



Research on the Path of Integration between Intangible Cultural Heritage and Cultural Tourism from the Perspective of Symbiosis Theory — A Case Study of Zherong Paper Cutting

Ziqi Wang

Tongji University, Shanghai 200092, China

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Abstract: The blending and integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with the tourism industry not only aid in the dynamic protection and inheritance of ICH but also enhance the quality and diversity of tourism products, further promoting the sustainable development of the cultural and tourism industry. The concept of "comprehensive ICH" emphasizes viewing ICH as an integrated system, encompassing all fields and elements closely related to ICH, to achieve its comprehensive development. Based on the framework of symbiosis theory, this paper interprets the three major dilemmas faced by the integration of ICH with cultural tourism in the context of globalization: the assimilation of ICH connotations, the imperfect cross-sectoral cooperation mechanism for cultural tourism integration, and the mismatch between ICH values and the economic benefits of cultural tourism. It proposes an inherent mechanism and an ought-to-be model for a "unified" symbiotic system of comprehensive ICH — cross-domain resource integration and interest coordination. By taking Zherong intangible cultural heritage paper cutting as an example, this paper provides a paradigm that can be referred to for deepening the research on the development of ICH and cultural tourism integration.

Keywords: symbiosis theory, cultural tourism integration, comprehensive intangible cultural heritage; Zherong paper cutting

1. Introduction: Realistic Dilemmas in the Integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage into Cultural Tourism

The 2021 "14th Five-Year Plan for Tourism Development" highlights the shift in people's tourism consumption from low-level to high-quality and diversified needs. With the deepening of national institutional reforms, China is entering a new era where cultural creation and tourism experiences are integrated. According to data from China Research and Intelligence, the market size of China's cultural tourism industry reached 3.58 trillion yuan in 2023, a year-on-year increase of 75.49%. Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH") is one of the most vivid and specific parts of a nation's culture and an essential historical resource for building a harmonious society and an innovative country. From a macro perspective, the legal protection of ICH in China has gradually matured, and the list of related projects is continuously expanding. However, significant challenges remain in the integration of ICH with cultural tourism.

1.1 Assimilation of ICH in the Context of Globalization

With the acceleration of globalization, Marshall McLuhan's concept of the "global village"[1] has become a reality. The development of information technology has promoted global integration, leading to the blurring of cultural boundaries. In this process, cultural flow often results in the assimilation of marginalized cultures into mainstream ones, and exchanges between different cultures have become increasingly close. In this context, the integration of ICH with cultural tourism faces challenges such as insufficient interaction and a single mode of cooperation.

1.2 Mismatch Between the Value of ICH and the Economic Benefits of Cultural Tourism

In the integration with the increasingly prosperous cultural tourism economy, the intrinsic value of ICH has not been fully reflected economically. This mismatch mainly stems from the tourism market's lack of understanding of the essence of ICH and the potential erosion of its original cultural spirit by commercialization. This results in challenges for ICH protection and inheritance, while also limiting the deep, sustainable development potential of the cultural tourism economy. Due to an overly conservative understanding of "protection" in some ICH projects, the cultural tourism industry is overly cautious in utilizing ICH, neglecting the need for the living transmission and innovative development of ICH. This over-protection makes it difficult for ICH projects to connect with modern society, limiting the widespread dissemination and application of their cultural value, thereby affecting their vitality and depth of inheritance.

2. Symbiosis Theory and Its Related Research

The German mycologist Anton de Bary first proposed the theory of symbiosis[2] in 1879 to explain the mode of coexistence between different biological species based on material connections. De Bary viewed symbiosis as a phenomenon of self-organization, emphasizing that individuals must coexist and interact in some way to form symbiotic relationships, co-evolving to survive. Based on the theory of social existence, Hu Shoujun[3] proposed the concept of "social symbiosis," arguing that symbiosis is a key feature of human existence and that symbiotic phenomena are widespread and universal in human society. In recent years, research on symbiosis theory has deepened, with its core ideas extending beyond mutualism between organisms to a broader application in interdisciplinary fields. These include interdisciplinary application expansion, systemic sustainable development, economic and environmental symbiosis, social symbiosis and cooperation, and technological symbiosis, providing strong theoretical support for understanding the interactions within complex social systems and promoting their sustainable development.

