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**EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF TRADITIONAL CULTURAL
TOURISM AS A DRIVING FORCE FOR RURAL ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE QUANZHOU
FLOWER HAIRPIN, CHINA**

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Abstract:

Traditional cultural tourism is increasingly recognized as a pivotal driver for rural economic development, especially in areas rich with intangible cultural heritage. This study investigates the potential of traditional cultural tourism in fostering rural economic growth through an in-depth case study of the Quanzhou flower hairpin, a distinctive intangible cultural heritage of Fujian Province, China. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, including literature review and questionnaire surveys, the research evaluates visitor perceptions, tourism market dynamics, and the economic impact of flower hairpin tourism on local rural communities. Results indicate that Quanzhou flower hairpin tourism significantly enhances local employment, stimulates regional economic activities, and promotes cultural awareness among tourists. However, challenges such as limited product diversification, insufficient infrastructure, and inadequate marketing strategies were identified. The study recommends strategic measures including enhancing cultural interpretation, diversifying tourism products, strengthening infrastructure, and adopting integrated marketing communication approaches. This research provides valuable insights into the sustainable development of traditional cultural tourism and underscores its role in revitalizing rural economies.



Introduction

Traditional cultural tourism, particularly when centered on intangible cultural heritage, has emerged as a critical avenue for sustainable rural economic development globally. Such tourism not only stimulates economic revitalization in rural communities but also preserves and promotes unique local cultures (Richards, 2007; Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009). Amidst rapid urbanization, rural regions worldwide face persistent economic challenges, including limited employment opportunities, declining traditional industries, and outmigration of youth populations. Cultural tourism, leveraging endogenous cultural assets, offers a viable pathway to address these issues by diversifying local economies and enhancing community well-being (Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Lin et al., 2021).

In China, the national rural revitalization strategy explicitly prioritizes the integration of culture and tourism as a driver for rural development. The government's "14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development" (China State Council, 2022) further mandates deepening cultural-tourism convergence, positioning it as a core engine for rural economic regeneration. Consequently, exploring effective models for leveraging traditional cultural tourism holds significant theoretical and practical urgency.

