

Research on Tourism Development in Hengjiang Ancient Town based on Spatial Production Theory

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Abstract

The slow-paced ancient town tourism has become an important choice for tourists to relax and unwind. As a national 4A-level tourist attraction and a key tourism resource town in Yibin City, Hengjiang Ancient Town faces contradictions between tourism space and residents' slow-paced living space amidst rapid tourism development. This paper, framed by spatial production theory, explores the dynamic process of tourism spatial production and the interactive relationships among four main actors - indigenous residents, businesses, tourists, and the government - in Hengjiang Ancient Town. The study reveals that the tourism spatial production in Hengjiang Ancient Town exhibits a "natural space-mental space-social space" tripartite synergy, but is challenged by incomplete functional transformation, insufficient cultural activation, and unequal distribution of interests among stakeholders. Based on these findings, this paper proposes an optimized path for ancient town tourism, encompassing "functional zoning + cultural activation + stakeholder coordination," highlighting that establishing spatial identity and collaborative mechanisms among stakeholders is crucial for promoting the sustainable tourism development of Hengjiang Ancient Town.

Keywords

Theory of Spatial Production; Hengjiang Ancient Town; Tourism; Tripartite Synergy.

1. Theory of Spatial Production

Spatial production theory, as an important theoretical tool for urbanization research, has demonstrated its effectiveness in tourism development studies of rural areas, communities, and historical districts.

1.1. Theoretical Foundation

1.1.1. Core Connotation of the Theory of Spatial Production

Following World War II, as urbanization accelerated across Europe and America, Western scholars began to investigate issues of urban development from a spatial perspective. It was against this backdrop that French urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre introduced the theory of spatial production. In his work, he elaborated on the evolutionary process of the "spatial dialectic" and conceptualized spatial production theory into three components: the essence of space, the production of space, and the study of urban space. This framework challenged the traditional, static understanding of space, asserting instead that space possesses dynamic and social characteristics that actively shape and are shaped by human behavior^[1].

1.1.2. Tourism Space Production Theory

Tourism spatial production theory is a derivative of spatial production theory applied specifically to the tourism sector. As defined by Guo Wen et al. (2020), tourism spatial production is the process wherein political and economic forces-such as capital, power, and stakeholder interests-collectively act upon a tourism space. This action transforms the space,

making it a medium or a direct product of these forces and, in doing so, forges new social relationships that are fundamentally based on that space^[2-4].

2. Domestic and International Research Status

2.1. International Research Status

Research on the theory of spatial production originated earlier in foreign countries. David Harvey applied Marxist epistemology to explore the relationship between urban space and social justice, proposing the "social process-spatial form" theory, forming a "space-society" monistic idea. Young was the first to introduce the theory of spatial production into the field of tourism, proposing that tourism space is formed by social construction and negotiation, and dividing tourism space production into two dimensions: tourism industry space production and tourism consumption space production. The focus is on the "coupling of spatial functions and experiential value" and "spatial governance under community participation." Early foreign research, based on human geography, analyzed the compatibility of ancient town street patterns, architectural texture, and tourism routes, exploring the balance between the protection of historical space and tourism development, emphasizing the key role of "authenticity protection" in maintaining the attractiveness of ancient town tourism. Later, it gradually shifted to the "human-land relationship" dimension, focusing on the principal status of community residents in tourism space planning and how community participation mechanisms affect the allocation of spatial resources and interest coordination^[5].

2.2. Domestic Research Status

Domestic tourism development research based on spatial production theory mostly concentrates on rural areas, communities, and historical districts. Research directly targeting ancient town tourism is relatively scarce, but relevant findings provide reference value for ancient town research, mainly divided into two categories: research focusing on urban social space and research focusing on the interaction of multiple factors.

Guo Wen (2020) proposed that tourism spatial production is a process of "adapting ancient culture for contemporary use" and spatial form transformation, where the ancient town's original living space is transformed into tourism consumption products. Xue Ying (2022), using southern Jiangsu tourism townships as samples, explored optimization paths for production-living-ecological spaces from three aspects: "spatial practice," "representations of space," and "representational spaces." Yin Tong (2018), taking Hancheng ancient district as an example, proposed external dynamics (government power, capital market, local subjects) and internal dynamics (cultural resources) of spatial production in historical districts, with experiential perception being an important influencing factor. Sun Yongsheng (2023), using Zhaxing Dong Village as an example, proposed that tourism space is formed through interaction among community residents, external capital, local government, tourists, and other subjects, with residents' behavior having significant implications for spatial form changes.

