

Original Research Article

Research on the integration and development mechanism of tourism industry in China's county-level cities——A case study of Huili

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Abstract: As Chinese residents' consumption structure upgrades toward experience-oriented consumption, tourism demand has demonstrated characteristics of high quality, diversification, and personalization. Under the dual-circulation economic paradigm, county-level urban and rural tourism has sustained its popularity by leveraging advantages of short distance, low density, and in-depth experience, emerging as a key direction for the supply-side reform of the tourism industry. Taking Huili City, Sichuan Province as the research object, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of "motivation-operation-guarantee" based on theories of industrial integration, regional tourism systems, and sustainable development. Employing case study, data analysis, and in-depth interview methods, it explores the paths and mechanisms of tourism industrial integration in county-level cities. The research finds that Huili has formed a three-dimensional driving model of "cultural tourism empowerment + agricultural tourism foundation + handicraft tourism value-added" through the in-depth coupling of culture, agriculture, handicrafts, and tourism. The core of its success lies in establishing a three-element motivation mechanism, a four-dimensional operation mechanism, and a four-layer guarantee mechanism. This paper proposes policy suggestions such as deepening "content-driven + technology-enabled" development, providing theoretical reference and practical paradigm for the high-quality development of tourism industry in similar county-level cities.

Keywords: tourism industry integration; county-level tourism; mechanism construction; Huili City

1. Overview of the research area

Huili City, located in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China, covers 4,527 square kilometers with a population of 462,000. A national historical and cultural city with over 2,000 years of urban history, it was upgraded from a county to a city in 2021, boasting the triple resource advantages of "culture + agriculture + handicrafts". Culturally, its well-preserved ancient city houses numerous cultural relic protection units and intangible cultural heritage items. Agriculturally, pomegranate cultivation has a history exceeding 2,000 years—With a planting area of 28,000 hectares and an output value surpassing 5 billion yuan in 2024. Handicraft-wise, the craftsmanship of bronze ware and green pottery is uniquely distinctive. In 2024, Huili's regional GDP reached 25.86 billion yuan, with the tertiary industry accounting for 46.8%. Tourism, as a pillar of the regional economy, contributed 18.6% to the comprehensive GDP and 21.3% to employment^[1].

2. Basic conditions and current situation of tourism industry integration in Huili City

2.1. In-depth integration of culture and tourism: From "resource activation" to "value addition"

Centered on four major cultural resources—Ming-Qing historical buildings, traditional streets, red heritage sites, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) crafts—Huili City advances cultural-tourism integration through the pathway of "cultural relic activation + ICH experience + red study tours." Surveys indicate that tourists' satisfaction with all cultural resources exceeds 4.2 points (out of 5), with historical buildings ranking first at 4.6 points, followed by red heritage sites (4.5), ICH crafts (4.4), and traditional streets (4.3).

A case in point is the functional transformation project of state-owned assets in the ancient city. Since

2022, Huili has renovated 200 idle state-owned assets in the ancient city following the principle of "restoring old buildings to their original appearance" and introduced new business formats. For example, "Shiyuanju," a cultural homestay converted from a former supply and marketing cooperative warehouse, received 32,000 visitors with an occupancy rate of 82% in 2024. By 2024, 86 assets had completed transformation, adding 32 new cultural-tourism formats and directly boosting employment for 526 people.

2.2. Integration of agriculture and tourism: From "single production" to "trinity industry linkage"

With the pomegranate industry as the engine, Huili has built an entire industrial chain model of "festival drainage + park carrying + agricultural experience", forming a "four-season tourism" product system. Carriers such as Tongkuang Village Pomegranate Sightseeing Park and Zhangguan Town Modern Agricultural Tourism Park have achieved efficient transformation through "sightseeing + research + shopping". The iconic Pomegranate Festival attracted 658,000 person-times in 2024, generating 630 million yuan in direct tourism income and driving more than 1.2 billion yuan in indirect related consumption. The annual total income of agricultural-tourism integration reached 1.85 billion yuan, accounting for 25.2% of the city's total tourism income; rural laborers accounted for 82%, and participating farmers increased their annual income by 25,000 yuan on average, with a growth rate 11 percentage points higher than the per capita disposable income of rural residents in the city.

