

Design Research on Integrating the Revitalization of Intangible Cultural Heritage with Urban Cultural Tourism Brands Driven by the Digital Economy

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Abstract:

In recent years, against the policy backdrop of deep integration between the digital economy and the real economy, the convergence of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with cultural tourism has demonstrated remarkable vitality. However, within this broader context, ICH practices frequently exhibit problematic trends of “symbolization,” “commodification,” and “homogenization” in brand development. This article explores these three prevalent issues, then deconstructs exemplary cases to reveal the potential for design intervention. It proposes a tripartite strategy of “cultural rooting–visual grammar reconstruction–cultural symbiosis and co-construction.” This design paradigm not only provides a systematic theoretical framework for academia but also charts a path for cultural policymakers and practitioners, facilitating the virtuous and sustainable integration of ICH resources with urban cultural tourism.

Keywords:

Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Tourism Convergence, Visual Translation, Urban Culture, Media Materiality

1. Introduction

The Report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China called for “accelerating the development of the digital economy” and “promoting the deep integration of culture and tourism.” Under this policy guidance, cities across the country have experienced a surge in cultural tourism development, accompanied by a proliferation of cultural and creative products and IP-based imagery. In efforts to enhance cultural identity, many promotional strategies have adopted soft implantation techniques, framing intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as symbolic representations of regional identity. However, this trend has often led to the symbolic and decorative treatment of ICH, detaching it from its original craftsmanship logic and spiritual essence. A large number of products labeled as “ICH” lack substantive cultural

foundations; rather than fostering living heritage transmission, they risk deepening public alienation from traditional culture within the consumer context.

Meanwhile, urban cultural tourism is becoming increasingly homogenized, with local knowledge displaced by standardized narratives. Everyday life scenarios are transformed into curated spectacles, while ritual spaces are reduced to social media check-in sites, eroding the authenticity of cultural expression. Against this backdrop of “copy-and-paste” tourism development, this paper seeks to explore: How can design intervention enable visual translations of ICH that transcend superficial labeling? And how can urban cultural tourism return to its local cultural context to achieve genuine place-based expression and cultural regeneration?

2. The Misuses of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Urban Cultural-Tourism Branding

China's intangible cultural heritage, characterized by its spiritual and intellectual dimensions as well as its dynamic, living transmission, has had a profound influence on human societies and the development of world civilization. [1] In recent years, however, generational shifts in consumer values have led audiences—whether in shopping, tourism, or social media engagement—to increasingly seek the stories and cultural substance behind the products they encounter. On one hand, creators on digital platforms focusing on ICH themes have frequently trended, signaling a strong surge in cultural identity awareness among the public. On the other hand, governments at various levels have actively promoted strategies combining “ICH revitalization + cultural tourism,” aiming to use intangible heritage to shape urban identity and reinforce cultural confidence. However, beneath this rosy trend lie significant malpractices in implementation:

- **Excessive commercialization:** ICH is progressively commodified into a “cultural product,” tailored to traffic and consumption dynamics, yet often disconnected from its ritualistic and community-based transmission (heritage commodification).
- **Over-generalization of cultural symbols:** ICH symbols are frequently appropriated in quantity but stripped of their ritual structures or deeper meanings, resulting in superficial cultural semantics (issues in managing ICH in tourism).
- **Homogenization and identity erosion:** In crafting city tourism brands, many locales indiscriminately deploy ICH motifs across public spaces, creating a “one-city-many-look” phenomenon. This dilutes distinctive cultural identities and undermines urban uniqueness (homogeneity critique).

On the surface, these three patterns may seem to reflect success in protecting and promoting ICH. In reality, however, they signify a departure from the cultural roots and community contexts of heritage. This shift obstructs intangible heritage's role in forming public memory and identity.

2.1. Excessive Commercialization: Cultural Inactivation and Transmission Distortion

While market-driven efforts in the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) sector can boost transmission and visibility, in practice, they often become imbalanced, allowing commercialization to erode cultural authenticity.

Take the Guqin (ancient zither) as an example. Since its designation as a national-level ICH item (first listed in 2003), over 200 qin halls (performance or teaching

venues) have sprung up in Chengdu and Chongqing. However, many are plagued by poorly qualified instructors and superficial operations. Some of these “qin halls” serve more as facades than substantive centers, with the instrument treated as a novelty or profit generator, prompting critiques within the field that its popularity outpaces depth—the so-called “heat without depth” phenomenon.