Domestic research on ancient town tourism space closely combines local ancient town characteristics, showing "practice-oriented" and "technology integration" features. In terms of research content, one aspect revolves around "spatial structure optimization," addressing common issues such as "excessive commercialization" and "chaotic functional zoning" by using spatial analysis tools to identify spatial conflicts among core sightseeing areas, commercial service areas, and residential areas, proposing optimization models such as "concentric" and "axis-belt" patterns. Another aspect focuses on "cultural empowerment of space," exploring integration paths between intangible cultural heritage, folk customs, and other cultural elements with the physical space of ancient towns^[6-7].

3. Deconstruction of Hengjiang Ancient Town Tourism Space from the Perspective of Spatial Production Theory

3.1. Ancient Town Tourism and its Development History

The concept of "ancient town" first appeared in the 1980s. Researchers generally believe that ancient towns are not only historically significant but also feature ancient buildings that harmonize with natural landscapes. Ancient towns preserve traditional folk customs and carry ethnic memories, representing not only historical and cultural heritage but also crystallizations of human civilization.

Ancient town tourism, as the name suggests, refers to a series of tourism activities carried out with ancient towns as spatial carriers, relying on tourism resources such as original architectural clusters, local customs, and distinctive cultures of ancient towns.

China's ancient town tourism has evolved through three stages: the initial stage (1980s-1990s) developed sightseeing and leisure based on proximity to cities and transportation advantages, represented by the six major ancient towns in southern China and Pingyao in Shanxi; the middle stage (from the mid-1990s) saw the rise of leisure vacation routes in areas with weaker transportation but pristine environments and original folk customs, with Wuyuan in Jiangxi, Naping Tulou, Lijiang in Yunnan, and Fenghuang in western Hunan as typical representatives; the modern stage (after the 21st century) features development patterns centered around three major ancient town clusters-Chengdu ancient towns, Jiangnan ancient towns, and Lijiang ancient towns-showing clustering, branding, and special activity-driven development, accompanied by market-oriented product updates and transformation through integration of cultural and modern elements^[8].

3.2. Spatial Attributes and Historical Evolution of Hengjiang Ancient Town

3.2.1. Natural Space: The Basic Characteristics of Physical-Geographical Space

Hengjiang Ancient Town is located in Xuzhou District, Yibin City, Sichuan Province, 42 kilometers away from the urban area. The ancient town is located in the southwestern part of Sichuan Province, backed by Shicheng Mountain Forest Park, and faces Louba Town, Shuifu County, Yunnan Province across the river. As a central town, it is the central town connecting Sichuan and Yunnan and is known as the "throat of Sichuan and Yunnan." The ancient town covers an area of 113 square kilometers, of which the scenic area occupies 1.86 square kilometers. The core protection area is bounded by the planned Binhe Road to the north, bordered by Mai Zixi to the west, and bordered by the Neikun Railway to the east and south, covering an area of 12.36 hectares. The town has a population of more than 30,000 residents.

In terms of spatial form, the ancient town relies on the Hengjiang River and Shicheng Mountain to form a "back-mountain-facing-water" pattern. The core protection area has 7 main streets and 10 alleys, with a high proportion of buildings from the Ming and Qing dynasties. The total area of historical buildings is 13,500 square meters, with a preservation rate of 90%. There are cultural relics protection units such as Zhu's Residence, Xiao's Mansion, and Bingchangxiang Business House. For details, see the following table.

These physical space elements, including geographical location, architectural layout, and natural scenery, constitute the "natural space" foundation of Hengjiang Ancient Town's tourism space production and are also the core material resources that attract tourists. The "natural space" proposed by Lefebvre corresponds to the physical-geographical attributes of Hengjiang Ancient Town and is the basic carrier of the ancient town's tourism space production^[9-10].

