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Sustainable Development of Cultural Tourism Products in Historic Urban Districts: A Case Study of Foshan's Diejiao Area

Xuechen Sun ¹, Liang Wang ² and Xuanxuan Li ^{1,*}

¹ School of Architecture and Art, Shijiazhuang Tiedao University, Shijiazhuang, 050043, China

² Shanghai Cehuaia Design Consulting Co., Ltd., Shanghai, 200030, China

* Correspondence: Xuanxuan Li, School of Architecture and Art, Shijiazhuang Tiedao University, Shijiazhuang, 050043, China

Abstract: As the global process of urbanization continues to accelerate, the comprehensive regeneration and functional transformation of old urban districts have emerged as pivotal challenges within contemporary urban development strategies. In this context, the tourism and leisure industries are increasingly utilized as strategic catalysts for economic revitalization; however, the practical implementation of these renewal projects often encounters significant obstacles. Over-commercialization frequently results in the erosion of local cultural identity, the alienation of traditional social fabrics, and the degradation of the historical environment. Adopting the overarching principles of sustainable development as a theoretical foundation, this research focuses on the Diejiao area of Foshan City as a representative case study to rigorously investigate the systematic construction, developmental approaches, and core principles of cultural tourism products within historic urban neighborhoods. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, this study integrates multi-dimensional research methodologies, including an extensive literature review, detailed field surveys, structured questionnaire-based interviews, and rigorous quantitative data analysis. Based on these findings, the study innovatively proposes a "2C2E" conceptual framework, which encompasses four critical dimensions: Culture, Community, Environment, and Economy. This framework advocates for a synergistic developmental model that prioritizes the preservation of cultural resources, the active involvement of local community members, the maintenance of environmental friendliness, and the long-term viability of economic growth. The empirical case analysis indicates that by implementing strategies centered on cultural innovation, ecological restoration, and community co-creation, the Diejiao area can successfully achieve a sustainable trajectory for tourism product development. Ultimately, this research offers significant theoretical insights and practical guidance for the tourism-led regeneration of aging urban sectors, while emphasizing the necessity for future inquiries to balance dynamic community interests with continuous cultural innovation.

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1. Introduction

Since the dawn of the 21st century, China's urbanization rate has successfully surpassed the 60% threshold, marking a significant transition in the nation's spatial development strategy. In core metropolitan regions, the traditional land development model has fundamentally shifted from a focus on incremental expansion-oriented growth toward the strategic optimization and high-quality transformation of existing urban stock. Old urban areas, serving as the essential cultural roots and historical repositories of these cities, possess an invaluable wealth of historical architecture, diverse intangible cultural heritage, and unique folk resources. Furthermore, these districts are typically situated within central urban zones, benefiting from superior geographical advantages and

established social networks. However, beneath this cultural richness lie pressing systemic challenges, including the rapid aging of physical infrastructure, the continuous deterioration of the residential living environment, and the progressive decline of traditional industrial functions.

In response to these urban issues, tourism, characterized as the world's most expansive and comprehensive industry, is increasingly being positioned by municipal governments and urban planners as a "golden key" to facilitate the multi-dimensional revitalization of aging urban sectors. Despite its potential, the practical implementation of tourism-led regeneration has frequently prioritized short-term economic gains over long-term social and cultural equilibrium. This profit-driven approach has precipitated a recurring vicious cycle in many regeneration projects, characterized by excessive commercialization, the alienation of authentic cultural symbols, the involuntary displacement of original residents, and a subsequent long-term decline in overall tourism appeal. The fundamental cause of this unsustainable phenomenon can be traced to the absence of a robust tourism sustainability framework specifically tailored to the complex and sensitive socio-spatial characteristics of old urban areas.

