



OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIES FOR HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT OF THE CULTURAL AND TOURISM INDUSTRY IN THE YANGTZE RIVER DELTA UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVEⁱ

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Abstract:

In recent years, the scale of the cultural and tourism industry in the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) has exceeded 11% of the regional GDP, while related employment has accounted for 10% of the total local workforce. As an emerging green pillar industry with significant growth potential, cultural and tourism development has increasingly served as an “efficiency multiplier” for multiple sectors. How to further advance the high-quality development of the YRD cultural and tourism industry, transform the region into a world-class tourism destination, enhance the happiness index of local residents, and promote global understanding and cooperation through cultural and tourism exchanges, thereby driving higher-quality, more integrated socio-economic development in the region, has become a critical strategic task requiring careful planning and sustained attention. Drawing on literature review and field investigation, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the current challenges and opportunities for the high-quality development of the YRD cultural and tourism industry under the Belt and Road Initiative. It further proposes concrete strategies and development plans for the next 5–10 years, with the aim of raising the industry’s contribution to 20% of the YRD’s GDP (10 trillion RMB) and increasing its share of total employment to 15%. The findings are intended to provide evidence-based reference for policymakers in formulating comprehensive development plans for the YRD cultural and tourism industry.

Keywords: cultural and tourism industry in the Yangtze River Delta, China; opportunities and challenges; development strategies

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1. Introduction

Since Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, aiming to build the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” more than 150 countries and over 30 international organizations have signed cooperation agreements. The cumulative import and export value among participating countries has reached 20 trillion USD, with an average annual growth of 6.4%, achieving remarkable success despite the countercurrents of economic globalization (Hu, 2024). In November 2023, China released its outlook for the next decade of higher-quality and higher-level Belt and Road development, aiming to build a world characterized by harmony and symbiosis, openness and inclusiveness, connectivity, and shared development, thereby contributing greater Chinese wisdom to the great practice of building a community with a shared future for humanity (Tang, 2023).

The cultural and tourism industry has a wide coverage, a long industrial chain, and a strong driving effect, making it a pillar sector for economic growth. With the rapid development of China’s economy, the strategic position of the cultural and tourism industry in socio-economic development has continuously increased. Tourism has become a major livelihood industry and a “happiness industry” that enhances people’s quality of life, contributing increasingly to both employment and consumption related to citizens’ welfare (Xu *et al.*, 2025). According to the *2024 Cultural and Tourism Development Statistical Bulletin* issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China, in 2024, Chinese citizens made 5.62 billion domestic and outbound trips (of which 123 million were outbound trips), representing a 14.8% year-on-year increase. Urban residents accounted for 4.37 billion domestic trips, an increase of 16.3%, while rural residents accounted for 1.25 billion domestic trips, up 9.9%. Total travel expenditure reached 5.8 trillion RMB, a year-on-year growth of 17.1%, with urban residents spending 4.9 trillion RMB (up 18.0%) and rural residents spending 0.8 trillion RMB (up 12.2%) (Yang, 2025).

According to data from the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), the contribution of China’s tourism industry to the economy will achieve an average annual growth rate of 9.7% in the next decade, which is more than twice the overall economic growth rate (4.4%) and will become one of the fastest-growing countries in the world. In the next decade, China’s tourism revenue will exceed 25.2 trillion yuan, more than 30 million jobs will be created, and the number of employees will exceed 107 million, accounting for 400% of the new jobs in the global tourism industry (Li *et al.*, 2025).

The Yangtze River Delta (YRD), comprising Zhejiang Province, Jiangsu Province, Anhui Province, and Shanghai City, is the fastest-growing economic region in China. In 2023, the region’s GDP reached 30.51 trillion RMB. Despite accounting for less than 4% of China’s land area, the YRD consistently contributes approximately one-quarter of the nation’s total economic output, serving as a “stabilizing force” for China’s economic development (Lu, 2024). In 2023, the three provinces and one city in the Yangtze River

Delta received a total of 2.574 billion domestic tourist visits, achieving a domestic tourism revenue of 3.1 trillion RMB, exceeding the development level in 2019, accounting for 52.6% and 63.1% of the national domestic tourism and domestic tourism revenue respectively. In addition, the 0.3 trillion-yuan international tourism revenue (this shortcoming also means that there is still a lot of room for growth for foreign tourists visiting the YRD), the cultural and tourism industry in the Yangtze River Delta has accounted for more than 11% of the total GDP and has become an emerging green pillar industry. One out of every 10 job positions is directly or indirectly related to the tourism industry, and there is also a lot of room for development. Cultural and tourism is becoming an “efficiency enhancer” for the development of multiple industries (Wang, 2024; Song, 2024).

