

From "Living Heritage Transmission" to "Rural-Driven Development": Research on the Industrialization of Sports Intangible Cultural Heritage Empowering Rural Revitalization

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the functional transformation and innovative pathways of sports intangible cultural heritage within the context of the rural revitalization strategy. The rich sports intangible cultural heritage resources inherent in rural settings are undergoing a profound reevaluation of their systemic value in response to specific national strategic drivers. However, the long-dominant paradigm of living heritage preservation struggles to translate into endogenous drivers for rural development due to its inherent economic fragility and limited social impact. To address this challenge, this study proposes constructing a rural industrial ecosystem with sports intangible cultural heritage as its core engine. The implementation pathways include: grounding in cultural origins to build a modern, multi-tiered product system and systematic brand; establishing organizational mechanisms through internal cultivation and external attraction to foster collaboration between local talent and professional operational entities; and extending industrial chains to promote deep integration and symbiosis between sports intangible cultural heritage and diverse sectors such as cultural tourism and specialty agriculture.

KEYWORDS

Living heritage; Rural-driven development; Sports intangible cultural heritage; Rural revitalization

1 Introduction

Throughout China's modernization journey, rural transformation and development have remained central priorities. The comprehensive implementation of the rural revitalization strategy in the new era is profoundly reshaping urban-rural relations while systematically revealing the multifaceted value of rural areas. Crucially, rural culture—as a marker of regional identity and a core bond within communities—has seen its role in fostering endogenous rural development rise to unprecedented prominence. Concurrently, the state's commitment to safeguarding and promoting China's rich traditional culture continues to strengthen, drawing unprecedented attention to numerous intangible cultural heritages rooted in rural landscapes and preserved through living traditions. The historic convergence of these two strategies at the practical level has opened up multidimensional space for exploring rural development. At this intersection, intangible cultural heritage sports—characterized by competition, fitness, and community interaction—are particularly vibrant and hold immense potential. They serve as vivid records of regional historical evolution while also functioning as living cultural forms that can be experienced, participated in, and consumed. Historically, preservation efforts have primarily focused on "living transmission," emphasizing the continuity of culture within its original communities. While this approach has significantly contributed to safeguarding cultural diversity, it was not inherently designed as a tool for development. As the urgent demands of rural revitalization collide with the static logic of intangible heritage protection, a deep tension emerges: on one side lies a valuable cultural asset awaiting activation, while on the other lies the inherent closed nature and economic fragility of the existing model.

2 Industrializing sports intangible cultural heritage represents a paradigm shift in activating endogenous development momentum in rural areas.

2.1 sports intangible cultural heritage embody dual attributes of cultural transmission and industrial development

The core of sports intangible cultural heritage lies in the symbiosis of cultural transmission and industrial development attributes. As a cultural vehicle, it is deeply rooted in specific historical and social practices. Its value is not only embedded in physical skills and rules but also intertwined with its rituals, beliefs, organizational forms, and collective memory. This cultural core forms its unique identity, endowing it with irreplaceable scarcity. Simultaneously, sports intangible cultural heritage are not static relics. Their dynamic participatory nature—manifested in competitive performances, visitor experiences, wellness activities, and more—harbors potential for transformation into marketable products. Industrial development grants them modern viability, transcending traditional dependency-based preservation. Crucially, these two attributes are interdependent and mutually empowering: profound cultural roots provide the brand foundation and

market differentiation for industries, while the revenue and attention from appropriate development inject material security and dissemination momentum into transmission. Therefore, understanding sports intangible cultural heritage requires transcending singular perspectives and exploring development paths within the dialectical unity of these dual attributes.

2.2 Inherent limitations and development bottlenecks of traditional living transmission models

The core of living transmission lies in ensuring the authentic continuity of intangible cultural heritage within its original cultural ecosystem, relying on intergenerational oral transmission and specific festive rituals. However, while this model maximizes the preservation of artistic authenticity, its inherent closed nature and fragility have led to significant challenges in the new era: Economically, it heavily depends on limited government subsidies or individual contributions, lacking sustainable endogenous support. Transmission activities struggle to maintain scale and are prone to interruption when external support weakens. The transmission chain is growing increasingly fragile due to the loosening of traditional rural social structures under the impact of urbanization and population mobility, coupled with declining identification and participation among younger generations, which triggers a structural crisis of generational succession. Simultaneously, activities remain largely confined to specific rural communities, lacking effective channels to connect with mainstream markets and the public. This hinders the broad recognition of cultural value, posing risks of marginalization^[1].