Table 1. List of Cultural Relics Protection Units in Hengjiang Town

Name	Dynasty	Category	Level
Shicheng Mountain Cliff Tombs	Song-Ming	Ancient Tombs	National
Zhu's Residence	Republic of China	Ancient Architecture	Provincial
Xiao's Mansion	Republic of China	Ancient Architecture	Provincial
Shicheng Mountain Ancient Battlefield Site	Qing	Ancient Site	County
Erhengyan Pingman Stele	Ming	Stele	County
Shicheng Mountain Buddha Statue	Ming	Grottoes and Carvings	County
Shicheng Mountain Ancient Plank Road Site	Ming	Ancient Site	County
Rain Master Temple Site	Qing	Ancient Site	County
Zeng Family Ancestral Hall	Qing	Ancient Architecture	County
Bingchangxiang Commercial Firm	Qing	Ancient Architecture	County
Yang Family Courtyard	Qing	Ancient Architecture	County
Zhou Family Courtyard	Qing	Ancient Architecture	County
Liangti Stone Steps and Road Stele	Qing	Ancient Architecture	County
Dabao Cliff Tomb Group	Han	Ancient Tomb Group	County

3.2.2. Mental Space: Core Connotations of Cultural-Psychological Space

Mental space: as the non-material dimension in Lefebvre's spatial classification, corresponds to the historical culture and humanistic connotations of Hengjiang Ancient Town and is the soul of ancient town tourism spatial production. Hengjiang Ancient Town is a national historical and cultural town with profound historical heritage, and the formation and evolution of its mental space span multiple historical periods.

Historical trajectory: In the Northern Song Dynasty, a water garrison was established, highlighting its military strategic value; in the Yuan Dynasty, an inspection office was set up, strengthening national governance functions; in the Qing Dynasty, due to the establishment of the Imperial Copper Transportation Bureau, it became an important economic and trade hub; in the early Republic of China period, it witnessed a peak in architectural development, with 7 main streets and 10 alleys in the ancient town. Buildings from the Ming and Qing dynasties dominate the core protection area of Hengjiang Ancient Town.

Cultural heritage: The ancient town, located at a crucial point on the Southern Silk Road, integrates Silk Road culture, architectural art, ancient battlefield relics, folk customs, cliff tomb traditions, and religious beliefs. Among these, the "Qin Five-Foot Road" witnessed commercial exchanges between Sichuan and Yunnan, earning the acclaim "Zhaotong's transportation never ceases, Xuzhou's replenishment knows no bounds" in ancient times. The Shicheng Mountain Cliff Tombs, a national cultural heritage site, reflect the Bo people's cliff tomb culture of the Song and Ming dynasties, also known as "Manzi Caves," a unique burial form. These tomb groups are distributed across five areas: Tiantang Gully, Beidou Rock, Thirty-Six Wall Mountain, Leida Stone, and Black Stone, all being ethnic tombs from the Song and Ming dynasties. Unlike the "Bo people's suspended coffins" in Gong County, the Shicheng Mountain Cliff Tombs display a burial form called cliff burial, which involves "carving caves and building rooms to place coffins inside." The stone carving craftsmanship is exquisite, with rich and diverse imagery, reflecting the cultural appearance and aesthetic concepts of the Bo people at that time. Additionally, intangible cultural heritage items such as Guanhe Boatmen's Work Chants and Hengjiang Folk Songs embody local folklore; religious relics from the Sui and Tang dynasties, such as "Nine Palaces and Eighteen Temples" (like the Shicheng Mountain Great Buddha Statue and Yushi Cave), carry religious cultural memories.

These cultural elements constitute the "mental space" of Hengjiang Ancient Town and are also the content that needs to be excavated and activated in tourism development. Through cultural displays, experiential activities, and other forms, non-material culture is transformed into perceptible tourism products, promoting the transformation of mental space into tourism consumption space^[11-13].

3.2.3. Social Space: Dynamic Relationships Constructed by Human Activities

According to Lefebvre's spatial production theory, social space refers to spatial forms that are continuously generated and dynamically changing through human practical activities in specific socio-historical contexts. Distinguished from natural space and mental space, social space emphasizes the connections and structures formed between people and social organizations around specific purposes in tourism spatial production, representing a concentrated manifestation of the interaction between natural space and mental space. As an important strategic node on the Sichuan-Yunnan border, the formation and evolution of Hengjiang Ancient Town's social space are mainly reflected in the historical processes of human activities and social relationships such as military defense, revolutionary struggles, and material circulation.

