

Original Research Article

Suzhou's cultural-Tourism integration for rural revitalization: Current progress and strategies*Jing Zhang**School of Economics and Management, Suzhou Institute of Industrial Technology, Suzhou, Jiangsu, 215000, China*

Abstract: With the deepening implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, Suzhou has actively explored innovative pathways for cultural-tourism integration by leveraging its rich historical-cultural resources and distinctive ecological advantages, effectively driving the transformation, upgrading, and sustainable development of its rural economy. This study analyzes the current progress of cultural-tourism integration in advancing rural revitalization in Suzhou, examines its successful practices and existing challenges, and proposes strategic recommendations for future development. These include balancing the conservation and utilization of cultural resources, aligning tourism reception capacity with market demands, and strengthening talent recruitment, cultivation, and innovation capabilities. The findings aim to offer insights for Suzhou and other cities pursuing similar development models.

Keywords: Cultural and tourism integration; Rural revitalization; Suzhou

1. Introduction

The Rural Revitalization Strategy, as one of China's major national strategies, aims to achieve agricultural and rural modernization in accordance with the overarching requirements of "prosperous industries, ecologically livable environments, civilized rural ethos, effective governance, and affluent livelihoods." Suzhou, a renowned historical and cultural city coupled with a premier tourist destination, possesses abundant cultural heritage and natural landscapes that provide inherent advantages for cultural-tourism integration. With the deepening implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, numerous localities are actively exploring and establishing modern rural industrial systems. As an innovative model for rural development, cultural-tourism integration serves as a critical bridge connecting urban and rural resources, facilitating the synergistic convergence of rural industries, spatial optimization, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. This integration has emerged as a vital force in stimulating consumption, expanding domestic demand, driving economic growth, and advancing holistic rural revitalization. In recent years, Suzhou has proactively aligned with national priorities, positioning cultural-tourism integration as a strategic engine for rural revitalization. Through a series of innovative measures, the city has achieved remarkable progress in fostering sustainable rural transformation.

2. Context and significance of cultural-Tourism integration in driving rural revitalization in Suzhou

2.1. Background

Situated in the Yangtze River Delta region, Suzhou boasts a robust economy, profound cultural heritage, and abundant tourism resources. However, accelerated urbanization has precipitated challenges in rural areas, including population outflow and industrial hollowing-out. To address these issues, Suzhou has pioneered innovative models of cultural-tourism integration. By revitalizing rural cultural assets, enhancing tourism service

quality, and attracting urban visitors and investors, the city has catalyzed diversified economic development in its countryside^[1].

2.2. Implications

Cultural-tourism integration serves as a powerful catalyst for rural revitalization in Suzhou. First, it reinvigorates rural vitality by optimizing industrial structures and expanding farmers' income streams. The convergence of cultural and tourism sectors not only stimulates traditional service industries—such as catering, accommodation, and transportation—but also spurs growth in agro-processing, handicraft production, and related sectors, thereby extending industrial value chains. Second, this integration safeguards and transmits rural cultural legacies while amplifying cultural soft power. Through systematic excavation and presentation of folk traditions, agrarian practices, ancient architecture, and artisanal crafts, rural cultural appeal gains global visibility, ensuring the perpetuation of local heritage. Third, it advances ecological and infrastructural modernization. Guided by eco-conservation principles, resource development under this model promotes green development concepts, improves living environments, and elevates residents' quality of life^[2].

3. Current development status of cultural-tourism integration in suzhou's rural revitalization

3.1. Policy guidance and planning prioritization

Suzhou has institutionalized cultural-tourism integration as a core rural revitalization strategy through policy innovations. Key documents like the Several Support Policies for Promoting High-Quality Tourism Development in Suzhou and the *Action Plan for Advancing High-Quality Tourism Development in Suzhou (2023–2025)* provide regulatory frameworks and developmental roadmaps. Parallel efforts focus on planning and constructing flagship rural tourism destinations—including key tourism villages and characteristic pastoral communities—to optimize resource allocation and service standards.

3.2. Project implementation and operationalization

Capitalizing on localized assets, Suzhou's districts have launched emblematic cultural-tourism initiatives. A prime example is the Tang Xiaoya Educational Tourism Program in Qingdeng Village (Xushuguan, Suzhou High-Tech Zone), which reimagines rural spaces as multifunctional hubs blending study tours, cultural immersion, and recreational activities. This project exemplifies how targeted interventions—village landscape rehabilitation, infrastructure modernization, and adaptive reuse of idle resources—can transform rural areas into social media-famous destinations. Such efforts have driven measurable improvements in environmental quality while significantly boosting tourist engagement and economic returns^[3].

4. Challenges in Suzhou's cultural-Tourism integration for rural revitalization

4.1. Imbalance between cultural resource preservation and utilization

In the process of promoting rural revitalization through the integration of culture and tourism in Suzhou, balancing the protection and utilization of cultural resources remains a critical challenge. This necessitates continuous exploration of scientifically sound models for cultural resource stewardship in practice.

