

Exploring the Pathways of Intangible Cultural Heritage Empowering Rural Revitalization: A Case Study of ZanHuaWei (Hairpin Flower) in Xunpu Village, Quanzhou

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Abstract. Protecting Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is of significant importance in advancing China's rural revitalization strategy. This study constructs a theoretical framework integrating perspectives from industrial economics and gender sociology, analyzing three dimensions—brand effects and industrial chain development, women's labor participation, and innovation-driven entrepreneurship—to explore the mechanisms through which ICH contributes to rural revitalization. By examining the practice of ZanHuaWei (Hairpin Flower) in Xunpu Village, Quanzhou, a phenomenon-level case of traditional craftsmanship transforming into a cultural tourism economy, this research deciphers the intrinsic logic of ZanHuaWei's industrialization through field interviews. Key findings reveal three pathways for ICH-driven rural revitalization: (1) Brand effects catalyze closed-loop industrial chains through celebrity influence and social media, driving local economic growth; (2) Women's deep engagement in employment forms a "three 90%" model, significantly enhancing household income and social value; (3) Entrepreneurial spirit drives product and marketing innovations, enabling the modern transformation of ICH techniques. The conclusion demonstrates that ICH industrialization, through the synergistic integration of multiple factors, effectively revitalizes rural economies and provides practical pathways for converting cultural resources into rural revitalization strategies.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Rural Revitalization; Women's Participation; Industrial Economy.

1. Introduction

In the 20th century, the concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) remained undefined, and its academic inquiry was persistently intertwined with material cultural heritage. The promulgation of the Venice Charter in 1964 marked a pivotal shift in ICH studies, emphasizing the authenticity of material heritage conservation. Later, with a view towards ideas such as capital operations and social diversity, emphasis in ICH studies shifted gradually towards "revitalization," thus transforming theory about traditional craftsmanship. To settle definitional conflicts in academic circles, the United Nations-issued Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 officially demarcated the scope, limits, and objects of ICH [1].

Around the world, several nations have carried out measures to protect and promote folk ICH crafts. For example, in the 1970s, the United Kingdom adopted cultural and creative industry policies to utilize traditional craftsmanship as intangible cultural resources [2]; Germany provided taxation relief and subsidies to ICH organizations [3]; and Japan incorporated traditional crafts into government-designated Intangible Cultural Properties for systematic protection [2].

As a global leader in ICH preservation, with the highest number of UNESCO-listed ICH projects, China has put priority on protecting and passing on ICH. In 2011, the Chinese government enacted the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage, providing the first comprehensive legal framework for ICH. The Rural Revitalization Strategy Plan (2018–2022) continued to highlight poverty reduction through ICH-based programs like traditional craft skill training programs aimed at equipping rural populations with marketable skills while fostering local brands [2]. Therefore, studies of ICH hold critical importance for understanding China's poverty reduction and rural revitalization strategies. ZanHuaWei (Hairpin Flower) from Xunpu Village in Quanzhou, a model of ICH, plays a pivotal role in its local development. This study

explores mechanisms and pathways through which ICH enables rural revitalization through an in-depth study of ZanHuaWei's development from a traditional handicraft to a cultural tourism phenomenon.

2. Theoretical Framework

By combining theories from industrial economics and gender sociology, this section establishes a theory-based framework to explain the internal logic of how Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) enables rural revitalization in three aspects: brand effects and industrial chain development, ICH transmission and dissemination, and cultural tourism integration.

2.1 Brand Effects and Industrial Chain

ZanHuaWei (Hairpin Flower) drives local economic growth through brand effects and industrial chain formation. A local brand is an approach that practices marketing theories and methods to regional development by projecting a unique local image to audiences. Differing from generic product brands, building a local brand involves an in-depth interaction with local history and culture, along with the successful utilization of local narratives and communicative strategies to help win acceptance and familiarity among various stakeholders. In addition, the strategic use of culturally relevant materials—such as ZanHuaWei in Xunpu Village—helps visitors to gain more sensory experience through interaction and stimulates them to want to share their experience, ultimately contributing to value gains in local brand and local economic development [4].

The development of an industrial chain enables rural industrial structures to be optimized and integrated development to be promoted. Studies suggest that through "ICH transmission, dissemination, experiential activities, tourism, and public cultural services," local areas can take a more efficient, diversified, and creative path to rural revitalization. For example, Wenzhou Zhejiang Province's Tao Culture Village adopted this model in 2018 to open a new path of "ICH + Poverty Alleviation" [5]. Xunpu Village has also set a model of cultural tourism integration around ZanHuaWei, greatly elevating the average incomes and the rural economic conditions.