Similarly, in collaboration with local governments and businesses, ICH performances are often heavily packaged and standardized to become viral influencer-worthy shows. These replicate formulaic programs that emphasize spectacle over authenticity, undermining the community-based transmission cycles and ritual essence of the heritage.

A detailed case in point is Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village in Guizhou. Built around Miao ethnic heritage, it has become a high-profile tourist destination. Under commercial pressure, the Miao community's everyday rituals have become programmed and mechanical, favoring performance value over deep cultural continuity. Scholars found that tourism-driven standardization strips rituals of their original meaning, turning them into tourist attractions rather than living traditions.

This displacement of tradition by market logic—where rituals become performances for profit—is akin to “raising the signboard and selling dog meat”: the label suggests cultural preservation, but the substance is diluted. The result is a cultural landscape not enriched by heritage, but diluted by economic expediency and superficial novelty.

2.2. Imbalanced Overuse of Cultural Symbols: Design Products Becoming “Waste Goods”

In cultural-creative products, festival events, and online dissemination, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) symbols are often overused without regard for their ritual structures or cultural meanings, resulting in cultural context drifting. The official China Intangible Cultural Heritage website has highlighted that many online merchants misuse the “non-heritage” label, selling low-quality, overpriced products to deceive consumers.

Although ICH symbols—such as paper-cutting motifs, ritual customs, and traditional patterns—are widely adopted across creative merchandise and social media, the deeper significance embedded in their cultural or ritual contexts is frequently overlooked. As a result, these symbols are reduced to shallow commercial tools.

Take the Bai ethnic “Three Course Tea” in Dali as a case study. Once a deeply symbolic tea ritual, it has been transformed into a customized tourist welcoming performance, choreographed to satisfy visitors’ aesthetic expectations. While the staged scene reinforces visual impression, the rigorous ritual process and core symbolism are diluted into mere routine entertainment.

Likewise, numerous e-commerce platforms market handicrafts like paper-cuttings or scented sachets under the “ICH” label, yet fail to reflect regional differences or authentic craftsmanship—such as styles distinctive of Lü Shengzhong’s paper-cut art. This leads to commodification, brand misrepresentation, and cultural misinterpretation.

Under such superficial deconstruction, supposedly culture-rich design products degenerate into factory-produced goods. The general public ends up encountering a hollow version of culture—a cosmetic performance devoid of authentic feeling or heritage continuity. Over time, instead of appreciation, consumers may develop

resistance, cynically viewing cultural expressions as mere commercial shows rather than genuine cultural transmission.

2.3. Homogenization and Identity Erosion: Urban Cultural-Tourism Aphasia

In an attention-economy era, uniform commercial templates are eroding local cultural DNA. Novel and distinctive logos play a vital role in marketing and promoting products, and the design of logos for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) products can effectively enhance their added value—revitalizing ICH projects for the modern age. [3] However, many cities and tourism destinations adopt similar strategies in cultural-tourism development, arbitrarily applying ICH symbols and leading to homogenized cultural branding that diminishes urban cultural distinctiveness. This creates a risk where cities lose their unique identity, as heritage symbols become visual clichés rather than meaningful representations. According to the 2024 China Cultural Tourism Development Report (2022–2023), over 60% of recreated historic streets in China feature nearly identical layouts—grilled squid stands, Hanfu rental shops, and wax-dyed patterned walls are ubiquitous across different projects.

A telling example is Fujian’s Yongding Tulou, where ancestral rituals have been truncated into 15-minute influencer-style light shows, diluting the Hakka ethic of “filial piety and remembrance of roots”. Across the country, cultural-tourism projects replicate ICH elements indiscriminately, blurring regional distinctions: the so-called “one-city-many-look” phenomenon. Public spaces often display identical types of ICH motifs, devoid of structural logic, making activation and preservation of urban historical memory difficult.

On the surface, these trends look like evidence of nationwide heritage protection and promotion. However, upon critical reflection, what they reveal is a meticulously managed “commercial factory”—a system that prioritizes spectacle over depth, resulting in cultural dilution rather than enrichment. Instead of enabling the public to genuinely experience and appreciate heritage, such practices foster frustration and skepticism towards superficial marketing tactics.

3. Deconstructing Exemplary Cases of ICH–Tourism Antegration

General Secretary Xi emphasized that “we must strengthen the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage, actively cultivate inheritors, and allow intangible cultural heritage to blossom with even more captivating brilliance.” [2] In recent years, the synergy between intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and urban tourism has emerged as a powerful catalyst for both cultural revitalization and economic growth. Effective integration can reinforce cultural identity, enhance cultural transmission, and help create tourism brands that showcase local distinctiveness. Yet truly successful cases go beyond surface-level packaging, engaging deeply with ritual structures, community participation, industry chains, and technological integration. This section selects three representative case studies to reveal their success mechanisms and design insights.

