



Case Study on the Construction of Rural Brand Identity Based on Optimal Differentiation Theory: A Case Study of Zhaoshan Town, China

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Abstract

Background and Aim: This study addresses the dilemma of cognitive biases and symbol alienation faced by rural areas in cultural tourism development. Taking Zhaoshan Town as a case, it explores how Optimal Distinction Theory can be applied to construct a differentiated and sustainable rural brand identity.

Materials and Methods: Using a mixed-method approach combining literature review, field investigation, questionnaires, and structured interviews, the study analyzed perceptions of cultural symbols among tourists and locals. It systematically examined tensions between cultural inheritance and market adaptability in rural branding.

Results: Findings reveal significant cognitive gaps between internal and external stakeholders regarding core cultural symbols, leading to structural contradictions in brand development. The study proposes a "three-dimensional brand symbol architecture" model and dynamic symbol density calibration to balance cultural authenticity and market recognition.

Conclusion: The application of Optimal Distinction Theory provides a viable framework for resolving symbol alienation and homogenization in rural branding. The study offers theoretical and practical insights for constructing sustainable cultural tourism brands in rural revitalization contexts.

Keywords: Rural Brand; Identity Construction; Cultural Symbol

Introduction

Zhaoshan Town in Ezhou, Hubei Province, China, as a typical lakeside cultural settlement in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, boasts ancient sites such as Neolithic remains and Han Dynasty Jingtuo Tombs. It carries three layers of cultural genes: a thousand-year-old fishing and farming civilization, red revolutionary memories, and wetland ecological landscapes. The "lake-town-field" symbiotic system provides excellent natural resources for the integrated development of culture and tourism, while its uniquely charming folk cultural system includes intangible cultural heritage instruments like the brand gong and jade chain, as well as living heritage arts such as stilt walking and Hubei storytelling, collectively forming a diverse cultural appeal. However, in the process of industrializing cultural tourism, the local area faces the dilemma of cultural symbol alienation and the homogenization of cultural tourism development. On one hand, traditional fishing and farming symbols and local folk cultures at Liangzi Lake have been simplified or even lost; on the other hand, imitating "internet celebrities" in cultural tourism projects has led to a deviation from the original context of local culture. Ultimately, this results in a reduced path for differentiated development of rural cultural brands, making it difficult to build a core competitive advantage for local cultural tourism. The weakening of local cultural symbols and the imitation of other cultural tourism projects reveal a structural contradiction between cultural subjectivity and market adaptability (Huang et al., 2017).

According to the search on CNKI, from 2002 to the present, a total of 2,372 studies have focused on rural brand building. Among these, 191 articles focus on rural tourism brands, and 66 discuss rural culture and cultural branding. Rural tourism brands were a research hotspot in 2023, with scholars presenting various perspectives. These studies provide a theoretical foundation and practical suggestions for the effective development of cultural tourism brands in Zhaoshan Town, offering theoretical guidance and management recommendations to cultural development departments and tourism enterprises. However, they have not yet proposed solutions to structural contradictions in the brand development process.



