

Exploration on the Activation of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Enyang Ancient Town under the Background of Cultural and Tourism Integration

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of cultural and tourism integration becoming a key trend in industrial development, intangible cultural heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH")—as a core resource carrying the cultural memory of a nation—its activation and utilization are not only a crucial path for protecting cultural traditions but also a significant driver for promoting the upgrading of local tourism. Taking Enyang Ancient Town in Bazhong City, Sichuan Province as the research object, this study systematically analyzes the composition of ICH resources, the current status of activation practices, and existing problems in Enyang Ancient Town through field surveys, questionnaire surveys, and other methods. The research finds that Enyang Ancient Town boasts rich ICH resources such as blue calico printing, sugar-coated sesame cakes, and Enyang leaf carving. Efforts have been made to advance ICH activation by developing study tour routes, constructing ICH workshops, and implementing "ICH into Scenic Areas" programs. However, it still faces challenges such as insufficient factor guarantee, inadequate transformation and integration, shortage of funds and talents, and lack of publicity and experiential elements. Based on these findings, this study proposes countermeasures such as strengthening factor guarantee, deepening the "ICH +" integration model, expanding channels for funds and talents, and innovating publicity approaches. These suggestions aim to provide references for the activation of ICH in Enyang Ancient Town and similar regions, and contribute to the in-depth integration of culture and tourism.

Keywords

Intangible Cultural Heritage, Enyang Ancient Town, Cultural and Tourism Integration, ICH Activation.

1. Introduction

With the in-depth advancement of China's cultural and tourism integration strategy, the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2018 marked a new stage of systematic integration in the cultural and tourism industry, gradually forming an interactive pattern of "culture empowering tourism and tourism disseminating culture". In 2021, the *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage* clearly proposed to promote the in-depth integration of ICH and tourism, and inject new vitality into traditional culture through creative transformation [1]. As a scarce resource with both cultural value and economic potential, the activation and utilization of ICH can not only enhance tourists' cultural experience but also inject sustainable development momentum into local tourism.

As one of the top ten ancient towns in Sichuan Province and a National AAAA-Level Tourist Attraction, Enyang Ancient Town has a history of over 1,490 years. Within its 0.5-square-kilometer core area, there are 18 ancient streets and lanes, 589 ancient buildings from the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as ICH resources such as red culture and Micang Ancient Road

culture [2]. However, with the acceleration of urbanization and the impact of new tourism formats, the ICH in Enyang Ancient Town is confronted with dilemmas such as inheritance discontinuity and insufficient transformation. Against this background, systematically sorting out the current status of ICH activation in Enyang Ancient Town, analyzing existing problems, and proposing countermeasures is not only a practical need to respond to the cultural and tourism integration policy but also a realistic requirement to resolve the contradiction between ICH protection and tourism development in the ancient town.

2. Current Situation of ICH Activation in Enyang Ancient Town

2.1. Overview of Enyang Ancient Town

Located in Enyang District, Bazhong City, Sichuan Province, in northeastern Sichuan, Enyang Ancient Town was once a commercial hub on the Micang Ancient Road. Known as "Little Shanghai" for being accessible by both water and land and the gathering of merchants and travelers, it has successively been awarded titles such as "National Historical and Cultural Town" and "Sichuan Provincial Cultural and Tourism Characteristic Town". The ancient town not only preserves material cultural heritage such as Qifeng Bridge, Wanshou Palace, and Wenchang Pavilion but also nurtures 121 ICH items at various levels, including blue calico printing, sugar-coated sesame cakes, and Enyang leaf carving [2]. The "Enyang Chuan Shuo" (Enyang Story) night tour project, developed based on ICH, restores the prosperity of the millennium-old water terminal through modern lighting and shadow technology, and has become a landmark format for the integration of culture and tourism in the ancient town.

2.2. Composition of ICH Resources in Enyang Ancient Town

The ICH resources of Enyang Ancient Town are characterized by profound historical connotations and distinct local features, with 121 items included in the protection lists at various levels. The core resources can be divided into four categories:

2.2.1. Traditional Craftsmanship

Represented by blue calico printing (provincial-level ICH in 2018), its production involves processes such as indigo extraction, pattern board carving, and paste scraping for dyeing. The products cover daily necessities such as clothing, handkerchiefs, and headscarves, with up to 24 major patterns and varieties. During the Republic of China period, it formed an industrial scale of "weaving machines everywhere, dyeing workshops lining the streets, and cloth-carrying boats like a continuous stream". Another example is Enyang leaf carving (municipal-level ICH in 2022), which is made into "thin as cicada's wings" artworks through more than ten processes including fermentation and carving, integrating traditional techniques with modern aesthetics.