3.1. Technological Empowerment & Immersive Experience: Suzhou’s “Lion Grove Garden Universe”

Suzhou’s Pingjiang Historic District has pioneered a new approach to integrating intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and digital technology through its “Lion Grove

Garden Universe” project. The initiative leverages 5G connectivity, drone-based aerial photography, and 360 high-definition VR to create an immersive classical garden experience, allowing visitors to transcend traditional evaluation methods and reinterpret the architectural symbols and spatial logic of the garden through a virtual lens.

Through the layered integration of visual, auditory, and spatial interaction, the case shifts visitor experience from mere “observation” to shared resonance—realizing a narrative loop of “visit → perceive → understand,” where embodied perception and cultural cognition coexist in design strategy. This approach effectively avoids the superficial trap of “visual replication” common in conventional exhibitions, transitioning ICH from static display to dynamic co-creation and endowing cultural symbols with renewed experiential value.

However, critical reflection is warranted: embedding ICH experiences into virtual systems may deepen sensory immersion but risks stripping tactile details and contextual authenticity from traditional skills and community contexts. When interaction becomes programmed, does it result in an “intellectual separation” from traditional knowledge systems? And if scenarios fail to facilitate deeper understanding, immersive cultural experiences risk devolving into transient sensory consumption. Therefore, the central design challenge remains: how to achieve culturally sustainable and depth-based translation through technological mediation, preserving authentic meaning while avoiding superficial novelty.

3.2. Co-Construction of Industrial Heritage and ICH: Zhenjiang China Vinegar Culture Museum

Hengshun Vinegar has taken Qing Dynasty traditional vinegar-brewing techniques as its core, inscribed as a national representative item of intangible cultural heritage. Based on its existing industrial facilities, the enterprise has systematically integrated historic factory spaces, traditional workshops, hands-on experience zones, educational classrooms, and cultural-creative products, constructing a composite cultural tourism ecosystem that encompasses brewing, learning, touring, and shopping.

In terms of operational logic, this model emphasizes institutional embedding by establishing national-level ICH demonstration bases and master studios to ensure the continuity of craftsmanship. It also stresses spatial continuity and the regeneration of place-based memory, assigning new cultural functions to the old industrial premises within the framework of heritage preservation. Furthermore, through cross-disciplinary integration involving industrial tourism, ICH exhibition, creative product development, and digital dissemination, the project has effectively broadened public engagement with traditional craftsmanship and expanded market visibility. In doing so, it achieves a dual coupling of cultural value and economic benefit.

Nevertheless, despite offering a significant example of ICH revitalization and industry integration, this case presents certain challenges. On one hand, the logic of industrial management and tourism-oriented spatial narratives may potentially weaken the community ecology and the living nature upon which ICH relies. On the other hand, when ICH is positioned merely as a value-added module within the structure of cultural tourism, its identity may be reduced to a commercial resource rather than being recognized as a cultural subject. Moreover, in practice, commercial revenue goals may overly dominate spatial design and cultural storytelling, thereby diluting the public's deeper understanding of the essence of ICH. These issues underscore the

importance of being vigilant against the functional alienation of cultural resources during design interventions and mechanism construction, so as to avoid emptying their spiritual core and community foundation under the guise of development.

3.3. Diverse Co-Creation and Everyday Practice: ICH Experience Nodes in Suzhou's Pingjiang District

Beyond the “Shilin Gardenverse” project, Suzhou has continued to expand the boundaries of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) revitalization through a variety of immersive strategies. These include digital twin technologies, traditional handicraft experiences, and nighttime garden performances, all of which contribute to constructing a cultural experience system that integrates daily life with ritualistic expression across multiple urban touchpoints. The online component features the development of digital ICH archives and virtual guided tours, serving as a foundational knowledge-access platform. Offline, immersive craft workshops and night performances invigorate the atmosphere of physical sites and encourage embodied participation. Together, they form a composite ICH experience chain structured around time, space, and social interaction. Within this framework, ICH is no longer a static object of display, but a dynamic element embedded in the rhythms of urban culture, reintegrated into everyday life.

