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Integration Mechanisms and Implementation Pathways for Li Intangible Cultural Heritage and Rural Tourism in Hainan under the Development of the Hainan Free Trade Port

Xuan Zhang*, Yisong Tai
Hainan Vocational University of Economics and Business, Haikou 571127, Hainan, China
Corresponding author, E-mail: 182150557@qq.com

Abstract
The development of the Hainan Free Trade Port has created new opportunities for rural cultural tourism through more open policies, greater visitor reach, and expanding markets. As a distinctive regional cultural resource, Li intangible cultural heritage has considerable potential for integration with rural tourism in Hainan. Yet current development remains constrained by limited cultural interpretation, short value chains, and restricted public reach. Focusing on the policy environment created by the Free Trade Port, this study reviews the current state of integration between Li intangible cultural heritage and rural tourism in Hainan. It develops an integration framework built around four dimensions: policy guidance, digital enablement, industrial collaboration, and talent development. It then proposes implementation pathways aligned with the Free Trade Port's development priorities. The study aims to offer theoretical insights and practical guidance for high-quality rural cultural tourism and the continued transmission of Li intangible cultural heritage through living practices.

Keywords
Hainan Free Trade Port; Li intangible cultural heritage; rural tourism; integration mechanisms

1. Introduction

The development of the Hainan Free Trade Port has entered a critical phase ahead of island-wide special customs operations. As institutional opening-up deepens, it is creating a favorable policy environment for upgrading the cultural and tourism industries and sharing ethnic cultures with international audiences. The Hainan Provincial Three-Year Action Plan for Rural Tourism Development (2024–2026) calls for using intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources to strengthen rural tourism, developing rural tourism brands with international appeal, and improving the quality and efficiency of rural cultural tourism [1]. At the same time, contemporary ICH protection places greater emphasis on living transmission and productive protection rather than static preservation, seeking to keep heritage connected to the people, objects, and everyday practices through which it remains meaningful [2]. The Li people of Hainan possess rich ICH resources, including Li

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brocade, folk songs, traditional handicrafts, and customary festivals. These resources are central to the cultural identity of Hainan's rural communities, yet their development has long been constrained by weak transmission, inefficient conversion of cultural resources into products and services, and low industrial added value. As new quality productive forces drive high-quality tourism development and the digital economy becomes more deeply embedded in industry, integrating Li ICH with rural tourism has become an important way to address challenges in heritage transmission, revitalize rural economies, and diversify the Free Trade Port's tourism offerings [3].

This study has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it examines the integration of ethnic ICH and rural tourism within the distinctive policy setting of the Free Trade Port. Drawing on emerging discussions of new quality productive forces, the digital economy, and industry–education integration, it addresses gaps in research on the mechanisms underlying Li heritage–tourism integration in Hainan and on the institutional conditions required to support it. It also contributes to broader discussions of cultural tourism and living heritage transmission in tropical ethnic regions. Practically, the study addresses fragmented heritage transmission, homogeneous rural tourism products, limited business formats, and weak market competitiveness. By improving integration mechanisms and developing new implementation pathways, it seeks to activate the cultural and economic value of Li ICH, create rural employment, increase local income, and support comprehensive rural revitalization.

2. Current State of Integration between Li Intangible Cultural Heritage and Rural Tourism in Hainan under the Free Trade Port Initiative

The combined policy support for institutional opening-up, rural revitalization, and ICH protection has created a favorable foundation for integrating Li ICH with rural tourism in Hainan. At the policy level, the Hainan Provincial Three-Year Action Plan for Rural Tourism Development (2024–2026) identifies heritage-based development as a direction for rural tourism. Institutional benefits associated with cross-border trade in services and the opening of the cultural and tourism sectors provide support for deeper integration and create favorable conditions for building Li heritage tourism brands with international reach [4]. In terms of resources, Li communities in central and southern Hainan have diverse ICH traditions and high-quality rural landscapes, giving them strong potential to combine ecology, culture, and tourism. Key destinations such as Binglanggu and Maona Village have begun to develop tourism offerings that incorporate heritage into visitor settings and hands-on experiences. Meanwhile, as domestic tourism consumption continues to shift toward immersive and culturally grounded experiences, the distinctive cultural value of Li ICH can meet demand for higher-quality and more differentiated products, creating considerable market potential [5]. The spread of digital technologies and artificial intelligence has also enabled heritage practices such as Li brocade weaving to reach broader audiences and markets through e-commerce, short-form video, and livestreaming. Smart tourism applications are gradually emerging, providing technical support for product innovation and market development.

Despite these advantages in policy, resources, markets, and technology, significant structural problems remain. Integration is often shallow and relies on static displays or brief performances. Cultural interpretation and storytelling are underdeveloped, participatory and experiential activities are limited, and products are frequently similar, resulting in low added value and a lack of distinctive tourism brands. Digital enablement

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is often superficial: AI, big data, and other emerging technologies are not used to their full potential, digital experiences remain limited, and social media operations lack a coherent strategy. Links between the heritage sector and rural tourism are also weak, leaving value chains short and business formats narrow. As a result, the Free Trade Port's openness has not yet translated effectively into greater industrial value. The sector also faces shortages of specialists in heritage transmission, tourism planning, and digital operations. Industry–education collaboration in vocational education remains insufficient, and gaps in the transmission of heritage to younger generations are becoming more visible. Fragmented administration, delays in policy implementation, and weak mechanisms for gathering market feedback further constrain high-quality integration between ICH and rural tourism [6].