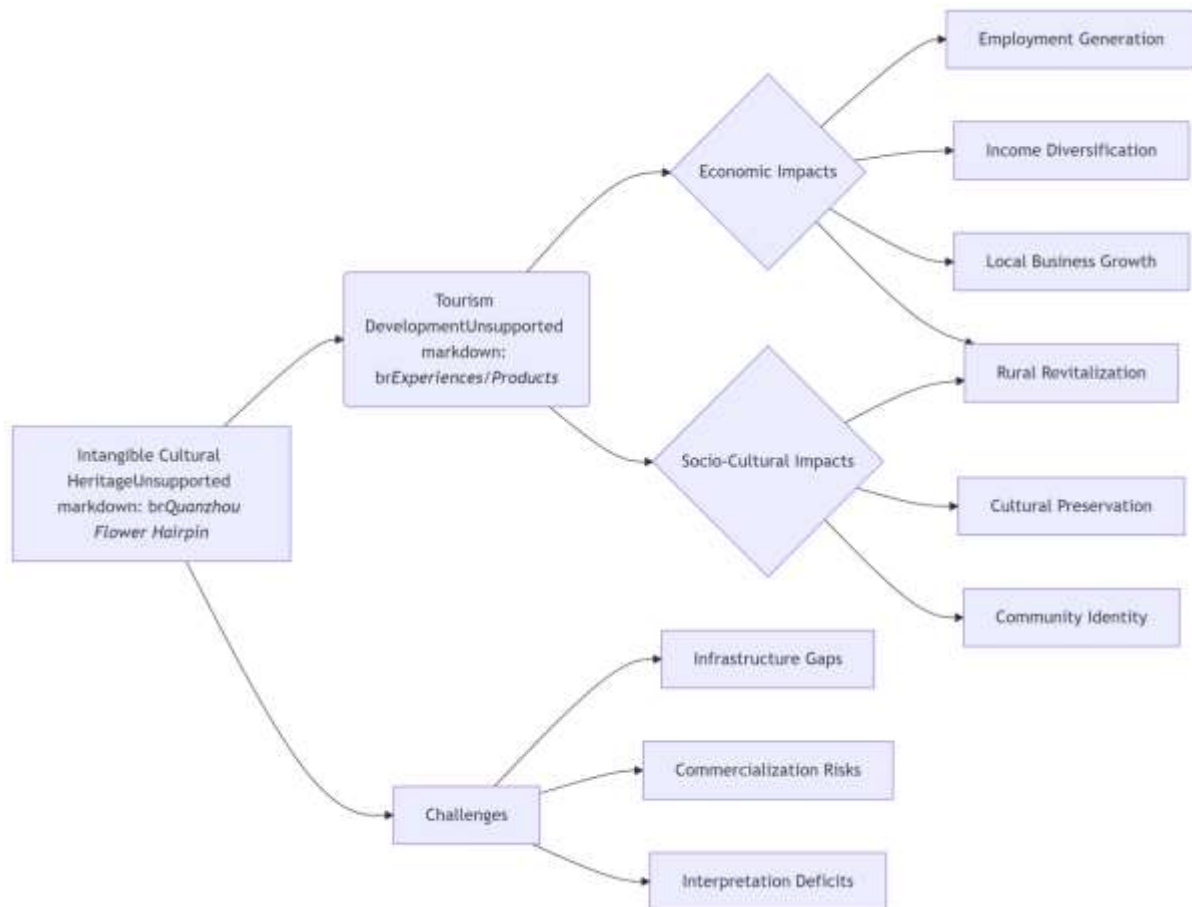
Quanzhou, a historically significant city in Fujian Province, presents an ideal research context. The Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tradition—a distinct intangible cultural heritage symbolizing local identity—has recently gained national prominence as a burgeoning tourist attraction. This phenomenon has catalyzed economic activity in surrounding rural areas, stimulating tourism-related entrepreneurship and expanding cultural product markets. Nevertheless, systemic challenges persist, including:

- ① Inadequate infrastructure,
- ② Superficial cultural interpretation,
- ③ Limited product innovation, and
- ④ Unsustainable commercialization trends.

To address these gaps, this study examines the potential of Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tourism as a rural economic driver through the following research questions:

- ① How does Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tourism contribute to the local rural economy?
- ② What are tourists' perceptions and satisfaction levels regarding this cultural tourism experience?
- ③ What key barriers impede its sustainable development?
- ④ What strategic interventions can enhance its economic viability and cultural sustainability?

Employing a mixed-method approach—combining visitor surveys and documentary analysis—this research provides empirical evidence on intangible heritage tourism's socioeconomic impacts. Its findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and enrich global discourse on culturally-grounded rural development.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework:
Interlinkages between Cultural Heritage Tourism and Rural Development**

Literature Review

Traditional Cultural Tourism: Conceptual Foundations

Cultural tourism constitutes a strategic pillar for sustainable development, particularly in rural contexts where it diversifies economic bases and arrests cultural erosion (Richards, 2018). Smith and Richards (2013: 15) define traditional cultural tourism as "experiential engagement with living rituals, artisanal crafts, and cultural landscapes that embody authentic local identity." Within this domain, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tourism has gained prominence for its dual capacity to preserve endangered cultural practices (e.g., rituals, craftsmanship) and generate place-specific competitive advantages (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). Critically, ICH tourism transcends economic functions by strengthening intergenerational cultural transmission and enhancing community self-worth, thereby countering rural depopulation (Bessière, 2013). In China, this aligns with the rural revitalization policy paradigm that explicitly leverages cultural assets for sustainable place-making (Su et al., 2018). Recent Chinese scholarship further corroborates this link. For instance, Zhang and Zhang (2024) emphasize the role of traditional village cultural tourism in fostering economic development within the broader framework of rural revitalization strategies.

