

Regional Cultural Branding in the Context of Culture–Tourism Integration

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Abstract: Culture–tourism integration has created new conditions for transforming local cultural resources, innovating tourism products, and communicating regional images. Nevertheless, regional cultural branding continues to face problems such as increasingly homogeneous positioning, superficial cultural representation, inadequate connections among tourism products, and excessive dependence on short-term online traffic. Regions should draw on their distinctive cultural foundations to establish coherent brand positioning, improve the hierarchy of tourism products and spatial experiences, promote the joint participation of governments, enterprises, residents, and tourists, and establish mechanisms for cultural protection and brand evaluation. These measures can strengthen brand distinctiveness, experiential value, and the capacity for sustainable operation.

Keywords: culture–tourism integration; regional culture; brand building; tourism experience; brand communication

Introduction

Culture provides tourism with content, memory, and spiritual value, while tourism provides market opportunities for the presentation, communication, and revitalized use of local culture. As tourism consumption shifts from sightseeing toward cultural experiences, leisure vacations, and lifestyle-oriented consumption, culturally distinctive local content has gradually become an important resource through which destinations establish differentiated advantages. Regional competition has also moved beyond individual indicators such as the number of attractions and visitor capacity toward comprehensive competition involving cultural content, product systems, public services, and overall image.

In 2024, the number of domestic tourist trips in China reached 5.615 billion, while total domestic tourism expenditure reached RMB 5.75 trillion, representing year-on-year increases of 14.8% and 17.1%, respectively ^[1]. Market expansion has provided a substantial consumer base for regional cultural branding while imposing higher requirements on the quality of cultural representation, tourism service capacity, and sustainable brand operation. Some regions have attracted widespread attention through distinctive cuisine, traditional craftsmanship, historic districts, and local ways of life. Other regions, however, continue to exhibit similar image positioning, superficial combinations of cultural symbols, and short-lived periods of popularity. Examining the formation and development of regional cultural brands under conditions of culture–tourism integration can contribute to the protection of local cultural

resources, the upgrading of the tourism industry, and the development of a comprehensive regional image.

1. The Internal Relationship Between Culture–Tourism Integration and Regional Cultural Brands

1.1 Fundamental Components of a Regional Cultural Brand

A regional cultural brand is a comprehensive image based on a particular geographical area. It integrates historical traditions, folk activities, spatial landscapes, production techniques, dietary customs, and residents' everyday lives to establish stable identifying characteristics, cultural meaning, and social recognition. Its functions extend beyond tourism marketing to encompass the transmission of local culture, the development of a public image, and regional industrial development.

A regional cultural brand primarily consists of three categories of elements. The core layer comprises local history, collective memory, and shared values and determines the cultural attributes of the brand. The representational layer consists of names, logos, colors, stories, and representative settings and performs the functions of visual identification and information communication. The experiential layer includes tourism products, public spaces, festivals, service quality, and interactions with residents and determines tourists' actual experience of the brand promise. These three layers must be effectively connected to establish a relatively complete understanding of the brand.

Li argues that tourism destination image planning should establish distinctive positioning based on an analysis

of local characteristics and translate its core concepts into visual communication and spatial experience ^[2]. Regional cultural branding cannot therefore remain at the level of promotional slogans or graphic symbols. Its value must be supported by cultural content, tourism products, and local ways of life.

1.2 How Culture–Tourism Integration Reconstructs Brand Value

Culture–tourism integration strengthens connections between cultural resources and the tourism market. Through appropriate organization and development, resources such as local opera, traditional villages, industrial heritage, and folk crafts can be transformed into performances, educational travel programs, exhibitions, cultural and creative products, and thematic routes. Culture shifts from static exhibition content to tourism content in which visitors can participate, learn, and gain experience, while tourism activities acquire greater cultural depth.

Culture–tourism integration also changes the actors involved in creating brand value. Traditional destination marketing is organized primarily by government departments and tourism enterprises. In a mobile communication environment, residents, businesses, tourists, and online content creators all participate in producing regional images. Photographs, reviews, and travel experiences posted by tourists can influence the destination choices of prospective consumers. Brand value therefore shifts from the outcome of one-way communication toward a socially constructed understanding created through multi-stakeholder participation.