The Dijiao area in Foshan represents a significant case study within this broader context, strategically located in the heart of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. Although the district maintains a profound historical legacy and hosts prestigious cultural resources-such as the dragon boat racing tradition, the intangible cultural heritage known as Chaji Shifan, and distinctive ancestral temple architecture-it currently grapples with severe developmental bottlenecks. These include the pollution of local river systems, the prevalence of low-end and fragmented commercial activities, the prolonged closure of various heritage structures, persistently low household incomes among the local population, and the concerning outmigration of the younger generation.

While existing academic discourse on the sustainable development of tourism in old urban areas has extensively examined individual components such as cultural heritage conservation, the mechanisms of community participation, and environmental impact assessments, there remains a notable deficiency in the systematic construction of cultural tourism products that are meticulously adapted to the unique contextual nuances of such districts. Therefore, determining how to catalyze community revitalization through the strategic development of tourism while simultaneously safeguarding the underlying cultural foundation has emerged as an urgent and critical developmental challenge for the Dijiao area.

2. The 2C2E Four-Dimensional Coordination Principle

Traditional theoretical frameworks concerning sustainability have long emphasized a triad of balance between economic viability, social equity, and environmental integrity. Within the specific field of tourism, Butler's Life Cycle Theory has provided a seminal foundation for understanding the evolutionary trajectories and stagnation patterns of tourist destinations. However, a critical limitation of this model in the context of urban regeneration is its insufficient attention to the central role of "people"-the residents who form the living fabric of old city districts [1]. To address this gap, this study integrates Social Exchange Theory to elucidate the sophisticated and dynamic psychological process through which community support fluctuates based on perceived cost-benefit ratios. In the initial stages of development, local residents often exhibit a predominantly "altruistic" and welcoming disposition toward tourism. Yet, as intensified commercialization begins to infringe upon daily spatial routines, erode traditional neighborhood cohesion, and escalate the local cost of living, their attitudes frequently pivot toward a "conflictual" stance. Such a shift, if left unaddressed, can precipitate the irreversible disintegration of longstanding community social networks [2]. Consequently, Community Tourism Theory underscores that a truly symbiotic relationship between the tourism industry and the local

populace can only be realized by transforming residents from "passively affected individuals" into "proactive participants" and stakeholders [3].

Synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, the 2C2E principles proposed in this research provide a holistic coordination mechanism encompassing four interdependent dimensions:

- 1) **Culture:** This dimension serves as the core ontological foundation of the project, emphasizing the preservation of cultural integrity, the continuity of historical narratives, the safeguarding of authenticity, and the enhancement of "readability" for visitors.
- 2) **Community:** This focus ensures the substantive fulfillment of local interests, the rigorous protection of participatory rights in the decision-making process, the establishment of equitable benefit-distribution mechanisms, and the sustained maintenance of the residents' quality of life.
- 3) **Environment:** This involves a sophisticated balance between the preservation of natural ecological systems and the harmonious coordination of the social-spatial environment, ensuring that the physical surroundings remain resilient under tourism pressure.
- 4) **Economy:** This dimension evaluates the depth of industrial integration, the degree of market compatibility, and the strategic relevance of local development policies to ensure long-term financial viability.

These four dimensions do not function in isolation; rather, they constitute an organic, systemic whole where an imbalance or deficit in any single area may trigger a cascading failure across the entire developmental system [4].

Furthermore, the practical implementation of product development under the 2C2E framework follows a rigorous and structured four-stage pathway: cultural screening, demand response, intensity control, and system building. In the initial "cultural screening" phase, local resources are meticulously evaluated based on criteria of rarity, representativeness, and potential for creative extensibility. In the case of Dijiao, the Longzhou (dragon boat) culture-characterized by its high competitive spirit, powerful visual aesthetics, and strong participatory appeal-is identified as a primary resource for active development. Conversely, ancestral temple culture is designated as a secondary resource focused primarily on preservation, given its profound religious significance and its role as a private community space.

