

Brand Building and Communication of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hainan in the Context of Cultural Integration

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Abstract: The integration of culture and tourism offers a strategic pathway for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to evolve from "static preservation" toward "dynamic development," enabling cultural assets to gain contemporary relevance while fostering economic value. Branding plays a critical role in linking Hainan's ICH to the cultural tourism market, enhancing visibility, and establishing a distinctive cultural identity. This study investigates the development needs of the cultural tourism sector in the Hainan Free Trade Port, focusing on key ICH resources such as Li ethnic brocade, Lingao fishing songs, and the Nanhai maritime routes. It identifies current challenges in Hainan's ICH branding, including severe homogenization of products, fragmented dissemination channels, and insufficient mechanisms for market conversion. To address these challenges, the paper proposes a three-dimensional brand development framework: (1) differentiated brand positioning, which emphasizes the unique cultural and historical characteristics of each ICH resource; (2) scenario-based content dissemination, leveraging immersive experiences, digital storytelling, and multi-platform promotion to enhance audience engagement; and (3) deepened industrial collaboration, fostering synergies between cultural practitioners, tourism operators, and creative industries to ensure sustainable development. By integrating "cultural essence, market demand, and innovative communication," this framework establishes a systematic approach to transform Hainan's ICH into the cultural tourism "core intellectual property" (IP) of the Free Trade Port. Ultimately, the proposed strategy not only strengthens the cultural recognition and experiential value of Hainan's ICH but also creates a sustainable pathway for economic growth. The study provides practical insights for policymakers, cultural managers, and tourism enterprises seeking to achieve a harmonious balance between cultural preservation and market-driven development, ensuring that Hainan's unique heritage becomes a dynamic, engaging, and economically viable element of its tourism ecosystem.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Hainan possesses more than 300 intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects spanning multiple categories, including ethnic traditions such as the Li ethnic group's textile dyeing techniques, maritime heritage exemplified by the historic Nanhai sea route, and folk customs like the Danzhou Tiaosheng folk opera. These diverse cultural resources constitute the core assets that differentiate Hainan's cultural tourism offerings and provide a foundation for creating distinctive tourist experiences.

In line with the 14th Five-Year Plan for Culture and Tourism Development, which emphasizes "deepening cultural-tourism integration and incorporating ICH into tourism experiences," Hainan has increasingly showcased ICH elements in scenic spots,

homestays, cultural markets, and other venues beyond traditional museums and master-apprentice workshops. Despite these efforts, current ICH presentations remain largely fragmented, with isolated exhibits and limited thematic cohesion. The absence of unified branding, coordinated content dissemination, and systematic communication strategies restricts the potential of ICH to serve as cultural landmarks or recognizable tourism icons.

Given this context, exploring effective branding and dissemination strategies for Hainan's ICH through cultural-tourism integration becomes essential. Such strategies can revitalize the contemporary value of these cultural assets, enhance visitor engagement, and contribute to the high-quality development of the Free Trade Port's cultural tourism sector. By linking heritage conservation with market-oriented approaches, Hainan can transform ICH from static preservation into dynamic cultural experiences that resonate with both domestic and international audiences [1].

1.2. Research Significance

From a theoretical perspective, this study integrates the concepts of "cultural-tourism convergence" and "intangible cultural heritage branding," with particular focus on Hainan's unique "oceanic + ethnic" heritage characteristics. It addresses existing gaps in the literature, such as the reliance on generic branding theories without regional specificity and communication approaches that overlook adaptation to cultural-tourism scenarios. By incorporating local cultural contexts and tourism dynamics, the research enriches the theoretical framework of regional practice in intangible cultural heritage branding.

From a practical standpoint, the study provides actionable solutions to real-world challenges in Hainan's ICH branding. These strategies support projects such as the Li ethnic group's brocade weaving and coconut carving initiatives in establishing distinctive brand identities. They also promote collaborative pathways for scenic areas, cultural enterprises, and tourism operators to integrate intangible cultural heritage with tourism offerings, thereby creating immersive, culturally enriched experiences for visitors. Simultaneously, these efforts enhance tourists' cultural appreciation, sense of connection, and recognition of Hainan's unique heritage, contributing to the sustainable growth of the local cultural tourism ecosystem [2].

2. The Value Basis of Brand Building and Communication of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hainan under the Background of Cultural and Tourism Integration

2.1. Branding: Transforming Intangible Cultural Heritage from 'Resource' to 'IP'

The essence of cultural-tourism integration lies in the principle of "culture empowering tourism, tourism activating culture," with branding functioning as the vital link connecting these two domains. Effective branding enables Hainan's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to overcome the challenge of homogenization and to assert a distinctive cultural identity. For example, the Li ethnic group's brocade can be positioned as "China's southern living textile epic," emphasizing its rarity and recognition as a human intangible cultural heritage. Similarly, the Nanhai maritime route can be branded as "a living fossil of ancient maritime wisdom," highlighting its uniqueness and historical significance as a maritime cultural legacy.