4.1.1. Conflict between conservation and economic development

On one hand, preservation entails substantial costs. The conservation of Suzhou's cultural assets—particularly ancient architecture and historic villages—requires significant ongoing financial investment for restoration

and maintenance to safeguard their historical integrity and cultural value. However, the high costs of preservation frequently conflict with limited fiscal resources, hindering comprehensive conservation efforts.

On the other hand, economic development pressures create competing priorities. In pursuit of rapid economic growth, some localities prioritize short-term tourism exploitation of cultural resources. While this approach may generate immediate economic benefits, it risks causing irreversible damage to these irreplaceable cultural assets.

4.1.2. Tension between conservation and tourism development

On one hand, certain cultural resources face excessive commercialization during cultural-tourism integration, where their exploitation prioritizes tourist attraction and revenue generation. However, such over-commercialization risks eroding the authentic character and cultural essence of these resources, ultimately diminishing their inherent historical significance.

On the other hand, preservation and utilization methods remain homogenized. Current approaches in Suzhou predominantly focus on sightseeing-centric exploitation of cultural assets. This monolithic strategy not only constrains the multidimensional potential of cultural resources but may also accelerate their degradation through repetitive consumption patterns.

4.2. Mismatch between tourism capacity and market demand

The rapid expansion of rural tourism in Suzhou has intensified the mismatch between tourism carrying capacity and market demand. Popular rural destinations frequently experience overcrowding and traffic gridlock during peak holiday periods. This reality necessitates strategic upgrades to infrastructure systems and service quality enhancements within Suzhou's cultural-tourism integration framework, ensuring market responsiveness while advancing rural revitalization objectives.

4.2.1. Uneven tourist distribution

Suzhou boasts abundant tourist attractions, including classical gardens, ancient water towns, and museums, yet suffers from disproportionate visitor distribution. Iconic sites like the Humble Administrator's Garden and Tiger Hill Scenic Area experience overwhelming visitor flows, while lesser-known cultural assets remain underutilized. This spatial imbalance strains carrying capacities at popular destinations to near-saturation levels, simultaneously leaving the developmental potential of undervisited sites untapped.

4.2.2. Inadequate tourism infrastructure development

The exponential growth of Suzhou's tourism market has exacerbated pressure on its infrastructure systems, particularly during peak travel periods such as public holidays and summer/winter vacation seasons. Critical facilities—including transportation networks, accommodation, and dining services in popular destinations—frequently fall short of meeting visitor demands. This systemic shortfall not only diminishes tourist experiences but also constrains the enhancement of tourism carrying capacities.

4.2.3. Insufficient tourism product innovation

Amid rising consumer expectations fueled by increasing disposable incomes, tourists now prioritize experiential engagement and interactive participation, seeking distinctive encounters during their journeys. However, Suzhou's tourism product development remains underdeveloped, predominantly concentrated in conventional sightseeing offerings. This lack of diversified and personalized tourism products fails to accommodate evolving market demands for multifaceted experiences.

4.3. Talent shortages and innovation deficits

The advancement of cultural-tourism integration for rural revitalization in Suzhou requires robust support

from high-caliber professionals. Nevertheless, pervasive talent gaps and innovation bottlenecks persist across rural areas, necessitating coordinated strategies to cultivate homegrown talent, attract external expertise, and foster innovation ecosystems—critical imperatives for driving high-quality development in this sector.

4.3.1. Talent shortfalls in cultural-Tourism integration

(1) Structural Talent Imbalance: Suzhou demonstrates concentrated expertise in traditional arts like Kunqu Opera and Pingtan storytelling, yet faces acute shortages in modern performance arts—including musicals, stage plays, dramas, and children's theater. This lopsided distribution constrains innovative synergies between cultural preservation and tourism development. Furthermore, critical gaps exist in creative professionals for cultural industries, compounded by insufficient marketing strategists and management specialists, resulting in suboptimal performance in project conceptualization, promotion, and operational management.

(2) Incomplete Talent Typology with Proficiency Gaps: The creation of high-quality tourism performance art suffers from systemic shortages across all production dimensions—both onstage and backstage roles. Taking stage productions as an example, critical deficiencies exist throughout the creative chain: from acting and playwrighting to directing, stage props management, and lighting design. This dual challenge of incomplete talent categories and insufficient expertise fundamentally constrains artistic output quality.

4.3.2. Innovation capacity deficits

(1) Content creation deficiencies: As compelling content fulfills tourists' cultural aspirations, it serves as the cornerstone for integrated cultural-tourism development. However, Suzhou's current capabilities in content innovation remain underdeveloped, requiring urgent enhancement of creative competencies and optimization of cultural product portfolios.

(2) Lagging digitalization in cultural-Tourism industries: Within the context of the digital economy, the cultural-tourism sector necessitates deep convergence with technological advancements. However, Suzhou's progress in digital transformation for cultural-tourism industries remains underdeveloped, characterized by the absence of pioneering enterprises to spearhead innovation. This deficit in industrial leadership substantially constrains the sector's capacity for innovative integration between cultural assets and tourism development.

