ICH activation and the tourism industry.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; activation and utilization; tourism industry; development trends; empowerment role

Received: 13 January 2026

Revised: 21 February 2026

Accepted: 04 March 2026

Published: 10 March 2026



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1. Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage is the "living fossil" of human civilization and a core identifier of national cultural identity. Encompassing traditional crafts, folk activities, oral literature, and traditional arts, its vitality lies in "living inheritance." As a vital industry connecting culture with the market, satisfying people's aspirations for a better life, and driving regional economic development, tourism serves as a crucial carrier for realizing the activation and utilization of ICH. In recent years, China's integration of culture and tourism has entered a stage of deep development, with "Culture + Tourism" becoming the mainstream trend. Tourist consumption demands have shifted from traditional "viewing mountains and waters" to "savoring culture, seeking resonance, and pursuing experiences." Consequently, traditional tourism development models struggle to adapt to

new-era consumer needs, facing bottlenecks such as singular business formats, severe homogenization, and insufficient cultural connotations.

The deep integration of ICH and tourism is not only a critical path to implementing the strategy of building a culturally strong nation and promoting the living inheritance of ICH but also a significant measure to drive the transformation and upgrading of the tourism industry, cultivate new growth points in cultural-tourism consumption, and assist in rural revitalization. The activation of ICH injects new vitality into traditional tourism, promoting high-quality development; conversely, tourism development provides a broad communication platform and market space for ICH, allowing it to survive and be passed down through "usage." Currently, how to leverage ICH activation to resolve the dilemmas of traditional tourism, grasp new development trends, and achieve a win-win situation for ICH inheritance and tourism development has become an urgent research topic. This paper focuses on ICH activation and new tourism trends, exploring the changing characteristics of tourism development, analyzing the empowering role of ICH, and proposing optimization strategies based on practical cases to provide references for relevant research and practice [1].

2. Core Connotation and Contemporary Value of ICH Activation and Utilization

2.1. Core Connotation

The activation and utilization of ICH is not merely "display and exhibition." Rather, based on respecting the authenticity and inheritability of ICH, it involves innovative transformation, scenario integration, and market empowerment. This approach moves ICH from being "specimens in museums" to "scenery in daily life," and from "niche inheritance" to "public sharing," achieving an organic unity of cultural, social, and economic values [2]. Its core connotation comprises three levels:

- 1) Living Inheritance: Ensuring the continuity of ICH skills and cultural connotations by cultivating inheritors, organizing ICH performances, and holding folk activities, thereby avoiding the predicament of "skills dying with the master."
- 2) Innovative Transformation: Creatively transforming and innovatively developing ICH elements in combination with modern aesthetic needs and consumption habits to develop cultural-tourism products and services that meet market demands.
- 3) Market Empowerment: Relying on industrial carriers such as tourism to bring ICH into market circulation, driving inheritance through consumption, and realizing "inheritance with motivation and development with pathways."

Compared to traditional ICH protection, activation and utilization emphasize the combination of "living" and "using," stressing the connection between ICH and modern life. It breaks down barriers between protection and market development, shifting ICH from "passive protection" to "active development," and from "static preservation" to "dynamic inheritance." This approach not only revitalizes ICH but also provides new opportunities for related industries, offering strong cultural support for the transformation and upgrading of the tourism sector.

2.2. Contemporary Value

In the new era of deep culture-tourism integration, the activation and utilization of ICH hold significant contemporary value, primarily reflected in three aspects:

- 1) Cultural Inheritance Value: As a vital part of China's excellent traditional culture, activating ICH facilitates the widespread dissemination of traditional crafts, folk customs, and oral literature, enhancing national cultural identity and pride, and solidifying the foundation of cultural confidence.
- 2) Economic Development Value: ICH activation drives the development of related industries such as cultural tourism, cultural creativity, and rural

industries, creating jobs and increasing residents' income. Especially in rural areas, ICH empowerment has become a "golden key" for rural revitalization.

- 3) Social Development Value: It enriches people's spiritual and cultural lives, meets diverse cultural needs, promotes cultural exchange between different regions and ethnic groups, and fosters social harmony.