Regional cultural brands also connect different industries. Coherent and clearly defined brand positioning can link tourist attractions, accommodation, catering, transportation, cultural and creative products, and performance programs to establish a relatively complete consumption chain. Brand influence can also extend to agricultural products, handicrafts, and local services, increasing both the economic and social value of cultural resources.

2. The Practical Foundations of Regional Cultural Branding

2.1 Continued Expansion of the Culture and Tourism Consumption Market

China's domestic tourism market continues to expand, while tourists are paying increasing attention to cultural

experiences, leisure vacations, and high-quality services. In 2024, China had 16,541 A-rated tourist attractions. These attractions received 6.76 billion visits and generated total revenue of RMB 481.42 billion during the year. Enterprises above the designated size in the cultural and related industries generated operating revenue of RMB 14.151 trillion, representing a year-on-year increase of 6.0% ^[1]. Both the cultural and tourism industries have therefore developed substantial market scale, providing a relatively strong industrial foundation for their integration.

Table 1. Key Indicators for China's Culture and Tourism Market in 2024

Indicator	2024 data	Year-on-year change
Domestic tourist trips	5.615 billion	+14.8%
Total domestic tourism expenditure	RMB 5.75 trillion	+17.1%
Domestic tourist trips by urban residents	4.370 billion	+16.3%
Domestic tourist trips by rural residents	1.245 billion	+9.9%
Number of A-rated tourist attractions	16,541	—
Visits to A-rated tourist attractions	6.76 billion	—
Total revenue of A-rated tourist attractions	RMB 481.42 billion	—
Operating revenue of enterprises above the designated size in cultural and related industries	RMB 14.151 trillion	+6.0%

The growth rate of total domestic tourism expenditure exceeded that of domestic tourist trips, indicating a degree of quality-oriented development in demand for culture and tourism consumption. Regional branding should therefore focus on tourists' length of stay, degree of cultural participation, and overall consumption rather than pursuing visitor volume alone.

2.2 Accelerated Transformation of Local Cultural Resources into Tourism Products

Historic and cultural cities, intangible cultural heritage, traditional villages, and local festivals provide a content foundation for regional branding. Culture–tourism integration has expanded the use of cultural resources beyond museum display and static preservation to encompass performances, educational travel, cultural and creative development, and experiences embedded in everyday settings. Traditional crafts can be demonstrated and taught in workshops, local operas can be incorporated into tourism performances, and historic buildings can accommodate cultural exhibitions, public reading spaces, and distinctive commercial activities.

The transformation of cultural resources must respect cultural traditions and community life. Simply reproducing old-style streets, folk performances, and photogenic installations can weaken regional distinctiveness. In their study of cultural and creative brands based on intangible cultural heritage, Zhai and Lu observe that some products lack cultural depth and distinctive brand identities. They argue that the development of ICH-based brands must integrate cultural transmission with market development ^[3]. Product design should clearly identify the source, meaning, and permissible uses of cultural content to maintain brand authenticity.

2.3 Digital Communication Expanding the Reach of Regional Brands

Short-video platforms, social media, online travel platforms, and digital maps have transformed the communication of regional brands. Tourists can obtain destination information before departure, share experiences during their trips, and publish reviews afterward. Communication content has expanded from uniformly produced promotional materials to include everyday life, distinctive cuisine, personal stories, and details of service encounters.

Digital communication reduces the cost of connecting regional brands with consumers but also amplifies the effect of service quality on brand reputation. A distinctive setting may attract considerable attention within a short period, but traffic congestion, disorderly pricing, and service disputes can spread equally rapidly. Digital communication capacity must therefore be matched by product capacity, public service quality, and mechanisms for managing public

opinion and responding to crises.

3. Principal Problems in Regional Cultural Branding

3.1 Insufficient Cultural Distinctiveness and Homogenized Content

Some regions lack systematic surveys of cultural resources and rely on broad descriptions such as “a long history,” “scenic and livable,” or “a famous cultural city.” Such descriptions rarely create distinctive memories. Different regions adopt similar approaches to district renewal, festivals, cultural and creative products, and nighttime tourism. Local culture is compressed into a limited number of generic symbols, reducing brand distinctiveness.