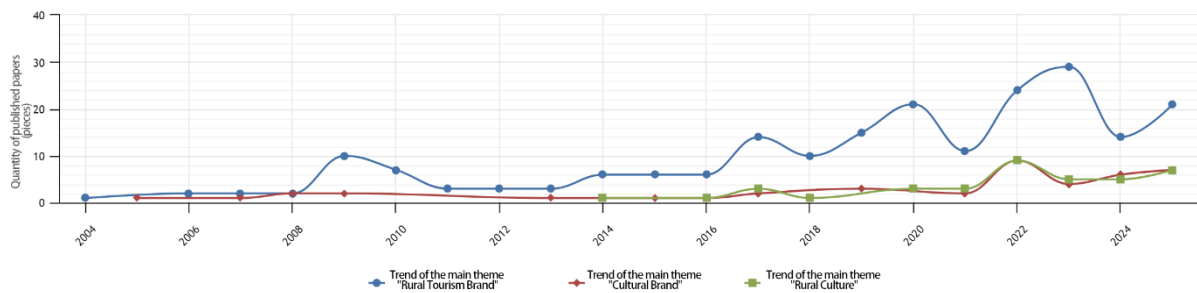


Figure 1 Analysis of the publishing trend of rural brand theme literature

Note: Constructed by the researcher

This study introduces the Optimal Distinction Theory (Guo et al., 2020), focusing on the core proposition of "how to achieve effective market recognition while maintaining cultural authenticity", and explores the similarities and differences in the construction of rural brands. This theory emphasizes that identity construction requires a dynamic balance between legitimacy and distinctiveness, which precisely aligns with the dual tension of cultural inheritance and tourism and cultural innovation transformation in rural brand building. Through a mixed research method, the study deconstructs the three tensions in the cultural symbol system of Zhaoshan Town: first, the conflict between the ritual connotation of the original fishery and farming symbols and the performative demands of the tourism scene; second, the disconnection between the historical narrative of the red site and the interactive demands of contemporary experience; third, the imbalance between the cultural valuation of the ecological wetland resources and the demands for environmental protection. The research data shows that tourists' "novelty perception" of cultural symbols is significantly negatively correlated with the "meaning demands" of residents, highlighting the complexity and balance requirements of brand identity construction. This study attempts to construct a three-dimensional model of "cultural gene anchoring - symbol gradient transformation - experience scene recreation" through the optimal distinction framework, providing a new theoretical perspective and practical path for the sustainable brand development of multi-cultural layered rural areas.

Objectives

1. This paper studies the phenomenon of symbol alienation in the development of the cultural tourism industry in Zhaoshan Town, analyzes the homogenization development status, causes, and influence on the inheritance and revitalization of local culture in the process of tourism development in Zhaoshan Town.
2. Through a case study, this paper obtains the level of local cultural symbols in Zhaoshan Town, reveals the structural contradiction between cultural protection and market acceptance in rural cultural and tourism development, and explores how to balance the uniqueness and inclusiveness between the two.

Literature review

1. Construction of rural brand identity from the perspective of rural revitalization

Against the background of the rural revitalization strategy, the integration of branding and local specialty industries has become a focal point in academic circles. Studies show that the suction effect of urbanization leads to continuous outflow of human resources and capital from rural areas. In this context, creating a rural brand with core competitiveness has become a key strategy for acquiring high-quality resources (Barneys, 2018). Branding is not only a vehicle for the external dissemination of rural cultural values but also a dual-empowerment tool that fosters internal consensus and attracts external resources, serving strategic functions in cultural identity construction and market resource acquisition (Acar et al., 2021).



In the practice of industrial integration, Fan Xiaomin et al. (2025) proposed a "policy support + cultural and tourism integration + technological empowerment" tripartite development model through the case study of Heilongkou Tofu industry, emphasizing the core driving role of regional cultural symbols in differentiating agricultural products. Research in the field of art design shows that professional clusters in universities can achieve precise alignment between talent cultivation and industry needs through the "real problem-solving" model of "rural problems-university solutions," providing an innovative paradigm for industry-education integration (Huang, 2025). In terms of agricultural product brand building, Deng Lei (2025) and Luo Yan (2025) respectively demonstrated that the modern transformation of traditional crafts can increase product value by 23%-35% based on craft brands and the "Gan Flavor" regional brand cases. Chi Zexin (2025) pointed out that the strategy of strengthening agriculture through branding needs to break through the dilemma of being "large but not strong," suggesting solving the low-end lock-in problem by linking quality traceability systems with brand value assessment. The theory of brand identity is further extended to rural settings; the concept of "shared imagination" proposed by Kristal (2020) was innovatively applied by Tian Qian (2025), who verified the reinforcing effect of multi-faceted collaboration mechanisms on cultural identity through the revitalization practices of intangible cultural heritage. Research on digital technology empowerment reveals that county-level media convergence plays a pivotal role in brand IP creation (Xu, 2025), the digital dissemination of intangible cultural heritage can transcend geographical limitations to form cross-regional influence (Wan et al., 2025), and the layout of multi-platform e-commerce combined with logistics system optimization can generate a multiplier effect on sales growth (Yang et al., 2025). Breakthroughs in regional brand theory are reflected in the synergistic effects of geographical indication certification systems and quality traceability (Liu, 2025), as well as the strengthening role of party building in enhancing organizational advantages for brand construction (Zhang et al., 2025). In terms of talent cultivation mechanisms, the "Golden Green Leader" training model promotes the transformation of traditional farmers into modern business entities through intelligent agricultural training (Yang, 2025), while the "brand feedback" mechanism formed by paired assistance between universities and party building provides an institutional innovation model for deep integration of industry, academia, and research (Zong, 2025).