Tourism-Driven Rural Development: Mechanisms and Evidence

Empirical studies consistently affirm tourism's role as a catalytic rural development agent through three primary pathways:

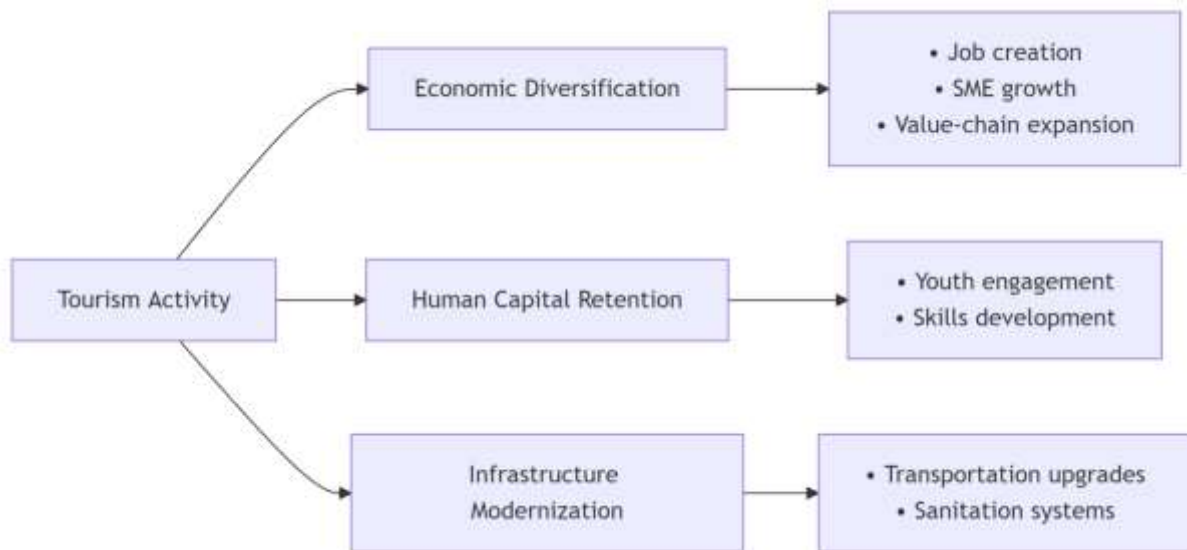


Figure 2: Diagram of Economic Diversification and Its Driving Factors

Empirical studies consistently affirm tourism's role as a catalytic rural development agent through three primary pathways: economic diversification, SME growth, and value-chain expansion (Figure 2). Meta-analyses by Lane and Kastenholtz (2015) demonstrate that rural tourism economies exhibit 23% higher resilience to agricultural shocks than non-tourism counterparts. Complementary domestic research by Jin (2024) confirms that rural tourism significantly drives the sustainable development of local economies by creating jobs and stimulating ancillary industries.

Crucially, success hinges on community-centric governance and cultural resource integration—factors determining whether tourism catalyzes sustainable development or exacerbates inequality (Sharpley & Vass, 2006; Bramwell & Lane, 2012). Chen (2016), in a study of traditional village tourism drivers, similarly stresses that endogenous community participation is indispensable for long-term viability.

Integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage into Tourism: International Practices

Numerous international cases show how intangible cultural heritage can successfully be integrated into tourism to drive rural economic and cultural sustainability. For instance, the Japanese experience in revitalizing rural economies through crafts tourism (such as pottery and kimono making) provides valuable insights. McKercher and du Cros (2002) and Hashimoto and Telfer (2007) found that integrating intangible heritage and traditional craftsmanship with tourism significantly enhanced local economic sustainability and cultural preservation.