3. Mechanisms for Integrating Li Intangible Cultural Heritage and Rural Tourism under the Free Trade Port Initiative

3.1. Policy Guidance: Using Institutional Opening-Up to Support Integration

Hainan can make use of the Free Trade Port's policies facilitating cross-border cultural and tourism exchanges to improve market access for heritage-based tourism projects and attract overseas investment and professional operators. Their international experience could help improve project development and operations. Targeted support, including subsidies and tax incentives, could also be provided to heritage experience centers and cultural and creative projects established in Li communities, reducing operating costs for businesses participating in integration. Dedicated funding for the living transmission, protection, and development of Li ICH could prioritize activities led by recognized heritage bearers, including training, knowledge transmission, and tourism product innovation. These measures would help bridge the gap between policy design and implementation and establish a stronger institutional foundation for sustained integration.

3.2. Digital Enablement: Using Technological Innovation to Drive Integration

The digital economy, artificial intelligence, and big data can support an integrated system for digital preservation, communication, visitor experience, and operations. First, drawing on Hainan's policy support for international digital-economy innovation, a digital repository of Li ICH could be established. Resources such as Li brocade weaving, traditional Li spinning, dyeing, weaving, and embroidery, Li folk songs, and the traditional Sanyuesan Festival could be collected, documented, stored, and organized at high resolution. Three-dimensional modeling and virtual-reality panoramas could be used to reconstruct heritage production processes and customary activities. This would help preserve heritage resources over the long term while providing a comprehensive digital foundation for future tourism development. Second, digital technologies could be incorporated into rural tourism settings to create immersive experiences, including virtual heritage-bearer guides, VR-based weaving activities, and augmented-reality interactions with customary scenes. These experiences could overcome some of the spatial and temporal limitations of conventional tourism and allow visitors to engage more deeply with the cultural meaning and technical skill embodied in Li ICH. Third, the Free Trade Port's cross-border e-commerce policies could support an online sales network for Li cultural and creative products in domestic and overseas markets, accompanied by content that tells the stories behind Li heritage.

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3.3. Industrial Collaboration: Broadening the Value Chain through Integrated Offerings

Li ICH can be more closely connected to rural sightseeing by incorporating heritage experiences into visitor routes and establishing immersive spaces in Li communities, such as heritage learning centers, live demonstration venues, and streets devoted to customary cultural experiences. This would enable visitors to encounter and experience Li culture during rural leisure trips, moving beyond sightseeing alone and enriching the cultural content of rural tourism. Heritage-based educational travel could also be developed, with hands-on courses tailored to students of different ages and with the establishment of provincial- and national-level practice and education bases for ICH. Such offerings would broaden the visitor base and diversify tourism products. In cultural and creative development, Li heritage elements could be adapted creatively into products that combine distinctive cultural features with practical uses. Li brocade patterns and weaving and dyeing techniques, for example, could inform clothing, household goods, and souvenirs, extending the value chain and bringing heritage into everyday life. This would create opportunities to translate cultural value into economic value. In addition, the Free Trade Port's international links could connect Li heritage tourism products with cross-border e-commerce and outbound tourism businesses, helping Li culture reach international markets and increasing the added value and market visibility of integrated products.

3.4. Talent Development: Strengthening the Foundation through Industry–Education Integration

A collaborative talent-development system involving government, educational institutions, businesses, and rural communities should be established. Building on Hainan's vocational education resources, relevant curricula could be improved and classroom learning better connected with workplace practice, skills competitions, and professional certification. This would help develop professionals with combined expertise in heritage transmission, tourism planning, and digital operations. For younger Li heritage bearers, a dual-mentor model pairing an ICH practitioner with a rural tourism professional could help them acquire skills in tourism operations and digital marketing while enabling experienced practitioners and professional operators to complement one another. Hainan could also use the Free Trade Port's talent recruitment policies to attract specialists in tourism planning, digital technology, and brand management. Appropriate support for relocation and employment would encourage qualified professionals from outside the region to participate in Li heritage tourism projects. Developing local talent while attracting external expertise would strengthen the human-resource foundation for sustained integration.

4. Implementation Pathways for Integrating Li Intangible Cultural Heritage and Rural Tourism under the Free Trade Port Initiative

4.1. Develop Distinctive Heritage Tourism Brands by Deepening Cultural Identity

Li communities should be positioned according to the distinctive ICH resources available in each village, avoiding overlap among local tourism brands. For example, Li spinning, dyeing, weaving, and embroidery could anchor a brand centered on weaving experiences; the Sanyuesan Festival, the Water-Splashing Festival, and other customary celebrations could form the basis of ethnic festival tourism; and traditional Li pottery,

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bamboo carving, and wood carving could support hands-on craft experiences. Developing these categories separately would create a complementary portfolio of brands and meet the cultural interests of different visitor groups. A coherent visual identity should also be developed by selecting representative elements of Li ICH and applying them consistently across brand materials. This would make the brands easier to recognize and communicate, providing a foundation for future brand extensions and market development.