Practically, China boasts rich ICH resources. To date, 43 Chinese items have been inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, with 1,557 national-level and nearly 10,000 provincial-level ICH projects. These abundant resources provide ample material for tourism development and vast space for ICH activation [3].

3. New Changes and Trends in Tourism Development in the New Era

With rapid socio-economic development, upgrading consumption structures, and the deepening of the culture-tourism integration strategy, traditional tourism is undergoing profound transformation, presenting new changes and trends that offer fresh opportunities for ICH activation.

3.1. Development Model: Transition from "Sightseeing-Oriented" to "Experience-Oriented"

Traditional tourism centered on "sightseeing," where the core demand was "viewing scenery and visiting spots." Products focused on basic services like tickets, transport, and accommodation, characterized by "superficial viewing" and limited cultural interaction. With consumption upgrading, tourist demands have shifted from "passive watching" to "active participation," and from "shallow experience" to "deep immersion." "Experiential tourism" has become the mainstream model. Experiential tourism emphasizes tourist participation and gain, focusing on excavating the cultural connotations of destinations. Through scenario creation, interactive participation, and emotional resonance, tourists gain a deeper understanding of local culture and lifestyles. For instance, in Zhangzhou Ancient City (Fujian), tourists can experience woodblock New Year picture printing and taste ICH cuisine; in Jingxian Paper Town (Anhui), they can participate in papermaking processes like scooping and drying. Such immersive experiences transform tourism from a "one-time check-in" into a "memorable and warm" cultural experience. This transition requires breaking traditional sightseeing modes to dig cultural resources and create experiential products. ICH, with its interactivity and cultural depth, perfectly aligns with these needs [4].

3.2. Product Supply: Transition from "Singular" to "Diversified"

Traditional tourism supply was singular, dominated by natural and human landscape sightseeing, leading to severe homogenization ("thousand landscapes, one face"). In the new era, tourist demands are diversified and personalized, giving rise to study tours, wellness tourism, folk tourism, and cultural creative tourism. On one hand, product categories have expanded across the entire "eat, stay, travel, shop, entertain" chain, incorporating ICH food, homestays, study tours, and performances. On the other hand, personalization has increased, with customized products for different demographics: ICH study tours for teenagers, folk wellness tours for the elderly, and ICH creative experiences for young adults. This diversification enriches choices and drives differentiated development, with ICH serving as the core material for creating unique products.

3.3. Value Orientation: Transition from "Traffic-Oriented" to "Value-Oriented"

Traditionally, tourism development prioritized "traffic" (visitor numbers and revenue), often neglecting cultural value excavation, leading to unsustainable "heavy commerce, light culture" dilemmas. Now, the focus is shifting to "value orientation," emphasizing the unity of cultural, social, and economic values, and using tourism to

disseminate culture and inherit civilization. This shift requires embedding cultural inheritance throughout tourism development. ICH, as a living cultural carrier rich in connotations and spiritual values, effectively enhances the cultural value of tourism products and drives value reconstruction. For example, Linqi No. 36 Courtyard in Dongyang, Zhejiang, created a "Rural Runway" combining blue calico printing techniques with rural tourism, achieving a win-win of economic and cultural values while ensuring the living inheritance of the craft [5].

3.4. Communication Mode: Transition from "Traditional" to "Digital"

Traditional communication relied on offline promotion and advertising, with limited reach and efficiency. With the rapid development of digital technologies (Internet, Big Data, AI), tourism communication has transformed. Digital communication offers wide reach, high efficiency, and strong interactivity. Short videos and live streams allow rapid dissemination of cultural features and products. Many ICH inheritors showcase skills via live streaming, and destinations promote ICH tourism through short video platforms, breaking geographical limits. Furthermore, digital technology fosters innovation through virtual ICH experiences and digital museums, injecting new vitality into the industry.