By establishing clear and compelling brand positioning, ICH is transformed from abstract or vague cultural symbols into tangible cultural and tourism intellectual properties (IPs) with memorable and marketable characteristics. This transformation not only attracts tourists to actively explore the heritage but also deepens the cultural resonance of tourism experiences, allowing visitors to engage meaningfully with both the aesthetic and historical values of Hainan's heritage assets [3]. Furthermore, a strong brand identity provides a foundation for cross-sector collaborations, such as integrating ICH motifs into fashion, media, or creative industries, thereby extending the heritage's influence beyond the tourism context.

2.2. Innovation in Dissemination: Bringing Intangible Cultural Heritage from Niche to Mainstream

Traditional approaches to ICH dissemination, such as "ICH Day" events or museum exhibitions, often reach limited audiences and fail to create sustained engagement. In contrast, cultural tourism offers diverse high-frequency touchpoints that can transform heritage into an immersive, everyday experience. Visitors can encounter ICH through craft workshops at scenic spots, ICH-themed products in homestays, or heritage-inspired culinary experiences at local restaurants. Such exposure allows tourists to interact with ICH in a tangible and memorable way, facilitating natural brand recognition and emotional connection.

Modern digital platforms further enhance the dissemination of ICH. Short videos, live streaming, and interactive social media experiences enable offline encounters to become online engagements. For instance, when tourists record and share the Li ethnic group's brocade weaving process on platforms like Douyin, it amplifies brand awareness, encourages cultural tourism visits, and generates a cyclical effect of "experience → dissemination → tourism traffic." These approaches not only increase audience reach but also create opportunities for collaborative content production involving local communities, cultural practitioners, and tourism operators, ensuring that heritage is communicated dynamically and contextually [4].

2.3. Market Transformation: Transitioning Intangible Cultural Heritage from 'Preservation' to 'Sustainability'

Cultural-tourism integration provides a viable pathway for the commercialization and sustainable development of ICH. Through brand licensing, heritage patterns and symbols can be incorporated into souvenirs, hotel décor, fashion, and lifestyle products, expanding the scope of cultural consumption. Skill-based experiences, such as workshops on Li ethnic brocade weaving or coconut carving, allow visitors to actively engage with heritage practices for a fee, generating direct economic benefits for heritage bearers.

Educational initiatives further broaden the application of ICH. Programs like "Exploring the Hidden Routes of South China Sea Navigation" introduce students to historical maritime knowledge and hands-on craft experiences, creating new consumption and learning scenarios. These market-oriented strategies enable ICH to reduce reliance on government subsidies, establishing a self-sustaining cycle of "protection, transmission, and development." By aligning cultural preservation with commercial viability, Hainan can ensure that its ICH not only survives but thrives as a dynamic and economically impactful component of the regional tourism ecosystem [5].

3. Existing Problems in the Shaping and Dissemination of Intangible Cultural Heritage Brands in Hainan

3.1. Vague Brand Positioning and Severe Homogenization

Many intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects in Hainan lack clear and distinctive brand positioning, which leads to serious homogenization among cultural products. For example, both Li ethnic brocade and Miao ethnic batik highlight "ethnic textiles" as their main selling point, but they fail to showcase their unique craftsmanship-Li brocade emphasizes the "continuous warp and discontinuous weft" technique, whereas Miao batik relies on "resist dye patterns." Similarly, products such as coconut carvings and shell carvings often share similar designs, mostly appearing as conventional decorative ornaments. These products lack narrative depth and innovative design elements that reflect Hainan's unique cultural identity. This low differentiation and unclear branding make it difficult for tourists to remember, recognize, or form emotional attachment to these cultural products, ultimately limiting their long-term appeal and commercial potential.

3.2. Fragmented Communication and Lack of Systematic Strategy

The dissemination of ICH in Hainan remains highly fragmented. Different stakeholders—including government agencies, tourist attractions, and heritage bearers—pursue their own promotional goals without a coordinated strategy. Government departments primarily focus on policy promotion and showcasing conservation achievements, while scenic spots emphasize experiential marketing through heritage zones. Heritage bearers, on the other hand, concentrate on demonstrating traditional skills at exhibitions. This disjointed approach often results in inconsistent messaging. For instance, the same heritage project may be marketed as "fun and engaging experiences" by tourism operators, while inheritors emphasize "craftsmanship preservation and skill transmission," leading to visitor confusion. Moreover, traditional offline promotion dominates the current landscape, whereas online channels such as short videos, live streams, and social media platforms lack professional management, further constraining the reach and impact of ICH communication [6].