In this background, as a leading demonstration zone for China’s modernization construction, how to further develop the cultural and tourism industry with high quality in the Yangtze River Delta in the next decade, build the Yangtze River Delta into a world-class tourist destination, improve people’s happiness index, and promote global understanding and cooperation of the Yangtze River Delta region through the cultural and tourism industry, and promote the comprehensive development of the social and economic integration of the Yangtze River Delta region with higher quality, has become a major development strategy that we must attach great importance to and scientifically plan (Tang, 2024; Wang, 2023).

Accordingly, this research project will employ both literature review and field investigation to conduct an in-depth analysis of the current challenges, opportunities, and constraints for high-quality development of the YRD cultural and tourism industry under the Belt and Road Initiative. Drawing on the development experience of leading global tourism countries and considering China’s national conditions, the study aims to propose comprehensive, specific, and effective strategies and policy recommendations to inform the formulation of 5–10 year plans for the high-quality development of the YRD cultural and tourism industry. These findings are intended to provide evidence-based reference for relevant government agencies and stakeholders in the tourism sector.

The research questions are as follows:

- 1) Under the background of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, what are the main opportunities and challenges currently faced by the cultural and tourism industry in the Yangtze River Delta region?
- 2) Are the tourists satisfied with the cultural and tourism experiences in the Yangtze River Delta region?
- 3) Which factors have the most significant impact on tourists’ satisfaction and their willingness to revisit?
- 4) What actionable countermeasure can be proposed to facilitate the high-quality development of the cultural and tourism industry in the Yangtze River Delta in the next 5 to 10 years?

2. Analysis of the Current Situation of the Cultural and Tourism Industry in the Yangtze River Delta

2.1 The Integrated Development Plan for the Yangtze River Delta

The Yangtze River Delta (YRD), comprising three provinces and one municipality, is a demonstration area for Chinese modernization and represents the fastest-growing economic region with the highest consumer spending power in China (Chen & Yuan, 2025). The region's rapid economic development and high population density contribute to both strong tourism demand and significant tourism attractiveness. The Chinese government's *Outline of the Regional Integrated Development Plan for the Yangtze River Delta* emphasizes deepening cultural and tourism cooperation, coordinating the usage of tourism resources, promoting integrated development of the tourism market and services, and jointly creating a number of high-quality leisure and resort tourism areas as well as world-renowned oriental holiday destinations. In 2025, the cultural and tourism authorities of the three provinces and one city in the Yangtze River Delta signed the *Strategic Cooperation Framework Agreement for High-Quality Development of Culture and Tourism in the Yangtze River Delta*. This agreement sets out the goal of building a united and open cultural and tourism market with vitality, providing diverse and high-quality products, and fostering an industry fully integrated across the region. It provides a favorable opportunity for the further upgrading and development of the cultural and tourism industry in the Yangtze River Delta (Tao & Li, 2025).

2.2 The Yangtze River Delta has a Solid Foundation for the Vigorous Development of Cultural Tourism

2.2.1 Distinctive Characteristics of the Yangtze River Delta Urban Agglomeration and Strong Development Potential

The international metropolitan cluster of Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Nanjing is gaining increasing global influence and positioning, supported by a profound cultural heritage. The region is characterized not only by its red culture, Haipai culture, and Jiangnan culture, but also by a wealth of outstanding historical buildings, traditional neighborhoods, cultural relics, and modern landmarks, all of which contribute to an ever-deepening urban cultural foundation. The Yangtze River Delta also hosts numerous activity platforms, including world-class cultural and sporting events such as the Shanghai International Film Festival, the Hangzhou Asian Games, and the Formula 1 Chinese Grand Prix. Furthermore, Shanghai successfully hosted both the First and Second China International Import Expo, demonstrating the region's increasingly diverse urban event platforms. These advantages are continuously enhancing the development of metropolitan cultural and tourism sectors, including urban landscapes, urban commerce, urban conventions and exhibitions, urban culture, urban leisure, and urban lifestyle experiences (Deng & Tao, 2025).

2.2.2 The Yangtze River Delta Region Enjoys the Advantages of a Large Flow Scale and a Solid Consumption Capacity Foundation

The Yangtze River Delta (YRD) benefits from a large population, prosperous economy, and a substantial base of high-income consumers with strong purchasing power and high-end consumption demand. “Boosting consumption” has become a frequent policy theme across the region, with many local governments introducing intensive measures to stimulate consumption potential in a comprehensive manner. Jointly organized “shopping festivals” have further emerged as a significant highlight. The YRD simultaneously serves as a destination, source market, and distribution hub for both international and domestic tourists. Its dual role as a traffic hub and a major consumption market continues to strengthen, providing the region with a growing advantage in cultural and tourism development (Zhou, 2025).