The current research shows three major trends: First, there is a focus on decoding cultural genes, with the theory of brand genes driving agricultural product design to shift from surface symbols to deep cultural narratives (Zhu, 2025); Second, there is an emphasis on integrating digital technologies, where live-streaming e-commerce accelerates the digital transformation of intangible cultural heritage brands through scenario reconstruction (Shen, 2025); Third, there is a deepening of collaborative mechanisms among stakeholders, with the framework for cultural and tourism brands based on spatial ternary theory enabling collaboration among multiple interest parties (Zhang et al., 2025).

2. Construction of rural brand identity under optimal differentiation theory

The theory of optimal differentiation focuses on how individuals or organizations achieve a dynamic balance between "seeking common ground" and "preserving differences" in areas such as strategy formulation and product design (Hans, 2019). Early studies proposed an "inverted U-shaped" curve hypothesis for the relationship between differentiation and group identity, but subsequent experiments found that it exhibits an "inverted S-shaped" nonlinear relationship. Moderate differentiation has a threshold that can cause a sharp decline in group identity, with cognitive dissonance playing a mediating role (Ke et al., 2025). Chen Guoquan's team, through a spatiotemporal theoretical perspective, constructed an optimal differentiation management model for organizations and teams, emphasizing the need to achieve situational balance through the synergy of temporal and spatial dimensions. They proposed the "center of gravity metaphor" to explain the dynamic integration mechanism of multiple elements (Chen et al., 2024). The application areas have expanded to multiple scenarios: international crowdfunding projects need to establish cross-level optimal differentiation and positioning at the individual-project-category level (Liang et al., 2023); platform companies achieve international innovation through reactive collaboration and



forward-looking collaboration (Zhou et al., 2024); internal entrepreneurial units adopt a "compensation-reinforcement-feedback" orchestration strategy to balance organizational rule tensions (Guo et al., 2024).

In the context of rural revitalization, scholars view villages as brand communities and propose a dual mechanism of internalized balance and externalized balance. Internalized balance fosters distinctive core competitiveness by uniting internal stakeholders, while externalized balance integrates external resources to promote deep development. Together, these mechanisms inject sustained momentum into village development (Wang et al., 2025). Identity reconstruction is proven to be a critical path; underdeveloped regions need to broaden their field boundaries through differentiated collective categories and reshape field structures by claiming legitimate leadership positions, achieving optimal differentiation in both spatial and temporal dimensions (Du et al., 2023). In practice, the "Village Super" case demonstrates: by tapping into folk culture to establish regional characteristics and leveraging event IPs to attract commercial investment, a virtuous cycle of "characteristic cultivation-resource aggregation-ecosystem construction" is formed (Wang et al., 2025). The research emphasizes the need to transcend the binary opposition between "compliance imitation" and "competitive innovation," integrating institutional logic with competitive logic to achieve an inverted U-shaped match between platform openness and entrepreneurial strategy through the mediating role of knowledge resource acquisition (Gao et al., 2024).