Similarly, South Korea's experiences with Hanbok (traditional clothing) tourism illustrate how intangible heritage can generate substantial economic impacts while reinforcing cultural identity (Park, 2014). Conversely, over-commercialization and lack of authentic interpretation can lead to cultural commodification, diluting cultural value and tourism appeal (Richards, 2018). Hence, balancing commercialization and cultural authenticity remains a significant challenge.

Empirical Studies of Cultural Tourism Development in China

Recent studies in the Chinese context further confirm that cultural tourism effectively drives rural economic development and cultural preservation. For example, Yang and Wall (2009) analyzed cultural tourism in rural Yunnan, demonstrating how traditional cultural tourism significantly improved local incomes and infrastructure. Similarly, Gao, Huang, and Zhang (2019) explored tea tourism in China, highlighting its role in rural revitalization, job creation, and income generation for local communities.

Several newer studies enrich this understanding. Wang (2024) characterizes rural tourism as a “new engine” for promoting simultaneous economic transformation and cultural inheritance, noting its synergistic effects on both material and intangible rural development. Meanwhile, Li (2024) examines integrative models in Guizhou’s Huanggang Dong Village, where “cultural tourism + rural e-commerce” spurred diversified income streams and enhanced market access for traditional crafts, illustrating innovative pathways for ICH-driven growth.

Additionally, Su et al. (2020) found that cultural tourism initiatives in rural Sichuan effectively integrated intangible cultural heritage with economic development, supporting local employment and preserving traditional culture. Despite these successes, they emphasized the importance of strategic management to prevent negative effects like cultural commodification, environmental degradation, and community displacement.

Research Gap and the Contribution of this Study

Despite extensive research internationally and a growing number of domestic case studies, such as those by Chen (2016) on development drivers and Zhang & Zhang (2024) on revitalization linkages, empirical research focusing explicitly on the role of intangible cultural heritage tourism in rural economic development remains relatively limited. More specifically, existing research seldom systematically examines tourists' perceptions, satisfaction, and detailed socioeconomic impacts related to intangible cultural tourism at the local rural level. Therefore, this research addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence from the Quanzhou Flower Hairpin case, exploring its potential and limitations as a driver of rural economic development.

This study not only contributes to theoretical understanding but also offers practical insights into how intangible cultural heritage tourism can sustainably support rural economies, providing useful lessons applicable to similar rural regions globally.

Methodology

Research Design: Mixed-Method Triangulation

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to investigate Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tourism's socioeconomic impacts. The approach integrates:



Figure 3: Overview of ERTY Comet APS Platform

Quantitative data establishes statistical generalizability of economic impacts, while qualitative insights uncover contextual nuances in tourist experiences and development barriers (Field, 2018).

Study Area

Quanzhou, located in the southeastern province of Fujian, is famous for its rich historical heritage, especially the hairpin craft, a national intangible cultural heritage. The core area of hairpin tourism includes Xunpu Village and its surrounding historical and cultural areas, which are characterized by traditional customs, crafts and unique local culture. In recent years, hairpin tourism has become an important driving force for the local rural economy, with a significant impact on regional development and employment.

Xunpu Village, a coastal settlement characterized by oyster-shell houses, matriarchal customs, and ritual flower hairpin wearing during traditional ceremonies. The surrounding region includes several cultural streets and museums showcasing the making and meaning of hairpins, attracting growing numbers of domestic tourists and cultural enthusiasts.

The development of flower hairpin-themed tourism—through festivals, workshops, and cultural exhibitions—has contributed to the revitalization of the local rural economy. It has created employment opportunities for local women, spurred small-scale entrepreneurship, and strengthened the visibility of Quanzhou's unique cultural identity. This makes it an ideal case for exploring the intersection of traditional culture and rural economic development.

Data Collection Methods

Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted by reviewing scholarly articles, governmental reports, tourism statistics, and policy documents related to Quanzhou cultural tourism and rural economic development. Key sources included official documents published by China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Quanzhou local government reports, and academic research articles retrieved from reputable databases such as Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and CNKI (Bowen 2009).