3.3. Weak Linkage between Culture and Tourism and Insufficient Market Transformation

The integration of ICH with cultural tourism often remains superficial. Many scenic spots offer experiences that primarily serve as photo opportunities or brief craft demonstrations, such as basic training in brocade weaving, without fully conveying the cultural significance behind the crafts. Cultural products, including T-shirts, notebooks, and small souvenirs featuring Li brocade patterns, often lack practical application, emotional resonance, or storytelling value. Additionally, there is insufficient synergy between ICH and related tourism sectors, including homestays, dining, and educational tours. For example, homestays rarely incorporate Li brocade elements into room décor, while restaurants seldom offer heritage-themed dining experiences, such as seafood banquets accompanied by Danjia fishing songs. This weak integration limits the ability of ICH brands to convert cultural value into marketable products and sustainable revenue streams.

3.4. Low Participation of Inheritors and Limited Brand Vitality

While many ICH inheritors excel in preserving and transmitting traditional craftsmanship, they often lack awareness of branding, marketing, and market-oriented strategies. For instance, some Li brocade artisans continue to rely solely on traditional patterns and handcrafting techniques, without adapting products to meet tourists' demand for lightweight, practical, or aesthetically modern items. With minimal involvement of inheritors in brand design, marketing, and operational management, ICH brands remain "culturally rich but commercially weak." The scarcity of young inheritors and successors exacerbates the problem, resulting in brands that lack fresh perspectives and innovative energy. Consequently, these ICH products struggle to adapt to the rapidly evolving cultural tourism market, reducing their potential for both cultural influence and economic sustainability [7].

4. Optimization Path of Brand Building and Communication of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hainan under the Background of Cultural and Tourism Integration

4.1. Brand Positioning: Differentiating the 'Hainan Intangible Cultural Heritage Brand Matrix'

Building on the unique characteristics of Hainan's intangible cultural heritage, a structured brand matrix with clear categorization has been developed to avoid homogenization. For ethnic heritage, the focus is on "living traditions." The Li ethnic group's brocade is positioned as "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity · Li Ethnic Living Textile Art," featuring core selling points such as the "Tongjing Duanwei" weaving technique and culturally significant patterns like "Gangong Bird" and "Dali Shenshen." Customized brocade products allow tourists to weave their names and travel dates into the fabric, creating personal mementos that strengthen emotional connections.

The Lingao Fishermen's Songs are positioned as "Maritime Folk Ballads · Hainan's Sonic Symbols," emphasizing their acappella style and resonance with fishermen's lives. Visitors can participate in "Fishermen's Song Experience Classes," learning traditional songs directly from inheritors by the sea, immersing themselves in the maritime culture.

For maritime ICH, the Nanhai Navigation Route is branded as "Ancient Maritime Navigation Wisdom · World Maritime Cultural Heritage," highlighting historical assets such as hand-drawn route maps and the pioneering spirit of fishermen. Visitors can follow the "Genglujing Study Tour Route" to learn route identification, maritime meteorology, and seafaring skills from experienced captains, gaining hands-on insight into ancient maritime life [8].

Folk ICH focuses on interactive experiences. Danzhou Tiaosheng is positioned as "Hainan Folk Carnival · Collective Dance Feast," featuring male-female duets and group dances. At the Danzhou Thousand-Year Ancient Salt Field Scenic Area, the "Tiaosheng Carnival Night" allows visitors to sing and dance alongside locals, providing an immersive folk cultural experience.

4.2. Innovation in Communication: Building an 'Online-Offline Synergy' Communication System Through Scenario-Based Approaches

Leveraging the unique environment of cultural tourism, communication strategies are designed to be precision-targeted and interactive, making ICH brands highly accessible. Offline experiences integrate ICH into visitor journeys. Scenic spots such as Binhualong Valley and Yannoda have established "ICH Brand Experience Zones," where workshops demonstrate the entire brocade weaving process. Visitors can operate looms and produce short videos like "My Brocade Craft," creating shareable experiences. QR codes placed along navigation systems provide audio narratives explaining heritage stories.

ICH-themed homestays, such as Sanya Yalong Bay's "Li Brocade Homestay," feature guest rooms decorated with Li brocade patterns. Inheritors offer workshop classes where visitors can produce their own creations, forming a closed loop of experience, retention, and dissemination. ICH-themed restaurants, such as Haikou's "Danjia Fishing Song Restaurant," provide menus designed in a lyrical style, with servers performing traditional songs while serving dishes like the "Genglujing Seafood Platter," transforming dining into an immersive cultural experience [9].