2.1 Symbiosis Theory and Its Research Progress

Yuan Chunqing[4] is one of the early scholars in China to conduct research on "symbiosis" theory. He believes that "symbiosis" in the economic field can be described as a malleable social state and analyzed the internal organization of this "symbiotic state," including symbiotic units, symbiotic environments, and symbiotic models. The interactions and collaborations emphasized by symbiosis theory within ecosystems, as well as the adaptive changes and innovations within symbiotic systems, have begun to be applied to the field of traditional culture and even ICH research. Wang Tingxin[5] explored the symbiotic relationships between traditional Chinese arts and contemporary politics, economy, culture, education, and folklore from the perspective of symbiosis theory. Lu Jiachen et al.[6] proposed long-term strategies for improving the income-generating capacity of ICH through tourism development by constructing an analytical framework for the symbiotic model of traditional villages' ICH. Li Yanqin et al.[7] elaborated on the collaborative path of guest value in the digital innovation of rural ICH. Lü Xiameng[8] and Wu Maoying[9] discussed the multi-faceted promotion of cultural tourism integration for rural revitalization based on the framework of symbiosis theory.

2.2 The Coupling of Symbiosis Theory and the Integration of ICH and Cultural Tourism

The necessary conditions for the formation of symbiosis are the compatibility of quality parameters, the generation of symbiotic interfaces, and the existence of heterogeneity. Symbiosis theory advocates achieving harmonious, stable, and sustainable development of systems through various interdependent and mutually promoting ways. In terms of the coupling of resource elements, external environment, and development models, ICH resources and the tourism industry have a high degree of coupling.[10] The relationship between ICH resources and the tourism industry precisely reflects the characteristics of symbiosis theory. Firstly, there is a complementary relationship between ICH resources and the tourism industry. ICH resources are an important part of the cultural tourism industry, each having unique cultural and economic value. ICH resources can enrich the depth of cultural tourism products and enhance their competitiveness, while the tourism industry can provide a broader dissemination space for ICH resources, increasing their influence. Secondly, there is a close interaction between ICH resources and the tourism industry. [11]The demand of the tourism market drives the excavation and protection of ICH resources, and the development of ICH resources brings new opportunities for the tourism industry. Thirdly, there is a mutually beneficial relationship between ICH resources and the tourism industry.[12] The integration of cultural tourism based on this foundation can achieve resource sharing and mutual benefits. The tourism industry provides economic benefits for ICH resources, improving the livelihoods of ICH inheritors and promoting the protection and inheritance of ICH resources. ICH resources bring core competitiveness to the tourism industry, helping to enhance its market position and attractiveness.

3. The Intrinsic Mechanisms and Ideal Model of the Comprehensive ICH Symbiotic System

Drawing on the concept of all-domain tourism, the development concept of "Comprehensive ICH" emphasizes viewing ICH as an integrated system, encompassing all fields and elements closely related to ICH to achieve its diverse utilization. The core idea of comprehensive ICH is to integrate ICH resources and promote the coordinated symbiosis of ICH with various units, using ICH as a key entry point to achieve sustainable development and maximize comprehensive benefits. In the concept of comprehensive ICH, it is not merely about the protection and inheritance of ICH resources but encompasses multiple dimensions, including the planning and development of ICH destinations, the development and management of ICH resources, the provision and experience of ICH services, the marketing and promotion of ICH in the cultural tourism market, and the cultural and social impact of ICH.