2.2.2. Traditional Cuisine

Sugar-coated sesame cakes (municipal-level ICH in 2014) are renowned for their "72 processes". They are made from fine flour, glutinous rice, maltose brewed from germinated barley, and other raw materials, with the heat of charcoal roasting controlled entirely by the experience of inheritors. The finished product is crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. The craftsmanship of making Bazhong Ten-Dish Feast (provincial-level ICH in 2023), as the highest courtesy for entertaining guests, features "half meat and half vegetarian, one dish with two flavors" and carries the memory of local food culture.

2.2.3. Traditional Performing Arts

Northern Sichuan Lantern Opera, awarded by the State Council as a "national-level ICH item", has been performed in various rural areas of northern Sichuan since the Ming and Qing dynasties. It boasts diverse performance forms and has remained vibrant over time. Another

example is Yin Family Flying Dragon Dance (provincial-level ICH in 2023), which demonstrates the vigor and agility of "dragon dance" through collective collaboration and is a core performance item in festival activities.

2.2.4. Folk Customs

Represented by the festival customs of the Ba people, inherited from the sacrificial and daily traditions of the Ba tribes, they include activities such as the "Dragon Lantern Festival" in the first lunar month, the "Wenchang Festival" in the second lunar month, and the "Qingming Festival" in the third lunar month. Taking the "Wenchang Festival" as an example, it continues the temple fair format of the Ming and Qing dynasties. People participate in incense burning and worship, as well as the parade of carrying pavilions, accompanied by stilt walking and flower boat performances. It embodies the Ba people's aspirations for literary fortune and peace, and is a vivid epitome of the folk culture in northeastern Sichuan.

2.3. Current Development of ICH Activation in Enyang Ancient Town

The activation of ICH in Enyang Ancient Town is supported by policies and implemented through diversified practices, forming a pattern of systematic promotion. At the policy level, the state has clarified the integration direction through documents such as the *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2021 and the *Notice on Promoting the In-depth Integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage and Tourism Development* in 2023. At the local level, Bazhong City issued cultural and tourism support measures in 2021; Enyang District formulated an ICH protection plan in 2020 and listed the ancient town as the core area in its "14th Five-Year Plan" for cultural and tourism development. Currently, more than 100,000 Chinese characters of ICH text materials have been compiled, over 100 pieces of ICH physical objects have been collected, and 121 ICH items have been included in the protection lists at various levels [3].

At the practical level, first, a study tour system has been established to integrate ICH into the scenic area planning. Relying on Wanshou Palace and other venues, ICH sales and exhibitions (such as sugar-coated sesame cakes and blue calico printing) have been carried out. The "ICH into Campuses" program has been promoted, inviting inheritors to provide guidance in primary and secondary schools. The ancient town has also been used as a study tour base for students to experience vein painting creation and shadow puppet shows. Second, efforts have been made to strengthen talent development and carrier construction: professional talents have been introduced from universities; more than 10 ICH inheritance and learning bases (such as the "Yin Family Flying Dragon Dance" base) have been established (Wanshou Palace has been approved as a provincial-level experience base for Northern Sichuan Lantern Opera); and ICH poverty alleviation workshops (for palm weaving, sugar-coated sesame cakes, etc.) have been set up, driving over 20,000 people to employment. Third, the integration of scenic areas and the development of cultural and creative products have been promoted: the "Xifanli" ICH Block has been built to carry out regular Sichuan opera performances and study tour activities; the immersive night tour project "Enyang Chuan Shuo" (Enyang Story) has been launched; characteristic streets for tea ceremony and food from Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Chongqing have been connected in a series; and IPs such as "Wanshou Palace" and "Enyang Chuan Shuo" (Enyang Story) have been refined to develop cultural and creative products (such as blue calico printing and leaf carving). These efforts have enriched the cultural and tourism formats, making Enyang Ancient Town a characteristic cultural tourism destination in northeastern Sichuan.

