

Development of Water Margin Cultural Tourism Resources in Yuncheng County under the Context of Cultural and Tourism Integration

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Abstract In order to better realize the development of cultural tourism products in Yuncheng County, this paper analyzed Water Margin cultural tourism resources, market demand and product design in Yuncheng County using the RMP (Resource-Market-Product) theory, summarized existing problems in the development of Water Margin cultural tourism in Yuncheng County, and proposed countermeasures for its development. It is expected to achieve the integration of Water Margin culture and the tourism industry under the broader context of cultural and tourism integration, provide richly diverse and distinctive tourism products and services, and promote the economic development of the tourist destination.

Keywords RMP theory, Cultural and tourism integration, Water Margin culture, Tourism development

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Yuncheng County is one of the core areas of the Water Margin stories. It is closely associated with figures such as Song Jiang, Chao Gai, and Wu Yong, and carries the cultural label of “Hometown of Water Margin”. The region preserves a wealth of historical relics, folk legends, and cultural traditions related to the Water Margin, reflecting a profound cultural heritage. In recent years, China has introduced multiple policies to support local areas in exploring distinctive cultural resources and promoting the transformation and upgrading of the cultural and tourism industries. In 2023, the Yuncheng Water Margin Tourism and Martial Arts Culture Comprehensive Enhancement Project was selected as a key development project in Shandong Province. As a distinctive local cultural brand, Yuncheng’s Water Margin culture aligns with policy directives and presents a favorable opportunity for development. Surrounding areas such as Liangshan and Yanggu also possess Water Margin-related resources, leading to regional competition. In this context, Yuncheng needs to emphasize its unique cultural characteristics through differentiated development and regional integration, achieve resource complementarity and collaborative development, and enhance overall competitiveness.

1 Theoretical and research overview

1.1 RMP theory

Proposed by Wu Bihu in 1999, RMP theory serves as a core framework for guiding regional tourism product development. It achieves precise

supply-demand matching through the three-dimensional linkage of resource evaluation, market demand analysis, and product design^[1]. Among these, resource analysis focuses on evaluating tourism resources and facilitating their transformation into products. Market analysis emphasizes investigating the elastic changes of product demand and deciphering the underlying motivations behind tourists’ choices of tourism products. And product analysis, in turn, highlights the innovative design and development of tourism products. The three are closely interrelated, and building on resource and market analysis, product analysis is conducted to derive regional tourism planning solutions centered around tourism products.

1.2 Literature review

Currently, there is limited systematic research on Water Margin tourism both at home and abroad, with most information primarily found in conferences, newspapers, and other media. Zhao^[2] reckoned that Liangshan’s excellent Water Margin cultural tourism resources have not been efficiently developed, resulting in resource wastage. Liu^[3] suggested that efforts to develop the wine culture within Water Margin culture should start from the story of “Wu Song at the inn: Three bowls of wine, and you can’t cross the ridge.” Li^[4] proposed that Water Margin cultural tourism should draw on the development experiences of traditional Chinese martial arts cultures, such as Shaolin and Wudang cultures. Li^[5] indicated in his research that with the widespread adoption of the internet across all industries, Water Margin cultural heritage requires creative transformation

and innovative development. The new model of “internet + tourism” has brought unprecedented opportunities as well as significant challenges to the development of Water Margin tourism. Gu^[6] stated that Water Margin cultural tourism should seize favorable opportunities, effectively leverage modern network technology, engage in cross-regional, cross-disciplinary, and cross-industry in-depth collaboration, develop local cultural resources, and build a high-quality brand for local cultural tourism. Only in this way can it remain invincible in the highly competitive tourism market. Jia et al.^[7], from the perspective of tourism brand image, proposed that the brand image of “Water Margin Hero City” should be established and promoted to make young people better understand Water Margin culture and its historical roots, so as to inherit the valuable spiritual wealth of the Chinese nation, and promote the integration of traditional and modern culture in multiple aspects.