Hengjiang Ancient Town has a long history and is known as an ancient battlefield. Historically, numerous battles of varying scales have occurred here. Today, through the well-preserved ancient battlefield sites, we can still feel the atmosphere of war. In the late Ming Dynasty, peasant uprisings brought together many revolutionary forces in this area. Military forces such as the Southern Sichuan Revolutionary Army, Yunnan National Protection Army, and the underground Communist Party's revolutionary armed forces left traces of battle here. During the Anti-Japanese War, this area was an important material transfer hub for Sichuan and Yunnan regions. Its precipitous geographical location, rich military relics, and war stories that have been passed down to this day endow Hengjiang Ancient Town with rich military cultural resources.

In summary, the social space of Hengjiang Ancient Town is constructed through the interaction of multiple forces—military, political, economic, and social—in different historical stages, exhibiting typical characteristics of dynamic relationship evolution. This social space, which integrates material, institutional, and relational networks, not only provides rich historical scenes and relics for ancient town tourism development but also injects distinct cultural memories and experiential value into tourism spatial production. Through the activation and utilization of spatial carriers such as ancient battlefield sites and revolutionary memorial sites, the transformation of social relationships into tourism consumption space can be effectively promoted, achieving the protection and living inheritance of historical culture^[14].

4. Current Status of Tourism in Hengjiang Ancient Town and the Shift in Tourism Spatial Production

4.1. Overview of Tourism Development in Hengjiang Ancient Town

Hengjiang Ancient Town has achieved significant milestones in its development. In 2014, it was jointly designated as one of the Sixth Batch of National Famous Historical and Cultural Towns by the National Cultural Heritage Administration and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development. This was followed by the honorary title of one of Sichuan's First Batch of Provincial-Level Characteristic Towns in 2017. In 2019, the town was officially certified as a National AAAA-Level Tourist Attraction, and in 2020, it was successfully established as a Tianfu Famous Tourism Town.

Regarding resource protection and development, Hengjiang Ancient Town is endowed with a wealth of historical and cultural resources, including the preserved ruins of the thousand-year-

old town, the ancient "Five-Chi Road" (Wuchidao), the Shicheng Mountain Cliff Tomb Cluster, and ancient military sites. Beyond these tangible assets, the town boasts profound and authentic local customs. During traditional festivals, residents continue to practice age-old traditions such as dragon lantern dances and the singing of mountain folk songs.

In terms of infrastructure improvement, the town has recently enhanced its facilities by adding two new parking lots and renovating six standardized public restrooms for tourists. A main visitor center is currently under construction, which will provide significant convenience for tourists arriving from the G85 Yinchuan-Kunming Expressway.

Concerning transportation accessibility, the town is relatively convenient to reach. The primary routes from downtown Yibin are via the G85 Yinchuan-Kunming Expressway or the national highway that crosses the Mamingxi Jinsha River Bridge towards Shuifu County. The town is located approximately 2 kilometers from the Louba toll station on the expressway, making it easily accessible. However, transportation options are limited, with self-driving being the predominant mode of travel.

According to publicly available data from the Yibin Municipal People's Government and Sichuan News Network, during the 2025 Spring Festival holiday period, Hengjiang Ancient Town attracted tourists by staging intangible cultural heritage performances like dragon dances, ox lantern dances, and land boat performances. While specific visitor data for the ancient town alone was not released, the five A-level attractions in Xuzhou District collectively received 135,300 visitor trips, generating 1.0389 million RMB in ticket revenue. During the 2024 National Day "Golden Week" holiday, the town hosted a black-canopied boat parade, vividly recreating historical scenes of Sichuan-Yunnan river transport and drawing large crowds of spectators and photographers. Furthermore, guided by its strategic positioning as "Silk Road Landscapes: Five Scenes in Harmony," the ancient town is actively promoting the integrated development of cultural tourism and its sericulture (silkworm farming) industry^[15-16].

4.2. The Shift in Tourism Spatial Production: Characteristics of Tripartite Synergy

Prior to its development for tourism, Hengjiang Ancient Town functioned primarily as a residential space for its local inhabitants and as a market center for surrounding communities. In this state, its spatial form was dominated by what Lefebvre terms natural space (physical-geographical space), characterized by a slow-paced and tranquil rhythm of life.

