

Development Pathways for Local Cultural Heritage Protection and Culture–Tourism Integration

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Abstract: With the vigorous development of the economy and tourism industry, local cultural heritage protection and culture–tourism integration have become important components of sociocultural and economic development. Based on the protection of local cultural heritage, this paper explores the internal relationship between cultural heritage protection and culture–tourism integration, as well as their implementation pathways and optimization strategies. Through literature review, field investigation, and case analysis, the study finds that current cultural heritage protection faces problems such as funding shortages, insufficient professional talent, and outdated protection concepts, while culture–tourism integration is confronted with difficulties including excessive commercialization, superficial exploration of cultural connotations, and an incomplete industrial chain. Cultural heritage protection and culture–tourism integration are mutually reinforcing. Heritage serves as the resource foundation and spiritual core of culture–tourism development, while the culture–tourism industry provides development momentum and communication carriers for heritage protection. Accordingly, this paper proposes a “four-in-one” development pathway: establishing the concept of protection first and moderate development; constructing a collaborative mechanism involving government guidance, market operation, and social participation; developing diversified culture–tourism products such as cultural experiences, study tours, and vacation programs; and improving an integrated support system covering planning, policies, standards, and supervision. This study provides a useful reference for local cultural heritage protection and the high-quality development of the culture–tourism industry.

Keywords: local cultural heritage; cultural heritage protection; culture–tourism integration; development pathways; sustainable development

1. Introduction

Local cultural heritage is an important component of human historical civilization. It contains rich historical and cultural information as well as distinctive local characteristics, and it represents a valuable non-renewable resource. With the deepening of globalization and the development of modernization, local cultural heritage is facing increasing protection and inheritance challenges. At the same time, cultural tourism is one of the most dynamic emerging industries of the 21st century and is playing an increasingly important role in promoting economic development. Against this background, the protection of local cultural heritage and the integrated development of culture and tourism have become issues of common concern in both academia and industry. How to ensure the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage while enabling it to realize its cultural value and social benefits, thereby achieving a win–win outcome between protection and development, is a problem that needs to be addressed at present. In recent years, various regions have actively explored the protection of cultural heritage and the integrated development of culture and tourism and have achieved certain results. However, problems such as weak protection awareness, extensive development methods, and incomplete industrial chains still exist. Therefore, in-depth

research on local cultural heritage protection and culture–tourism integration is of great significance for promoting effective cultural heritage protection and the high-quality development of the culture–tourism industry.

2. Theoretical Basis and Current Situation Analysis of Local Cultural Heritage Protection

2.1 Theoretical Framework for Local Cultural Heritage Protection

The theoretical basis of local cultural heritage protection is established on multiple disciplines, including cultural anthropology, history, and conservation studies, forming a theoretical framework centered on authenticity protection, integral protection, and sustainable protection^[1]. The theory of authenticity protection holds that cultural heritage possesses historical, artistic, scientific, and social value, and that the historical information and cultural connotations contained in cultural heritage should be preserved as much as possible during the protection process, so as to prevent value loss caused by excessive intervention and improper restoration. The theory of integral protection advocates protecting cultural heritage within the historical environment and cultural context in which it was generated and developed. It emphasizes not only the protection of cultural heritage itself, but also the protection of related environmental factors, cultural customs, and social

relationships, thereby establishing a comprehensive cultural heritage protection system. The theory of sustainable protection argues that cultural heritage protection should be integrated with socioeconomic development. While meeting the cultural needs of contemporary people, it should also ensure that cultural heritage can be properly preserved and passed on to future generations, so as to achieve fairness and rationality in cultural inheritance.

2.2 Policy Evolution of Local Cultural Heritage Protection in China

China's policies on local cultural heritage protection have undergone a transformation from single protection to comprehensive protection, from static protection to dynamic protection, and from government-led protection to multi-stakeholder participation. Since 2019, the state has successively issued important documents such as the *Several Opinions on Further Strengthening the Reform of Cultural Relics Protection and Utilization* and the *Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Integrated Development of Culture and Tourism*, proposing that attention should be paid to cultural heritage protection while also emphasizing its rational utilization. Governments at all levels have increased investment in cultural heritage protection year by year. From 2020 to 2024, China's cumulative special funds for cultural relics protection exceeded CNY 30 billion, with an average annual growth rate of more than 15%. Meanwhile, laws and regulations related to cultural heritage protection have become increasingly sound, forming a legal framework with the *Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics* as the main body and the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law* and the *Regulations on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns, and Villages* as supporting laws and regulations.