2.2 Women's Labor Participation and Employment

Women's participation in social labor is a major contributor to local economic growth. In traditional agrarian communities, such as Xunpu Village (previously dependent on fishing), women were bound to be disadvantaged in labor participation due to physical constraints. With the development of the ZanHuaWei industry, however, women soon gained access to associated areas through their dexterity, patience, and attention to detail. This participation raised labor supply but also improved labor efficiency and in turn fostered economic development [6].

Women's employment plays a crucial role in expanding middle-income groups. Female employment not only provides households with economic support and additional financial security but also contributes intangible resources. Research has verified that women's labor participation drives upward mobility in household income levels through multi-dimensional mechanisms [7]. The development of ZanHuaWei has effectively mobilized previously underutilized female labor in Xunpu Village, increasing local women's employment rates and thus driving household economic development.

2.3 Innovation and Entrepreneurship

The economic value brought about by ZanHuaWei is also a result of entrepreneurial innovation. The major elements of entrepreneurship among private enterprises now include innovation capability to create value, a sense of responsibility in coping with major crises, and craftsmanship to seek high quality [8]. Among these, innovation capability is the key to the industrialization of ICH. Studies demonstrate that by matching local techniques with contemporary tastes and design trends and bringing in novel design ideas, traditional ICH can be greatly enhanced in market competitiveness

[9]. ZanHuaWei entrepreneurs have integrated traditional clothing with diverse cultural trends, which not only revitalized traditional craftsmanship but also catalyzed industrial expansion and economic growth.

3. Case Introduction

Xunpu Village, located in Fengze District, Quanzhou City, was historically dependent on fishing and tidal flat aquaculture. The Xunpu Women, recognized as one of “Fujian’s Three Major Fisherwomen”, have preserved the traditional craft of ZanHuaWei. In 2008, ZanHuaWei was inscribed into China’s Second National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, it only gained widespread public attention in 2023, driven by celebrity influence. Since then, the village has attracted thousands of daily visitors seeking to experience the “Flower Garden on the Head,” transforming the once-overlooked ICH into a cultural tourism phenomenon.

According to statistics from the Quanzhou Cultural and Tourism Bureau, ZanHuaWei generated an economic increment of RMB 500 million for Xunpu Village in 2023. In November 2024, it was listed among CCTV’s “Top Ten National Cultural Tourism Innovation Cases”. By 2024, the village had received over 4.5 million tourists, with daily visitor numbers peaking at nearly 100,000 [10]. This explosive growth stems from three core drivers: (1) a closed-loop “ICH + Cultural Tourism” industrial chain built on brand effects; (2) deep engagement and employment of women in the industry; and (3) innovation and entrepreneurship among local stakeholders. The convergence of these factors has propelled the transformation of this coastal fishing village into a cultural tourism landmark.

4. Brand Effects and Industrial Chain

4.1 Brand Formation Mechanism and Expansion

The branding trajectory of ZanHuaWei (Hairpin Flower) originated from its unique Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) DNA. As a nationally recognized ICH, ZanHuaWei embodies the maritime beliefs and aesthetic practices of Xunpu Women. However, its widespread public recognition emerged in 2023 when Zhao Liying’s ZanHuaWei styling triggered a celebrity-driven breakthrough. Before this, despite government efforts since 2004 to promote ZanHuaWei through ICH exhibitions, outreach remained limited. The synergy of celebrity influence and social media propelled ZanHuaWei from obscurity to a phenomenon-level cultural tourism IP, attracting thousands of daily visitors to Xunpu Village.

Subsequently, brand effects catalyzed the formation of a scaled industrial chain. Field interviews reveal that the number of ZanHuaWei shops in Xunpu Village peaked at over 400, stabilizing at around 300 currently. To accommodate surging tourist demand, the industrial expansion of ZanHuaWei exhibits demystification strategies: for instance, traditional fresh flowers were replaced with recyclable nylon replicas. This transformation successfully converted ZanHuaWei from an ICH practice into a mass-consumable experience, further solidifying its brand IP. Under this branding strategy, Xunpu Village achieved a total tourism revenue exceeding RMB 600 million in 2023, with villagers’ bank deposits increasing by RMB 243 million and per capita income doubling. These economic increments, driven by ICH-based labor, validate the potential of traditional culture to empower local development through branding pathways.