However, once the town's rich tourism resources-particularly its cultural and mental resources-were excavated and developed, Hengjiang Ancient Town acquired a new spatial identity. In addition to its roles as a place of residence and trade, it took on the form of a tourist destination. This transformation marks a symbolic shift: its natural space began to evolve, turning toward the dimensions of mental space (cultural-psychological space) and social space.

5. The Actors of Spatial Production in the Context of Tourism Development

All activities within a given space are inevitably carried out by certain "actors." When applied to the tourism space of the ancient town, the primary actors of spatial production correspond to four main groups: "indigenous residents," "businesses," "tourists," and "the government." The production of a new tourism space atop the original spatial foundation has triggered issues of psychological identification for the indigenous residents concerning the three other, external actors, as well as a reconstruction of their own cultural identity. When confronted with the tourist gaze and the impact of commercialization, indigenous residents find themselves wanting to preserve their traditional way of life while simultaneously having to adapt to the

economic opportunities and spatial changes brought by tourism. This creates a psychological tension between cultural preservation and modern development.

5.1. Indigenous Residents: The Original Actors of Spatial Production

With the tourism development of Hengjiang Ancient Town and the rapid pace of urbanization, the local rural population has gradually converged on the town center. Guided by policies from the Yibin municipal and Xuzhou district governments, both the productive and social spaces of the town have undergone gradual transformation. The spatial form has evolved from what was once a "society of acquaintances" toward a "semi-acquaintance society."

Hengjiang Ancient Town has been a major commercial hub since ancient times. In earlier years, its geographic isolation, combined with its long-standing commercial atmosphere, established it as the primary market gathering place for surrounding townships. To this day, the town maintains the custom of holding a market day on the 3rd, 6th, and 9th days of each lunar calendar cycle. This commercial activity undoubtedly increases the flow of people, enhancing contact between the town's residents and the outside population. This was particularly amplified after the completion and opening of the Heng-Lou Bridge in 2021, which shortened the distance between Sichuan and Yunnan and provided great convenience for external populations to enter Hengjiang. This external population includes tourists, new settlers, and commercial entrepreneurs and investors seeking to generate income.

5.2. Businesses: The Capital Force in Spatial Production

Throughout its tourism development process, Hengjiang Ancient Town has managed to retain its original traditional lifestyle and its centuries-old architectural clusters. Yibin Changhe Tourism Development Co., Ltd. is the sole operating entity for the ancient town. Using tourism as its foundation, the company plans to leverage modern tourism business models and strong government support in the coming years to create a leisure, wellness, and vacation resort area. This development will be centered on Hengjiang Ancient Town as the core, integrating regional tourism resources such as the Shicheng Mountain Scenic Area and the Panlong Lake Ecological Scenic Area.

Due to the relatively low level of commercial development, the majority of vendors currently in the town are local residents. A very small number of external merchants, from places like Chongqing and Hunan, have also settled in the town over the years, transitioning from an external population to permanent local residents. Consequently, the actors of spatial production in Hengjiang are atypical. This differs from the clear theoretical distinction between indigenous residents and businesses; in Hengjiang, the indigenous residents are the residents, but they are also the business owners—the two roles have become inseparable. During the development process, the town has continuously intensified its efforts to attract key provincial and municipal investment, actively participating in external marketing and promotional events like the Sichuan International Tourism Trade Expo to increase its visibility and secure powerful cultural tourism companies for the comprehensive development of its tourism projects.

5.3. Tourists: The Essential Actors in Tourism Spatial Production

Hengjiang Ancient Town first opened for tourism in August 2017. In the year that followed, it received 600,000 visitor trips, including 30,000 from overseas. In 2021, with an investment of over 46 million RMB, the Heng-Lou Bridge was completed, reducing the travel time between Yibin and Shuifu County in Yunnan. That year, the town received a total of 504,400 visitor trips. The visitors are predominantly domestic, originating mainly from Yibin and nearby surrounding cities. They typically visit the town via self-driving tours and short suburban excursions.

The town's tourist source market is constrained by several factors. At the external policy level, visitor flows are influenced by municipal and district tourism plans. Internally, the market is

affected by the town's own economic condition, the quality of its infrastructure, the state of its tourism resource preservation, and the intensity of its promotional efforts. Because the current tourism reception facilities for dining and lodging are limited and cannot meet the needs of large-scale overnight tourism, the vast majority of visitors make same-day round trips.