For example: Tongkuang Village Pomegranate Sightseeing Park adopts the "government + enterprise + cooperative + farmer" model. After its completion in 2021, the government invested 12 million yuan in infrastructure construction; enterprises operated projects such as "pomegranate adoption", with 860 trees adopted and 1.032 million yuan in income in 2024; cooperatives organized farmers to participate in services and management; farmers obtained triple income from land transfer, labor services and dividends. In 2024, the average household income increased by 32,000 yuan, 65% higher than that of non-participating farmers.

2.3. Integration of handicrafts and tourism: From "traditional skills" to "cultural and creative products"

Focusing on the two intangible cultural heritage skills of red copper hot pot and green pottery, Huili has realized inheritance and value addition through "productive protection + brand building + market expansion". In 2024, the annual output value of red copper hot pots reached 150 million yuan, with 80% sold through tourism channels; the annual output value of green pottery reached 120 million yuan, with 65% sold through tourism channels. Both have set up experience workshops, receiving 125,000 and 86,000 experience tourists respectively annually.

For example: the digital transformation of the green pottery intangible cultural heritage workshop. Cooperating with Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, the workshop introduced 3D printing technology to shorten the mold cycle, built laboratories to develop new glazes, and increased the product qualification rate from 65% to 92%. It developed cultural and creative products such as tea sets and ornaments. The "pomegranate-patterned green pottery tea sets" sold 12,000 sets with a gross profit margin of 60% in 2024; a "digital experience area" was set up for tourists to experience production through VR and practice. In 2024, it received 86,000 person-times and drove sales of 78 million yuan.

3. Mechanism construction for the integration and development of tourism industry in Huili City

3.1. Motivation mechanism: A ternary-driven integration power system

3.1.1. Market demand driving force

Tourism consumption structure has upgraded significantly. From 2020 to 2024, the number of visitors increased from 3.2 million to 6.0008 million, with an average annual growth rate of 20.4%; total tourism income rose from 3.26 billion yuan to 7.341 billion yuan, growing at an average annual rate of 23.9%. The income growth rate has consistently outpaced that of visitor arrivals, confirming the improvement in tourists' consumption capacity^[2]. Demand exhibits three key characteristics: cultural experience demand accounts

for 68% (up 23 percentage points from 2020); family parent-child tours make up 42%, spurring demand for agricultural and study tour products; short-distance tourists from within the province and surrounding areas account for 85%, driving strong demand for weekend and short-holiday products and directly promoting the iteration of integrated products.

3.1.2. Policy guidance driving force

A support system of "top-level design + policy matching + fund guarantee" has been established. Twelve plans including the "14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural and Tourism Development of Huili City" have been formulated to clarify integration paths; an annual special fund of 180 million yuan for cultural and tourism is allocated to support resource integration, infrastructure construction, and brand promotion; a leading group for tourism industry development, with the municipal party committee secretary as group leader, has been set up, and an inter-departmental joint meeting system established to coordinate and solve problems in integrated development.

3.1.3. Enterprise innovation driving force

Enterprises have enhanced integration efficiency through multi-dimensional innovation. In product innovation, "ancient city night tours" have introduced light shows and folk performances, receiving 860,000 visitors and generating 230 million yuan in income in 2024; in model innovation, the "government + enterprise + cooperative + farmer" mechanism has been promoted, with 15 key enterprises linking 28 cooperatives and over 1,200 households; in technological innovation, 50 million yuan has been invested to build a "smart tourism brain" to achieve integrated services. In 2024, online bookings accounted for 45.2%, complaint handling time was shortened to within 2 hours, and satisfaction rate reached 92.3% (up 15 percentage points from 2020).

3.2. Operation mechanism: A four-dimensional transformation integration implementation path

3.2.1. Resource integration

Classify and integrate cultural, agricultural and handicraft resources, promote the cross-industry flow of factors and spatial integration layout, build a spatial pattern of "one core, two belts and three districts", and realize resource agglomeration.

3.2.2. Brand building

Shape the urban tourism brand of "Millennium Ancient City · Pomegranate in Huili", cultivate three major product brands, formulate integrated product standards, and standardize quality and service processes.

3.2.3. Marketing promotion

Expand the market through online and offline channels such as new media platforms, OTA cooperation, festival activities and cross-regional routes. In 2024, the total reading volume of new media content exceeded 200 million times, and online bookings accounted for 45.2%.

