

Harmonizing Heritage: Strategies for the Preservation and Commercialization of Cultural Artifacts

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Abstract: This paper examines the economic implications of integrating the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with industrialization and branding strategies in China. By focusing on poverty alleviation and rural revitalization, ICH initiatives have created sustainable economic opportunities through cultural tourism, job creation, and market expansion. Through detailed case studies of Chishui Bamboo Weaving and Liancheng Lianshi Paper, the paper illustrates how traditional crafts can be effectively commercialized without compromising their cultural integrity. Policy support, digital engagement, and innovation are identified as key drivers for enhancing ICH commercialization and fostering local economic development.

Keywords: Non-material cultural heritage, Economic development, Cultural tourism, Poverty alleviation, Digital engagement.

1. Introduction

Non-material cultural heritage, encompassing traditions, rituals, knowledge, and practices passed down through generations, holds intrinsic value in preserving a society's identity and heritage. However, the traditional approach to safeguarding and promoting this heritage has often faced challenges in realizing its full economic potential[1]. The lack of structured commercialization and branding strategies has limited direct revenue generation and failed to harness indirect benefits such as job creation and investment stimulation. As a result, many valuable cultural practices have struggled to thrive in a rapidly changing economic landscape.

In response to these challenges, a shift towards industrializing and branding non-material cultural heritage has emerged as a promising solution to maximize economic benefits. Adopting innovative approaches to monetizing and promoting these intangible assets has unlocked new revenue-generation opportunities. Direct income streams from cultural products, experiences, and services have created sustainable economic pathways for communities previously reliant on traditional practices[2].

Moreover, the industrialization and branding of non-material cultural heritage have brought about direct financial gains and yielded significant indirect benefits[1]. Creating cultural enterprises has led to job opportunities within local communities, empowering individuals and preserving traditional skills. Additionally, branded cultural products' increased visibility and market appeal have attracted investments and stimulated economic growth in previously overlooked regions. This paper will analyze the macroeconomic atmosphere of cultural heritage preservation in China, followed by a

bespoke analysis framework. After reviewing a few case studies, we will conclude and propose strategic recommendations to local authorities to harness cultural heritage's economic and social potential.

2. Macroeconomic Trend of Cultural Heritage Preservation in China

2.1. Support from Government

Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in China has become a cornerstone of the nation's cultural and economic policy. The "14th Five-Year Plan for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage," outlined by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, represents a significant macroeconomic commitment to safeguarding the country's cultural legacy. This plan emphasizes ICH's intrinsic value and acknowledges its potential as an economic growth and social development driver.[3]

One of the key trends in China's ICH preservation is integrating cultural heritage with poverty alleviation and rural revitalization strategies. As indicated in the notice from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Office of the Leading Group for Poverty Alleviation and Development, there is a concerted effort to promote the construction of ICH poverty alleviation workshops. These initiatives aim to foster local economies by combining traditional crafts with modern business practices, creating new employment opportunities, and enhancing artisans' livelihoods. For example, more than 2000 workshops were established to alleviate poverty and offer training to more than 180000 local workers by late 2020. [4]

One tangible example of this integration is the establishment of the "Ruo'ergai" embroidery workshops in Sichuan Province. The "Ruo'ergai" embroidery, a traditional craft of the Tibetan people, has been revitalized through these workshops, which train local women in the intricate art of hand embroidery [5]. By modernizing the designs to appeal to contemporary tastes while preserving the cultural essence, the workshops have successfully connected these artisans to new markets.

Embroidery, once a domestic craft, is now a thriving business, with products ranging from traditional clothing to modern accessories and home decor items. This has not only provided a stable income for the participants but also helped to preserve and promote the region's cultural identity. The workshops have become a beacon of cultural and economic revival, showcasing how traditional skills can be adapted to meet market demands while uplifting the community's economic status.