2.2.3 Advantages of Convenient International and Domestic Transportation

The Yangtze River Delta (YRD) is the most developed region in China in terms of transportation, featuring the greatest diversity of transport modes, the busiest networks, and the most open transportation hubs, with its infrastructure system continuously improving. The region has already established a comprehensive transportation network that integrates highways, railways, waterways, and airways. The psychological perception of travel time has been significantly shortened, with the YRD forming a half-hour commuting zone, a one-hour living circle, and a three-hour high-speed rail network, therefore enhancing the efficiency of logistics and passenger flows. The YRD’s superior geographical location, strong industrial base, and world-class business environment provide critical support for the integrated development of the cultural and tourism industry (Pan, 2024).

2.3 Continuous Enhancement of the Cultural and Tourism Industry

The three provinces and one municipality of the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) are jointly accelerating the establishment of a pilot zone for the high-quality development of public cultural services and a world-class cultural and tourism destination. They are building and sharing digital resources and interconnectivity through a regional digital platform for public cultural and tourism services. Residents of the YRD can now use their social security cards to obtain a “Yangtze River Delta All-in-One Card,” which grants equal access to cultural and tourism activities as well as medical services and discounts across the region, thereby making interprovincial and intercity travel increasingly convenient and economically efficient (Chen, 2023).

On this basis, the three provinces and one municipality of the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) are continuously strengthening in-depth cooperation with cities along the Yangtze River Basin, promoting rural revitalization through the development of the cultural and tourism industry, and accelerating the modernization of new rural areas (Dong, 2024). Furthermore, by enhancing the integration of major cultural, sports, and tourism

resources in the YRD, large-scale sporting events with significant influence, such as the Jiangsu Super Football League and the Zhejiang Basketball League, are being leveraged to stimulate the growth of the cultural and tourism sector (Tang, 2024).

In July 2025, China's first LEGOLAND Resort, located in Jinshan District, Shanghai, officially opened, which has had a significant spillover effect on surrounding accommodation, transportation, catering, etc. The number of bookings for surrounding homestays has increased six times compared to the same period last year. This indicates that theme parks can serve as a "traffic entry point" for cultural and tourism consumption, with upstream driving IP development and technology manufacturing, downstream extending to derivatives and transportation services, and horizontally activating catering, exhibitions, rural cultural and tourism, etc. This "point-to-area" development path has made theme parks a catalyst for industrial upgrading and regional economic development. Zootopia in Shanghai Disneyland's and Monkie Kid area in LEGOLAND Resort not only provide a variety of games for consumers to immerse themselves in, but related themed products are also highly sought after, further promoting consumption (Li, 2025).

The Nanjing Road Shopping Mall in Shanghai has divided thousands of square meters of space into more than 10 new performing arts spaces, bringing explosive popularity to the business district through the "watching a play in the mall". In Jiangsu Province, trams have been transformed into "mobile cafes", connecting consumption nodes along the line. "Culture + Commerce" has enriched the urban consumption ecology and injected surging momentum into the cultural and tourism consumption market. With the upgrading of consumption and increasingly diverse demands, the functional boundaries of traditional architectural venues are being broken. The deep integration of "culture + commerce" has given rise to diverse new cultural spaces, enriching people's consumption scenarios. For example, some bookstores gather various elements such as culture, art, and commerce, setting up reading areas, coffee areas, cultural and creative areas, clothing areas, etc., and often holding various cultural activities such as book signings and art exhibitions, providing consumers with a good place to relax, gain knowledge, and experience the cultural atmosphere. The new cultural space breaks through the limitations of physical space and stimulates the "multiplier effect" of consumption through diverse and integrated scene design. It attempts to create urban living complexes, making every corner of the city a potential "tipping point" for economic growth (Ma, 2025).

Many tourist attractions use technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to create immersive tourism projects. From "going to the mall to watch a show" to "mobile coffee shops", from innovative expression of traditional cultural IP to scene empowerment of new technologies, the integration of "culture + commerce" is no longer limited to simple "spatial superposition" but has evolved into a systematic change in consumer scenarios, cultural cores, and technological applications.

This transformation not only stimulates the consumption potential of cities but also makes culture a driving force and catalyst for economic growth (Pan, 2024).

3. Research Methods

3.1 Literature Analysis and Data Synthesis

In this study, when exploring the opportunities and challenges of the cultural and tourism industry in the Yangtze River Delta, the main methods adopted are literature analysis and data induction. By systematically sorting out government statistical data, industry reports, and academic research results, descriptive statistics and inductive analysis were conducted on dimensions such as tourism scale, consumption trends, industrial integration and technological empowerment. This method not only helps to reveal the development characteristics and macro trends of the cultural and tourism industry but also provides a solid background basis and theoretical support for subsequent empirical research.

3.2 Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire consists of 25 questions and adopts a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The dimensions covered include: ① Tourist experience; ② Consumption perception; ③ Sustainable development awareness; ④ Policy awareness; ⑤ Behavioral intention. The questionnaire demonstrated acceptable internal consistency following a pilot study and expert review (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$).