3.2.4. Value transformation

In 2024, integration drove the income of related industries to 12.85 billion yuan, accounting for 49.7% of GDP. At the same time, it improved rural infrastructure, promoted the protection of cultural heritage and the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, realizing the transformation of economic, social and cultural multi-values.

3.3. Guarantee mechanism: A four-layer supported integration stability system

Huili City has built four major guarantee systems to lay a solid foundation for the integrated development of the tourism industry. All measures are supported by practical cases, and the guarantee effect is remarkable.

3.3.1. Technological innovation level

Construct a system of "modernization of traditional skills + intellectualization of tourism services". Intangible cultural heritage workshops have established 5 industry-university-research platforms with universities such as Sichuan Tourism University, developed 15 integrated products in 2024, and "pomegranate-patterned green pottery tea sets" have obtained national appearance design patents; 120 million yuan has been invested to build a "smart tourism brain", realizing full Wi-Fi coverage in key areas. The number of users of the "Huili Tourism" mini-program reached 860,000, with online transactions exceeding 3.2 billion yuan; the smart monitoring system for pomegranate planting has been promoted, and the rate of high-quality fruits has reached 92%, an increase of 18 percentage points compared with traditional methods.

3.3.2. System guarantee level

Establish a system of "planning + policy + assessment". Form a three-level planning of "master plan + detailed plan + special plan", clarifying the "one core, two belts and three districts" layout; issue 8 supporting policies covering finance and taxation fields; implement "one seal for approval", shortening the project approval time limit from 30 days to 10 days; establish a benefit evaluation system, incorporate the results into the annual assessment, and promote development through assessment.

3.3.3. Talent support level

Implement the "tourism talent revitalization plan". From 2021 to 2024, 586 tourism professionals were introduced; oriented training was carried out in cooperation with Sichuan Tourism University, training more than 1,200 local tour guides and intangible cultural heritage inheritors; an incentive fund was set up, with 1.5 million yuan awarded to 48 outstanding talents in 2024, and 35 local talents were promoted to key positions.

3.3.4. Ecological constraint level

Adhere to the concept of "ecological priority" and build a system of "protection + governance + restoration". Demarcate ecological red lines, and control the floor area ratio of scenic spots below 0.3; invest 120 million yuan in environmental governance in 2024, build 15 sewage treatment stations and 28 garbage transfer stations, realizing daily garbage collection and transportation; implement greening projects to add 8,000 mu of green space. The excellent air quality rate of scenic spots is 98.5%, and the surface water quality compliance rate is 100%, successfully creating a "National Model City for Ecological Civilization Construction".

4. Research conclusions and policy suggestions

4.1. Research conclusions

Tourism industry integration is an effective path for the high-quality development of tourism industry in county-level cities. Through in-depth integration of multiple industries, Huili City has solved problems such as product homogenization and low industrial correlation, realizing industrial value addition and farmers' income increase.

The integration of tourism industry in county-level cities needs to build a three-dimensional mechanism system of "motivation-operation-guarantee". The ternary motivation, four-dimensional operation and four-layer guarantee support each other, promoting the in-depth development of integration.

The integration of tourism industry in county-level cities needs to highlight characteristics according to local conditions. Huili City has formed a unique model based on its own resources, and integration should proceed in an orderly manner, evolving from shallow to deep levels.

4.2. Suggestions

4.2.1. Deepen the "content-driven + technology-empowered" strategy

Explore local characteristic resources to develop immersive interactive products, increase investment in smart tourism construction, and promote the integration of traditional industries with modern technologies.

4.2.2. Build a diversified interest linkage mechanism

Refer to the interest distribution ratio of Huili City, improve the functions of cooperatives, establish a risk-sharing mechanism, and ensure win-win results for all parties.

4.2.3. Improve the factor support system

Solve the bottlenecks of talents, funds and technology through school-enterprise cooperation for oriented talent training, establishment of industrial integration funds, and construction of industry-university-research cooperation platforms.

4.2.4. Strengthen regional coordination

Jointly build tourism routes with surrounding cities, establish inter-departmental coordination mechanisms, promote cooperation between tourism enterprises and multi-industry enterprises, and form coordinated development.

4.3. Research limitations and prospects

As a case study, this research requires further validation of its generalizability and lacks long-term follow-

up on the integration effects. Future studies could expand the sample size for multi-case comparisons, establish long-term tracking mechanisms, and adopt quantitative methods to enhance scientific rigor and precision.

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