In summary, the construction of rural brands requires grasping the "spatiotemporal dual balance": spatially, maintaining uniqueness through cultural symbol innovation; temporally, obtaining legitimacy by modernizing traditional elements. At the same time, establish a "threshold warning" mechanism to promptly adjust strategies when external resource dependence is too high or internal cultural alienation exceeds the critical point (Wang et al., 2025; Du et al., 2023).

Conceptual Framework

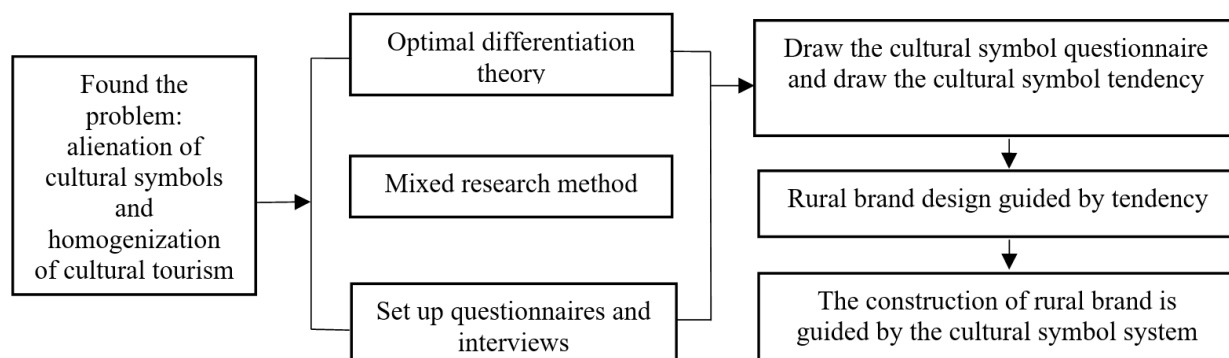


Figure 2 Conceptual Framework

Note: Constructed by the researcher

Methodology

This study combined a variety of research methods:

Literature review: systematically review the core views of "optimal differentiation theory" and existing research on rural brand construction at home and abroad, summarize the key issues of rural brand in cultural inheritance, resource integration, and market competition, and clarify the theoretical framework and analysis dimensions of this study.

Field investigation: In Zhaoshan Town, Ezhou, three typical administrative villages were selected to carry out a field investigation and brand element recording, and the brand logo and cultural symbols in rural public space were photographed and sorted out.



Survey and Interviews: Collects opinions and attitudes from tourists and residents regarding the cultural recognition and brand image of Zhaoshan agricultural products, and whether they align with rural values. **Question Design:** Includes four sections—representative elements, brand image, folk culture, and route recommendations; **Key Figure Interviews:** Conducts semi-structured interviews with village officials, cooperative leaders, and intangible cultural heritage bearers, focusing on "brand uniqueness" and "industry legitimacy."

Data analysis: Verify the correlation between "strength of uniqueness" and "brand identity" through the above data, subdivide group differences based on demographic variables, refine the core contradiction points, and draw the key path map for brand identity construction.

For studies involving children, we will select participants from the population residing in Zhaoshan Town. The entire research process will be conducted under the supervision of students and in collaboration with teachers. We will take great care to ensure that the privacy and rights of participants are fully protected. All personal information will be treated as confidential upon the consent of the participants. This study will adhere to relevant ethical guidelines throughout its duration.

The data content of this study is consistent:

1. Stage 1: Questionnaire survey

- Group No.1 (control group): Twenty-five practitioners of the cultural tourism industry in Zhaoshan Town (21-40 years old)
- Group No.2 (experimental group): Twenty-five residents of Zhaoshan Town (18-62 years old)
- Group No.3 (experimental group): Twenty-five local children from Zhaoshan Town (3-16 years old)
- Group No.4 (test group): Twenty-five Out-of-town tourists (6-73 years old, all Chinese citizens)

Questionnaire on cultural symbols of Zhaoshan Town:

Respondents will be given the same questionnaire based on their visual perception of local elements and their understanding of folk cultural elements. The questionnaire design will integrate existing literature and the theoretical framework of this study. (To facilitate children's understanding, the questionnaire includes explanatory images.)