2.3 Industrialization is the core pathway for transforming sports intangible cultural heritage from cultural resources into economic capital

As the core pathway for transforming sports intangible cultural heritage resources, industrialization fundamentally achieves a systematic leap from cultural capital to economic/social capital. Its core mechanism involves creatively transforming the cultural DNA of sports intangible cultural heritage into product forms aligned with modern consumer demands—such as branded events, immersive cultural tourism, curriculum systems, and distinctive cultural and creative products—through market-oriented operational concepts. Value chain restructuring constitutes a critical link: embedding fragmented transmission practices into regional economic cycles to stimulate employment expansion, investment aggregation, and industrial synergy effects. Consequently, sports intangible cultural heritage evolve from preservation objects into engines driving rural development by channeling economic, informational, and human flows, thereby forming a symbiotic closed loop where generated benefits are reinvested in transmission.

3 Current practical challenges in empowering rural revitalization through the industrialization of sports intangible cultural heritage

3.1 Structural mismatch between cultural authenticity and market demand

The core challenge in the early stages of industrialization lies in the structural disconnect between the authentic forms of sports intangible cultural heritage and market demands. Their authenticity is rooted in complex ritual processes, deep community ethical foundations, and diverse, non-standardized practices—elements that form the core of their cultural value. However, modern markets predominantly pursue fast-paced, fragmented entertainment experiences, struggling to fully appreciate the process-oriented and spiritual essence emphasized by intangible cultural heritage. This tension creates a key barrier to industrialization: directly replicating the original culture without adaptation risks market indifference. Excessive simplification or spectacle-driven transformation easily leads to the erosion of the cultural core and loss of IP value, ultimately resulting in homogenized performances^[2]. Thus, the primary challenge for successful industrialization is how to explore expression paradigms and presentation pathways that align with modern aesthetics and consumption logic, while preserving cultural authenticity without compromising its sacredness and uniqueness.

3.2 Shortage of multi-skilled operational talent and lack of local organizational systems

The ongoing industrialization of sports intangible cultural heritage requires support from professional teams integrating cultural interpretation and market operation capabilities. However, the current composition of rural human capital poses a critical constraint: while ICH inheritors, as custodians of artistic essence, excel in specialized skills and spiritual understanding, they generally lack professional expertise in modern business management, brand operations, and capital operations, making it difficult for them to lead industrialization processes. External professional teams, although possessing market experience, often lack sufficient respect for and deep engagement with local culture, leading their operational models to create cultural alienation and conflicts of interest with communities^[3]. The more profound

dilemma stems from the lack of localized organizational systems capable of supporting industrialization operations. Many regions still rely on loose groups of inheritors or temporary project teams for advancement, severely lacking stable, locally based legal entities to undertake long-term resource integration, market engagement, and professional operations. The absence of organizational vehicles prevents the systematic implementation of industrialization, hinders the effective revitalization of local resources, and results in fragmented development with persistent obstacles.

3.3 Insufficient integration between single-industry development thinking and diverse rural industrial ecosystems

The widespread challenges in industrializing sports intangible cultural heritage stem from an overreliance on single-industry pathways, failing to position them as core nodes within integrated rural industrial ecosystems. Current practices often remain confined to event-centric approaches: core operations are restricted to hosting competitions and festivals, relying on ticket sales or short-term consumption for revenue. This model features a short value chain, weak added value, and poor risk resilience. The core value of sports intangible cultural heritage lies not in its intrinsic nature, but in its potential as a highly recognizable cultural symbol to leverage synergies across multiple industries—including cultural tourism, agricultural products, handicrafts, and wellness—as a pivotal hub. However, existing departmental silos, fragmented planning, and the absence of integration concepts have long hindered its development from local agricultural endowments, natural landscapes, and craft traditions. This lack of deep synergy severely compresses industrial value space, impedes the formation of resilient networks of multi-sectoral interlocking symbiosis, and ultimately diminishes its overall effectiveness in driving rural revitalization.