In summary, existing studies have provided systematic approaches for the development of Water Margin cultural tourism from multiple perspectives such as resource efficiency, cultural symbols, industrial models, digital technology, and brand image. Future research could further integrate tourist behavior and destination competitiveness models to quantitatively measure the emotional, experiential, and economic values of Water Margin cultural resources. It will enrich the research paradigm of traditional cultural tourism at the academic level and promote high-quality and sustainable development of Water Margin cultural tourism in Yuncheng County and even the southwestern Shandong region at

the practical level.

2 RMP analysis of Water Margin cultural tourism in Yuncheng County

2.1 Analysis of Water Margin cultural tourism resources in Yuncheng County (R)

As the birthplace of Water Margin culture, Yuncheng County in Shandong possesses unique historical and cultural significance, along with developmental advantages. Shandong has become a cultural tourism destination that blends Confucian traditions with the chivalrous spirit. According to the 2017 national standard *Classification, Investigation and Evaluation of Tourism Resources* (GB/T 18972-2017), the Water Margin cultural tourism resources in Yuncheng County were categorized into 5 main categories, 9 subcategories, and 13 basic types (Table 1). It can be observed that Yuncheng County boasts a rich variety and comprehensive range of Water Margin cultural tourism resources, providing a solid foundation for the in-depth development of these resources.

2.2 Market analysis of Water Margin cultural tourism in Yuncheng County (M)

Field investigations reveal that the vast majority of tourists prioritize cultural experiences as their primary motivation and obtain partial information through social media. It indicates that the Water Margin story IP has developed initial cultural appeal and online influence, serving as an emotional gateway for cultural

and tourism integration. However, contrasting this cultural popularity is tourists' short standing time, with nearly half being one-day trips. The consumption per capita is concentrated between 200–300 RMB, primarily allocated to transportation, tickets, and dining, while expenditures on entertainment and shopping remain relatively low. Many tourists do not agree that the Water Margin culture sufficiently represents Yuncheng. These feedback points converge on the fact that Yuncheng County has not yet systematically integrated the core spiritual essence of Water Margin culture into its scene creation, service training, and product innovation. Inadequate infrastructure, weak service awareness and tourism products that remain at the sightseeing level lack designs for deep experiential engagement.

2.3 Analysis of Water Margin cultural tourism products in Yuncheng County (P)

Yuncheng County boasts a relatively rich and diverse range of Water Margin cultural tourism products, and has initially established a four-dimensional product spectrum integrating “sightseeing, experience, performances, and commodities”.

2.3.1 Scenic spot sightseeing type.

(1) Shuihu Hero City, located in Yuncheng County, Heze City, Shandong Province, is a national 4A-level tourist attraction and the origin of the Water Margin stories. The scenic area features ancient architectural complexes built around scenes from the Water Margin stories, such as the Yuncheng County Government Office,

Song Jiang Martial Arts School, Sun Erniang's Inn, and Timely Rain Teahouse.

(2) Songjiang Lake, part of the Liangshan Marsh waters, recreates the authentic atmosphere of the “Juyi Water Area” through its reed wetland ecology and the imagery of “Little Dongting Lake”. Huangnigang, located in Huangnigang Town, 16 km southeast of Yuncheng County, is renowned for the story of “Robbing the Convoy of Birthday Gifts”. It features a massive rock inscribed with “Huangnigang” and related stone tablets.

2.3.2 Cultural experience type.

(1) Water Margin Culture Museum: The museum houses a large collection of cultural relics and materials related to Water Margin culture. Through physical display and scene reconstruction, it introduces the historical origins and development of Water Margin culture.

(2) Yuncheng Water Margin Wine Culture Experience Hall: This experience center focuses on the wine culture depicted in *Water Margin*, integrating elements of Song Dynasty brewery culture, scenes from the Water Margin stories and interactive experiences. It shows the heroic spirit of “drinking from large bowls and eating big pieces of meat” in Water Margin.