2.3 Challenges Facing Current Local Cultural Heritage Protection

At present, local cultural heritage protection faces many problems, such as unreasonable resource allocation, insufficient protection efforts, and single inheritance methods. In terms of funding, there is a large funding gap for cultural heritage protection. Statistics show that approximately 30% of national key cultural relics protection units currently face funding shortages to varying degrees, and grassroots cultural heritage protection institutions generally face financial constraints^[2]. In terms of talent, professional and technical personnel are seriously insufficient. The ratio of professional and technical personnel in the national cultural relics and museum system to cultural relic resources is only 1:3,000, far behind the

advanced international level. In terms of awareness, some localities still emphasize development over protection and economic benefits over cultural value, resulting in excessive development and irrational use of cultural heritage. In addition, constructive damage and environmental pollution during urbanization are also major difficulties in cultural heritage protection.

3 Research on the Mechanisms and Models of Culture–Tourism Integration Development

3.1 Theoretical Connotation and Development Logic of Culture–Tourism Integration

Culture–tourism integration refers to the deep integration of the cultural industry and the tourism industry in resource allocation, product development, marketing, service provision, and other aspects. Based on the mutual penetration and combination of culture and tourism, it aims to extend the industrial value chain and enhance industrial competitiveness. The development logic of culture–tourism integration includes three levels. At the resource level, integration combines cultural resources with tourism resources to create attractive products. At the industrial level, integration connects the cultural industry chain with the tourism industry chain to form a complete industrial ecosystem. At the market level, integration combines cultural consumption with tourism consumption, thereby enriching consumer experiences and realizing value.

3.2 Value Mechanism of Cultural Heritage Resource Transformation

The value mechanism by which cultural heritage resources are transformed into culture–tourism products consists of three steps: value discovery, value creation, and value realization. Value discovery refers to conducting in-depth research on cultural heritage, understanding its historical and cultural background, and identifying its uniqueness and market potential, thereby providing a basis for subsequent development^[3]. Value creation means using modern technologies and creative approaches to reinterpret cultural heritage, so that its spiritual connotations can be presented in new forms and tourists can experience the charm of cultural heritage. Value realization refers to transforming the cultural value of cultural heritage into economic benefits, enabling cultural heritage to generate economic value while ensuring its safety. This process must conform to the principles of cultural heritage protection, and the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage must not be damaged in the process of value realization.

3.3 Comparison of Culture–Tourism Integration Development Models in Typical Regions

Through comparative research on the practice of culture–tourism integration development in several typical regions across China, several major development models can be identified. The resource-driven development model is based on abundant cultural heritage resources and forms culture–tourism products with local characteristics through in-depth exploration and packaging of these resources, as represented by historical and cultural cities such as Xi'an and Luoyang. The innovation-driven development model is led by technological innovation and creative design, using new technological means to improve the display quality of cultural heritage and the quality of tourist experience, such as the digital innovation of the Palace Museum and the virtual reality experience of Dunhuang. The market-driven development model is based on market demand and realizes the rational utilization of cultural heritage resources through industrialized operation and brand-oriented management, as represented by the commercial development models of ancient towns such as Wuzhen and Lijiang.

3.4 Assessment of the Impact of Culture–Tourism Integration on Cultural Heritage Protection

Culture–tourism integration has a dual impact on cultural heritage protection. On the one hand, culture–tourism integration brings positive effects to cultural heritage protection. It can provide economic support for cultural heritage protection. Statistics show that from 2020 to 2023, approximately 25% of the revenue obtained through culture–tourism integration was used for cultural heritage protection and inheritance^[4]. On the other hand, culture–tourism integration also brings certain negative impacts to cultural heritage protection. For example, excessive commercialization has become increasingly prominent, and phenomena such as overdevelopment and excessive packaging have occurred in some places, which have had a certain impact on the authenticity of cultural heritage. In addition, the arrival of large numbers of tourists also places pressure on the preservation of cultural heritage. Therefore, tourist volume should be reasonably controlled, and environmental monitoring should be properly conducted.

4 Coordinated Development Pathways for Local Cultural Heritage Protection and Culture–Tourism Integration

4.1 Development and Utilization Strategies Under the Protection-First Principle

Amid the rapid development of the cultural tourism

industry, the protection and utilization of local cultural heritage must adhere to the principle of protection first. According to data released by the National Cultural Heritage Administration, from 2019 to 2023, the number of cultural relics protection units nationwide increased from 5,058 to 5,417. However, cultural heritage damage caused by unreasonable development has also occurred repeatedly, which clearly demonstrates the necessity and urgency of establishing a protection-first concept. The protection-first principle means that all development activities must be based on protecting the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage, and that the intensity and scope of development should be reasonably controlled to avoid irreversible losses to the heritage itself. This principle not only refers to the protection of tangible cultural heritage, but more importantly, to the protection of the authenticity of the cultural spirit and cultural value contained in cultural heritage, so as to prevent culture from being commodified and superficialized.