3.1 Intrinsic Mechanisms of the Comprehensive ICH Symbiotic System: Ecological Interaction of Cultural Asset Sharing and Mutual Benefit

The comprehensive ICH symbiotic system is an integrated ecological system that, through the close connection between ICH and other elements, combines the interaction and benefit-sharing among symbiotic units (ICH inheritors, communities, markets, policies) in symbiosis theory. This forms a sustainable development model aimed at promoting the self-sufficiency and self-reliance of ICH. The intrinsic mechanisms of the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system are based on the close connection between ICH and other elements. After revealing the deep value of the comprehensive ICH development concept and its impact on socio-economic development, we turn to discuss the core components of the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system — the symbiotic units, symbiotic environment, and symbiotic model. This step is crucial for understanding how the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system operates, involving how dynamic complementary relationships and resource sharing can achieve organic integration and mutual promotion between ICH and socio-economic development.

3.1.1 Symbiotic Units: Dynamically Complementary Peripheral Elements

In symbiosis theory, symbiotic units refer to individuals or organizations that form stable interactive relationships through resource sharing and benefit exchange in a specific symbiotic environment. In the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system, the main symbiotic units include ICH protectors (such as traditional craftsmen, performers, educators) and related entities in the tourism industry (such as tourism enterprises, tourists, governments, communities). Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each symbiotic unit is a prerequisite for effective coordination and linkage. These units share resources and benefits through communication and interaction and jointly promote the inheritance and protection of ICH and the sustainable development of the tourism industry.

3.1.2 Symbiotic Environment: Inclusive and Diverse Social Environment

The symbiotic environment refers to the external conditions and background for the interaction and development of symbiotic units, involving aspects such as the natural environment, socio-cultural conditions, economic conditions, and policies and regulations. In the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system, the symbiotic environment specifically refers to the comprehensive environment that supports the symbiosis of ICH and the tourism industry. This includes the ecological environment needed for ICH protection and development, the socio-cultural environment, economic environment, and policy environment, as well as the market environment, marketing environment, competitive environment, and policy environment relied on by the tourism industry.

3.1.3 Symbiotic Model: Collaborative and Interactive Model

In symbiosis theory, the symbiotic model describes the organization and operation mode of interactive relationships between symbiotic units, emphasizing how to achieve the stability and development of symbiotic relationships through cooperation mechanisms and management strategies. In the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system, the tourism industry assists in the protection, inheritance, and innovation of ICH by providing resources such as market promotion, financial support, and technological upgrades. Meanwhile, ICH enriches the content of the tourism market and meets the diverse needs of tourists by offering unique cultural products and experiential services, thus driving the development of the tourism industry.

3.2 Ideal Model of the Comprehensive ICH Symbiotic System: Cross-Field Resource Integration and Benefit Coordination

The ideal model of the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system mainly involves three aspects. Firstly, ICH elements and their environment and community should maintain harmonious symbiosis, meaning the development of ICH elements should respect and protect the humanistic environment while meeting the needs of community members. Community participation is an important component of the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system, and the community is also a source of market and productivity for the tourism and cultural creative industries. Community participation can provide motivation and support for the development of the comprehensive ICH symbiotic system. For example, Yunnan's "Tea Customs" (Dali Bai Three-Course Tea), as a protected item in Chinese traditional tea-making techniques and related customs, is not only a form of ICH but also a part of the daily life of local community members. Through community participation, it has integrated with traditional Bai dance and song, resulting in the Bai Three-Course Tea dance and song.

Secondly, ICH elements should achieve mutually beneficial symbiosis with the economy and culture, meaning the inheritance and development of ICH elements should drive economic development and enhance cultural value, and vice versa, the economy and culture should support the inheritance and development of ICH elements. ICH is an important resource and source of inspiration for the cultural and creative industries, and the design and innovation of the cultural and creative industries can inject new life and vitality into ICH.

Finally, ICH elements and the cultural tourism industry should achieve sustainable symbiosis, meaning the development of ICH elements should guide and promote the development of the tourism industry, and vice versa, the tourism industry should provide platforms and opportunities for the inheritance and development of ICH elements.