2.3.3 Performing arts and entertainment type.

(1) “Loyalty on Liangshan Marsh” Live-Action Show: The drama is presented in a series of interconnected episodic scenes, including eight episodes such as *The Marshes of Mount Liang*, *Chivalrous Lin Chong*, *Righteous Wu Song*, *The three Chivalrous Heroes*, *Just Lu*

Table 1 Classification of Water Margin tourism resources in Yuncheng County

Main Categories	Subcategories	Basic types	Resources
B Water area landscapes	BA River systems	BAC Ancient river course sections	Songjiang River
	BB Natural lakes and marshes	BBB Pools and ponds	Songjiang Lake
E Buildings and facilities	EA Comprehensive human tourism sites	EAA Social and commercial activity sites	Water Margin Hero City (including Song Jiang Martial Arts School, Wu Yong's School, Yuncheng Tavern, Timely Rain Teahouse, Sun Erniang's Inn, Broadsword Hall, Ming-Qing Theater, Yuncheng County Government Office)
		EAE Cultural activity sites	Song Jiang Martial Arts School, Water Margin Culture Museum
		EAG Religious and ritual activity sites	Jiutian Xuannv Temple (Kuangmiao Suzhuang), Lingguan Temple (Wangshawan), Songgong Temple (Shuibao)
		EAI Memorial sites and commemorative activity locations	Song Jiang's Hometown, Huangnigang
	EC Landscape and small-scale structures	ECB Viewpoints	Songjiang River Scenic Area, Songjiang Lake Tourism Zone
F Historical sites	FA Material cultural relics	FAA Architectural heritage sites	Guangming Temple, Songjia Village, Zeng Family Fortress, Dongxi Village, Huandao Village, Shizi Slope, Cheshi Village
G Tourism commodities	GA Agricultural products	GAC Livestock products and byproducts	Mutton, beef
	GC Handicrafts	GCB Textiles and dyeing and weaving products	Coarse cloth, Lu brocade, blueprint cloth
H Human Activities	HA Historical records and events	HAA Historical figures	Song Jiang, Chao Gai, Wu Yong, Liu Tang
		HAB Historical events	Robbing the Convoy of Birthday Gifts, Secretly Releasing Chao Gai, Song Jiang Kills Yan Poxi, Sleeping Drunk in the Lingguan Temple
	HB Seasonal and annual festivals	HBC Modern festivals and celebrations	Shandong clapper ballad, Zhang Hong Quan (Zhang Hong Boxing), China (Yuncheng) Hero Festival, Hero Chrysanthemum Festival, Martial Arts Show, Water Margin Scene Plays

Da, and *Loyal Song Jiang*. Through spectacular martial arts performances and storytelling, it recreates the legendary tales of the Liangshan heroes, allowing visitors to travel back a millennium and experience the charm of Water Margin culture.

(2) Water Margin-themed amusement projects: The scenic area offers leisure activities such as the “Haohanpo” climbing and “Liangshan Escort Agency” archery. Visitors can immerse themselves in the roles of Water Margin heroes, gaining recreational enjoyment and a sense of achievement through skill imitation.

2.3.4 Characteristic commodity type.

(1) Water Margin cultural souvenirs: Currently developed products include statues of Water Margin characters, models of Water Margin weapons, and Water Margin-themed stamps. These souvenirs are exquisitely crafted, portable, and possess certain collectible value.

(2) Commodities with local characteristics: Traditional handicrafts such as Yuncheng leather carvings and Lu brocade, as well as local delicacies such as Yuncheng Zhuangmo (sturdy pancake) and Yuncheng Zaoyu (pickled fish), all carry strong local cultural characteristics.

