On the Opportunities and Challenges of the Integrated Development of Culture, Sports and Tourism in Shenyang

Xiaobin Li

Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, Liaoning, 110000, China

Abstract. Against the backdrop of the comprehensive revitalization of Northeast China, Shenyang, a national historical and cultural city and a key former old industrial base, regards the integrated development of culture, sports and tourism (CST) as a key driver for urban transformation. Combining policy documents, industry data, and typical cases (e.g., the transformation of industrial heritage in Ironbridge Gorge, UK), this study systematically analyzes the opportunities, challenges, and breakthrough paths for the integrated development of CST in Shenyang. This research provides practical references for Shenyang to achieve high-quality integrated development of CST and offers valuable insights for the transformation of old industrial cities in Northeast China. Located in the southern part of Northeast China, Shenyang is the capital of Liaoning Province. Historically known as Shengjing and Fengtian, it has long been hailed as "the birthplace of one dynasty and the capital of two emperors." The city boasts a brilliant and profound historical and cultural heritage, with abundant cultural relics and unique regional cultural traits. At the beginning of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Shenyang served as a crucial heavy industry base, making significant contributions to national construction. Known as the "Eastern Ruhr" and "the eldest son of the People's Republic," it was one of the key industrial cities prioritized for development by the state. During the period of supporting the Third Front Construction (a national industrial development campaign), Shenyang also supplied a large number of technical talents to the country, leaving a significant mark in the history of China's industrial development. However, with the changes of the times, Shenyang has gradually moved away from its identity as an old industrial base and entered a painful period of transformation. The global supply chain has been affected by factors such as geopolitical conflicts and adjustments in the real estate market, posing numerous challenges to Shenyang's development. Nevertheless, Shenyang has seized the opportunities of the era: through measures such as industrial upgrading, expanding domestic demand, and deepening reforms, its economic operation has shown a trend of stable progress with optimized structure in the past two years.

Keywords: Integration of Culture; Sports and Tourism (CST); Development Opportunities; Practical Challenges; Breakthrough Paths.

1. Opportunities

1.1 Policy Opportunities

On October 24, 2024, the State Council officially released the Approval of the Territorial Spatial Plan of Shenyang (2021–2035) (Guohan [2024] No. 157). Against the background of the deepening Northeast Revitalization Strategy, this approval clearly defines Shenyang’s urban nature as "the capital of Liaoning Province, an international central city in Northeast Asia, a national historical and cultural city, and an international comprehensive transportation hub city," with its core functional positioning as "a national advanced manufacturing base, a modern service industry center in Northeast China, and a regional highland for scientific and technological innovation" [1]. In January 2025, General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered an important speech during his inspection tour in Liaoning, expressing the earnest expectation that "Liaoning should take the lead in achieving new breakthroughs in promoting the comprehensive revitalization of Northeast China in the new era and strive to write a chapter of Chinese-style modernization for Liaoning" [2].

The approval of Shenyang’s positioning as an international central city in Northeast Asia, a national historical and cultural city, and an international comprehensive transportation hub, coupled with General Secretary Xi Jinping’s earnest expectations, has provided strong policy support for

Shenyang's development, ushering in a crucial window period for breakthroughs in the comprehensive revitalization of Northeast China. Furthermore, the convening of Shenyang's Work Conference on High-Quality Integrated Development of Culture, Sports and Tourism (CST) has pointed out a key implementation path for Shenyang's revitalization and breakthrough during this critical period. The integrated development of CST has thus become an important driver for Shenyang to realize urban transformation and high-quality development.

1.2 Regional Characteristics

Located in northeastern China, Shenyang has a temperate semi-humid continental climate with distinct seasons. Its long winter with abundant snowfall and prolonged low temperatures provides a natural advantage for the development of the ice-snow economy. Rivers such as the Hunhe River and Puhe River run through the entire city, and the ecological governance along these river basins has achieved remarkable results. In the northeastern part of the city, high-quality ecological scenic spots such as Qipanshan International Scenic Tourism Development Zone and Shenyang National Forest Park are concentrated, jointly creating a livable environment and a cultural tourism foundation characterized by "mountains and waters reflecting each other."

