

Between Preservation and Revitalization: Mapping Sustainable Futures for Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Intangible cultural heritage serves as a bridge connecting tradition and modernity, carrying significant value for cultural identity, ecological wisdom, economic vitality, and cross-cultural exchange. However, the preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage currently face multiple challenges, including declining public engagement, disrupted intergenerational transmission, and an imbalance between economic benefits and cultural value. To address these issues, this paper proposes innovative pathways: integrating intangible cultural heritage into cultural tourism to enhance its visibility and experiential value, utilizing digital technologies for dynamic preservation and broad dissemination, and advancing industrial upgrading to foster a synergistic relationship between cultural preservation and economic development. These strategies aim to provide theoretical and practical references for the sustainable safeguarding and innovative development of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords

Intangible cultural heritage, Preservation, Revitalization

Introduction

As stated in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Intangible cultural heritage is defined as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills-as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith-that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part or their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Rooted in the collective memory and identity of communities, Intangible cultural heritage provides not only strong internal cohesion for the region, but also the key to ensuring the inheritance of culture. Amid rapid eservesic globalization and technological advancement, the elements such as tourism, technological Innovation and cross-sector integration serve as catalysts for revitalization, currently show the sustainability of dynamic protection.

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Methodology

This study employs dual methodological approach—comparative research and inductive summary—to analyze innovative strategies for preserving and revitalizing intangible cultural heritage amid contemporary challenges. Through cross-cultural comparisons of intangible cultural heritage preservation across different countries or regions, the study identifies successful models and common pitfalls in balancing economic development and cultural sustainability. By conducting inductive reasoning, this study sorts out the relevant cases from authoritative platforms such as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Database and China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network and focuses on the representative practices such as digital technology empowerment and cultural tourism integration, from which we can refine the replicable experience.

Results and Discussion

The Significance of Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation

From ancient traditions to modern livelihoods, intangible cultural heritage weaves together our cultural identity, ecological wisdom, economic vitality, and global connections, and preserving humanity's diverse legacy while shaping a sustainable future.

Cultural Value

The preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage are essential for reinforcing cultural continuity and fostering a sense of identity. A profound understanding, safeguarding, and perpetuation of intangible cultural heritage enables communities to retain awareness of their identity, historical roots, and developmental trajectory, thereby contributing to the cultivation of spiritual civilization and enriching the collective cultural knowledge base. Communities and their cultural assets, including intangible cultural heritage, as critical and inseparable parts of these areas (Esfehani & Albrecht, 2016). It sustains historical memory while showcasing cultural uniqueness in a globalized world.

Ecological Value

The preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage contribute significantly to ecological conservation and sustainable development. As a diverse repository of traditional knowledge and practices, intangible cultural heritage offers valuable resources and inspiration for the sustainable development of ecological environment. By deepening human understanding of nature, intangible cultural heritage encourages practices that align with ecological principles, fostering harmonious coexistence between humanity and the natural environment. This synergy not only enhances the preservation of intangible cultural heritage itself but also generates broader ecological benefits. Many intangible cultural heritages are closely related to the ecological environment, such as traditional lifestyles and agricultural methods, which all contain the concept of protecting the ecological environment and embody the principle of sustainability.

Economic Value

The preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage can effectively promote stable and healthy economic development. Intangible cultural heritage not only creates more employment opportunities for society but also fully harnesses the economic potential of cultural industries, thereby contributing to national economic growth. The integration of

cultural industries with other sectors can further stimulate innovation across industries, injecting new vitality into local economies.

Value in Exchange and Mutual Learning between Civilizations

The transmission of intangible cultural heritage carries a nation's soft cultural power, with heritage items serving as significant markers of national identity. Art forms such as folk songs and dances embody emotions universally shared across humanity. Intangible cultural heritage facilitates international cooperation in heritage preservation and cultural exchange, enabling joint protection of humanity's shared cultural legacy. Cultural exchanges through intangible heritage, which are exemplified by the historical spread of music and dance along the Silk Road, foster mutual understanding and respect among civilizations. The UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, for instance, promotes global collaboration to counter the crisis of cultural homogenization.

Challenges in the Revitalization of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Current efforts to preserve and revitalize intangible cultural heritage encounter significant challenges. Limited public promotion has restricted the reach of certain heritage elements, while outdated transmission methods, constrained by traditional concepts, hinder effective dissemination. Furthermore, underdeveloped related industries and weak innovation capacity have prevented the full realization of their economic potential. These combined challenges impede comprehensive safeguarding efforts, demanding immediate attention and collaborative solutions from all stakeholders.

Insufficient Public Promotion

Many intangible cultural heritage items suffer from limited public awareness, remaining confined to small inheritor circles and local communities. While a general understanding of various cultural practices and points of view, and a respect for these on the part of everyone involved are key to the appropriate care of cultural heritage (Ogden, 2007). Valuable heritage in remote areas faces particular challenges due to isolated locations and less educated audiences, hindering knowledge dissemination. Current promotion relies on outdated methods that fail to create meaningful engagement, resulting in superficial public understanding. Homogeneous content further restricts multidimensional appreciation of intangible cultural heritage, limiting both cultural transmission and societal value recognition. The field investigation conducted by López-Guzmán and González (2016) analyzed that the public's perception of intangible cultural heritage is influenced by its educational level, occupation, motivations, etc. The difficulty lies in understanding and recognizing public, in order to contribute to the development of management plans and marketing strategies that adapt to different attractions.