2. Stage 2: Structured interviews

- No.1 Interview group: Head of the culture and tourism department of Zhaoshan Town Government (30-40 years old)
- No.2 Interview group: Zhang Yuzhao, Calligraphy Hall administrator (28 years old)

Structured interviews are used to focus on the distribution of local cultural themes and the analysis of tourism development tendencies to deepen the insights of the research.

Results

According to the literature review and preliminary field research, common cultural elements and regional symbols in the traditional culture of Zhaoshan Town include Zhaoshan Hu You, Zhang Yuzhao, Liangzi Lake scenery, and Biyu tea. The survey on cultural symbols of Zhaoshan Town asks respondents to identify the elements that best represent the Zhaoshan brand, which brand image is easier to remember, and whether this brand image fully utilizes the unique elements of Zhaoshan. Respondents can choose one or more answers. The results of different groups are shown in the table below.





Table 1 No.1 group (control group) investigation form of cultural symbols in Zhaoshan Town (25)






	Option 1	%	Option 2	%	option	%	option	%	option	%
natural element	Zhaoshan Hu You	44 %	Mountains Forest Park	34 %	Liangzi Lake mountains and waters	10 %	Jade tea	10 %		
cultural element	Yu Lianhuan	50 %	Crossing the flower dragon boat	21 %	Zhang Yuzhao's calligraphy	21 %	Gong and cymbal	7 %	Zhaoshan Temple	5%
brand logo		29 %		26 %		26 %		8 %		8%
scenic spot	Zhang Yuzhao Cultural Park	26 %	Liangzi Lake Ring Greenway	21 %	Yuanjiawan Scenic Area	18 %	Zhaoshan Folk Art Museum	16 %	Mountains Forest Park	11 %
Cultural expression	satisfied	81 %	To be optimized	18 %	discontent	1 %				

Table 2 No.2 groups (test group) investigation form of cultural symbols in Zhaoshan Town (25)











	Option 1	%	Option 2	%	option	%	option	%	option	%
natural element	Zhaoshan Hu You	58 %	Mountains Forest Park	4 %	Liangzi Lake mountains and waters	12 %	Jade tea	8 %		
cultural element	Yu Lianhuan	60 %	Crossing the flower dragon boat	5 %	Zhang Yuzhao's calligraphy	87 %	Gong and cymbal	60 %	Zhaoshan Temple	15 %
brand logo		80 %		4 %		30 %		5 %		8%
scenic spot	Zhang Yuzhao Cultural Park	95 %	Liangzi Lake Ring Greenway	8 %	Yuanjiawan Scenic Area	57 %	Zhaoshan folk art	64 %	Mountains Forest Park	40 %
Cultural expression	satisfied	85 %	To be optimized	1 %	discontent	0 %				






Table 3 No.3 groups (test group) investigation form of cultural symbols in Zhaoshan Town (25)

	Option 1	%	Option 2	%	option	%	option	%	option	%
natural element	Zhaoshan Hu You	78 %	Mountains Forest Park	64 %	Liangzi Lake mountains and waters	60 %	Jade tea	10 %		
cultural element	Yu Lianhuan	70 %	Rowing a dragon boat through the flowers	68 %	Zhang Yuzhao's calligraphy	80 %	Gong and cymbal	50 %	Zhaoshan Temple	8%
brand logo		88 %		60 %		90 %		30 %		5%
scenic spot	Zhang Yuzhao Cultural Park	70 %	Liangzi Lake Ring Greenway	80 %	Yuanjiawan Scenic Area	45 %	Zhaoshan folk art	30 %	Mountains Forest Park	75 %



	Option 1	%	Option 2	%	option	%	option	%	option	%
Cultural expression	satisfied	80 %	To be optimized	15 %	discontent	5 %				

Table 4 No.4 groups (test group) investigation form of cultural symbols in Zhaoshan Town (25)