3 Existing issues in the development of Water Margin cultural tourism resources in Yuncheng County from the perspective of cultural and tourism integration

3.1 Insufficient exploration of the connotation in Water Margin cultural tourism resources

Although Yuncheng County prides itself as the “Hometown of Water Margin”, its cultural interpretation remains superficial. While the vast majority of tourists list “experiencing culture” as their primary motivation, few affirm that “Water Margin cultural products are rich, interesting, and highly experiential.” The experience in the scenic area is monotonous and highly homogeneous, limited to forms such as static sculptures, exhibition board explanations, role-playing, and simple scene photography. There is a lack of narrative progression and situational reconstruction centered on the spirit of “loyalty” and “chivalry”. Cultural and creative products merely feature printed images of characters such as Song Jiang and Wu Song, lacking in-depth interpretation and extension of their personalities and stories. The same situation exists in local catering and accommodation industries. For example, most hotels merely hang character portraits or display weapon models in their entrances and corridors, lacking plot-

driven spatial storytelling. In terms of catering, some hotels have set up “Water Margin-themed private rooms” and launched “Heroes’ Banquet” set menus, naming dishes after character stories, such as “Lin Chong goes to Liangshan on a snowy night” and “Li Kui fights Zhang Shun (the ‘White Streak in the Waves’).” However, due to the lack of story interpretation and interactive elements, tourists remember the dish names but not the stories behind them.

3.2 Relatively dispersed spatial distribution of Water Margin cultural tourism resources

The Water Margin cultural resources in Yuncheng County cover the urban core area, rural heritage sites, and intangible cultural folklore, with distances between them mostly ranging from 10 to 30 km. There is a lack of a concentrated and contiguous core cultural tourism cluster or typical scenic points. For example, “Yuncheng Hero City” is located in the county center, the “Huangnigang Heritage Site” is situated about 20 km southeast of the county in a rural area, and “Song Jiang’s Hometown” is in Songzhuang Village, approximately 15 km northeast of the county. Spatially, these sites form a “scattered distribution”, requiring tourists to frequently switch locations, which is time-consuming and effort-intensive. The scattered layout makes it difficult to concentrate supporting services such as catering and accommodation. Additionally, the high cost for tourists to visit multiple attractions leads to a prominence of one-day trips, limiting the overall boost in comprehensive consumption.

3.3 Lagging public infrastructure in Water Margin tourist areas

The overall digitalization level of the scenic areas is relatively low. (i) There is no real-time visitor flow monitoring and early warning system, making localized congestion prone to occur during peak periods. (ii) Online platforms offer limited functions, supporting only ticket bookings while lacking channels for AR guided tours, audio commentary, instant complaints, and feedback suggestions. (iii) Parking lots still rely on manual payment collection, with opaque parking space information. Restrooms and rest areas within the tourist attractions feature outdated facilities, lacking USB charging ports and Wi-Fi coverage.

3.4 Weak brand communication of Water Margin tourist attractions

Current promotional channels still primarily rely on offline brochures and local television, lacking internet-driven strategies. The matrix operation of new media accounts on platforms

such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu is ineffective. There are problems including slow content updating, small fan bases, and low interaction rates, and most content consists of reposted promotional videos from the scenic areas, lacking narrative-driven and task-oriented content or user generated content (UGC). In surveys, nearly half of the respondents did not agree that “Water Margin culture can represent Yuncheng”, reflecting a deeper crisis of an indistinct brand image.

4 Suggestions for the development of Water Margin cultural tourism resources in Yuncheng County in the context of cultural and tourism integration

4.1 Deepening research on Water Margin culture and innovating immersive cultural tourism experiences

The first step involves establishing a Water Margin Culture Research Center through collaboration with universities and historical-cultural research institutions. This center should systematically organize the original text of Water Margin, folk legends, and local chronicles to distill the cultural essence. For instance, themes such as the social ideals and Jianghu ethics underlying *Gathering of the Heroes at Liangshan* can be translated into interpretive materials for the scenic areas, such as guided commentary and cultural handbooks.

Secondly, development is underway for diverse immersive products. (i) For general tourists, it is necessary to offer 30-minute micro-theaters featuring iconic scenes from the stories. (ii) For the youth market, an immersive murder mystery game titled *The Birthday Gift: Scheme within a Scheme* can be developed, incorporating NPC interactions, puzzle-solving mechanisms, and multiple branching endings. (iii) For family-oriented visitor groups, an educational program named “Young Hero Camp” can be designed, integrating Song Dynasty-themed sports such as cuju (ancient football) and archery, as well as intangible cultural heritage skills such as movable type printing, into challenge-based games.