Questionnaire Survey

The primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire survey conducted among visitors to Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tourism sites. The questionnaire comprised two sections: (1) demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, education level, occupation, income) and (2) visitors' perceptions and experiences regarding tourism facilities, satisfaction, cultural interpretation, and economic impacts. The survey was conducted online over a two-week period in December 2024, using purposive sampling to ensure respondents had prior experience or sufficient knowledge about Quanzhou Flower Hairpin culture. A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed, of which 100 valid questionnaires were returned, achieving an effective response rate of 83.3%, which is acceptable for exploratory social science research (Babbie 2020).

Data Analysis Methods

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, and mean values, employing SPSS 26.0 and Microsoft Excel software for statistical analysis. These methods allowed for clear representation and interpretation of visitors' demographic profiles, attitudes, satisfaction levels, and the perceived economic impact of traditional cultural tourism on local rural communities (Field 2018).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure research validity and reliability, the survey instrument was pre-tested with a small group of tourism experts and revised according to their feedback. Additionally, triangulation was employed, cross-validating findings from the questionnaire with secondary data from the document analysis (Creswell and Poth 2018). These steps ensured the accuracy and credibility of the research outcomes.

Results

Visitor Demographic Characteristics

A total of 100 valid questionnaires were analyzed. Among respondents, females represented a significantly higher proportion (73%) than males (27%). The predominant age group was 18–24 years (43%), followed by visitors aged 25–34 years (21%). Respondents with undergraduate education accounted for 45%, indicating a generally well-educated visitor profile. Occupations were primarily students (55%) and private-sector employees (20%), reflecting younger tourists' predominance in experiencing cultural tourism activities (Yang and Wall 2009).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	27	27%
	Female	73	73%
Age	<18 years	12	12%
	18–24 years	43	43%
	25–34 years	21	21%
	35–44 years	15	15%
	>45 years	9	9%
	High School	19	19%
Education Level	Diploma	30	30%
	Bachelor	45	45%
	Master or above	6	6%
	Student	55	55%
Occupation	Employee	20	20%
	Freelancer	12	12%
	Government Officer	4	4%
	Other	9	9%
	<3000	56	56%
Monthly Income (RMB)	3000–6000	19	19%
	6000–9000	16	16%
	>9000	9	9%

Data show that tourists are mainly young and highly educated, mainly students and young employed people, which provides a basis for potential economic contribution (Yang and Wall 2009).

Visitor Experiences and Satisfaction

Respondents generally expressed positive perceptions regarding the Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tourism experience. Approximately 72% of tourists agreed that flower hairpin tourism effectively showcases local traditional culture, aligning with findings by Gao et al. (2019), who suggested that cultural tourism significantly enhances regional cultural awareness. However, about 25% expressed dissatisfaction or uncertainty about tourism promotion efforts, indicating gaps in market visibility and promotional effectiveness.

Visitors rated tourism infrastructure moderately high, with 74% expressing satisfaction. Nevertheless, around 10–12% expressed dissatisfaction, suggesting the need for improvements in infrastructure such as transportation and basic facilities, similar to finding form (Su et al. 2020).

Table 2. Visitor Perception and Satisfaction

Statements	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Total (%)
Tourism effectively represents local traditional culture	22	50	72
Tourism infrastructure is satisfactory	33	41	74
Adequate tourism promotion	38	37	75
Cultural interpretation is sufficient	42	18	60
Products are diverse and innovative	38	28	66

Surveys show that most tourists recognize the positive cultural experience of hairpin cultural tourism, but there is room for further improvement in product innovation and cultural interpretation (Gao et al., 2019; Su et al. 2020).

Economic Impact of Quanzhou Flower Hairpin Tourism

Respondents largely affirmed the economic benefits of flower hairpin tourism. Specifically, 76% agreed or strongly agreed that tourism activities increased local employment and resident incomes, consistent with existing literature highlighting cultural tourism's role in local economic stimulation (Sharpley and Vass, 2006; Lane and Kastenholz 2015). Furthermore, the tourism boom notably benefited local businesses, including accommodations, restaurants, and cultural product retailers.