In the "demand response" phase, the specific needs and socio-economic concerns of the residents are quantified and analyzed through extensive surveys and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Subsequently, the "intensity control" stage establishes clear development thresholds and spatial boundaries based on a scientific assessment of the environmental carrying capacity to prevent over-tourism. Finally, the "system building" phase ensures that these refined cultural assets are aligned with contemporary market trends, thereby providing a solid strategic foundation for the creation of high-quality "weekend micro-getaway" products that appeal to modern urban consumers while respecting local heritage.

3. Four-Dimensional Diagnosis of the Diejiao Area

To provide a scientific basis for the proposed 2C2E framework, this research conducts a comprehensive four-dimensional diagnosis of the Diejiao area, focusing on the current status of its cultural resources, community dynamics, environmental systems, and economic market.

3.1. Cultural Resources: Enrichment Amid Fragmentation

Diejiao possesses a remarkably profound and multifaceted cultural foundation that serves as the ontological basis for its potential tourism development. This foundation includes the highly distinctive Longzhou competitive culture, which is centered around

the globally rare technique of bend dragon boat racing—a spectacle of high technical difficulty and visual intensity. The intangible cultural heritage of the area is equally diverse, encompassing seventeen recognized folk traditions, including the Chaji Shifan percussion performance, traditional lion dance, and Cantonese opera. Furthermore, the district maintains an exquisite collection of ancestral temple architecture and a commercial legacy that can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty Haibian Xu market. This is complemented by a vibrant festive culture, featuring traditional celebrations such as the Chinese New Year, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Linhai Dan festival.

However, a rigorous analysis reveals that these resources currently exist in a state characterized by being scattered in isolated points, seasonally activated, and intergenerationally fragmented. The lack of effective spatial integration and sustained functional revitalization presents a significant bottleneck. For instance, the renowned dragon boat events are concentrated almost exclusively during a three-day window of the Dragon Boat Festival, leading to excessively high idle rates for related infrastructure and facilities throughout the remainder of the year. Moreover, heritage forms like Chaji Shifan suffer from a fragile chain of transmission, with the average age of performers skewing significantly older, posing a substantial risk of cultural erosion. The local commercial landscape is currently dominated by fragmented, low-to-mid-end retail formats, while the majority of ancestral temples remain inaccessible and closed to the public year-round, failing to contribute to the daily cultural life of the area [5].

3.2. Community Demands: Improvement Over Development

Based on extensive social surveys of long-term residents, this research identifies a clear hierarchy of needs where the improvement of infrastructure and the living environment ranks significantly higher than the desire for tourism expansion. Data indicates that only approximately 12% of respondents expressed a primary concern for increasing cultural visibility, suggesting that residents prioritize tangible quality-of-life improvements over abstract promotional efforts. The analysis also reveals a distinct age-based stratification in developmental priorities: residents under the age of 35 tend to prioritize opportunities for increasing economic income and job creation, whereas those over the age of 51 demonstrate a much stronger preference for micro-regeneration projects that preserve the existing neighborhood scale and social fabric [6].

In terms of psychological disposition toward tourism, the community exhibits three distinct attitudinal clusters: a positive group that anticipates economic dividends and local prosperity; a cautious group concerned with potential disruptions to their daily socio-spatial routines; and an uncertain group that remains hesitant due to a lack of transparent information and involvement. Despite these differences, a robust community consensus has emerged around three core issues: the urgent need for systematic waste sorting and riverway remediation; the absolute requirement for the in-situ preservation of ancestral temples; and significant apprehension regarding noise and environmental pollution generated by tourism activities. This suggests that while the community is not inherently opposed to development, they are deeply wary of being marginalized by external commercial forces and are protective of their cultural authenticity [7].

3.3. Environmental Systems: Dual Pressure from Nature and Society

The environmental system of Diejiao is currently under significant stress from both natural and social perspectives, creating a fragile baseline for sustainable growth. Regarding the natural ecological environment, the area faces chronic challenges such as the heavy silting of the Shuangxi River, where Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD) levels frequently exceed environmental standards due to upstream discharge and local runoff. Many of the district's original, classic water-town landscapes have gradually disappeared due to uncoordinated urban encroachment, leaving the per capita public green space far below national standards for healthy urban living.

