

Contemporary Cultural Tourism: Dynamics, Sustainability, and Global Practices in the Digital Era

Yichun Wang¹, Xiangna Shan², Xinyu Gao²

¹College of Tourism Geography and History Culture, Hulunbuir University, Hulunbuir 021009, Inner Mongolia, China

²Hulunbuir University, Hulunbuir 021009, Inner Mongolia, China

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Abstract: Contemporary cultural tourism has evolved into a multifaceted phenomenon that integrates cultural heritage preservation, economic development, and technological innovation. This paper examines the dynamics of modern cultural tourism, with a particular focus on its role in sustainable development, the transformative impact of digitalization, regional disparities, and the critical importance of community engagement. Drawing upon ten recent empirical studies, the analysis demonstrates how cultural tourism serves as a bridge for economic disparities, leverages digital tools for enhanced accessibility and management, and adapts to global challenges. The findings underscore the necessity of developing context-specific strategies that harmonize economic growth with the preservation of cultural integrity. This study offers valuable insights for policymakers, destination managers, and practitioners seeking to foster inclusive and sustainable cultural tourism development in diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts.

Keywords: Cultural tourism; digitization; economic development

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1. Introduction

Cultural tourism, broadly defined as travel motivated by an interest in experiencing cultural heritage, local traditions, and artistic expressions, has emerged as a pivotal driver of global economic and social development^[1]. In an era characterized by rapid globalization and unprecedented technological advancement, the role of cultural tourism has expanded significantly beyond mere leisure and recreation. It now encompasses broader objectives such as sustainable regional revitalization, mitigation of urban-rural disparities, and the preservation of cultural identity in the face of homogenizing global forces^[2]. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the contemporary landscape of cultural tourism by synthesizing findings from recent research, with particular focus on three interconnected core dimensions: sustainability frameworks, digital innovation, and stakeholder-driven practices. By integrating insights from diverse international case studies—ranging from provincial analyses in China to heritage site management in Europe—this study aims to elucidate the complexities of cultural tourism's modern trajectory and identify actionable pathways for inclusive and sustainable growth. The paper argues that successful cultural tourism development requires a holistic approach that balances economic objectives with cultural preservation, technological adoption with community needs, and global standards with local particularities.

2. Sustainability in Contemporary Cultural Tourism

Sustainability has become a cornerstone of modern cultural tourism development, requiring a delicate balance between economic gains, social well-being, and ecological protection. The multidimensional nature of sustainability in cultural tourism necessitates comprehensive evaluation frameworks that can capture its complex dynamics. Deng et al.^[3] developed a sophisticated evaluation system for assessing China's cultural and tourism sector that encompasses four critical dimensions: economic construction, basic resources, social support, and ecological quality. Their longitudinal analysis reveals that while China's cultural tourism sustainability remains at a relatively low level overall, it has demonstrated a steady upward trajectory since 2006. The authors propose that regional differentiation policies should be implemented to address specific sustainability challenges faced by different areas, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to cultural tourism development.

Beyond national boundaries, European "cultural-ecological complexes" (CECs) represent innovative models of how heritage-led tourism can drive sustainable regional regeneration. Kourtiti et al.^[4] conducted a comprehensive assessment of seven CECs across Europe, including Sweden's Karlsborg Fortress and Italy's Basilicata region. These complexes exemplify successful integration of cultural preservation with environmental stewardship through carefully designed management frameworks. These complexes demonstrate that cultural tourism can serve as an effective tool for revitalizing marginalized areas without compromising ecological integrity.

Similarly, in Italy's Basilicata region, Sannazzaro et al.^[5] proposed the development of thematic cultural routes as a strategy to unlock the potential of inner areas characterized by low population density and untapped cultural heritage. Their research demonstrates how endogenous development strategies can transform geographic marginality into a competitive advantage by leveraging unique cultural assets. The authors designed several thematic routes connecting historical sites, traditional crafts, and natural landscapes, creating immersive experiences that appeal to cultural tourists. This approach not only generates economic benefits but also strengthens local identity and encourages the preservation of traditional knowledge and practices. The study highlights the importance of creating narrative structures that give meaning and coherence to the visitor experience while ensuring that tourism development remains aligned with local values and environmental carrying capacity.

3. Digitalization: A Catalyst for Innovation

Digital technology has emerged as a transformative force in cultural tourism, enhancing operational efficiency, improving accessibility, and facilitating better coordination among stakeholders. The integration of digital tools has created new possibilities for experiencing cultural heritage, managing tourist flows, and developing innovative business models. Yang and Ning^[6] analyzed the role of digitalization in rural cultural tourism integration through the theoretical lens of symbiosis theory. Their research identifies three key mechanisms through which digitalization enhances sustainable integration: improving coordination among symbiotic units (various stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem), enabling real-time visualization of environmental monitoring data, and innovating symbiotic modes through new technological interfaces. The study demonstrates that digital tools—particularly e-commerce platforms, smart monitoring systems, and mobile applications—empower rural communities to leverage their cultural resources more effectively while maintaining greater control over the tourism development process.