From a cultural perspective, Shenyang has a profound and distinctive heritage: it is home to three world cultural heritages (the Shenyang Imperial Palace, the Qing Fuling Mausoleum, and the Qing Zhaoling Mausoleum), which completely preserve the architectural styles and historical context of the ethnic regimes in the northeastern border areas during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In terms of industrial heritage, Shenyang ranks among the top in China in terms of both scale and activation level. It includes three national-level industrial heritage benchmark projects—the China (Shenyang) Industrial Museum, the No. 2 Metalworking Workshop of Shenyang Heavy Machinery Factory (now the 1905 Cultural and Creative Park), and the Shenyang Metallurgical Machinery Repair Factory (now the Fengtian Workshop)—as well as 22 provincial-level industrial heritage sites such as the Shenyang Monosodium Glutamate Factory (now the Hongmei Cultural and Creative Park) and the Tiexi Worker's Village. These sites vividly witness the development history of Shenyang as "the eldest son of the People's Republic in industry." Additionally, Shenyang boasts diverse red cultural resources; spiritual landmarks such as the September 18th History Museum, the Former Site Memorial Hall of the Manchurian Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, and the Former Residence of Zhou Enlai for Youth Study are not only patriotic education bases but also provide profound historical materials for study tours.

Leveraging these characteristics, Shenyang has issued a package of policy guarantees and guiding opinions focusing on the integrated development of CST and the high-quality development of the ice-snow economy. It has made active breakthroughs in areas such as industrial heritage activation, ice-snow scenario innovation, and cultural IP development, forming a unique resource matrix of "ecology + culture + industry + ice-snow." Most of these resources possess irreplaceable regional recognition, laying a solid foundation for the integrated development of industries.

1.3 Development Potential

The integrated development of CST has become a key sector for stimulating consumption and boosting economic revitalization. Driven by both market potential and policy support, its development space continues to expand. Data from the 2025–2026 China Ice and Snow Sports Industry Development Trend Report shows that driven by events such as the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, China's ice and snow sports had driven a total market consumption of 1,048.01 billion yuan by 2024, and this scale is expected to further rise to 1,559.38 billion yuan by 2029 [3], indicating the continuous release of the "long-tail effect" of the ice-snow economy.

At the policy and practical levels, during the 2024 National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Gao Zhidan, Minister of the General Administration of Sport of China, stated in the "Ministers' Channel" that during the 2024–2025 ice-snow season, 58 high-level international and domestic ice-snow events (including the Harbin Asian Winter Games)

were successfully held nationwide. Ski resorts across the country received a total of over 190 million visitors, a year-on-year increase of 22.8%. Among them, ski resorts in core ice-snow resource areas such as the three northeastern provinces, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang accounted for over 40% of the national passenger flow, reaching 76 million person-times [4], which confirms the core position of northern China in the ice-snow cultural tourism field. In addition, the consumption trend of "traveling with events" has become increasingly prominent. For example, the 2025 Jiangsu Provincial Urban Football League successfully stimulated the summer consumer market through the operation model of "event IP + urban cultural tourism," serving as a vivid case of the integrated development of CST.

The above data and practices collectively indicate that the integrated development of CST is not only a theoretical "blue ocean" but also has mature implementation paths. It holds significant innovative value and practical significance for activating regional consumption and promoting industrial upgrading.

1.4 A Case of Industrial City Transformation: Ironbridge Gorge, UK

Located on the banks of the River Severn in England, Ironbridge Gorge has a temperate maritime climate and is a benchmark case for global industrial heritage protection and the integration of cultural tourism. In the 18th century, the construction of the "world's first iron bridge" in 1779 and the innovation of coke iron-smelting technology made it an important birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, propelling the global manufacturing industry into the "Iron Age." After the 19th century, with the shift of the steel industry's focus, the region gradually declined, leaving behind a large number of industrial relics such as iron bridges, old steel mills, and storage facilities, which became "living fossils" of industrial civilization.