4 Building an industrial ecosystem for rural revitalization driven by sports intangible cultural heritage

4.1 Modern product system and branding based on cultural core

The fundamental approach to resolving the dual challenge of cultural authenticity and market adaptability lies in anchoring creative translation and systematic reconstruction to cultural DNA, thereby constructing a tiered, multi-lineage modern product matrix. This system must exhibit a multi-layered architecture extending from core to periphery: The core layer focuses on highly authentic ICH performances and premier competitions, serving deep cultural experience demands as the foundation for preserving cultural essence and brand authority; The intermediate layer targets the mass leisure market, developing standardized, highly interactive experience modules that lower participation barriers through engaging activities while achieving immersive cultural engagement; The peripheral layer leverages core cultural IP value to expand into cross-border carriers such as cultural and creative products, digital collectibles, film and television licensing, and locally co-branded agricultural products. Complementing product development is the systematic empowerment of brand value. By deeply extracting the historical narratives, spiritual totems, and geographical DNA embedded in intangible cultural heritage, it constructs a unique symbolic recognition system and contextualized brand storytelling. By integrating a multi-channel communication matrix, it drives the transformation of regional intangible cultural heritage projects into brand assets with broad influence and cultural premium value ^[4]. The core of this model lies in precisely anchoring indigenous cultural value to modern consumer touchpoints, achieving deep spillover from cultural capital to market value.

4.2 Organizational safeguards: local talent cultivation and professional operational entities

Sustainable industrial ecosystems hinge on establishing organizational capability frameworks. This requires talent strategies that integrate endogenous cultivation with external recruitment, alongside the creation of specialized governance entities. Local Capacity Elevation: Systematically implement localized talent empowerment initiatives. High-End Factor Attraction: Local governments should design targeted incentive policies to attract urban professionals with expertise in cultural tourism planning, brand operations, and capital integration. These professionals should be embedded into rural project structures as co-founders, operations directors, or strategic advisors. Organizational Innovation Breakthrough: The key lies in establishing specialized operational entities with clear responsibilities, closed-loop governance, and shared benefits. Essentially, this approach adopts community-based enterprises or mixed-ownership companies as organizational models, utilizing equity and contractual design to unite village collectives, inheritors, professional teams, and social capital into a cohesive development community. The essence of this mechanism lies in the refined coupling of specialized divisions: inheritors focus on preserving and innovating cultural expressions, while professional teams lead market expansion and organizational governance. This forms a stable collaborative framework based on comparative advantage and mutual integration, forging a solid institutional foundation for industrialization.

4.3 Extending industrial chains through multi-sector integration of sports, cultural tourism, and agriculture

The fundamental pathway to unleashing the empowering potential of sports intangible cultural heritage lies in breaking down industrial silos and constructing a cross-domain, integrated industrial matrix. This requires embedding a rural industrial ecosystem perspective at the planning stage. sports intangible cultural heritage should be reshaped as a core catalyst for aggregating local resources, rather than functioning as an isolated industrial unit. Its essence lies in scenario-based consumption unit innovation integration: Chenjiagou Village in Wenxian County, Henan Province, serves as a prime example. Centered on Tai Chi culture as its core IP, it has not only spawned specialized Tai Chi schools and international competitions but also successfully leveraged diverse sectors, including boutique homestays, Tai Chi apparel, cultivation and processing of the "Four Major Huai Herbs," and "Tai Chi + farming experience" programs. This has formed an industrial ecosystem characterized by a prominent mainstay and mutual prosperity across multiple sectors. Within this framework, cultural narratives are transformed into high-premium experiential components; local handicrafts can also be developed into licensed cultural merchandise through event authorization mechanisms. This restructuring of industrial chains centered on intangible cultural heritage IP systematically integrates the entire consumption chain—encompassing dining, lodging, transportation, sightseeing, shopping, and entertainment. It not only achieves multidirectional extension and value elevation across the industrial chain but, more crucially, establishes an immovable and immersive geo-cultural experience system^[5]. Through profound restructuring of industrial elements and mutual value enhancement, this model builds endogenous competitive barriers, ultimately fostering a symbiotic ecosystem architecture characterized by positive feedback loops across multiple industries.

5 Conclusion

The realization of sports intangible cultural heritage is undergoing a pivotal transformation: its paradigm is shifting beyond traditional preservation-centered living transmission toward development-oriented, rural-driven approaches. This represents not only an era-defining renewal of cultural conservation concepts but also an intrinsic requirement for exploring a Chinese path to rural revitalization. Current industrialization faces practical bottlenecks, including tensions between cultural authenticity and market logic, shortages of specialized talent and organizational vehicles, and insufficient depth of industrial integration. Overcoming these obstacles requires building a rural industrial ecosystem with sports intangible cultural heritage as its core engine, rooted in cultural essence to drive modern innovation in products and brands. This involves innovating collaborative mechanisms to integrate local and external forces, as well as deepening the symbiotic integration of diverse business models.

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