Moreover, the success of these ICH poverty alleviation workshops has been amplified through exhibitions and online platforms, which showcase the artisans' work to a broader audience. This visibility has attracted tourists and buyers, further boosting the local economy and solidifying the role of ICH in rural development and poverty alleviation [6].

These workshops preserve traditional skills and inject new vitality into rural communities, contributing to the broader goal of rural revitalization. The workshops also serve as hubs for innovation, where old techniques are adapted to meet contemporary consumer demands, ensuring the sustainability of these traditional practices.

2.2. Culture-related Consumption became more popular

Moreover, the "2022 ICH Consumption Trends Report" highlights a growing consumer interest in ICH-related products and experiences. This trend indicates a burgeoning market for cultural goods and services, which can stimulate local economies and promote cultural tourism. The report suggests that as consumer awareness and appreciation for ICH grow, so does the potential for economic activities centered around cultural heritage.

According to the same report, there will be more than 1 million live broadcasts in 2022 related to intangible cultural heritage on Taobao, and the guided transaction volume of intangible cultural heritage live broadcasting will reach nearly 8 billion RMB, doubling from 2020. In addition, the

number of businesses participating in self-broadcasting will increase from 22,000 in 2020 to 33,000 in 2022[7].

The role of digital platforms further amplifies the macroeconomic impact of ICH preservation. They have become instrumental in promoting ICH products, reaching wider audiences, and increasing market accessibility for traditional crafts[6]. This digital transformation aligns with the broader trend of integrating technology into traditional sectors to enhance visibility and commercial viability. For example, integrating traditional crafts like the intricate Suzhou embroidery on Alibaba's specialized ICH e-commerce platform has connected artisans with a nationwide audience. Through these platforms, crafts once confined to local markets have gained broader recognition and commercial success. Social media, particularly in China, has also played a crucial role in promoting ICH. Platforms like Douyin and Weibo have enabled artisans to demonstrate their crafts, engage with a younger audience, and boost sales, illustrating the effective fusion of technology and tradition in revitalizing cultural heritage[8].

In summary, the macroeconomic trends in China's ICH preservation sector reflect a strategic fusion of cultural protection with economic innovation. By leveraging policy support, rural revitalization initiatives, consumer market trends, and digital technology, China is positioning itself to harness the untapped economic potential of its rich cultural heritage. These efforts preserve the country's cultural legacy and lay the groundwork for sustainable economic development driven by cultural diversity and creativity.

3. Introducing A Framework of Measuring Economic Impact of Cultural Heritage Preservation Initiatives

3.1. Economic Impact Framework

We employed a framework to evaluate the initiatives' impact in a structured and systematic manner. The framework proposed here is designed to capture various economic activities stimulated by cultural heritage preservation. At its core, the framework recognizes that the economic benefits of ICH preservation are multifaceted, extending beyond direct financial gains to include the stimulation of ancillary industries and the creation of employment opportunities.

3.1.1. Key Components of the Framework

Cultural Tourism Projects: we think the potential of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to catalyze cultural tourism is significant. A prime example is the revitalization of the ancient town of Lijiang in Yunnan Province, China. By preserving and promoting its rich Naxi culture, Lijiang has become a UNESCO World Heritage site, attracting millions of visitors annually[9].

Investment in Infrastructure and Development: Preservation efforts often necessitate investment in infrastructure, such as the restoration of heritage sites and the development of surrounding areas. This framework component looks at the capital expenditure and the economic activity generated in construction and related sectors [10].

Cultural and Creative Industries: One important role of ICH is inspiring creative industries, such as producing and selling cultural artifacts and themed merchandise. The economic impact can be gauged by the revenue generated from these products and the growth of associated businesses. If no specific data can be found, the overall economic growth will be used as a reference.

Employment Opportunities: ICH preservation can provide significant employment opportunities, particularly in less developed regions, through training programs for ICH practitioners. This aspect of the framework measures the number of jobs created and the resultant improvement in local economies.