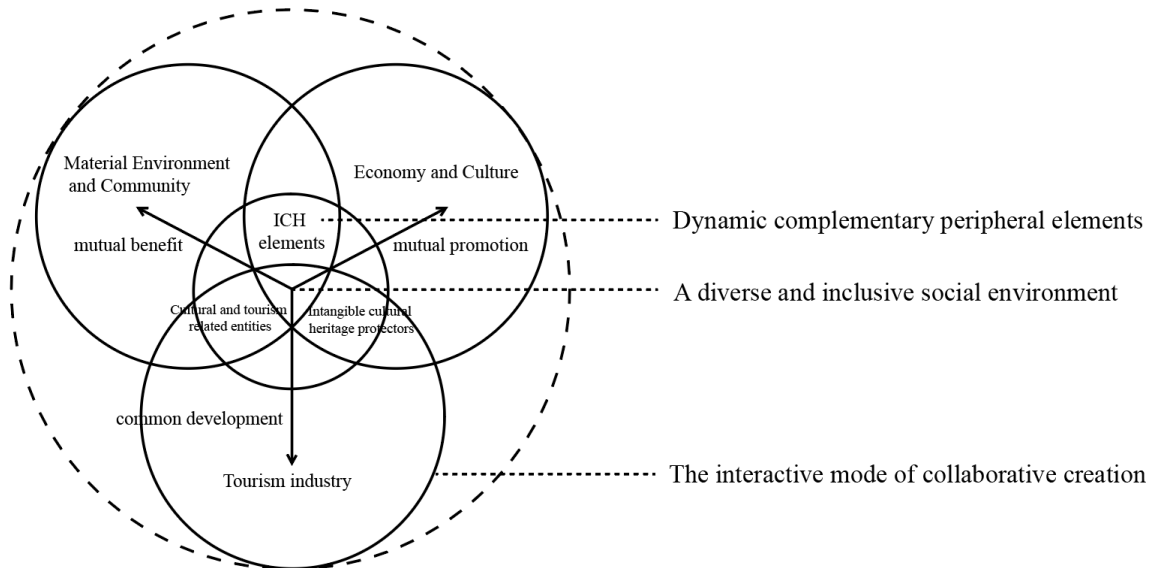


Figure 1. Global Intangible Cultural Heritage Symbiosis System

4. Case Study of the Comprehensive Integration of ICH and Cultural Tourism in Zherong from the Perspective of Symbiosis Theory

From the perspective of symbiosis theory, the integration model of cultural tourism in Zherong County, Ningde City, Fujian Province, demonstrates a harmonious symbiosis between tradition and modernity, culture and tourism, and nature and humanity. This provides new paths for the protection and inheritance of ICH such as Zherong paper cutting.

4.1 Gaps in Symbiotic Units and Rigid Collaboration Models

The gap in ICH inheritance poses a significant obstacle. Modern lifestyles have reduced young people's interest in and opportunities to engage with the traditional art of Zherong paper cutting, leading to a decline in the number of inheritors and challenges in the dissemination and development of the art. To address this, Zherong County has implemented measures such as establishing the Zherong Paper Cutting Window, Zherong Folk Art Museum, and Zherong Paper Cutting Specialty Industry Museum to attract and support the development of paper cutting enterprises.

4.2 Lack of Symbiotic Environmental Mechanisms and Insufficient Resource Integration

In recent years, the Zherong County government has enacted a series of policies to protect and promote Zherong paper cutting, providing macro-level support. However, the effective integration of ICH projects with tourism resources remains insufficient at the implementation level. For example, the combination of Zherong paper cutting with tourism products is limited, with a lack of in-depth exploration in integrating paper cutting art into tourism experience design and product development.

Additionally, the absence of a benefit coordination mechanism is a problem. The symbiotic mechanism among ICH inheritors, tourism operators, and government departments in terms of benefit distribution and role positioning is unclear, making it difficult for all parties to form a cohesive force when advancing cultural tourism integration projects.

4.3 Asymmetric Mutualistic Symbiosis Stage

Zherong paper cutting, as a unique ICH art form, has established a symbiotic relationship with the local cultural tourism industry, bringing varying degrees of benefits to both. However, this symbiotic relationship is not balanced. For Zherong paper cutting, while the development of the cultural tourism industry provides opportunities for publicity and display, allowing more people to learn about and engage with this traditional art, the exposure often remains superficial, lacking deep

cultural exchange and artistic dissemination. Although Zherong paper cutting has gained some attention, it has not received economic benefits commensurate with its cultural and artistic value.