To activate the value of these heritage sites, the UK established the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust in 1968, which systematically integrated 10 thematic museums in the region (such as the Coalbrookdale Iron Museum and the Jackfield Tile Museum) to form an "industrial heritage cluster" model. The museums not only preserve core industrial equipment such as an 8,000-horsepower steam prime mover manufactured in the UK in 1905 but also innovatively launch immersive programs such as "steam locomotive experience" and "steel forging interaction," allowing visitors to intuitively experience the charm of industrial history through touching, operating, and participating.

The successful transformation of Ironbridge Gorge is supported by both policy guidance and cultural and creative development. The government ensures the sustainability of heritage activation by subsidizing museum operations and establishing a special fund for industrial heritage protection. Meanwhile, it further extends the value of the industrial chain by developing cultural and creative products based on industrial elements and holding industrial-themed festivals. In 1973, Ironbridge Gorge hosted the "First International Congress on Industrial Monuments," establishing its status as a "global benchmark for industrial heritage protection," and successfully applied to become the world's first "industrial-themed world heritage site." Later, through collaboration with the Ruhr Area in Germany and the Lorraine Industrial Area in France, it built the "European Industrial Heritage Tourism Belt," ultimately achieving a perfect transformation from an "industrial decline area" to a "cultural tourism destination" and providing a replicable model for the renewal of old industrial cities worldwide.

2. Challenges

Although Shenyang possesses resource endowments and policy advantages in promoting the integrated development of CST, it still faces multi-dimensional challenges.

2.1 Scattered Cultural Tourism Resources, Lack of Efficient Connection, and Weak Cluster Effects

While Shenyang has a wide range of cultural tourism resources, their distribution is scattered, failing to form a scale effect. Moreover, the landscape resources across different administrative districts lack efficient connection; the streetscapes linking these districts lack narrative appeal, and no scenic characteristic tourism corridors that align with the style of cultural tourism resources have been formed. Additionally, the above-ground transportation system undergoes partial repairs every year, leading to severe chaos in passenger distribution sections during peak tourism seasons. The lack of orderly planning for construction schedules and cultural tourism routes results in insufficient capacity of the above-ground transportation system to meet the growing passenger demand, leading to congestion and other issues.

2.2 Superficial Cultural IPs and Weak International Communication Capacity

Most of Shenyang's existing resources, such as Qing culture, industrial culture, and red culture, remain at the level of symbolic display, leaving much room for improvement in terms of experience and spiritual narrative. Affected by tense international geopolitics, the tourism market has been impacted. Although the "TikTok Refugee" trend on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) has aroused the curiosity of many foreign tourists about China, Shenyang currently lacks solid multilingual cultural tourism promotion materials. This makes it difficult for foreign tourists to gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese history and culture and develop cultural resonance. Furthermore, the promotion frequency of resources related to the integrated development of CST is low, and exchanges with Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Russia are insufficient. Its exposure is less than 50% of that of Harbin.

2.3 Weak Financial Strength, Inadequate Service Capacity, and Lack of Policy Details

Shenyang has an imbalanced economic structure, with weak competitiveness in traditional industries and insufficient cultivation of emerging industries compared to cities in southern China. Its financial self-sufficiency capacity is weak, and there is still a gap in the improvement and upgrading of infrastructure compared to southern cities. Although the existing policies for the integrated development of CST have been initially implemented, they lack top-level overall planning and operable implementation details, resulting in low policy accuracy and difficulties in implementation. At the same time, Shenyang has prominent shortcomings in its business environment: the approval process is relatively cumbersome compared to southern cities; there are numerous online service apps with poor operational convenience; and there is significant room for improvement in offline service efficiency. Additionally, there are obvious differences between northern and southern populations in terms of urban economic foundation, mass football foundation, business operation models, and consumption habits, making it impossible to replicate the success of the Jiangsu Provincial Urban Football League in Northeast China.

2.4 Inadequate Resource Integration and Coordinated Development

There is homogeneous competition among the three northeastern provinces, and the regional coordination mechanism is incomplete. The competition in the ice-snow economy with Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces is fierce. In the past two years, Heilongjiang Province, with Harbin at its core, has ranked among the top in the country in the ice-snow economy, leading to a significant diversion of Shenyang's tourist sources. Therefore, exploring distinctive ice-snow culture, seeking common ground while reserving differences, and pursuing win-win cooperation have become urgent issues for Shenyang to promote the high-quality integrated development of CST.