This model achieves a fusion of dynamic and static engagement through digital and interactive means, thus broadening the public's perceptual pathways to ICH. However, its effectiveness warrants further critical examination. For instance, are behavior recognition systems and interaction designs grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the embodied norms and cultural context of traditional craftsmanship? When performance logic is programmed, does it risk misinterpreting or restructuring the community's “original state” of cultural expression? Moreover, can short-term immersive interactions be transformed into sustained community engagement, or do they merely result in superficial, check-in-style consumption? Without strong community collaboration and deep cultural grounding, such design strategies risk falling into the trap of experience-oriented approaches driven by attention metrics, thereby deviating from the original intent of “cultural symbiosis.” Therefore, in exploring design pathways for ICH integration, it is essential to uphold cultural subjectivity and ensure the continuity of transmission mechanisms, avoiding context displacement caused by form-driven solutions.

The three aforementioned cases exemplify the diverse pathways of “visual grammar reconstruction” in the integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and cultural tourism. From technological empowerment and the redefinition of public space to the expansion of sensory-interactive experiences, they collectively construct a “perceptible pathway” for ICH engagement. However, for design interventions to achieve sustainable cultural translation, attention must be directed toward three key issues. First, digitalization should serve the restoration of cultural contexts and the reconstruction of spatial situatedness, thereby preventing the drift of symbols and the emptiness of meaning. Second, the essence of ICH lies in the community; mechanism design must ensure the co-creation rights and narrative agency of original inheritor groups. Third, experiential design should establish a dynamic system of feedback and content renewal, breaking away from short-term consumer logic to support a continuously generative cultural structure. These reflections provide both theoretical grounding and practical direction for the implementation of the proposed design

paradigm: “Cultural Root Anchoring — Visual Grammar Reconstruction — Cultural Co-symbiosis and Co-construction.”

4. Design Intervention: Constructing a Paradigmatic Pathway for ICH Activation and Urban Cultural- Tourism Integration

Intangible cultural heritage products are goods or services developed by heritage bearers or enterprises, based on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources, employing either traditional methods or modern techniques to innovate, design, and produce these offerings. [4] When applying intangible cultural heritage (ICH) elements within urban cultural tourism, it is essential not only to preserve the heritage’s transmission and amplify its cultural output, but also to adopt a market-oriented approach that continually enhances the innovation of tourism product offerings. Tourism merchandise design should authentically reflect local and ethnic cultural essence, while integrating innovative features in the product packaging, content, and design to meet contemporary consumer expectations. [5]

4.1. Cultural-Roots Anchoring: Returning to Community Ritual and Transmission Ecology

In the integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and cultural tourism, it is essential to recognize and respect the living ecology of culture. ICH should be reframed not merely as a performative product for the stage, but as a shared foundation of cultural memory within the community. To achieve this, community-led workshops should be organized that invite collaboration among inheritors, scholars, and designers, incorporating everyday craftsmanship and traditional festivals into the design process to ensure the authentic presentation of cultural meaning and ritual structures. Furthermore, intergenerational transmission mechanisms—such as mentorship or apprenticeship models—should be established to sustain the vitality of ICH environments. Spatial design should also preserve elements of “community embeddedness” for instance by setting up interactive nodes during festive events to foster public engagement. This approach not only helps to counteract tendencies toward excessive commercialization but also reinforces the continuity of urban cultural memory and identity.

4.2. Visual-Grammar Reconstruction: Deep Narrative & Multimodal Experiential Design

In light of increasingly apparent sustainability challenges in heritage transmission, combining digital technologies with intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection has become an important pathway and method for safeguarding and locally transmitting art-related ICH. [6] Effective design must transcend visual replication—crafting cultural scenes with narrative depth and multisensory interactivity. The following strategies illustrate this approach:

- Narrative-integrated digital display: Use storytelling frameworks to integrate local legends, historical context, and symbolic reinterpretation in digital exhibits, thereby counteracting the cultural shallowness born of generic symbol use. Platforms like immersive storytelling VR and AR deeply embed rituals and context into experience, maintaining narrative integrity while engaging modern audiences.

- Multimodal immersive design: Deploy VR/AR, spatial sound and lighting, gesture-based interaction, and environmental layouts to construct a closed-loop

experience— “explore → embody → understand → remember.” This preserves cultural ritual logic while enhancing semantic recognition and cognitive engagement.

- Content iteration and lived integration: Implement mechanisms for updating and evolving experience content linked to local festivals, ritual cycles, and community co-production. Continuous adaptation promotes cultural resonance over time, embedding ICH into the lived urban rhythm rather than as one-off spectacles.