4.2 Driving the Related Industrial Chain

Driven by the shared goal of enhancing tourists’ ZanHuaWei experiences, Xunpu Village’s service sector has undergone explosive growth. The number of restaurants in the village surged from a few scattered establishments to nearly 100, while homestays increased from virtually none to over a dozen. Among the hundreds of millions of revenues generated by ZanHuaWei, consumption in dining and accommodation has become a critical economic pillar. The integration of service

industries with ZanHuaWei studios has created diversified consumption scenarios, which have greatly improved residents' operational income. According to an interviewee, "locals even quit their jobs to run small eateries because business booms during peak tourist seasons."

The ZanHuaWei phenomenon has also spurred the revaluation of domestic assets, revitalizing Xunpu Village's rental market. Flocks of external photography studios have triggered booming demand for commercial areas, allowing villagers to capitalize on vacant resources through two main channels: renting out shopfronts and turning vacant rooms into paid photography studios. Notably, previously abandoned buildings like dilapidated homes have been converted into "heritage-inspired" shops. Some residents have even turned their ground floors into rental areas or micro businesses and relocated their living areas to upper floors. As a result, residents with no ZanHuaWei craftsmanship or service industry skills can gain stable rental returns.

In addition to this, industrial chain extension has generated versatile employment opportunities for young workers across the country. Freelance shooters generally receive 2–3 bookings a day at RMB 80–150 a session, with monthly incomes exceeding RMB 10,000 in peak seasons. Many photographers enter into in-store collaboration agreements with ZanHuaWei studios to generate mutual promotional synergies. Similarly, makeup artists form alliances with local studios to supply "social media-ready makeup + ZanHuaWei" packages, raising average customer spending to RMB 198 on average from RMB 40. This is a model of synthesis, blending traditional craftsmanship and new services. As an elderly ZanHuaWei artisan put it, "Without their makeup skills, people wouldn't come here for our ZanHuaWei."

5. Women's Labor Participation and Employment

The rapid development of ZanHuaWei in Xunpu Village has established a special "three 90%" employment pattern: 90% of cultural tourism practitioners are women, 90% of service recipients are women, and women account for 90% of the cultural tourism revenue generated [11]. The women-dominated economic pattern has not only reshaped the industrial ecosystem but also helped to empower women to fulfill their social values.

5.1 Women's Employment and Economic Impact

The "three 90%" model is a reflection of women's potential to generate economic returns. The first "90%"—90% practitioners are women—shows women's predominance in the main labor force in ZanHuaWei. Their participation has turned surplus rural labor into marketable human capital, expanding industry scale and realizing economies of scale. Particularly, the number of registered ZanHuaWei studios, predominantly female-run, surged from a handful to over 300 within a few years of the tourism boom. From a long-term perspective, the high participation by women will improve employment density and thereby speed up cultural tourism development in Xunpu Village.

The third "90%"—90% of revenue is generated by women—demonstrates their critical role in boosting local economic output. Women's natural dominance of ZanHuaWei craftsmanship brings them a comparative advantage in this heritage industry. Such an advantaged status takes their extraordinary speed and artistic skill of constructing intricate flower arrangements and leads to greater customer throughput and satisfaction directly. It also maximized the industrial division of labor and improved supply chain efficiency while creating enormous employment opportunities and family income. At the same time, the second "90%"—90% of service recipients are women—highlights women's enormous consumption power and economic creativity. This is further boosted by social media, whose female tourists actively seek out and post their ZanHuaWei experiences, further stimulating their peer-driven primary demands.

5.2 Women's Skills and Social Value

By converting traditional skills to marketable skills, women in Xunpu Village have achieved their social value. Most local women have superior ZanHuaWei skills previously reserved for daily

decoration. With ZanHuaWei's popularity, their skills found additional applications. Today, for example, they adorn ZanHuaWei for tourists in specialized workshop studios—securing hair buns, pairing floral motifs, and fixing bright flowers. Interviews show that although some view it as a part-time occupation, numerous elderly women have dropped traditional fishing or oyster shucking to seek more lucrative ZanHuaWei livelihoods. Part-time or full-time, Xunpu women have transformed inherited skills into sustainable livelihoods and injected real economic value through tourism.