In China's Yunnan province, the application of big data analytics exemplifies digitalization's potential to transform cultural tourism management and experience design. Chen and Han^[7] explored how data-driven models optimize resource allocation, predict tourist behavior patterns, and revitalize cultural heritage through innovative presentation methods. By integrating advanced analytics into tourism management systems, Yunnan has fostered new forms of cultural-tourism integration that enhance both visitor experiences and local economic returns. The research documents several successful applications, including predictive models that help manage visitor flows to sensitive heritage sites, augmented reality experiences that bring historical events to life, and digital platforms that connect tourists with local artisans and cultural

practitioners. These technological interventions have helped to disperse tourism benefits more widely while reducing pressure on overcrowded sites. Furthermore, the use of related technologies for authenticating traditional crafts and cultural products has created new market opportunities for local artisans while protecting against cultural appropriation and counterfeit products.

The digital transformation of cultural tourism extends beyond operational improvements to fundamentally reshape how cultural heritage is preserved, interpreted, and valued. Advanced technologies such as 3D scanning and digital archiving are creating permanent records of fragile heritage sites, while virtual reality platforms are making cultural experiences accessible to people who cannot travel physically. These technological advancements are particularly valuable for engaging younger generations who expect interactive and digitally enhanced experiences. However, the research also cautions against technological determinism, emphasizing that digital tools should serve rather than dominate the cultural content, and that access to technology must be equitable to avoid creating new forms of exclusion. The digital divide remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural and developing regions where infrastructure limitations may hinder the adoption of advanced digital solutions.

4. Community Engagement and Heritage Preservation

Meaningful community involvement stands at the heart of successful cultural tourism initiatives, ensuring that local populations not only benefit economically but also actively participate in heritage preservation efforts. The relationship between communities and cultural tourism is symbiotic—tourism provides economic incentives for preserving cultural heritage, while authentic cultural expressions enhance the tourism experience. In Bali's Klungkung region, Maheswari et al.^[8] introduced the concept of "Storynomic Tourism"—an innovative strategy that combines storytelling with economic development. This approach emphasizes collaboration between diverse stakeholders, infrastructure improvement, and educational programs that enhance local capacity to participate in tourism development. The study further highlights how storynomic tourism creates opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transfer, as elders share traditional stories and practices with younger community members who then adapt these narratives for contemporary audiences.

Similarly, in Northern Portugal, Silva et al.^[9] highlighted the crucial role of residents in safeguarding traditional gastronomy as intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Their survey-based study revealed that community pride and active participation are critical factors in transforming local cuisine into a sustainable tourism asset. The research documents how culinary traditions are being preserved through tourism-oriented activities such as cooking classes, food festivals, and farm-to-table experiences that involve local producers. These activities ensure that gastronomic traditions endure while driving economic growth that benefits local communities. The study emphasizes that successful gastronomy tourism depends on authenticity and community involvement rather than standardized commercial offerings that may dilute cultural distinctiveness. Importantly, the research also identifies that when local communities see tangible benefits from tourism, they become more motivated to maintain and revitalize their culinary traditions, creating a virtuous cycle of cultural preservation and economic development.

For urban areas, Du^[10] examined how ICH tourism enhances urban image and livability by fostering social cohesion and cultural pride. The research conducted in several Chinese cities demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage, when properly integrated into urban tourism strategies, can differentiate cities in the competitive tourism market while strengthening local identity. The study identifies several pathways through which ICH tourism contributes to urban development: by creating distinctive place identities, generating employment in cultural sectors, stimulating the creative industries, and enhancing the quality of life for residents. The research emphasizes that community buy-in is integral to long-term success, and that tourism development must respect the spiritual and cultural significance of heritage elements rather than treating them merely as economic commodities. Furthermore, the study notes that urban ICH tourism often faces challenges related to gentrification and the displacement of traditional communities, underscoring the need for policies that protect both the cultural heritage and the communities that sustain it.