Development based on the protection-first principle must rely on scientific and reasonable evaluation standards and access systems, detailed protection plans, and development guidelines. The protection scope and development intensity of different types of cultural relics and historic sites should be clearly defined. According to the China Cultural Tourism Development Report 2023 released by the China Tourism Academy, cultural heritage scenic areas that adopt a protection-first development model have an average tourist satisfaction rate 15.3% higher than that of traditional development models, and the excellent preservation rate of cultural heritage reaches 89.7%, far exceeding the industry average of 73.2%. This model emphasizes refined design and carries out development in a low-impact and reversible manner on the basis of ensuring the safety of cultural relics. It mainly develops tourism projects compatible with the nature of heritage, such as cultural exhibitions, educational experiences, and artistic creation, thereby integrating protection with utilization and supporting the sustainable development of local cultural heritage^[5].

4.2 Application of Digital Technologies in Cultural Heritage Protection and Inheritance

Digital technologies are an important driving force for cultural heritage protection and inheritance today, and they provide an effective pathway for the long-term preservation and living inheritance of local cultural heritage. According to the 14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Relics Protection and Scientific and Technological Innovation issued by the National Cultural Heritage Administration, from 2019 to

2023, national investment in cultural relics digital protection projects reached CNY 8.5 billion, and the proportion of digital protection increased from 23% to 67%. Three-dimensional digital modeling, virtual reality reconstruction, and artificial intelligence recognition are the main technical means for digital cultural heritage protection. Advanced methods such as high-precision three-dimensional scanning, multispectral imaging, and LiDAR mapping can record cultural heritage objects with millimeter-level accuracy, providing a scientific basis for cultural relic restoration, environmental monitoring, and risk assessment. These methods also address problems such as information loss and inheritance discontinuity in traditional protection approaches.

Digital technologies for cultural heritage have considerable development potential and economic benefits in the application of culture–tourism integration, bringing tourists immersive cultural experiences and more considerate services. According to data from the China Tourism Academy, from 2020 to 2024, tourist satisfaction in cultural tourism scenic areas using digital technologies was 32% higher than that in ordinary scenic areas, the average length of stay increased by 45%, the revisit rate increased by 28%, and the market size of digital culture–tourism products increased from CNY 15.6 billion to CNY 42.3 billion. The application of augmented reality guide systems, holographic projection display technologies, and intelligent voice interpretation systems enables tourists to experience the charm of history and culture across time and space. Meanwhile, the application of big data analysis and cloud computing platforms also contributes to the intelligent management of cultural heritage and precision marketing, realizing the digital transformation of cultural resources and the transformation and upgrading of the culture–tourism industry.

4.3 Collaborative Governance Mechanism Involving Multiple Stakeholders

Local cultural heritage protection and culture–tourism integration involve multiple stakeholders, including governments, enterprises, communities, and academic institutions. A sound collaborative mechanism is therefore needed to coordinate interests and resource allocation among all parties. The government should play a guiding role by issuing relevant plans and policies, building communication platforms, and ensuring coordination among policies related to cultural relic protection, tourism development, and urban construction. Enterprises are market actors and should fulfill their responsibilities. While obtaining profits, they should also comply with relevant laws and regulations and actively

participate in cultural heritage protection^[6].

Community residents are both the owners and beneficiaries of cultural heritage, and their participation has an important influence on cultural heritage protection and development. Community participation mechanisms should be established, such as setting up cultural heritage protection funds, organizing cultural inheritance activities, and creating employment opportunities, so that local residents can actively participate in cultural heritage protection and development. Academic institutions and professional organizations should give full play to their technical advantages and propose reasonable and effective protection and development measures. At the same time, communication mechanisms, information-sharing platforms, and benefit distribution mechanisms should be established and improved, so as to form a favorable pattern of government leadership, market operation, social participation, and professional support. In this way, all parties can actively participate and cooperate effectively in the process of cultural heritage protection and culture–tourism integration development.

5. Conclusion

Local cultural heritage protection and culture–tourism integration are important issues in cultural construction and economic development in the new era, and reasonable development approaches should be pursued on the basis of protection. By proposing rational development schemes under the premise of protection, using digital technologies to protect and disseminate cultural heritage, giving full play to the participation of multiple stakeholders in governance, and introducing policies conducive to sustainable development, sound interaction and coordinated development between cultural heritage protection and the culture–tourism industry can be achieved. This is conducive not only to the effective protection and living inheritance of cultural heritage, but also to the high-quality development of the culture–tourism industry, bringing new vitality to local economic and social development. In the future, research and exploration should be further strengthened, and relevant systems should be improved, so that local cultural heritage protection and culture–tourism integration can achieve better results and make greater contributions to China’s construction of a strong cultural nation and the realization of high-quality development.

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