4.3. Online Outreach: Expanding Brand Influence Beyond Physical Boundaries

Digital platforms are utilized to extend ICH brand influence to wider audiences. Official accounts on platforms like TikTok regularly release content including heritage knowledge (e.g., symbolism in Li brocade patterns), stories of inheritors (e.g., innovations by post-90s generation artisans), and cultural tourism vlogs (e.g., "Traveling Hainan with Intangible Cultural Heritage"). Live-streaming sales enable inheritors to demonstrate weaving and coconut carving, promoting creative products in real time. Cloud-based experience sessions allow online participants to learn songs and craft techniques, breaking geographic and temporal limitations. Campaigns such as the hashtag "#MyStoryWithHainanIntangibleCulturalHeritage" encourage user-generated content, while mini-games like "Li Brocade Pattern Puzzle" and "Genglujing Route Spot-the-Difference" provide interactive engagement and offer rewards such as tickets or discounts, enhancing participation and brand awareness.

4.4. Industrial Synergy: Deepening the 'Intangible Cultural Heritage + Tourism' Ecosystem

ICH is integrated across cultural tourism sectors, including scenic areas, creative industries, education, and homestays, to improve market conversion. The "ICH + Scenic Area" initiative incorporates cultural elements into Sanya Nanshan Cultural Tourism Zone and Baoting Qixianling Scenic Area. Measures include constructing "ICH Cultural

Walls" with relief carvings of Nanhai routes and Li brocade patterns, and integrating performances like "Lingao Fishing Song Ensemble" and "Danzhou Tiaosheng Dance" into visitor itineraries, transforming destinations from sightseeing locations to immersive cultural experiences.

"ICH + Cultural Creativity" develops practical products in collaboration with design agencies, applying Li brocade patterns to souvenirs (notebooks, scarves) and daily necessities (cushions, tea sets), as well as digital products like Li brocade collectibles and Genglujing maritime maps to engage younger audiences. "ICH + Education" initiatives design courses for students and adults to experience and learn heritage crafts, marine history, and cultural practices. "ICH + Homestays" creates immersive rural experiences, such as the "Coconut Carving Homestay" and "Fishing Song Homestay," where guests participate directly in craft-making and maritime traditions, blending heritage with local lifestyles.

4.5. Multi-Stakeholder Coordination: Establishing a 'Multi-Party Linkage' Safeguard Mechanism

Under government guidance, Hainan has established the "Hainan Intangible Cultural Heritage Brand Development Center," providing professional services in brand positioning, design, and promotion. A dedicated fund subsidizes initiatives such as cultural product development and live-streaming operations. The "Hainan Intangible Cultural Heritage Brand Competition" identifies exemplary brands for wider promotion. Training programs empower heritage bearers with brand and market knowledge through expert lectures and study visits to regions with successful heritage branding practices.

Enterprises provide market and technical support. Cultural tourism companies develop educational products, design agencies create ICH-themed goods, and online platforms like Douyin and Meituan offer traffic and sales channels. This collaboration achieves synergy among culture, market, and technology, ensuring that heritage brands are both culturally rich and commercially viable.

5. Conclusions and Perspectives

The integration of culture and tourism provides three strategic opportunities for the branding of Hainan's intangible cultural heritage (ICH): creating immersive scenarios, tapping into market potential, and engaging target audiences. The primary goal is to transform ICH from static cultural assets into distinctive, marketable brands that simultaneously generate cultural influence and economic value. While Hainan's current ICH branding faces challenges such as ambiguous positioning, fragmented communication, and weak industrial collaboration, the adoption of targeted strategies—including differentiated brand positioning, scenario-based promotion, deep industrial integration, and multi-stakeholder coordination—can effectively address these issues. By implementing these approaches, signature elements such as Li ethnic brocade and the Nanhai navigation routes can be developed into core cultural intellectual properties (IPs) that drive tourism growth within the Hainan Free Trade Port.

Looking ahead, the construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port offers unprecedented international opportunities for the expansion of ICH brands. For example, Hainan can showcase its intangible cultural heritage through large-scale events such as the "Free Trade Port International Cultural Festival," attracting overseas tourists and global media attention. Cross-cultural collaborations along the "Belt and Road" initiative could combine Li brocade techniques with Southeast Asian textile traditions to create innovative "cross-border ICH creative products," enhancing both cultural exchange and commercial potential. The application of emerging technologies, such as metaverse platforms, could allow the creation of virtual ICH experience pavilions, enabling international audiences to explore Hainan's cultural heritage through immersive digital avatars.

Throughout this process, it remains essential to adhere to the principle of "culture as the core, market as the orientation," ensuring that commercialization does not compromise the authenticity and integrity of intangible cultural heritage. By maintaining a balance between preservation and innovation, Hainan's ICH brands can continue to thrive, serving as a model for the sustainable integration of culture and tourism while enhancing the province's global cultural influence and economic development.

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