5.4. The Government: The Power-Holding Actor in Spatial Production

The government serves as the organizer of Hengjiang's spatial evolution and urbanization process, making it the actor that holds power in spatial production.

Government Investment Drives Infrastructure Construction. The government has successfully propelled the town to achieve several key designations: the sixth batch of "China's Famous Historical and Cultural Towns," a pilot town in the third batch of the "Sichuan Province Hundred Towns Construction Initiative," a "Hometown of Folk Culture and Art of Sichuan Province," and a priority development town for the entire municipality. The town's characteristic industries are developing rapidly, its reception capacity and external image have been further enhanced, and its commercial trade has become more vibrant.

Government Policy Guides Integrated Development. The 2021 Preliminary Plan for County-level Regional Division in Xuzhou District, Yibin City positioned Hengjiang as a central hub to drive the development of 54 surrounding villages and communities, establishing a Sericulture, Culture, and Tourism Industrial Zone. The plan emphasizes the development of sericulture, ecological sightseeing agriculture, and ancient town tourism, leveraging the Shicheng Mountain and Hengjiang Ancient Town scenic areas to advance agro-tourism integration. In August of the same year, the Heng-Lou Bridge opened, connecting Sichuan and Yunnan provinces and enabling a one-minute commute between Yibin's Hengjiang and Yunnan's Shuifu. The bridge's completion incorporates Hengjiang into Yibin's half-hour economic circle, set to drive the growth of the town's tourism industry and elevate its public profile.

Government Planning Perfects the Tourism System. In the Xuzhou District of Yibin City Master Plan for Global Tourism Development (2022-2035), the district government listed the Hengjiang Ancient Town project in its key project repository. The government will focus on creating the "Ancient Capital Post Road Cultural Tourism Route." Leveraging the three distinctive spaces of Hengjiang Ancient Town, the Shicheng Mountain Pastoral Complex, and the Shicheng Mountain Forest Park, and centered on the core concept of "A Thousand-Year Post Road, A Landscape Prelude" for the "First City on the Yangtze, Pleasant Yibin" brand, the plan aims to construct a beautiful humanistic habitat themed "Farming and Weaving in Shicheng, Ancient Charm in Hengjiang," and to build a regionally significant immersive cultural tourism destination for Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Chongqing. In 2024, the Hengjiang Ancient Town Tourism Infrastructure Comprehensive Renovation Project was successfully declared a key provincial cultural and tourism integration project. It was also listed among the 82 "Beauty of Construction, Freedom in the Countryside" national high-quality rural tourism routes (Sichuan · Ancient Charm and Original Hometown Tour) selected and promoted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism^[17].

6. Recommendations for Collaborative Tourism Development Among Hengjiang Ancient Town's Spatial Actors

Under the policy guidance of vigorously promoting the deep integration of culture and tourism, the four main actors of Hengjiang Ancient Town-indigenous residents, tourists, businesses, and the government-should collectively establish a shared sense of spatial identity and implement an optimization path for the town's tourism based on "functional zoning, cultural activation, and stakeholder coordination."

6.1. Advancing Functional Zoning to Optimize Spatial Structure and Resource Allocation

Based on spatial production theory, Hengjiang Ancient Town needs to construct a clearly layered system of functional zones to mitigate the conflict between tourism space and residential space. The government should lead the master planning of functional sectors, including a "Core Protection Zone," a "Commercial Service Zone," a "Residential Living Zone," and an "Ecological Coordination Zone," clearly defining the dominant function and development controls for each area.

On the natural space level, leveraging the "mountain-backed, water-facing" geographical layout and the extant Ming and Qing dynasty architecture, the authenticity and historical character of the core zone must be rigorously protected and continued.

On the social space level, rational zoning can reduce the disruption caused by tourist activities to the daily lives of residents, thereby enhancing the compatibility between community living quality and the tourist experience.

Simultaneously, by capitalizing on the synergistic advantages of linking Hengjiang Ancient Town with surrounding resources like Shicheng Mountain and Panlong Lake, a regional collaborative development pattern of "axial linkage and layered expansion" should be promoted. This will achieve a spatial transformation from a single attraction into a comprehensive tourism destination^[18-19].