3. Analysis of Main Problems in ICH Activation in Enyang Ancient Town

To analyze the main problems in the activation of ICH in Enyang Ancient Town, a field survey was conducted on the ancient town, and a questionnaire survey was carried out to understand

tourists' experiences and perceptions of ICH tourism in Enyang Ancient Town. The survey was conducted from April 20 to 25, 2025, through on-site distribution in the scenic area and online distribution on social media platforms. A total of 202 questionnaires were distributed, with 187 valid ones recovered, resulting in an effective rate of 93%. Statistics show that the gender distribution of the respondents was relatively balanced (53.67% female and 46.33% male); the age group was mainly young and middle-aged people aged 18-40 (accounting for 80.22%); the educational background was mostly university degree (accounting for 70.06%); the occupations were mainly students (33.33%) and company employees (24.86%); the monthly income was mostly below 3,000 yuan (33.33%), followed by 3,000-5,000 yuan (28.25%), which is in line with the economic development level of Bazhong City; the source of tourists was mainly local in Bazhong City (63.84%), while only 20.34% were from outside Sichuan Province. Data from the field survey and questionnaire survey provide direct evidence for the analysis of problems.

3.1. Insufficient Factor Guarantee and Unstable Inheritance Foundation

The questionnaire survey reveals that 74.58% of tourists believe that ICH activation should focus on cultural inheritance; additionally, 61.58% argue that infrastructure construction should be strengthened. However, the current guarantee capacity cannot meet these demands. On the one hand, Bazhong has weak local financial capacity and lacks systematic protection policies, with insufficient infrastructure. The daily work such as investigation, application, and collection of physical objects for municipal and county-level ICH items progresses slowly. On the other hand, there is a serious shortage of professional personnel: the Sichuan Opera Troupe of Enyang ICH Center has only 8 staff on permanent establishment, with the youngest staff being 44 years old and 2 of them about to retire—far below the personnel demand of 30-40 people for a professional Sichuan Opera Troupe. It also faces the dilemma of a lack of funds, venues, costumes, and equipment. In addition, there is a lack of specialized institutions and museums for ICH protection, and the work relies solely on the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center. Moreover, traditional projects such as leaf carving and blue calico printing have weak self-renewal capabilities, fail to adopt modern technologies such as VR and holography, and lack recognition among the younger generation, leading to the risk of craftsmanship loss.

3.2. Inadequate Transformation and Utilization, and Superficial Integration of Culture and Tourism

There is an obvious shortage in the coordination of "protection and utilization", and the value of ICH resources has not been fully released. Product development is limited to the production and sales of tangible products, with weak brand awareness and a lack of market-oriented marketing entities. This results in low integration with tourism, cultural and creative industries, business districts, study tours, and other fields, as well as low industrial transformation efficiency. From the perspective of tourist demand: 53.11% prefer dynamic on-site performances, 51.41% prefer skill experience, 51.98% prefer food tasting, and 64.41% are interested in folk activities and traditional handcraft products. However, the ICH display in Enyang Ancient Town is mostly static (such as leaf carving and palm weaving), and dynamic performances only remain at the level of superficial viewing, with few opportunities for tourists to participate personally. This not only fails to meet the experience needs but also leads to tourists' insufficient understanding of ICH culture.

3.3. Shortage of Funds and Talents, and Insufficient Development Momentum

The shortage of funds and talents has formed a vicious circle, restricting the advancement of ICH activation. In terms of funds, Bazhong is located in northeastern Sichuan, with underdeveloped light industry and heavy industry, and a lack of supporting industries. Its backward economy makes enterprises unwilling to invest, and the local finance is also unable

to increase investment, which limits the depth and breadth of ICH development. In terms of talents, in addition to the aging of the Sichuan Opera Troupe, the overall shortage of professional talents is severe due to the constraints of establishment and funds. This not only affects the continuity of ICH inheritance but also makes it difficult for the government to conduct in-depth research, innovative exploration, and scientific planning for ICH tourism development, further exacerbating problems such as low fund utilization efficiency and poor publicity effects, and forming a dilemma of "lack of funds → lack of talents → difficult development".

3.4. Lack of Publicity and Experience, and Low Public Awareness

The communication power and influence of ICH are insufficient, and the public awareness is at a low level. From the perspective of tourist sources: 63.84% of tourists are from local Bazhong City, indicating a narrow radiation range; 56.5% of tourists argue that tourism publicity needs to be strengthened, reflecting tourists' weak perception of ICH. In addition, ICH projects such as shadow puppet shows lack interactive links, and tourists mostly watch passively, making it difficult to gain an in-depth understanding of cultural connotations. Tourism scenarios are also limited to traditional forms such as skill demonstrations and product exhibitions, with insufficient innovation and diversity, which cannot meet the diverse needs of modern tourists. Ultimately, this leads to superficial tourist experiences and difficulties in improving the public's awareness of ICH.