3.5. Spatial Layout: Transition from "Core Scenic Areas" to "All-for-One Integration"

Traditionally, tourism was concentrated in core scenic areas, leaving surrounding regions underdeveloped ("hot core, cold periphery"). The new trend is "All-for-One Tourism," breaking regional barriers and integrating resources to achieve "scenery everywhere, tourism anytime, participation by all." This requires integrating ICH resources throughout the region, not just in core spots but also in villages, blocks, and homestays. For example, Zhangzhou Ancient City integrates Gezaixi Opera and glove puppetry into streets and shops, creating a "Living ICH Grand View Garden." Similarly, Xijiang Thousand Households Miao Village in Guizhou leverages Miao embroidery and silver forging to build an all-domain ICH destination, driving surrounding rural development.

4. The Empowering Role of ICH Activation in Traditional Tourism

The integration of ICH activation and traditional tourism is not a simple superposition but a deep empowerment relationship. ICH injects new vitality into traditional tourism from multiple dimensions: product, quality, brand, market, and inheritance [6].

4.1. Enriching Product Supply and Resolving Homogenization

Product homogenization is a major bottleneck. ICH resources, characterized by uniqueness, regionality, and diversity, provide crucial support to resolve this. ICH activation diversifies product categories and connotations. ICH elements can be embedded into traditional products to enhance cultural depth (e.g., performances in scenic spots) or used to create distinctive products like ICH study tours and folk tours. For instance, Jingxian Paper Town in Anhui, centered on the human ICH of Xuan paper making, built a museum, workshops, and creative stores. Tourists can observe and participate in all 108 procedures, forming a unique brand. In 2024, the town received over 400,000 visitors, generating nearly 20 million RMB, with secondary consumption accounting for 40% of revenue, successfully transitioning from a "ticket economy" to a "comprehensive consumption" model.

4.2. Enhancing Product Quality and Core Competitiveness

Traditional tourism often suffers from uneven quality, focusing on infrastructure over culture. ICH, embodying rich connotations and craftsmanship, enhances both cultural and service quality. Culturally, ICH transforms "hollow sightseeing" into

meaningful experiences. In Zhangzhou Ancient City, the "Minnan Small Theater" allows tourists to enjoy ICH performances while tasting Kung Fu tea, enhancing cultural quality. Regarding service quality, the participation of inheritors adds professionalism and uniqueness. ICH-themed homestays, food, and souvenirs further elevate the overall experience. From January 2024 to September 2025, Zhangzhou Ancient City received 53.84 million visitors, with ICH-driven consumption exceeding 7.45 million RMB, demonstrating significant results.

4.3. Building Distinctive Brands and Enhancing Regional Visibility

Branding is core to competitiveness. ICH, as a regional cultural identifier, helps build distinctive brands. Each region's ICH is a "business card" of local history and customs. Integrating ICH into branding boosts recognition. For example, Dongyang, Zhejiang, leveraged blue calico printing to create the "Linqi No. 36 Courtyard Rural Runway" brand, featuring rural model teams and exhibitions. This not only boosted tourism but also elevated Dongyang's regional visibility. Such branding also facilitates cultural dissemination, further enhancing competitiveness.

4.4. Expanding Market Space and Driving Revenue Growth

Traditional tourism markets are often limited locally. ICH activation attracts diverse groups (outsiders, culture enthusiasts, students), expanding the market radius. ICH study tours attract youth; folk tours attract culture lovers. This drives revenue for tourism and related sectors (transport, accommodation, dining). Moreover, it creates jobs and increases income, especially in rural areas where villagers become inheritors or service providers. For instance, Linqi No. 36 Courtyard established a "Her Workshop," employing idle female labor and increasing annual income by 10,000 RMB per person. Similarly, Xijiang Miao Village created ICH workshops for embroidery and silver forging, enabling villagers to earn while inheriting culture.

4.5. Promoting Cultural Dissemination and Achieving Win-Win Inheritance and Development

Traditional tourism often neglects cultural dissemination. ICH activation makes tourism a vehicle for cultural dissemination. Tourism brings ICH out of niche circles to a broader market. Tourists become disseminators and inheritors through experiences and purchases. Market demands also drive ICH innovation. For example, Zhangzhou Ancient City created the IP image "Hou Xi" based on glove puppetry, developing over 100 creative products with revenue exceeding 2.28 million RMB since 2024. This "tourism disseminates culture, culture empowers tourism" model achieves a win-win, revitalizing ICH and ensuring high-quality tourism development.