The superficial representation of cultural content is another prominent problem. Some projects emphasize architectural appearance and visual effects while paying insufficient attention to local historical development, technical processes, and residents’ everyday lives. Tourists may be able to take photographs at popular locations but remain unable to understand the cultural meanings underlying the landscape. When cultural resources function primarily as decorative materials, a brand lacks a stable core of values and struggles to develop sustained recognition.

3.2 Disconnection among Brand Communication, Product Supply, and Public Services

Some regions equate brand building with advertising and invest heavily in slogans, logos, and online promotion without simultaneously improving product systems and public services. When a gap exists between a promoted image and visitors’ actual experience, wider brand communication also expands the reach of negative reviews.

Product supply may also lack sufficient variety and hierarchy. Core attractions may have weak connections with surrounding villages, cultural institutions, and commercial districts, resulting in short visitor stays. Cultural exhibitions, accommodation, catering, and cultural and creative products may lack a coherent theme and fail to create a continuous experience. Sun’s research indicates that the branding of non-traditional tourist cities must move beyond short-term media attention toward multi-stakeholder value co-creation. Industrial structures, supply chains, and service systems constitute an important foundation for sustaining brand influence ^[4].

Fragmented responsibility for brand management represents an additional constraint. Departments

responsible for culture, tourism, publicity, transportation, and market regulation each perform some relevant functions. Enterprises focus on operating revenue, cultural institutions emphasize preservation and transmission, and residents are concerned with everyday order and the distribution of benefits. In the absence of coordination, brand positioning, project development, and market regulation can easily become disconnected.

4. Pathways for Regional Cultural Branding under Culture–Tourism Integration

4.1 Defining a Brand Core with Distinctive Local Characteristics

Brand positioning should be based on a survey of cultural resources. Regions can systematically examine historical events, representative individuals, modes of production, folk festivals, culinary traditions, and natural environments and assess their cultural value, state of preservation, and suitability for transformation into tourism experiences. Where cultural resources are abundant, the content that best represents the character of the region and can support meaningful experiences should be selected as the brand core, while other resources perform complementary functions.

The brand core should express a clearly defined value theme. Regions characterized by history and culture can emphasize civilizational continuity and urban memory. Regions with concentrations of traditional crafts can highlight craftsmanship and the aesthetics of everyday life. Ethnic regions can present cultural diversity and community life, while regions combining natural and cultural resources can construct narratives about relationships between people and the environment. Brand communication should use stable and accurate language and avoid frequent changes in slogans.

Once a cultural theme has been determined, consistent content standards should be established. Brand names, logos, cultural and creative designs, spatial wayfinding, and promotional materials should remain internally coherent. Consistency does not require formal uniformity. Individual attractions and communities can communicate according to their own characteristics while contributing to a regional brand system that has a shared theme and diverse content.

4.2 Establishing a Multilevel System of Culture and Tourism Products

A regional cultural brand must be embodied in specific

products. At the foundational level, cultural institutions, heritage displays, public interpretation, and thematic routes can meet visitors' basic need to understand local culture. At the experiential level, skills workshops, participation in folk customs, local cuisine, and immersive performances can increase interaction with cultural content. At the extended level, educational travel, cultural vacations, cultural and creative consumption, and festival activities can diversify consumption opportunities during visitors' stays.

Product development should strengthen spatial coordination. Core attractions can perform the functions of brand presentation and visitor distribution, while surrounding communities, villages, towns, and cultural institutions provide in-depth experiences. Thematic routes should connect dispersed resources and be supported by transportation, signage, interpretation, and rest facilities. Spatial coordination can expand brand coverage and relieve pressure on the carrying capacity of individual attractions.

The development of tourism settings should facilitate cultural understanding. Zhang et al. argue that differentiated culture and tourism settings support non-homogeneous development strategies and are jointly constituted by cultural meanings, spatial facilities, consumption activities, and participating actors^[5]. Regions can integrate cultural content into neighborhood life, public art, festival rituals, and community interactions to strengthen tourists' overall experience of local culture.