	Option 1	%	Option 2	%	option	%	option	%	option	%
natural element	Zhaoshan Hu You	60 %	Mountains Forest Park	76 %	Liangzi Lake mountains and waters	90 %	Jade tea	20 %		
cultural element	Yu Lianhuan	80 %	Crossing the flower dragon boat	75 %	Zhang Yuzhao's calligraphy	90 %	Gong and cymbal	84 %	Zhaoshan Temple	30 %
brand logo		90 %		70 %		50 %		5 %		8 %
scenic spot	Zhang Yuzhao Cultural Park	95 %	Liangzi Lake Ring Greenway	90 %	Yuanjiawan Scenic Area	68 %	Zhaoshan folk art	55 %	Mountains Forest Park	50 %
Cultural expression	satisfied	90 %	To be optimized	8 %	discontent	2 %				

Most people believe that the Zhaoshan Hu You and Yulianhuan better represent the brand image of Zhaoshan; in terms of brand image design, most people think that designs featuring the natural elements of Liangzihu Lake more effectively highlight the cultural core and value of Zhaoshan Town; regarding scenic spot recommendations, everyone generally favors the Changyu Zhu Cultural Park, the Liangzihu Lake Greenway, and the Yuanjiawan Scenic Area. The specific route planning will need to be designed based on the theme of a one-day tour.

Discussion

The interview mainly focused on the core issues of qualitative research and the development of local rural cultural tourism brands. The following is a more specific summary of the focus group discussion results.

Interview group No.1: Head of the cultural tourism department of Zhaoshan Town Government (30-40 years old)

The current Zhaoshan Town Government Organization Department is focusing on party building and attempting to integrate intangible cultural heritage (ICH) into the party activity system. On important dates such as July 1st Party Founding Day and Chongyang Festival, they organize the public to watch ICH performances like the Lotus Boat and Jade Linked Rings through party day activities or events for retired cadres. However, the integration remains at a one-way performance stage, lacking a regular and in-depth cultural dissemination mechanism, which fails to effectively activate the party-building empowerment value of ICH culture. Additionally, Zhaoshan Town has clearly defined its brand development strategy, completing the slogan planning for "Ink Flows from Zhaofeng, Camellias Scented with Pomelo Fragrance," and proposing a visual reinforcement plan to set up brand logos at the Wu-Huang Expressway exit.



However, the implementation of core elements has been hindered: the LOGO and IP design have stalled due to leadership changes and a shortage of staff in the Cultural Tourism Office, which only has three full-time employees; the brand system lacks standardized application norms and has not been linked with geographical indication products such as Liangzi Lake crabs and Zhaoshan tea oil.

Interview group No.2: Zhang Yuzhao, Calligraphy Hall administrator (28 years old)

Ezhou Zhaoshan Town's cultural and tourism development faces multiple challenges and transformation opportunities. After hosting international cultural exchange activities in 2023, the visitor numbers at the Zhang Yuzhao Cultural Park plummeted to one-third of last year's level, revealing issues such as insufficient content innovation and rigid management mechanisms. The calligraphy-themed exhibition hall relies on traditional display methods and lacks digital interactive facilities, resulting in an average stay time of less than half an hour for ordinary visitors. Over ten cultural and creative products developed within the hall, priced between 80-300 yuan, mainly attract scholars, with less than 5% of ordinary visitors purchasing them. Due to funding constraints, public calligraphy classes are only offered 4-6 times per year, and children's courses face enrollment difficulties due to parental time conflicts and a lack of incentive mechanisms. Other attractions also encounter development bottlenecks: the Peony Base once attempted to create an astronomy camp and a scarecrow kingdom but was shelved due to a 20-year planting period limitation and lack of supporting facilities, incurring annual maintenance costs of 80,000-100,000 yuan for idle facilities; four out of six planned rest stops along the lakeside greenway remain closed long-term, and village collectives restrict the development of camping and other business activities due to environmental and safety concerns; the Water Grass Base, as an ecological technology project, has potential for educational tours but lacks visual science education installations; scattered flower bases have seen a 40% decline in visitors due to economic downturns and insufficient linkage with other attractions.