Table 3. Visitor Perceptions of Economic Impacts

Economic Impacts Statements	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Total (%)
Enhances local employment opportunities	16	60	76
Increases income for local residents	22	54	76
Stimulates local businesses	29	46	75
Encourages investment in local infrastructure	32	36	68
Contributes to rural economic revitalization	13	60	73

The vast majority of tourists believe that hairpin cultural tourism has significantly promoted local employment, income, business development and overall economic vitality (Sharpley and Vass, 2006; Lane and Kastenholz 2015).

Identified Challenges in Sustainable Tourism Development

The survey revealed several issues hindering sustainable development. About 34% of respondents felt the tourism products lacked sufficient diversity and depth, indicating a tendency toward superficial experiences and commercialization. This aligns with Richards' (2018) observations regarding challenges in balancing authenticity and commercialization.

Table 4. Main Challenges and Issues Identified by Visitors

Identified Challenges	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Total (%)
Insufficient infrastructure	20	12	32
Limited depth of cultural interpretation	29	11	40
Over-commercialization	20	15	35
Lack of diverse tourism products	18	16	34

Further, respondents highlighted interpretation and insufficient understanding of the cultural connotation of Flower Hairpin (40%), limited infrastructure (32%), and overly commercialized product offerings (35%) as significant challenges. These results echo international experiences, where similar challenges impacted cultural tourism's long-term sustainability (Hashimoto and Telfer, 2007; Park 2014).

These challenges are consistent with common issues raised in the international cultural tourism development literature, suggesting that the next step in development needs to pay attention to balancing commercial interests and cultural depth (Richards, 2018; Hashimoto and Telfer 2007).

Discussion

The Potential of Traditional Cultural Tourism for Rural Economic Development

The findings clearly demonstrate that traditional cultural tourism, exemplified by Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tourism, offers significant potential for promoting rural economic development. Consistent with previous studies (Lane and Kastenholz, 2015; Gao et al. 2019), this research identified substantial economic benefits including increased employment, higher local incomes, and stimulation of local businesses. The majority of respondents confirmed that their tourism activities directly contributed to local economic vitality, echoing Sharpley and Vass's (2006) findings that cultural tourism effectively stimulates local economies by diversifying income sources and enhancing rural attractiveness.

Additionally, the relatively young and educated demographic observed among visitors aligns with Yang and Wall's (2009) assertion that younger tourists have a higher willingness to engage in culturally immersive experiences, thus representing substantial market potential for rural cultural tourism.

Importance of Enhancing Visitor Experiences through Cultural Interpretation

Our survey indicated moderate satisfaction regarding cultural interpretation, suggesting considerable room for improvement. This finding resonates with Richards' (2018) global analysis, highlighting that meaningful cultural interpretation enhances visitor satisfaction, promotes longer stays, and increases repeat visitation. Effective interpretation of intangible heritage not only deepens tourists' appreciation of local culture but also positively impacts destination competitiveness and sustainability (Timothy and Boyd 2006). Therefore, improving interpretation methods, such as providing skilled guides, informative materials, and interactive cultural experiences, could significantly boost the attractiveness and sustainability of Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tourism.

Addressing Challenges of Infrastructure and Commercialization

Infrastructure inadequacies were identified by visitors as significant barriers to the sustainable development of traditional cultural tourism in Quanzhou. As discussed by Su et al. (2020), rural tourism development commonly faces infrastructure challenges, especially regarding transportation, sanitation facilities, and general tourism services. Investing in improved infrastructure is crucial, not only for visitor satisfaction but also for the sustainable expansion of the local tourism economy.