(3) Insufficient policy support and flawed incentive mechanisms: Suzhou's cultural-tourism talent policies suffer from inadequate targeting and the absence of a comprehensive evaluation framework. This institutional gap has constrained talent cultivation and recruitment efforts, failing to establish effective incentive structures—a critical deficiency that ultimately hinders the advancement of cultural-tourism integration^[4].

5. Strategic pathways for cultural-Tourism integration driving rural revitalization in Suzhou

5.1. Balancing cultural resource conservation and utilization

First, develop tiered conservation plans tailored to distinct cultural assets—including historical architecture and traditional villages—during cultural-tourism integration processes. These plans must delineate conservation parameters, establish protection tiers, and specify safeguarding measures. Concurrently, strengthen legal frameworks to ensure institutional authority and enforcement mechanisms for heritage protection protocols.

Second, advance the revitalization and activation of cultural resources through tourism integration. Develop culturally distinctive tourism products that synergize with local heritage assets, thereby actualizing their economic and socio-cultural value. Concurrently, empower community participation in heritage stewardship by institutionalizing mechanisms for resident engagement in conservation practices. This can be operationalized through cultural festival programming, artisanal heritage transmission initiatives, and participatory governance models—strategies proven to strengthen communal cultural identity and foster place-based belonging.

Finally, governmental authorities must implement incentive policies to mobilize social capital investment

in cultural resource conservation. Establish dedicated funding mechanisms to finance preservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse initiatives during tourism development phases. Institutionalize robust supervision systems mandating periodic inspections and evaluations of conservation efforts, ensuring strict enforcement of protective measures. Implement dynamic strategy adjustments based on assessment outcomes to guarantee scientifically sound preservation methodologies that align cultural resource protection with sustainable tourism growth.

5.2. Aligning tourism carrying capacity with market demand

Firstly, it is necessary to strengthen the construction of tourism infrastructure, including accommodation facilities, catering services, and transportation systems, to ensure sufficient service capacity meets market demand. Simultaneously, rational planning of the spatial distribution of tourism facilities should be implemented to effectively disperse tourist flows during peak seasons and prevent excessive pressure on local reception capacities in specific areas.

Secondly, it is essential to enhance tourism service quality. On one hand, efforts should be intensified to provide professional training for tourism practitioners, elevating their professional competence and service awareness to ensure high-quality visitor experiences. On the other hand, systematic measures must be taken to formulate and refine tourism service standards, implementing standardized management protocols to guarantee consistent and stable service quality across the industry.

Thirdly, strategic innovation in tourism product development should be prioritized. By aligning with market demand and leveraging local resource endowments, diversified tourism offerings must be systematically developed and promoted to cater to heterogeneous visitor preferences. Concurrently, institutional mechanisms for brand architecture construction and strategic promotional campaigns should be strengthened, thereby enhancing product differentiation through improved market visibility and reputation equity to attract broader tourist demographics.

5.3. Strategic talent development and innovation enhancement

First, develop a robust talent introduction and cultivation framework. Suzhou's governmental departments should deepen collaboration with local universities, research institutions, and other academic bodies to attract professionals and teams specializing in cultural-tourism integration, providing intellectual capital for rural revitalization. By establishing research hubs, innovation platforms, and collaborative initiatives, a dynamic ecosystem will be created for experts to leverage their expertise. Policy incentives and financial support will encourage professionals to embed themselves in rural areas, channeling their knowledge into grassroots development. Additionally, enterprises should facilitate partnerships between in-house talent and external professional organizations, importing cutting-edge concepts and technologies to drive integrated cultural-tourism growth. These strategies aim to attract and retain top external talent and intellectual resources, fostering sustained rural revitalization momentum.

Second, scale up investment in rural education to elevate farmers' literacy and technical proficiency. Suzhou's relevant authorities can enhance agricultural technology adoption and cultural-tourism innovation capabilities among farmers through targeted training programs and on-the-ground technical guidance. By offering preferential policies and improved livelihood conditions, the government can attract high-caliber talent to settle in rural regions, encouraging their active participation in cultural-tourism projects and driving rural revitalization forward.

Finally, cultivate a culture of innovation among talent pools. To address gaps in innovative capacity, local enterprises should strengthen ties with research entities and universities, integrating new technologies and ideas into talent development. Strategies like training workshops, cross-sector exchanges, and knowledge-sharing forums will systematically enhance the innovative edge of professionals in cultural-tourism integration. Mean-

while, supporting talent to lead technological and managerial innovations will infuse rural revitalization with fresh energy and sustainable momentum, ensuring long-term progress driven by creative solutions^[5].

6. Conclusions and prospects

Suzhou's cultural-tourism integration for rural revitalization has achieved notable progress in driving rural economic transformation, enhancing cultural soft power, and improving ecological environments and infrastructure. However, challenges remain: imbalanced protection and utilization of cultural resources, mismatched tourism services with market demands, and shortages in talent and innovation. Going forward, Suzhou should deepen innovation in cultural-tourism integration, adopt targeted solutions to address these issues, and advance high-quality development to fully implement the rural revitalization strategy.

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