Simultaneously, the social environment is under immense pressure. The influx of a large migrant worker population has complicated the local demographic structure, placing a burden on public security and community management systems. The high density of self-built housing, characterized by narrow alleys and irregular construction, presents notable fire safety hazards. Furthermore, daily noise disturbances are already impacting the rest and well-being of residents, indicating that the community's social carrying capacity is nearing a state of saturation. These multi-layered pressures underscore the necessity of integrating environmental remediation with tourism planning to ensure the resilience of the local ecosystem.

3.4. Economic Market: Demand Upgrading Amid Supply Lag

An analysis of the broader Guangzhou-Foshan metropolitan market reveals a substantial flow of high-spending tourists, whose expenditure on cultural experiences can account for up to 12% of their total per capita consumption. The regional market is undergoing a fundamental structural shift: moving from traditional sightseeing to leisure-oriented vacations, from standardized group tours to personalized customization, and from long-term travel to high-quality micro-cations. These modern consumers seek immersive experiences that offer a deep connection with local history and lifestyle.

In stark contrast to this robust regional demand, Diejiao currently attracts a smaller volume of tourists with a significantly lower willingness to spend. This disparity indicates a profound mismatch between the current supply-side product offering—which remains fragmented, seasonal, and low-value—and the demand-side requirements of the mainstream market. Bridging this gap requires the transformation of Diejiao's raw cultural assets into sophisticated, market-ready tourism products that align with contemporary consumption patterns while maintaining their local soul. This economic lag suggests that without a strategic upgrade in product quality, the area will remain a marginal participant in the regional tourism economy.

Would you like me to continue with the next section, perhaps focusing on the specific 2C2E implementation strategies for the Diejiao area?

4. Sustainable Cultural Tourism Product System Construction

4.1. Development Goal Positioning

Guided by the 2C2E principles, the Diejiao area has established four strategic development objectives designed to harmonize social, cultural, ecological, and economic dimensions. First, the project aims to build a highly liveable community by optimizing the "15-minute living circle" framework. This involves the systematic enhancement of public service infrastructure, including the construction of pocket parks, kindergartens, and standardized community health service stations, ensuring that urban renewal directly benefits the daily lives of local residents. Second, the area is positioned to become a regional cultural hub through the implementation of a spatial pattern described as "one city, two rivers, five cultural veins." This layout connects a 2.3 km² cultural core with the twin waterways of Dongsheng and Tantou, integrating five distinct cultural corridors to form a cohesive narrative landscape.

Third, the development seeks to restore the essence of an eco-friendly Lingnan waterside town. By expanding existing water surfaces and integrating advanced sponge city technologies, the project will construct ecological embankments that provide both flood resilience and aesthetic value. Fourth, the strategy focuses on fostering an industry-town integration zone. By promoting cultural-commercial-tourism demonstration projects and providing institutional support for cultural and creative incubators, the plan aims to catalyze local employment and provide sustainable pathways for increasing residents' household income, ensuring that economic growth is inclusive and community-oriented.

4.2. Four Product Matrices

To translate these strategic goals into tangible market offerings, the study proposes a diversified matrix of four primary tourism products:

- 1) **Cultural Experience Products for Daytime Sightseeing** Centered on a specialized museum cluster, this matrix offers an immersive introduction to Diejiao's unique heritage. As shown in Figure, the product design emphasizes interactive technology and historical restoration. The Dragon Boat Museum, for instance, integrates traditional static exhibitions with high-fidelity VR drift simulations to recreate the adrenaline-fueled scenes of bend racing. Similarly, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum features a dedicated interactive stage for "Ten Fan" (Shifan) music performances. To ensure historical authenticity, the Street Market Museum utilizes archival records to faithfully restore the Ming Dynasty Haibian Xu market, meticulously reconstructing the original morphology of its historical streets and lanes to provide visitors with a "living history" experience.
- 2) **Leisure Lifestyle Products for Overnight Vacation** This matrix focuses on integrating cultural heritage into contemporary lifestyle scenarios to encourage longer visitor stays. The traditional Dragon Boat "Hundred-Family Banquet" (Baijia Yan) has been transformed from a spontaneous communal meal into a standardized, high-quality tourism product. Available every weekend, it allows tourists to dine alongside local villagers, fostering cross-cultural exchange. Furthermore, the "Ten Fan" Teahouse repurposes underutilized ancestral hall spaces to offer a "music appreciation and cultural learning" package, featuring live instruction by recognized intangible heritage inheritors. The development of waterside homestays follows the "host culture" principle, where residents receive professional hospitality training from the government while retaining traditional architectural features such as swing doors and internal courtyards, thereby creating a symbiotic economic model for local families.
- 3) **Environmentally Friendly Products for Ecological Feedback** The restoration of the local water system serves as the leading initiative for this category, utilizing a rigorous three-step process of "dredging, water revitalization, and landscaping." Strategic dredging projects introduce fresh, flowing water from the nearby Qiandeng Lake to ensure constant circulation and biological health. Along the restored riverbanks, waterfront boardwalks and specialized dragon boat docks are constructed to enhance accessibility. Historically significant sites, such as Baoya Pond and the "Spring Plowing at the Eastern Port" (Donggang Chuneng) landscape, are being ecologically restored with native vegetation to provide habitats for local bird species. Crucially, these environmental amenities remain free for resident use, while a specific portion of tourism-generated revenue is reallocated to a dedicated local environmental protection fund, establishing a sustainable cycle where tourism directly supports ecological conservation.
- 4) **Cultural Creativity and Science Education Products for Industrial Extension** To ensure the long-term vitality of the community, the "Diejiao Cultural and Creative Workshop" is being established as a hub for innovation. The local government provides rent-free or subsidized spaces to attract creative enterprises, focusing on the development of high-value cultural goods such as precision dragon boat models, "Shifan" musical instruments, and waterside-themed artistic prints. Additionally, the project establishes formal partnerships with regional universities to create internship bases for the joint training of designers specializing in intangible cultural heritage. Complementing these industrial efforts, a "Community Tourism Lecture Series" has been launched to provide systematic vocational training for residents in areas such as

professional guiding, hospitality management, and e-commerce operations, effectively empowering the community to manage their own local tourism resources.

5. Operational Safeguard Mechanisms

5.1. Organizational Structure: Tripartite Governance

To ensure the effective implementation of the 2C2E principles, the Diejiao area has established a multifaceted organizational and governance structure. This structure is designed to facilitate a collaborative environment where government guidance, enterprise operation, and community participation are seamlessly integrated. The primary organizational objective is to build a highly livable community by optimizing the "15-minute living circle" and systematically expanding public infrastructure, such as community parks, kindergartens, and healthcare service stations.

From a spatial perspective, the governance framework supports the creation of a cultural hub through the "one city, two rivers, and five cultural corridors" pattern. This plan encompasses a 2.3-square-kilometer cultural core area, strategically connecting the Dongsheng and Tantou riverways to link five vital cultural dimensions: the competitive Longzhou culture, intangible cultural heritage, traditional street market culture, ancestral temple heritage, and regional festival traditions. Furthermore, the governance body oversees the transition toward an eco-friendly waterside city by expanding water surface areas and implementing sponge city technologies to enhance natural self-purification. Finally, the structure fosters an industry-town integration zone, utilizing cultural and creative incubators to generate local employment and provide a stable mechanism for increasing residents' income.