4.2. Diversify Business Formats and Build an Integrated Industrial System

Hainan can use the Free Trade Port's policies facilitating market access to encourage a wider range of market participants to help build an integrated industrial system. Efforts should address bottlenecks across the full process, from heritage resource development and tourism-site operations to product design and production, brand management, and marketing, replacing fragmented approaches with coordinated development. Different business formats should follow differentiated strategies. In heritage-based educational travel, primary and secondary schools, universities, and professional training organizations could jointly develop short experiential camps, medium- and long-term study programs, and specialized skills courses, creating a pathway from initial experience to sustained learning. In festival tourism, traditional Li celebrations could be linked to rural tourism and consumption settings. Regularly scheduled events and recognizable brands would help avoid a model in which economic activity peaks only during a single annual festival and would instead encourage year-round consumption. In rural wellness tourism, traditional Li medicine and health practices could be explored in conjunction with Hainan's high-quality rural environment to develop heritage-based wellness experiences and broaden the range of tourism offerings.

4.3. Improve Governance and Strengthen Policy and Institutional Support

Support policies for cultural tourism under the Free Trade Port initiative should be refined to ensure that they are targeted and implemented effectively. Relevant standards for heritage protection, tourism development, and market supervision should also be strengthened. A cross-departmental coordination team could integrate policy resources related to ICH protection, tourism development, rural construction, and fiscal support, addressing the disconnects that can arise from fragmented administration. Dedicated service and coordination mechanisms should be matched to different projects so that the practical needs of businesses, local residents, and heritage bearers can be addressed promptly. Hainan's streamlined approval system could be used to simplify project approval procedures and shorten processing times, reducing transaction costs for market participants. At the same time, cultural safeguards should govern the development of heritage resources. Clear requirements for living transmission should be established to prevent excessive commercialization from undermining the cultural foundations of Li ICH. Development and use should proceed within these safeguards, maintaining a dynamic balance between cultural continuity and industrial growth.

4.4. Use the Free Trade Port's Openness to Promote International Brand Development

Taking advantage of visa-free entry policies, Hainan could develop high-quality rural tourism routes centered on Li ICH for international visitors. Bilingual interpretation and in-depth experiences should be designed with overseas visitors' cultural knowledge and expectations in mind, encouraging participation and expanding the inbound tourism market. International events held in Hainan, including the China International

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Consumer Products Expo and the Hainan International Tourism Island Carnival, could feature dedicated areas for Li heritage tourism. Live craft demonstrations and immersive activities would introduce the distinctive cultural appeal of Li ICH to exhibitors and visitors from China and abroad. Partnerships with established international tourism companies and cultural brands could help Li heritage tourism brands benefit from mature operating systems and communication networks, increasing their visibility and recognition in global markets. A multilingual content strategy tailored to overseas social media platforms could further share stories of Li heritage transmission and tourism development, making the culture more accessible to international audiences. These efforts could gradually establish Li ICH as a recognizable symbol of Hainan's cultural engagement with the world.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

5.1. Conclusions

The institutional opportunities and industrial upgrading associated with the development of the Hainan Free Trade Port create new possibilities for the living transmission of Li ICH and the high-quality development of rural tourism. Deeper integration serves both the contemporary needs of heritage protection and the effort to strengthen the cultural identity and value chains of Hainan's rural tourism industry. This study reviews the current state of integration between Li ICH and rural tourism in Hainan and identifies a foundation of policy support, cultural and ecological resources, market demand, and technological development. Based on the Free Trade Port's development priorities, it proposes an integration framework built around policy guidance, digital enablement, industrial collaboration, and talent development. It also outlines practical pathways: developing distinctive heritage tourism brands, diversifying business formats across the value chain, improving coordinated governance, and promoting international brand communication. Making effective use of the Free Trade Port's open policies and institutional advantages can help activate the cultural and economic value of Li ICH, address challenges in heritage transmission, support industrial development and income growth in Li communities, and advance rural revitalization. It can also diversify Hainan's cultural tourism offerings and support the development of Hainan into an international tourism and consumption destination. The experience may offer practical lessons for integrating ethnic ICH and rural tourism in other tropical regions of China.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on conceptual mechanisms and implementation pathways. Future research could incorporate fieldwork data from Li villages across Hainan and conduct empirical and quantitative analyses to refine the proposed mechanisms and implementation details. As island-wide special customs operations take full effect, new quality productive forces continue to develop, and digital technologies advance, integration between Li ICH and rural tourism is likely to expand in both depth and scope. Further research could examine the international development of heritage tourism, innovation in smart tourism experiences, and mutually beneficial relationships between tourism and local communities, exploring new models for using ethnic ICH to support high-quality rural cultural tourism under the Free Trade Port initiative.

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