4. Countermeasures and Suggestions for Promoting ICH Activation in Enyang Ancient Town

4.1. Strengthen Factor Guarantee and Consolidate the Foundation of Inheritance

To address the problems of insufficient vitality in ICH protection and inheritance and weak infrastructure, a guarantee system should be built from three aspects: system, resources, and technology. First, improve policy and institutional support: strictly implement the requirements of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law*, promote the Bazhong Municipal Government to fully include ICH protection funds in the fiscal budget, and set up special funds for daily work such as investigation and application of municipal and county-level ICH items to solve the problem of "slow progress". At the same time, integrate existing resources to establish specialized ICH museums or exhibition centers in Bazhou District and Enyang District, supplementing the functions of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center and realizing the systematic operation of ICH physical object collection, skill demonstration, and cultural dissemination. Second, make up for the shortage of professional personnel: to solve the problem of the Sichuan Opera Troupe's "8 permanent establishment positions and aging staff", expand the personnel team through measures such as adding permanent establishment positions and signing flexible employment agreements; cooperate with universities such as Sichuan Art Vocational College to cultivate talents for Sichuan Opera performance and ICH management in a targeted manner; invite ICH inheritors (such as those of blue calico printing and leaf carving) to carry out the "mentor-apprentice" program to attract young people to learn craftsmanship and alleviate the risk of "inheritance discontinuity". Third, inject momentum through modern technologies: abandon the traditional venue display model, and adopt technologies such as VR and holography to create immersive experience projects. For example, develop a "digital blue calico printing workshop" to allow tourists to simulate carving and dyeing processes online, and provide practical experience in combination with ICH workshops offline, enhancing the attractiveness of ICH to the public.

4.2. Deepen the "ICH +" Integration and Release the Value of Resources

Focusing on the challenges of insufficient transformation and utilization and weak tourist experience, promote the in-depth integration of ICH with multiple fields based on "demand orientation". First, create "ICH + Experience" consumption scenarios: in response to the demand of 53.11% of tourists for dynamic on-site performances and 51.41% for skill experience, add interactive links in the "Xifanli" ICH Block—for example, incorporate tourist role-playing into Northern Sichuan Lantern Opera performances, set up "hands-on operation" experience areas for shadow puppet shows, and launch "1-hour ICH handcraft" packages in palm weaving and leaf carving workshops, transforming tourists from "viewers" to "participants". For the folk activities concerned by 64.41% of tourists, regularly hold the "Enyang ICH Culture Festival" to restore traditional scenarios such as the "Wenchang Festival" parade of carrying pavilions and the "Dragon Lantern Festival" dragon dance, enhancing the sense of cultural immersion. Second, promote "ICH + Industry" integration and innovation: break through the limitation of "sales of tangible products", and develop a series of cultural and creative products with core IPs such as "Enyang Chuan Shuo" (Enyang Story) and "Wanshou Palace"—integrate blue calico printing elements into clothing and household items, and use leaf carving techniques to make ancient town scenery ornaments; cooperate with local catering enterprises to build "ICH food workshops", transform the "72 processes" of sugar-coated sesame cakes into visual production experiences, and develop Bazhong Ten-Dish Feast into "portable gift boxes". Expand sales channels through "online e-commerce + offline sales exhibitions" to realize the transformation from "cultural value to economic value". Third, optimize the design of "ICH + Study Tour" routes: rely on existing study tour bases, develop "ICH exploration courses" for primary and secondary school students, allowing them to participate in simple processes such as vein painting creation and blue calico printing paste scraping; set up "ICH management practice camps" for college students majoring in cultural and tourism, conducting research based on the ICH activation cases of the ancient town. This not only cultivates potential inheritors but also provides intellectual support for ICH activation.