5.2. Profit Distribution: Equity Priority

A critical safeguard for social sustainability is the revenue distribution mechanism, which is designed around the core principle of "basic compensation plus graduated dividends." During the initial renovation and construction phases, residents are provided with transitional subsidies calculated based on their original housing area to mitigate any temporary displacement or inconvenience. Once the project transitions into the operational phase, a formalized percentage of profits derived from ticket sales, boutique accommodations, catering services, and other commercial sectors is mandatorily allocated to a dedicated community fund.

To ensure equitable benefits, 60% of this fund is distributed equally among all registered local residents as a baseline dividend. The remaining 40% is utilized as an incentive fund to reward residents who actively participate in the daily operations of the tourism site, such as those serving as heritage guides or managing homestays. This dual-track distribution model ensures that the dividends of urban regeneration are shared broadly across the community, preventing the economic marginalization of original inhabitants.

5.3. Dynamic Regulation: Capacity Alert and Management

To prevent the degradation of the living environment due to over-tourism, a smart tourism management platform has been established to provide real-time monitoring of tourist density, water quality indicators, and ambient noise levels. This system functions as a digital "safety valve" for the community. When visitor numbers reach 80% of the pre-calculated social and environmental carrying capacity, a yellow alert is automatically triggered, leading to the immediate suspension of group bookings and external promotions.

Should the visitor count reach 100% of the designed capacity, a red alert is activated, enforcing a strict "exit only" policy to ensure safety and resident comfort. Furthermore, the platform is integrated with a direct resident complaint mechanism; if a specific

commercial area receives a high concentration of complaints regarding noise or environmental disturbance, the platform provides the administrative authority to temporarily suspend commercial activities in that zone. This dynamic regulation ensures that the intensity of tourism development remains within the limits of the environment's resilience.

5.4. Brand Strategy: IP Leadership and Cultural Discourse

The long-term vitality of the Diejiao area is safeguarded by a sophisticated brand strategy that centers on the "Diejiao Drifting Dragon Boat" as its core Intellectual Property (IP). Two major seasonal festivals serve as the primary anchors for this strategy: the "May Day Dragon Boat Season" and the "Autumn Equinox Shifan Festival." During the Dragon Boat Season, the area hosts an International Bend Dragon Boat Invitational Tournament, supported by professional prize funds to attract competitive teams from around the globe, thereby elevating the local tradition to an international sporting event.

The Shifan Festival is strategically integrated with the broader Foshan Autumn Folk Parade, featuring an innovation competition that creatively blends traditional Shifan music with modern street dance to appeal to younger demographics. Complementing these large-scale events, the brand strategy incorporates the concept of a "City Study" (Chengshi Shufang). This includes the launch of a floating bookhouse program in collaboration with regional public libraries, as well as the installation of micro-libraries along key tourist routes. These initiatives generate a sustained cultural discourse, transforming Diejiao from a mere sightseeing destination into a significant site for intellectual and cultural exchange.

6. Conclusion

This study expands the theoretical boundaries of sustainable tourism by introducing the 2C2E four-dimensional framework, asserting that the revitalization of historic urban areas is not a simple matter of economic exploitation or physical architectural renovation. Rather, it is a complex process of synergistic evolution among four deeply interconnected dimensions.

First, the research concludes that residents' demands must serve as the "ballast of development"-any commercialization strategy that overlooks the community's fundamental call for environmental and infrastructure improvement is inherently unsustainable and bound to face local resistance. Second, cultural categorization acts as a necessary "firewall for preservation," suggesting that sensitive resources such as ancestral temples and the Shifan musical arts must be managed through differentiated development intensities to protect their authenticity. Third, the environmental carrying capacity constitutes the absolute "ceiling for growth," necessitating the use of smart monitoring technologies to prevent systemic collapse. Finally, industrial integration serves as the "perpetual engine of vitality." By extending the value chain into cultural-creative incubators and educational products, the regeneration of old urban areas can achieve a level of resilience that far exceeds the limitations of a traditional ticket-based economy. Through this holistic approach, areas like Diejiao can successfully balance the preservation of their historical soul with the demands of modern urban development.

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