Capitalizing on their comparative advantages in skills, Xunpu women have reshaped their identities to achieve social value. Before ZanHuaWei's popularity, they adhered to a "living off the sea" lifestyle, spending most of their time fishing: men went deep-sea fishing while women manned small boats to near-sea areas or oysters in the village. After ZanHuaWei went viral, their inborn skills—previously non-monetary—can be commoditized into assets and their work roles changed to independent working women. This shift from single-dimensional livelihoods (marine-based labor: prying open oysters) to multidimensional livelihoods (fishing + ZanHuaWei) diversified their livelihood capital. Therefore, women broke through customary family constraints, entered market institutions, and became integrated into society: time allocations changed to flexible work time, sources of income shifted to workers' revenue sources along with entrepreneurial ones, and social ties stretched to market institutions rather than remaining confined to the family. Numerous women have opened their own ZanHuaWei studios to take on full-time work. These studios serve as both workplaces and social hubs, fostering peer learning and collective branding.

In addition to this, Xunpu women have also become a cultural symbol and a symbol of tourism. As Fujian's Three Great Fisherwomen, along with Huian Women and Meizhou Women, their particular ZanHuaWei headdresses and traditional clothing have become the village's most representative cultural symbols. Photos of Xunpu women adorned with intricate floral crowns are everywhere on tourism promotions and are viral online. On an internal level, this symbolism reinforces cultural awareness among ICH inheritors, instilling pride and motivating younger generations to continue learn and preserve the craft; externally, it constructs a rich cultural landscape that attracts tourists who seek a specific cultural and aesthetic experience based around these women and their customs.

6. Innovation and Entrepreneurship

6.1 Product and Content Innovation

ZanHuaWei practitioners have attained modern production methods through factors such as material innovation. Traditional ZanHuaWei utilized fresh flowers, which faced challenges like short life cycles and poor reusability. By replacing them with nylon flowers, businesses standardized ZanHuaWei services, extended product life, facilitated easier storage, eliminated organic waste disposal issues, and minimized costs. This re-planning of production factors has driven the industry transformation from artisanal production towards a service economy.

In the context of booming cultural tourism, ZanHuaWei has evolved from a lifestyle practice to a market-driven brand, focusing on customer experience. To match up with the diverse aesthetic preferences, practitioners creatively combined ZanHuaWei techniques with several clothing cultures, producing new cultural symbols. For instance, "ZanHuaWei + HanFu (traditional Han clothing)" packages combine traditional hairstyles with silk embroidery, which are especially appealing to young female tourists who aim for aesthetic traditions. In addition, under the "ZanHuaWei+" fusion model, enterprises created other packages such as ZanHuaWei + Qipao (cheongsam) and ZanHuaWei + MaMianQun (horse-face skirt) as well. Such combinations tend to add accessories such as strands of pearls or hairpins for added visual attractiveness. To sum up, ZanHuaWei designs are now infused into varied clothing with individualized color combinations and coordinated hairpieces. A single ICH technique has thus given rise to several standardized product lines, commodifying ZanHuaWei as a customized cultural product.

6.2 Marketing Model Innovation

ZanHuaWei studios leverage social media platforms such as XiaoHongShu (Little Red Book) and Douyin (TikTok) to promote themselves, and employ brief videos for showcasing craftsmanship and tourist activities. Algorithmic software embedded within platforms enables targeted transmission and increases branding visibility. With heightened homogenized competition between ZanHuaWei studios, peripheral studios bridge the gap with core-region rivals by regularly updating information to appeal to potential customers.

Overcoming geographical limits of offline services, studios introduced online sales outlets, creating “cloud experience” settings. Live-streaming of demonstrations of ZanHuaWei services enables tourists to reserve sessions and choose attire combinations online. Not only is this online platform increasing tourist coverage, but it also enables pre-consumption cultural engagement, speeding the process of ICH transforming from localized tradition to standardized commercial products.

7. Summary and Conclusion

This research sets up a three-in-one framework of analysis of "brand effects, women's participation, and innovation-driven entrepreneurship" to systematically explain the in-depth mechanisms by which intangible cultural heritage drives rural revitalization. The conclusions are as follows: First, brand effects drive the comprehensive model of "ICH + Cultural Tourism" through industrial chain extension and capital value restructuration, boosting local economic scale. Second, women's employment leadership—taking advantage of traditional skills—stimulates labor force transformation and diversified household income, reconstructing rural gender-economic patterns. Third, the entrepreneurial mindset encourages technology upgrading and cultural symbol innovation, achieving the transition of ICH from a traditional craft to a standardized economy. The Sunup Village practices show that ICH industrialization needs the combination of cultural resources, social capital, and market mechanisms, providing a replicable approach to similar areas to revitalize economies through cultural empowerment.

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