5. Pathways for the Integration of Zherong ICH and Cultural Tourism from the Perspective of Symbiosis Theory

In the 20th National Congress report, Xi Jinping advocated for furthering the progress of socialist culture through innovative transformation and creative development and emphasized strengthening the protection of cultural relics and heritage while considering historical and cultural inheritance in urban and rural construction. The concept of comprehensive ICH emphasizes that to protect and develop Zherong paper cutting, it must be integrated with Zherong's geographic environment, historical culture, socio-economics, education, and research, forming a comprehensive, multi-level, and three-dimensional protection and development mechanism.

5.1 Coordinating Symbiotic Units and Strengthening Substantive Links Between Them

First, addressing the issue of rigid traditional collaborative models, more flexible and diverse collaborative work models should be established, including but not limited to cross-department cooperation, public-private partnerships, and community participation. Second, enhancing the links between symbiotic units should not only involve formal cooperation but also substantive resource sharing and information exchange. This includes showcasing the artistic value of Zherong paper cutting, the stories of its inheritors, and the development of ICH tourism products. Such efforts can increase the exposure of ICH projects and provide unique cultural connotations for tourism products.

5.2 Optimizing the Symbiotic Environment and Promoting Resource Integration and Tourism Innovation

Policy innovation is crucial at the community and top-level design stages. This includes promoting cooperation models between ICH projects and cultural tourism projects, encouraging ICH participation in developing cultural tourism products, and guiding government funds to support ICH and cultural tourism integration projects, thereby effectively combining ICH and tourism resources. On the market level, integrating educational and cultural resources beyond establishing certification and identification systems for ICH products using emerging technologies like NFTs and blockchain is essential to create synergistic effects along the industrial chain. Establishing an ICH and cultural tourism industry alliance can promote resource sharing and cooperation across different fields, accelerating the transition from creative ideas to market products and enhancing the market competitiveness of ICH products.

5.3 Strengthening the Symbiotic Model and Activating the Vitality of ICH

The initial economic benefits of ICH projects are usually low, making it challenging to attract commercial investment. Consequently, government funding becomes the primary support for ICH protection, and the activation of ICH's potential cannot be separated from the cultural tourism industry. To achieve a more balanced symbiotic state, cultural tourism products and services incorporating Zherong paper cutting elements should be expanded. This includes integrating paper cutting art exhibitions with local attractions, offering interactive experiences like paper cutting workshops, and enhancing tourists' participation and experience.

Innovating ICH inheritance methods and expressions to meet modern society's needs and aesthetics is crucial. Digitalizing ICH and creating a metaverse with virtual and real integration can reduce reliance on single revenue models, thus revitalizing Zherong paper cutting and bringing broader recognition and higher economic value. The self-operation and marketization of ICH projects are key to achieving self-development and self-regulation. Exploring new business models for Zherong paper cutting, such as online sales platforms and cross-sector collaborations, can open new revenue channels and achieve a self-sustaining operational model.

6. Conclusion

Integrating intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with the cultural tourism industry is not only a process toward achieving a symbiotic state but also an innovative approach to heritage protection and utilization. Previous studies have pointed out potential negative effects and practical challenges of cultural tourism integration. However, using the framework of symbiosis theory in cultural tourism integration allows for a more systematic understanding of the complexities and multi-dimensional value of merging ICH with the tourism industry. By adopting a "Comprehensive ICH" strategic approach, these negative effects can be mitigated, leading to the sustainable symbiosis of ICH and the entire cultural tourism industry.

In the future, the integration of cultural tourism will be realized at a deeper level, and the fusion of ICH and the tourism

industry will become a normalized phenomenon. Symbiosis theory will provide theoretical support and guidance for this process, enabling the achievement of diverse social, cultural, and economic benefits.

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