Moreover, over-commercialization emerged as a critical concern, echoing issues previously identified in international case studies (Hashimoto and Telfer, 2007; Park 2014). The risk of commodifying culture can erode authenticity, negatively influencing visitors' cultural experiences and satisfaction (Richards 2018). Therefore, careful management of cultural resources to balance economic goals with cultural integrity is crucial for ensuring long-term sustainability.

Recommendations for Sustainable Development of Cultural Tourism

Based on our findings and aligning with international best practices (McKercher and du Cros, 2002; Su et al. 2020), several strategic recommendations are proposed to sustainably harness the economic potential of traditional cultural tourism:

- Enhanced Cultural Interpretation:** Strengthen cultural interpretation through interactive experiences, storytelling, and professional training of local guides.
- Diversified Product Innovation:** Develop innovative cultural products that reflect authentic local traditions, avoiding superficial commercialization.
- Infrastructure Development:** Improve transportation and sanitation infrastructure to accommodate increased visitor flows sustainably.
- Stakeholder Collaboration:** Promote active collaboration among government agencies, local communities, businesses, and cultural heritage organizations to develop cohesive cultural tourism strategies.

These recommendations, if effectively implemented, can significantly enhance the economic contributions and cultural sustainability of traditional cultural tourism, benefiting rural communities in Quanzhou and similar regions elsewhere.

Conclusions and Implications

Summary of Major Findings

This study explored the potential of traditional cultural tourism, exemplified by Quanzhou Flower Hairpin, as a driver for rural economic development. Based on empirical data collected through questionnaire surveys, several key findings emerged:

Firstly, Quanzhou Flower Hairpin tourism significantly enhances rural economic vitality by creating employment opportunities, increasing local residents' incomes, and stimulating local businesses. This finding aligns closely with global literature confirming cultural tourism's capacity to support rural economies through diversification and revitalization (Sharpley and Vass, 2006; Lane and Kastenholz 2015).

Secondly, while visitor satisfaction was relatively high regarding cultural representation and overall experience, issues of inadequate infrastructure, superficial cultural interpretation, and excessive commercialization emerged as significant barriers. These challenges parallel those observed in similar international studies (Richards, 2018; Hashimoto and Telfer 2007), underscoring universal concerns in the development of sustainable cultural tourism.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes theoretically by addressing a notable gap in the empirical exploration of intangible cultural heritage tourism and its economic implications at the local rural level, specifically within the Chinese context. It further validates and enriches existing tourism development frameworks (McKercher and du Cros, 2002; Timothy and Boyd 2006), highlighting the nuanced relationship between intangible cultural heritage tourism and rural economic sustainability.

Practical Implications

The findings yield significant practical implications for policymakers, tourism developers, and local community stakeholders aiming to sustainably harness traditional cultural tourism's potential:

Infrastructure Enhancement: Prioritizing infrastructure improvements such as transportation networks, sanitation, and public facilities is critical for sustainable tourism growth (Su et al. 2020).

Cultural Interpretation and Authenticity: Enhancing the depth and authenticity of cultural interpretation methods is essential to improve visitor satisfaction and repeat visitation, supporting long-term tourism sustainability (Richards, 2018; Timothy and Boyd 2006).

Product Innovation: Developing diversified and innovative cultural tourism products that reflect authentic local traditions can mitigate the risks associated with commercialization, thus ensuring cultural integrity and market competitiveness (Hashimoto and Telfer 2007).

Community Involvement and Collaboration: Active collaboration among local communities, businesses, government agencies, and heritage experts is imperative for creating sustainable cultural tourism ecosystems (Bramwell and Lane 2012).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the contributions, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the research utilized a relatively small sample size from a single region, potentially limiting generalizability. Future research could include comparative studies with larger sample sizes across different regions and cultures. Secondly, the cross-sectional design limits insights into longitudinal effects; thus, future research should adopt longitudinal methodologies to explore long-term economic and cultural impacts more comprehensively.

Finally, additional qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews or participatory observation could provide richer insights into community perspectives and tourist experiences, enhancing the understanding of intangible cultural heritage tourism's dynamics.

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