6.2. Deepening Cultural Activation to Achieve Contemporary Transformation of Mental Space

Mental space is the core resource for the sustainable tourism development of Hengjiang Ancient Town. It is essential to break away from a static preservation model and instead promote the living inheritance and innovative expression of cultural elements such as Silk Road history, ancient architectural arts, and intangible cultural heritage projects.

Specific pathways include:

Developing immersive cultural exhibition scenes by utilizing cultural heritage sites like the Zhu Family Residence and the Xiao Mansion.

Restoring historical scenes of the "Qin Five-Chi Road" and integrating them with folk activities like the black-canopied boat parade and mountain song performances to construct a perceptible and participatory cultural narrative system.

Actively using new media technologies such as short videos and live streaming to expand communication channels and developing locally distinctive cultural and creative products to achieve the efficient conversion of cultural resources into tourism products.

Through this cultural activation, Hengjiang Ancient Town can enhance its distinct identity among the cluster of ancient towns in the Yibin region, thereby shaping the brand image of "Ancient Charm of Shicheng, Vibrant Colors of Hengjiang."^[20]

6.3. Strengthening Stakeholder Coordination to Build a Pluralistic Co-Governance Mechanism

The production of tourism space in the ancient town involves a contest of interests among multiple actors—the government, indigenous residents, businesses, and tourists. It is necessary to establish a collaborative co-governance mechanism to balance their respective demands. The government should play a leading role by refining policy guidance and infrastructure provision while also creating a transparent and open platform for decision-making participation. This can be achieved through channels like official government social media accounts and community council meetings to promote the substantive involvement of indigenous residents in planning and oversight processes. The government must continue to exert effort in policy support and

infrastructure improvement, while also improving mechanisms for public opinion collection and supervision to ensure consultative governance among residents, businesses, and tourists. With Hengjiang Ancient Town as the core, cross-attraction resource integration and product coupling with sites like Shicheng Mountain Forest Park and the Shicheng Mountain Cliff Tomb Cluster should be pursued to create a comprehensive complex for sightseeing and cultural experience. Through a systematic design that is "networked, scenarized, and experiential," a sustainable sense of local identity and cultural pride can be steadily cultivated^[21-23].

Indigenous residents, as the original actors of spatial production, should actively participate in tourism development and the promotion of local culture, converting traditional cultural resources into economic benefits. By providing authentic experiences, they can strengthen their own sense of identity with and belonging to the ancient town's space.

Businesses, as the force of capital, should operate with integrity, focusing on quality and distinctiveness. While respecting culture and ecology, they must avoid excessive commercialization and homogenization, and collaborate with residents and the government to jointly shape the town's brand and competitiveness.

Tourists, as essential actors, influence the town's development through their consumption and feedback. The government and businesses need to focus on their needs and experiences and improve feedback mechanisms, using data to drive the continuous optimization of services and projects. This will help Hengjiang's tourism achieve a dynamic balance between protection and development^[24-26].

In summary, the production of tourism space in Hengjiang Ancient Town requires the joint participation and synergistic cooperation of all four actors: indigenous residents, tourists, businesses, and the government. Only by establishing a shared sense of spatial identity and forming a unified force for development can the sustainable growth of tourism in Hengjiang be realized, allowing this famous historical and cultural town to radiate with new life and vitality.

7. Conclusion

Based on the theory of spatial production, research on the tourism development of Hengjiang Ancient Town shows that the formation of its tourism space is the result of the dynamic synergy of natural space, spiritual space, and social space. Currently, Hengjiang Ancient Town still faces challenges in the production process of tourism space, including incomplete functional transformation, insufficient cultural revitalization, and unequal distribution of interests among various stakeholders. To achieve sustainable development of ancient town tourism, we should actively promote the optimization path of "functional zoning+cultural activation+benefit synergy", present historical and cultural resources through reasonable planning of spatial structure, in-depth exploration and innovation, and establish a collaborative governance mechanism involving multiple parties such as government, residents, enterprises, and tourists. Only by establishing a common spatial identity and development consensus among all parties can Hengjiang Ancient Town effectively promote positive interaction in protection and development, and radiate new vitality and energy.

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