The framework presented here offers a structured way to measure and understand the economic impact of cultural heritage preservation initiatives. Focusing on key economic sectors and employing a mixed-methods approach provides a nuanced view of the economic benefits that flow from ICH preservation. This framework is a tool for analysis and a catalyst for discussions on policy and investment in the cultural heritage sector.

3.2. Case Studies of Cultural Heritage Preservation Initiatives

Having established a comprehensive framework to measure the economic impact of cultural heritage preservation initiatives, it is essential to apply this framework to real-world examples. The following case studies illustrate how various cultural heritage preservation projects in China have utilized the components of the proposed framework to achieve significant economic and social benefits.

3.2.1. Chishui Bamboo Weaving

Chishui, a city in Guizhou Province, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, particularly its bamboo weaving tradition. The craft, deeply rooted in local history, has been passed down through generations, embodying the essence of Guizhou's non-material cultural heritage.

Cultural Tourism Projects:

The revitalization of Chishui Bamboo Weaving has the potential to attract cultural tourism. Although specific tourism-related data is not readily available, the city's overall tourism income was reported to be 123.71 billion yuan in 2023, with 10.87 million tourist visits. Integrating bamboo weaving into cultural tourism projects could significantly boost these figures. For instance, creating guided tours that showcase the bamboo weaving process and its history could attract more tourists.[11]



Figure 1: Local artists creating Chishui Bamboo Weaving crafts[12]

Investment in Infrastructure and Development:

The preservation and promotion of bamboo weaving may necessitate investments in infrastructure, such as the establishment of workshops and exhibition centers, which could serve as focal points for both preservation and tourism. While the specific capital expenditure for bamboo weaving is not disclosed, the city's overall growth in the industry sector, with a 29.0% increase in the scale above industry, indicates a supportive environment for such investments.[11]

Cultural and Creative Industries:

The production and sale of bamboo weaving artifacts contribute to the creative industries. These products can range from traditional baskets to modern home decor items, appealing to a wide range of consumers and potentially generating substantial revenue.

Employment Opportunities:

The bamboo weaving industry provides employment opportunities, particularly for local artisans. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that the city's focus on rural revitalization and poverty alleviation suggests that such traditional crafts play an important role in creating more jobs in the local market.

As it was reported by *Culture Industry*, at present, bamboo weaving has directly or indirectly driven more than 500 local left-behind women in Chishui, the disabled, and returned migrant workers to achieve home employment or nearby employment, becoming an important industry for farmers to get rid of poverty and increase income, and contributing to local economic and social development [11].

3.2.2. Liancheng Lianshi Paper in Fujian

Liancheng Lianshi Paper is a distinguished handicraft from Liancheng County, Fujian Province. This revered papermaking art has been preserved with care and stands as an integral element of Liancheng's cultural legacy.

Economic Impact through Cultural Tourism

Recognized as a national "Intangible Cultural Heritage Workshop," Lianshi Paper has emerged as a pillar for cultural tourism, invigorating the local economy by celebrating its traditional craft. The increase in tourist reception by 35.9% and a significant surge of 52.3% in tourism revenue in Liancheng County reflect the burgeoning appeal of cultural heritage tourism, which Lianshi Paper enhances.[13]

Infrastructure and Development Investments

The Lianshi Paper industry has benefited from strategic investments in infrastructure, including establishing dedicated workshops that safeguard the craft and stimulate the local economy. The modest yet consistent growth in Liancheng's industrial sector, marked by a 1.7% increase, underscores the county's commitment to nurturing traditional industries.[13]

Cultural and Creative Industries

Lianshi Paper enriches the cultural and creative sectors by offering a spectrum of paper products that bridge tradition with innovation. Its status as a recognized intangible cultural heritage craft positions it to drive commercial activity and support the expansion of related businesses.

Job Creation and Local Economy

As a custodian of traditional craftsmanship, Lianshi Paper has become a significant source of employment, particularly for local artisans. It supports the county's rural revitalization efforts and contributes to the local economy, although the number of jobs generated remains undisclosed.