To address these issues, it is necessary to activate existing resources from multiple dimensions. By linking the Changyu Zhao Cultural Park with a flower base 3 kilometers away through thematic connections, we can design a composite experience product featuring "calligraphy printing + handmade flowers," implementing a joint ticket system to enhance consumer loyalty. The idle peony campsite can be transformed into a nature classroom for low-cost family activities such as insect observation. In terms of operations, two lakeside rest stops will pilot a "village collective + enterprise" co-management model, promoting local agricultural specialties and setting up a profit-sharing mechanism. At the same time, AR interactive devices will be introduced at the aquatic grass base to develop ecological study courses. For promotion, dynamic advertising screens should be set up at highway exits to strengthen brand exposure, and applications should be made for provincial cultural tourism funds to support the digital transformation of the cultural park. In terms of customer operations, the focus can be on the family market by designing weekend study camps that combine farm dining with handmade experiences, while simultaneously offering online calligraphy live-streaming courses to enhance user loyalty through points redemption. These measures should follow the principle of "light assets, heavy linkage," prioritizing the co-management of rest stops and pilot study courses to gradually resolve the issues of homogenized competition and facility vacancy.

Conclusion

Through research and analysis, the cultural symbol system of Zhaoshan Town has been clarified. The foundational layer centers on Zhang Yuzhao's calligraphy culture, Liangzi Lake's fishing and farming techniques, and the lotus-picking boat folk customs, serving as a repository of cultural genes. Activities





such as authentic calligraphy exhibitions and intangible cultural heritage performances ensure the purity of local culture, allowing residents to accurately interpret the historical origins of these symbols. The derivative layer enhances symbol recognition through productization: calligraphy rubbing experience kits incorporate AR tracing functions, Hu You's creative gift boxes feature calligraphy rubbings on their packaging, and wetland study courses design interdisciplinary tasks like "water quality testing + learning to sing fishing songs." These innovations effectively increase visitors' recognition of local culture. The innovative layer focuses on breaking traditional boundaries in cultural tourism projects, such as developing a "Digital Water Plant Pavilion" for real-time monitoring of wetland ecological data, enhancing data visualization, and establishing a dual-track issuance model of "calligraphy NFT + physical cultural products." By using blockchain technology to authenticate cultural assets, it achieves digital appreciation of traditional symbols, promoting diversified development of cultural tourism projects in Zhaoshan Town.

The dynamic adjustment model of cultural symbol density in Zhaoshan Town, established based on the optimal differentiation theory, can prevent cultural alienation caused by excessive uniqueness or homogenization due to the solidification of legitimacy. In the dynamic calibration mechanism, symbol density regulation is crucial: when the basic layer legitimacy indicators or the derivative layer uniqueness indicators deviate from the threshold, the system triggers the calibration procedure.

Recommendations

This study reveals that the sustainable development of cultural symbols in Ezhou's Zhaoshan Town urgently requires a systematic and hierarchical cultural framework to balance the tension between "traditional preservation" and "innovative breakthroughs." At the same time, dynamically calibrating the density of derivative layer symbols can effectively maintain the market perception threshold for cultural uniqueness, avoiding the trap of homogenized competition.

The study has the following limitations: First, the sample focuses on three administrative villages in Zhaoshan Town, and the applicability of the conclusions to other rural areas with different geographical characteristics needs further validation; Second, data from structured interviews and field observations may be influenced by participants' subjective expression biases. Future research could expand to other towns in the Liangzihu Basin, employing mixed research methods to longitudinally observe the intergenerational transmission effects of symbolic alienation. It is hoped that this study will provide a "legitimacy-uniqueness" dynamic balance paradigm for the development of cultural resources in rural revitalization, promoting a deeper transformation of local culture from landscape display to value regeneration.

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