Thirdly, themed catering and accommodation products should be designed. It is necessary to introduce standardized menus for the “Water Margin Banquet” in collaboration with local time-honored brands. Additionally, a “Hall of Loyalty and Righteousness” themed hotel in the county core area and a cluster of rural “Juyi Inn” lodgings can be established, integrating Water Margin elements from architectural style to interior decoration.

4.2 Planning “Themed Routes” to connect scattered scenic spots

It is necessary to develop “Three Major Themed Zones for Water Margin Culture” to achieve an agglomeration effect. (i) Core exhibition zone: Taking Water Margin Hero City as a hub, the Water Margin Culture Museum, Song Jiang Martial Arts School and Tangta Plaza can be integrated to create a “Loyalty and Righteousness Jianghu Reception Hall” that combines tourist distribution, cultural exhibition, and nighttime performances. (ii) Story Scene Zone: An outdoor exploration route can be designed along Huangnigang-Songjiang River, featuring plot nodes such as “Robbing the Convoy of Birthday Gifts” and “Three Attacks on the Zhu Family Village”. The route is equipped with AR code-scanning triggers for decorated eggs, blind box tasks, and reward points. (iii) Folk Experience Zone: “Water Margin Intangible Cultural Heritage Villages” can be developed in townships such as Zhangying and Suiguantun, integrating guzheng performances, paper-cutting, martial arts experiences with hero-themed homestays and farmhouse banquets to create immersive “culture + lifestyle” scenarios. A dedicated “Water Margin Hero Bus” line can be launched using antique-style vehicles with audio commentary, to connect all zones.

4.3 Establishing an intelligent tourism service platform for full-scenario digital operations

Building an intelligent tourism management service system is currently an urgent issue to address. (i) It is necessary to develop a “Shuihutong” mini-program to integrate six major functions: appointment ticketing, AR guided tours, real-time visitor flow monitoring, performance schedules, one-click complaints, and a points mall. (ii) The infrastructure should be upgraded by implementing license plate recognition and

contactless payment in parking lots, embedding navigation QR codes, displaying real-time routes on electronic screens, and providing voice announcements at key nodes to achieve full-scenario intelligent guidance. Restrooms should be equipped with environmental monitoring and intelligent deodorizing systems, while rest areas should be provided with 5G network coverage and USB charging facilities. (iii) It is necessary to establish a “culture + convenience” service standard. The catering sector can introduce a unified brand, pricing and quality control system for the “Water Margin Banquet”. The accommodation sector can implement a tiered “themed hotel + homestay” management system with public online ratings. The performance sector should dynamically adjust schedules based on visitor flow alerts to reduce waiting time.

4.4 Transitioning from single-point promotion to whole-network co-creation to enhance brand awareness

Surveys indicate that new media platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu have become the primary channels for tourists to understand the Water Margin cultural scenic area. (i) It is necessary to establish a content matrix. Various platforms can simultaneously open the official account of “Water Margin Jianghu”, and short videos of the story can be displayed vertically every day. Local talents can be invited to create a series of “100 Little-Known Facts About Water Margin”. (ii) Crossover collaboration: Limited-edition co-branded merchandise themed around “Water Margin Heroes” can be launched in partnership with milk tea and coffee brands. Blind box figures can be developed collaboratively with Pop Mart to rejuvenate the traditional IP and align with trendy play culture. (iii) Festival planning: Festive activities such as the “Water Margin Hero Convention” Cosplay Challenge, “Songjiang

Lake Light Show,” and “Water Margin Hanfu Show” can be organized to generate sustained topical engagement. (iv) UGC (User Generated Content) incentives: A “Jianghu Check-in” task can be integrated into the mini-program, so as to allow tourists to earn redeemable points by uploading images, text, or short videos. The points can be used for ticket discounts or food and beverage promotions, so as to create a closed loop of online and offline traffic.

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