4.3 Improving Brand Communication and Tourist Interaction

Brand communication should shift from one-off promotion toward the continuous development of content. Local cultural researchers, heritage bearers, residents, tour guides, and tourists can all participate in content production. Communication materials should present not only landscapes but also people, skills, and local ways of life, avoiding excessive reliance on sensational content and short-lived internet memes.

Different communication platforms should perform different functions. Government media should release authoritative information and public service content. Short-video platforms are suitable for presenting settings and activities. Online travel platforms should focus on itinerary planning and product transactions. Public cultural platforms can provide historical materials and educational content.

Brand names, themes, and basic visual identities should remain consistent across platforms.

Tourist reviews should be incorporated into brand management. Regions can categorize online reviews, complaints, and consumption data to identify recurring problems relating to transportation, prices, sanitation, and service. When misunderstandings or controversies arise during communication, responsible organizations should promptly disclose the relevant facts and improve services. Tourist participation can provide evidence for product adjustment and strengthen connections between the brand and the market.

5. Safeguards for the Sustainable Operation of Regional Cultural Brands

5.1 Improving Collaborative Governance among Multiple Stakeholders

Regional cultural brands have a public character. Governments should therefore assume responsibility for planning and coordination, cultural protection, public services, and market regulation. Enterprises are responsible for product development and operational management, cultural institutions provide specialist research and content review, and community residents participate in cultural presentation, service provision, and negotiations over benefits. These stakeholders should establish regular communication mechanisms and jointly discuss brand positioning, project development, and major events.

Brands extending across multiple regions also require coordination of resources across administrative boundaries. Cultural routes, heritage corridors, and ecotourism areas may involve several cities and counties. They can establish unified brand rules, service standards, and information platforms, while individual localities develop differentiated products based on their own resources. Combining a unified brand with local distinctiveness can expand overall influence.

Resident participation is essential to sustainable brand operation. The redevelopment of cultural spaces, organization of festivals, and operation of tourism businesses may affect everyday community life. Project decisions should therefore incorporate residents' views and establish channels through which they can obtain employment, operate businesses, and share in the resulting benefits. Local culture will have a stable foundation for transmission only when residents receive reasonable benefits and identify with

the brand's values.

5.2 Establishing Brand Evaluation and Cultural Protection Systems

Brand evaluation should not rely exclusively on visitor numbers, online popularity, or tourism revenue. Evaluation systems should also include brand awareness, tourist satisfaction, the state of cultural resource preservation, the degree of resident participation, repeat visitation, average length of stay, and the efficiency with which complaints are handled. Priorities can vary according to the stage of development. During the initial stage, evaluation can focus on cultural positioning and basic services; at a mature stage, it can emphasize brand loyalty and comprehensive benefits.

Cultural protection should be incorporated throughout product development. Projects involving cultural relics, intangible cultural heritage, or traditional villages should undergo assessments of cultural value that distinguish content available for use, content subject to restrictions, and content that must not be commercialized. Heritage bearers, researchers, and local residents should participate in reviewing products to prevent cultural content from being misinterpreted or excessively adapted.

Regions can also establish annual brand-review systems that comprehensively examine product quality, communication content, market order, and cultural protection. When deviations in positioning, declining service quality, or damage to culture are identified, projects and management measures should be adjusted promptly to maintain a stable brand image.

Conclusion

Culture-tourism integration has expanded the reach of local cultural resources and changed both the composition and formation of regional brand value. A regional cultural brand is no longer merely a tourism image but a comprehensive system consisting of cultural content, spatial settings, product supply, public services, and social recognition. Distinctive local culture provides the foundation for brand differentiation, while stable products and services determine whether the brand can achieve long-term recognition.

Regional cultural branding requires the systematic organization of cultural resources, definition of core values, development of product systems, and improvement of communication mechanisms. It also requires coordination

among governments, enterprises, cultural institutions, residents, and tourists. Brand development must respect the boundaries of cultural protection and avoid homogeneous development and dependence on short-term online traffic. Only when cultural representation, tourism experiences, and regional governance form stable relationships can a regional cultural brand accumulate lasting social reputation and market value.

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