3.2.3. Mabian Flower Embroidery Workshop in Sichuan

The Mabian Flower Embroidery Workshop is a cultural beacon in Sichuan Province, renowned for its traditional Yi ethnic embroidery. This craft is a vibrant testament to the Yi people's rich history and artistry, expressed through detailed and vibrant designs.

Economic Impact through Cultural Tourism

The Mabian Flower Embroidery Workshop contributes to cultural tourism, attracting visitors who seek authentic cultural experiences. The region's economic growth, with a 7.0% increase in GDP, provides a strong foundation for the workshop to flourish as a cultural attraction. [14]

Infrastructure and Development Investments

The workshop's establishment signifies an investment in cultural heritage and economic development. It is part of Sichuan's broader industrial growth, which increased by 7.6%, indicating a supportive context for preserving and promoting traditional crafts. [14]

Cultural and Creative Industries

The workshop enriches the cultural and creative industries by offering various Yi embroidery products that cater to traditional and modern markets. This approach ensures the craft's relevance and accessibility to a wide audience.

Job Creation and Local Economy

As a key employer of local artisans, particularly women, the workshop is a vital source of income and skill development. It supports the local economy and is integral to rural revitalization strategies.

3.3. Comparative Analysis and Synthesis of Cultural Heritage Preservation Strategies

In conducting a horizontal comparison of the Chishui Bamboo Weaving, Liancheng Lianshi Paper, and Mabian Yi Embroidery as intangible cultural heritage projects, they collectively demonstrate the significant potential of traditional culture in boosting local economic development and the cultural tourism industry. Although each case presents different data profiles, marketing strategies, and employment impacts, they all effectively protect and promote their traditional crafts through the establishment of workshops and national recognition. These projects provide employment opportunities for local artisans, particularly women, and contribute to the cultural and creative industries by innovating products that blend traditional skills with contemporary demands. The challenges they face include enhancing market visibility and commercial value while preserving their cultural uniqueness and quantifying the direct impact of cultural tourism.

Overall, these cases illustrate that with strategic investment and integration of culture with tourism, the economic potential of intangible cultural heritage can be fully exploited, leading to sustainable economic growth and cultural prosperity for local communities. It is also crucial to ensure that these heritage crafts' authenticity and cultural integrity are meticulously maintained while exploiting the economic potential.

4. Conclusion and recommendation

In conclusion, examining China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through the lens of Chishui Bamboo Weaving, Liancheng Lianshi Paper, and Mabian Yi Embroidery showcases the dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and economic development. These initiatives highlight the viability of traditional crafts in bolstering local economies, creating employment, and invigorating rural communities. To amplify these impacts, several recommendations are proposed:

Market Expansion: It is crucial to broaden the market reach of ICH products by developing comprehensive marketing strategies that target both domestic and international consumers, thereby increasing demand and appreciation for these cultural artifacts. Participating in international trade fairs, creating online marketplaces, and forming partnerships with global retailers can help broaden market reach.

Innovation in Tradition: Encouraging innovation while respecting traditional techniques will allow ICH to adapt to modern consumer tastes and ensure the crafts remain a vibrant part of contemporary culture. For instance, incorporating contemporary design elements into traditional bamboo weaving products has attracted younger consumers.

Digital Engagement: Harnessing the power of digital platforms and social media is essential for expanding the audience for ICH, facilitating online engagement, and enhancing the commercial viability of traditional crafts. Utilizing platforms like Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and WeChat can help artisans reach a broader audience and engage with consumers directly.

Policy Support: Developing supportive policies and regulatory frameworks that protect and promote ICH is vital. This includes financial incentives for artisans, legal protections for traditional knowledge, and educational initiatives cultivating new talent. Policies such as tax incentives for cultural businesses and grants for artisans have proven effective in supporting traditional crafts.

By adopting these strategies, China can harness the economic potential of its ICH, fostering a sustainable and prosperous future for local communities while honoring and preserving their cultural legacy.

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