4.3. Expand Supply and Demand Channels to Resolve the Dilemma of Funds and Talents

To address the vicious circle of insufficient capital investment and shortage of professional talents, a dual-drive model of "diversified financing + targeted talent cultivation" should be built. First, expand fund sources: in addition to relying on local finance, attract social capital through "policy guidance + market operation": launch the "ICH Industry Investment Promotion Plan", providing tax reductions and land preferential policies for ICH workshops and cultural and creative development projects to attract investment from cultural and tourism enterprises in Sichuan; based on the foundation of "ICH poverty alleviation workshops", connect with rural revitalization special funds to support the expansion of production scale of ICH projects such as palm weaving and Shu embroidery, achieving a win-win situation of "employment and income increase + ICH inheritance"; explore the "ICH crowdfunding" model, launching crowdfunding on social media for small-scale needs such as costume renewal and equipment procurement of the Sichuan Opera Troupe to mobilize the public's participation enthusiasm. Second, build a hierarchical talent cultivation system: to solve the problem of "shortage of professional talents", promote it in three categories: for high-level talents, introduce talents specialized in cultural and tourism planning and brand marketing from universities such as Sichuan Normal University and China West Normal University to enrich the ICH management team; for inheritance talents, provide living subsidies for existing ICH inheritors and encourage them to carry out skill teaching in primary and secondary schools and communities; for grassroots service talents, conduct regular training for staff of ICH workshops in the ancient

town and scenic area interpreters, covering content such as ICH cultural knowledge and service etiquette to improve the quality of tourist interaction experience.

4.4. Innovate Publicity and Experience to Enhance Public Awareness

To address the problems of narrow radiation range, low public awareness, and insufficient experience, efforts should be made from both "communication channels" and "scenario innovation". First, develop a new media publicity matrix: in line with the characteristics that tourists mainly obtain information from social media and friends' recommendations, build a publicity model of "content creation + influencer collaboration": arrange special personnel to shoot ICH short videos, such as "the entire production process of sugar-coated sesame cakes" and "behind-the-scenes stories of Northern Sichuan Lantern Opera", and release them on platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat Channels; invite Sichuan-based tourism bloggers and food influencers to visit the ancient town and conduct "ICH check-in live broadcasts", focusing on promoting characteristic projects such as blue calico printing experience and Enyang Ten-Dish Feast tasting to attract the attention of tourists from outside Sichuan Province (currently only 20.34%); establish the official WeChat public account "Enyang ICH" to regularly publish ICH cultural popularization and event previews, enhancing user stickiness. Second, optimize ICH experience scenarios: break through the single form of "skill demonstration and product exhibition": add "audience interaction links" to projects such as shadow puppet shows and Yin Family Flying Dragon Dance, such as allowing tourists to participate in shadow puppet script creation and parade with the dragon dance team; integrate ICH elements into the light and shadow show in combination with the "Enyang Chuan Shuo" (Enyang Story) night tour project, such as restoring blue calico printing patterns and Sichuan Opera facial makeup with lights to create a "night ICH feast"; in response to the food tasting demand of 51.98% of tourists, set up "ICH food tasting areas" in the ancient town's food street, with inheritors explaining the cultural stories behind the food on-site, allowing tourists to deepen their understanding of ICH through taste experience.

5. Conclusion

Through the study on the activation of ICH in Enyang Ancient Town, this paper finds that the ancient town is endowed with rich and distinctive ICH resources. Efforts have been made to advance ICH activation by developing study tour tourism, constructing workshops, and integrating with scenic areas, initially realizing the linkage between cultural inheritance and tourism development. However, four major bottlenecks—insufficient factor guarantee, inadequate transformation depth, shortage of resources supply, and lack of communication and experience—still restrict its sustainable progress. The countermeasures proposed in this paper, namely "strengthening guarantee, deepening integration, expanding channels, and innovating publicity", can effectively resolve the above dilemmas and provide a practical transformation path for the ICH in the ancient town from "static display-based protection" to "dynamic inheritance and innovative transformation".

The limitation of this study lies in that the questionnaire survey samples are mainly concentrated on young and middle-aged tourists (18-40 years old accounting for 80.22%), with insufficient coverage of groups. In the future, the sample scope can be expanded to include elderly tourists and foreign tourists, and research can be conducted from multiple perspectives such as ICH inheritors, government staff, and business operators to further enrich the research conclusions. Against the background of the continuous deepening of cultural and tourism integration, Enyang Ancient Town needs to take ICH as the core and innovate the activation model to achieve "dynamic cultural inheritance and distinctive tourism development", thereby providing replicable experience for the activation of ICH in similar ancient towns.

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