Transmission Difficulties

In the field of protection and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, a deep-rooted traditional concept holds that only by adhering to the original ecology and purity can we ensure the authenticity and continuity of culture. However, this conservative approach often exhibits caution or even resistance toward new media and modern dissemination methods, inadvertently constraining preservation efforts by over-reliance on conventional techniques while neglecting the vast potential of contemporary communication channels. Against this backdrop, certain intangible cultural heritage practices, such as traditional handicraft workshops, have gradually declined in the digital-industrial era due to their inherent inefficiency and outdated modes of operation, facing increasingly limited viability. The mere enthusiasm of inheritors and a handful of devotees proves insufficient to guarantee stable transmission or sustainable

development of these cultural assets.

Underdeveloped Related Industries

The industrialization of intangible cultural heritage remains underdeveloped, with untapped economic potential limiting industrial chain growth. Gao Jiesong and Kang Jiandong pointed out that These shortcomings include insufficient operational efficiency, underutilization of the cultural attributes of heritage projects, and inadequacies in the intelligent layout of cultural creative research and development (Gao & Kang, 2024). Weak capacity further hinders effective integration of intangible cultural heritage with modern elements, compromising both industrial sustainability and intangible cultural heritage's contemporary relevance. This stagnation threatens long-term heritage revitalization and continuation.

Innovative Pathways for Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation and Revitalization

The inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage face challenges, but it also explores innovative paths. The integration of cultural tourism makes intangible cultural heritage show its charm in tourism and go to the world. Digital empowerment innovates the communication mode, and makes the intangible heritage rejuvenate with the help of new technologies. Industrial expansion excavates intangible value, promotes a win-win situation of culture and economy, and opens up new prospects for non-genetic inheritance and development.

Cultural Tourism Integration for Heritage Revitalization

Heritage tourism is an immersion of the visitor into natural history, cultural heritage, arts, philosophy and institutions from other regions or countries (Nguyen & Cheung, 2014). Under the backdrop of global exchange and cooperation, the deep integration of intangible cultural heritage with tourism spaces has emerged as a new trend. By organically incorporating heritage elements into scenic areas, urban districts, and rural villages, and by developing specialized tourism routes and products, visitors can personally experience the charm of intangible cultural heritage during their travels. This approach significantly enhances cultural value and adds appeal of tourism offerings. Furthermore, Initiatives like intangible cultural heritage Shopping/Food Festivals, boosted by e-commerce and social media, expand heritage product markets while connecting traditions with modern life. Tourism services should offer immersive educational experiences. Participation in global intangible cultural heritage exchanges and exhibitions enhances China's cultural influence, promoting cross-cultural dialogue and worldwide heritage sharing.

Digital Empowerment for Heritage Innovation

Digital technology is revolutionizing intangible cultural heritage preservation and communication. High-definition imaging and 3D scanning create detailed digital archives, safeguarding oral histories, craftsmanship, and cultural contexts while overcoming traditional transmission barriers. The intangible cultural heritage protection institutions play the role of safeguarding and preserving so they should reap the benefits of ICT to help disseminate the knowledge to the general public (Cao & Zhou, 2011). VR/AR technologies enhance exhibitions through immersive experiences, boosting global accessibility. Social platforms like TikTok and WeChat amplify intangible cultural heritage outreach via short videos and live streams, engaging younger audiences and fostering real-time interaction between inheritors and the public. These innovations not only raise awareness but also strengthen cultural identity, ensuring intangible cultural heritage has dynamic evolution in the digital era.

Industrial Expansion for Cultural-Economic Synergy

To unlock intangible cultural heritage's potential, expanding its industrialization is crucial for

both preservation and economic growth. In order to understand the diversified needs of tourists, travel companies should conduct market research before developing souvenirs, so as to bring more perceived value to tourists (Liu et al., 2020) Developing diverse intangible cultural heritage-based creative products integrates cultural essence into daily life, engaging younger audiences. Establishing a digital intangible cultural heritage industrial chain, through digital collections, virtual exhibitions, and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises support, creates new business models while blending tradition with modern tech. Encouraging inheritors to innovate by merging traditional crafts with contemporary design and technology enhances artistic value and market appeal. This synergy not only boosts cultural industries' economic potential but also fuels comprehensive socio-economic development through cross-sector integration, achieving a culture-economy win-win.

Conclusions

Intangible cultural heritage, as a treasure of human civilization, carries the memory of history and the wisdom of nations. In the contemporary era, we pioneered new pathways for its preservation and revitalization through diversified approaches including industrial expansion and innovative transmission. From the development of cultural and creative products to the integration of tourism projects, from the construction of digital industry to the innovative exploration of inheritors, each step demonstrates the dual value of intangible cultural heritage in both cultural and economic fields. Looking forward to the future, we should remain steadfast in our original commitment to preserving and revitalizing intangible cultural heritage while letting intangible cultural heritage become a cultural bridge connecting past, present and future.

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