3. Breakthrough Paths

3.1 Improving Support Policies and Funding Guarantees

The integrated development of culture, sports, and tourism (CST) has a significant driving effect on the economy, but it also requires corresponding financial investment. Such projects generally feature long return cycles, volatile market popularity, and uncertain profitability. They need to be advanced in coordination with urban infrastructure construction, adhering to the principles of moderate development and rational utilization.

In the critical period of comprehensive revitalization and transformation in Northeast China, financial authorities can take the lead in encouraging social capital to participate in cultural and tourism development. The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model should be promoted to attract joint investments from central enterprises, cultural tourism groups, and private enterprises, thereby diversifying investment sources. The government should ensure a safe investment environment and streamlined approval processes through policies, provide appropriate financial subsidies for key projects and those with ecological benefits, and offer certain tax reductions to all participating investors. Through these policies and diversified investment methods, the integrated development of CST can be effectively guaranteed.

3.2 Coordinating Planning for Integrated CST Development and Driving Regional CST Industry Growth through Advantageous Projects

Focus on industrial upgrading of advantageous projects, improve institutional mechanisms, and coordinate solutions to cross-departmental collaboration issues. Higher-level plans should clarify development priorities, while lower-level departments should cooperate to refine and implement specific schemes. Current landscape resources should be systematically sorted, scientifically classified, and reasonably connected. Dominant benchmark project types should be selected to create high-quality, refined cultural IPs, optimize service experiences of integrated CST projects, and promote their implementation in stages, batches, and a steady manner.

Strengthen cooperation with neighboring provinces and cities to deepen Shenyang's "integrated CST circle." Promote regional collaborative development with Shenyang's districts, other cities in Liaoning Province, and the three provinces of Northeast China. Develop differentiated cultural and tourism products to avoid homogenized competition. With the integration of ice-snow economy in the three northeastern provinces as a competitive unit, efforts should be made to build an internationally influential ice-snow IP.

3.3 Exploring Shenyang's Urban Appeal and Innovating New Paradigms for Integrated CST Development

Kevin Lynch, a scholar studying urban imagery, stated, "the city is a vast memory system of collective history and ideas" [5]. To explore Shenyang's urban appeal and innovate new paradigms for integrated CST development, it is essential to activate urban scenes, provide citizens with opportunities for in-depth interaction with historical culture, industrial heritage, and intangible cultural heritage, and recreate memories of different eras and scenes in the city.

For example, industrial cultural heritage sites can be transformed into short drama filming bases, which not only preserve historical memories but also promote industrial culture through short videos. They can also enhance public engagement through industrial life experiences, traditional opera performances, cultural and creative products, and festival events. Additionally, these sites can host exhibitions, appointment-based rentals, and experiences of high-tech industrial equipment, allowing citizens to witness technological progress and the advancement of the times.

Cultural and tourism projects with grassroots popularity can be promoted on a large scale and sustainably. For instance, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) cultural night markets can invite experienced TCM practitioners and inheritors of intangible skills to provide consultations, popular science lectures, and workshops. This allows people to directly experience the charm of TCM culture,

learn health-preserving methods, drive the development of related industrial chains, and strengthen cultural confidence.

Collaborate with local technology enterprises and cultural tourism platforms to launch an AI intelligent route generation system. Based on tourists' preferences (e.g., research, leisure, industrial experience), travel duration, and budget, the system will automatically generate diversified and personalized routes, while synchronously connecting services such as scenic spot reservations, transportation transfers, catering, and accommodation to improve the efficiency of tourists' experiences.

4. Conclusion

The integrated development of CST in Shenyang faces multiple opportunities, including policy dividends, resource endowments, and market expansion, while also needing to address practical challenges such as scattered resources, weak IPs, insufficient finances, and regional competition. In the future, through the paths of "policy refinement, diversified funding, resource coordination, and technological empowerment," the integration potential of "ecology + culture + industry + ice-snow" can be further unleashed, promoting the CST industry to become a "new engine" for the comprehensive revitalization of Northeast China. Meanwhile, Shenyang's practice provides a reference paradigm for other old industrial cities to "solve transformation problems through CST integration," which holds significant practical significance and promotional value.

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