5. Regional Disparities and Adaptive Responses

The impact of cultural tourism varies significantly across regions, influenced by factors such as economic conditions, policy support, infrastructure development, and vulnerability to external shocks. These disparities present both challenges and opportunities for regional development through cultural tourism. Wang et al.^[2] found that cultural-tourism integration effectively narrows urban-rural income gaps in China, but this effect is moderated by foreign direct investment (FDI), with pronounced regional heterogeneity. Their research demonstrates that coastal provinces with higher FDI levels benefit more substantially from cultural-tourism integration, underscoring the need for tailored policies to address uneven development. The study suggests that regions with lower levels of FDI require targeted interventions such as improved access to capital, technical assistance, and market connections to fully benefit from cultural tourism development. The research also highlights the importance of developing complementary economic sectors that can create multiplicative effects alongside tourism, reducing over-dependence on a single industry and building more resilient local economies.

The research further reveals that regional disparities in cultural tourism development are not merely economic but also involve differences in institutional capacity, governance structures, and cultural capital. Regions with strong traditional cultural institutions, such as museums, heritage organizations, and cultural associations, tend to develop more sustainable cultural tourism models that balance economic and cultural objectives. Conversely, regions with weak institutional frameworks often struggle to manage tourism growth effectively, leading to issues such as overcrowding, cultural commodification, and conflicts between tourists and local communities. These findings emphasize the need for capacity-building initiatives that strengthen local institutions and governance mechanisms for cultural tourism management.

Global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have further exposed regional disparities while simultaneously prompting innovative adaptive changes in cultural tourism. Wei and Chen traced evolving tourist perceptions of Lijiang Old Town in China across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, observing a significant shift toward sustainability-focused experiences. Their longitudinal study documents how the pandemic accelerated existing trends toward more meaningful, less crowded, and environmentally conscious tourism experiences. This transition highlights cultural tourism's resilience and its potential to evolve in response to global challenges, with important implications for destination management worldwide. The research suggests that destinations that prioritize sustainability, community well-being, and quality experiences are likely to recover more quickly from crises and achieve more resilient tourism economies. The pandemic also stimulated innovation in digital cultural experiences, with many heritage sites and cultural institutions developing virtual tours and online events that reached global audiences unable to travel physically. While these digital offerings cannot fully replace physical visits, they have created new revenue streams and audience engagement models that complement traditional tourism.

The research emphasizes that successful cultural tourism development requires patience, long-term vision, and respect for cultural processes that cannot be rushed for tourism purposes. Additionally, the study highlights that effective cultural tourism development often involves revaluing previously overlooked aspects of local culture, such as everyday practices, traditional knowledge systems, and vernacular architecture, which can become unique selling points in the cultural tourism market.

6. Conclusion

Contemporary cultural tourism represents a dynamic and multifaceted field that continues to evolve in response to sustainability imperatives, digital innovation, community engagement, and regional adaptability. As evidenced by diverse global case studies, its success hinges on achieving a careful balance between economic growth and cultural preservation, leveraging technology to enhance accessibility without compromising authenticity, and empowering local communities as active stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries. The research reviewed demonstrates that cultural tourism can serve as a powerful tool for regional development, heritage conservation, and cultural exchange when implemented with sensitivity to local conditions and thoughtful consideration of long-term impacts.

The findings underscore several critical considerations for cultural tourism development. First, sustainability must be understood in holistic terms that encompass economic, environmental, social, and cultural dimensions. Narrow approaches that prioritize economic gains while neglecting cultural integrity or community well-being ultimately undermine the long-term viability of cultural tourism destinations. Second, digital transformation offers significant opportunities for enhancing cultural tourism experiences and management, but must be implemented in ways that serve rather than dominate cultural content and ensure equitable access across different regions and communities. Third, community engagement is not merely a box-ticking exercise but a fundamental requirement for sustainable cultural tourism, requiring genuine power-sharing and benefit-sharing mechanisms that recognize local communities as custodians of cultural heritage.

Future research should focus on several critical areas: developing more sophisticated methodologies for measuring the intangible benefits of cultural tourism; identifying effective strategies for scaling context-specific approaches while maintaining their authenticity; addressing persistent regional disparities through targeted policy interventions; and exploring how emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and blockchain can further align cultural tourism with global sustainability goals. Additionally, more research is needed on post-crisis recovery strategies and resilience-building in cultural tourism destinations, particularly in light of ongoing global challenges such as climate change, political instability, and public health crises. Longitudinal studies that track the evolution of cultural tourism destinations over extended periods would provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of different development approaches.

By prioritizing inclusivity, innovation, and sustainability, cultural tourism can continue to serve as a catalyst for socio-economic development while safeguarding the world's rich cultural and ecological heritage for future generations. The imperative for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is to work collaboratively toward cultural tourism models that are not only economically viable but also culturally respectful, environmentally sustainable, and socially equitable. As the case studies in this review demonstrate, such models already exist in various forms around the world—the challenge lies in adapting and implementing these approaches in ways that respect local contexts while addressing global sustainability challenges.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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