In sum, visual-grammar reconstruction reframes ICH design from superficial symbolism to a deeply narrative-driven, psychologically resonant multimodal experience. It forms a crucial second phase following cultural-roots anchoring and precedes the final phase of cultural co- - construction.

4.3. Cultural Symbiosis & Co-Construction: Institutional and Ecological Integration Mechanisms

Institutional and ecological integration mechanisms are essential to sustaining intangible cultural heritage (ICH) vitality within urban cultural-tourism ecosystems. A promising paradigm involves establishing a collaborative governance body comprising community representatives, government agencies, and heritage experts—mandating shared decision-making over cultural resource allocation and equitable benefit-sharing. Embedding cultural ecology impact assessments into public performance evaluations, alongside exit mechanisms, helps deter homogenization and overdevelopment of heritage resources, aligning with discursive-institutionalist critiques that stress the importance of place-based governance and institutional adaptability. In spatial and industrial domains, integrating ICH into urban renewal, tourism value chains, and industrial heritage conversions supports heritage symbiosis within the city fabric—exemplified by how Zhenjiang Vinegar Culture Museum weaves traditional brewing ICH into renovated factory spaces, craft workshops, museum exhibitions, educational programming, and digital outreach to form a robust “brew–learn–visit–purchase” ecosystem. Such structural embedding amplifies urban cultural memory and identity consistency, while enhancing local cultural-tourism brand distinctiveness. However, careful calibration is needed: ensuring that industrial and commercial frameworks do not stifle the ICH's living character, that heritage remains an autonomous conceptual domain rather than becoming merely an add-on cultural content, and that revenue goals do not distort spatial narratives or ritual authenticity. This integrated approach thus provides a tangible institutional and design pathway toward the proposed paradigm of Cultural-Roots Anchoring → Visual-Grammar Reconstruction → Cultural Symbiosis & Co-Construction, firmly rooted in governance, community, and city structure.

The proposed three-tiered design intervention strategy—comprising Cultural-Roots Anchoring, Visual-Grammar Reconstruction, and Cultural Symbiosis & Co-Construction—functions as an interlinked, closed-loop paradigm designed to tackle the three prevalent dysfunctions in current ICH-tourism branding. First, commercialization bias is countered through community-led participation and ritual co- - creation, ensuring heritage is rooted in collective memory rather than commodified spectacle. Second, symbol overuse is mitigated through narrative-informed design and multi-stakeholder collaboration, which avoid cultural dilution by embedding local legends, historical context, and participatory meaning-making into experiences. Third, homogenization across cities is checked by institutional collaboration and spatial-ecological structuring, enabling governance mechanisms and

culturally sensitive planning to preserve urban cultural distinctiveness and brand uniqueness.

This integrated methodology is both operationally viable and theoretically rigorous, advancing the academic discourse on ICH-tourism fusion toward models that are deeper, more participatory, and sustainable. It offers a comprehensive design-reference for future research and practice grounded in evidence-based frameworks of community participation, immersive multimodal storytelling, and institutional governance. This paradigm not only addresses cultural preservation challenges but also positions ICH-tourism integration within a resilient, identity-rich, and value-generating framework for urban development.

5. Conclusions

In the context of rapid digital economy development and the growing public consciousness of cultural consumption, the integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and urban cultural tourism has acquired new strategic significance. However, in practical application, ICH is often reduced to a commercial symbol, resulting in superficial displays and replicative forms, while urban cultural tourism frequently falls into the trap of homogenization. To address this structural issue, this paper proposes a three-dimensional design framework: “Cultural Root Anchoring – Visual Grammar Reconstruction – Cultural Symbiosis and Co-Creation,” aiming to reconstruct the deep connection between the living transmission of ICH and urban cultural expression.

Specifically, the first dimension emphasizes a community-centered approach, revitalizing ritual spaces and everyday contexts to restore the fertile ground for ICH growth. The second dimension deepens the semantic construction of cultural symbols through narrative design and multimodal experiential strategies, countering visual replication and cultural dilution. The third dimension focuses on institutional co-governance and spatial integration, embedding mechanisms within urban renewal processes to incorporate ICH into the urban cultural system and create differentiated brand value.

This framework not only responds to key challenges in the current integration of ICH and cultural tourism, but also offers actionable pathways for policymakers, design practitioners, and local cultural governance. In the future, it is hoped that this paradigm can take root in a broader range of cities and communities, contributing to a new model of cultural tourism that is grounded in cultural roots, visual logic, and ecological collaboration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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