5. Problems in the Integrated Development of ICH Activation and Tourism

Despite significant progress, several issues constrain the depth and quality of integration:

- 1) **Severe Homogenization:** Some regions lack deep excavation of local resources, blindly copying other models, resulting in generic products lacking local appeal.
- 2) **Insufficient Depth:** Integration often remains at a "superficial display" stage, using ICH merely as decoration without deep cultural excavation or innovative transformation, failing to provide deep experiences.
- 3) **Disconnect between Inheritors and Market:** Some inheritors lack market awareness and innovation skills, while tourism enterprises lack understanding of ICH, hindering the creation of culturally rich products.
- 4) **Imperfect Policy and Support Systems:** Lack of special policies and funding for ICH-tourism integration in some areas affects inheritor training, product development, and dissemination.

- 5) Insufficient Digital Empowerment: Reliance on traditional modes and limited application of digital technologies fail to meet new-era consumer habits and communication needs.

6. Optimization Paths for Deep Integration

To address these problems and align with new trends, efforts should focus on resource excavation, model innovation, reinforcement of guarantees, and digital empowerment [7,8].

6.1. Deeply Excavate ICH Resources to Create Differentiated Products

Regions should leverage local advantages to avoid blind copying. Conduct ICH resource censuses to sort out types, characteristics, and status, digging into historical stories and folk customs. Combine this with consumer demands to creatively transform ICH elements into modern products (creative goods, study tours, wellness). Adopt classified development models: experience workshops for crafts, folk activities for customs, and immersive performances for oral literature.

6.2. Deepen Integration Models to Enhance Tourist Experience

Break the "shallow integration" dilemma. Integrate ICH into the entire tourism chain ("eat, stay, travel, shop, entertain") to create immersive scenarios like ICH-themed homestays and food streets. Innovate experience modes (skill trials, performances, study tours) to shift tourists from "passive watching" to "active participation." Learn from Zhangzhou's "front factory, back shop" model or Jingxian's experience spaces to let tourists personally participate in crafting.

6.3. Strengthen Talent Training to Connect ICH with the Market

Talent is core. Train inheritors in skills and market operations to enhance their innovation capabilities. Cultivate composite talents who understand ICH, tourism, and markets through cooperation between enterprises, inheritors, and universities. Establish docking platforms to facilitate precise matching between ICH resources and market needs.

6.4. Improve Policy Guarantees and Strengthen Financial Support

Governments should issue special policies clarifying goals and measures, guiding participation, and regulating markets. Increase financial input via special funds for product development, training, and infrastructure. Encourage social capital participation for diversified funding. Establish evaluation systems to supervise product quality and service levels.

6.5. Strengthen Digital Empowerment to Expand Channels

Leverage digital technologies. Use short videos and live streams to promote ICH tourism. Integrate digital tech to create virtual experiences, digital museums, and online study tours. Utilize big data to analyze consumer behavior and precisely push products, promoting digital and intelligent development of ICH tourism.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

The deep integration of ICH activation and tourism development is an inevitable requirement of the new era's culture-tourism strategy and a vital path for living inheritance and high-quality tourism. Amidst upgrading consumer demands and digital advancements, traditional tourism is transforming towards experience, diversification, value orientation, digital communication, and all-for-one integration. As a core resource, ICH empowers traditional tourism by enriching products, enhancing quality, building

brands, expanding markets, and promoting cultural dissemination, effectively resolving development dilemmas and achieving mutual empowerment.

Although challenges such as homogenization, shallow integration, talent shortages, and inadequate digital support persist, the future holds broad prospects with improving policies, growing talent pools, and widespread digital application. Moving forward, it is essential to uphold the authenticity and inheritability of ICH, deeply excavate cultural connotations, innovate integration models, strengthen talent and policy support, and leverage digital empowerment. This will ensure ICH revitalizes through deep integration with tourism, while tourism achieves high-quality development through ICH empowerment, ultimately realizing the organic unity of cultural inheritance, economic development, and social progress.

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