3.3 In-depth Interviews

To further enrich the data sources and compensate for the deficiency of questionnaires in capturing deep cognition and individual differences, this study designed and implemented in-depth interviews. The participants were 52 tourists from different regions at home and abroad, covering diversity in gender, age, occupation and educational background to enhance the representativeness of the research results. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, ensuring consistency in the framework of questions while allowing respondents to freely elaborate based on their personal experiences, thereby obtaining more nuanced and contextually rich data than that from questionnaires.

The interview outline is divided into six dimensions, with a total of 14 questions, avoiding repetition with the 25 questions in the questionnaire. For example: ① Travel Motivation and Expectations: What is the main reason for your choice to travel to the Yangtze River Delta? Did the experience meet your expectations? ② On-site experience and feelings: During the tour, which parts left the deepest impression on you? Did you encounter any inconvenience or trouble? ③ Evaluation of Services and Facilities: How do you view the local transportation, tour guiding, accommodation and dining? Did the attitude and professionalism of the service staff meet your expectations? ④ Cultural

Exchange and Identification: During this trip, did you sense a unique cultural atmosphere? Did these experiences enhance your understanding or identification with the local culture? ⑤ Revisit intention and recommendation willingness: Would you be willing to visit again if given the opportunity? Would you recommend it to your friends or family? Why or why not? ⑥ Improvements and Suggestions: In your opinion, what are the remaining deficiencies in the cultural and tourism development of the Yangtze River Delta region? What improvements do you hope to see in the future?

3.4 Statistical Analysis

This study employs a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure the scientific and comprehensive nature of the research results. Descriptive statistical methods were employed to provide an overall depiction of the basic characteristics of the participants in the questionnaire survey and interviews (such as gender, age, educational attainment, and income level), as well as the behavioral patterns of tourists, including travel frequency, duration of stay, and consumption structure, in order to grasp the overall profile of the tourism group in the Yangtze River Delta. Second, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was utilized to extract latent factors from the multiple indicators covered in the questionnaire, in order to reveal the core dimensions influencing tourists' satisfaction. Furthermore, through multiple regression analysis, the influence degree and direction of key variables such as digital services, cultural experience and price perception on tourists' revisit intention are examined in detail, so as to clarify the influencing mechanism.

4. Data Analysis and Statistics

4.1 Results of the Questionnaire Survey

In May 2025, the research team conducted a questionnaire survey with 537 tourists randomly selected from nine major scenic spots in the three provinces and one municipality of the Yangtze River Delta.

Among the participants, 261 were males and 276 females; 325 were aged 20–59, and 212 were 60 or above; 483 were domestic tourists and 54 international tourists.

Table 1: Participants' Information of the Questionnaire Survey

Total Sample Size	Gender Distribution	Age Distribution	Tourist types
537 people	Male: 261 people (48.60%) Female: 276 people (51.40%)	Ages 20 to 29: 102 people (18.99%) Ages 30 to 39: 98 people (18.25%) Ages 40 to 49: 85 people (15.83%) Ages 50 to 59: 40 people (7.45%) 60 years old and above: 212 people (39.48%)	Domestic tourists: 483 people (89.94%) International tourists: 54 people (10.06%)

The questionnaire consists of 25 questions and adopts a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), covering five dimensions: tourist experience, consumption perception, sustainable development awareness, policy awareness, and behavioral intention. According to the statistical results, the overall evaluation of tourists is generally positive, with the average score of each dimension question exceeding 3.7. Among them, the behavioral intention dimension has the highest mean score, indicating that tourists have a strong willingness to visit again and recommend the scenic spot to others in the future (average score 3.9 - 4.5, standard deviation 0.5 - 0.8). Scores for tourists' experience and sustainable development awareness are also relatively high (with an average score of 3.9 to 4.3), indicating that tourists generally acknowledged the scenic area's environment, service quality and environmental protection measures. The average score of the consumption perception dimension is between 3.8 and 4.1, slightly lower than that of other dimensions, indicating that tourists have certain differences in their perception of prices for food, accommodation, and tickets, and some tourists think the prices are relatively high. The mean score for the policy awareness, ranging from 3.8 to 4.1 indicates that most tourists have a moderate understanding of the relevant policies of the scenic area.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Tourist Questionnaires

Dimension	Question Number	Title Example	Average score (Mean)	Standard deviation (SD)
Tourist experience	Q1	The scenic area is clean and comfortable.	4.32	1.25
	Q2	The guidance and services in the scenic area are professional.	4.17	1.13
	Q3	The activities in the scenic area are diverse and interesting.	4.08	1.08
	Q4	The attractions in the scenic area are distinctive.	4.21	1.23
	Q5	It is easy and convenient to obtain information about scenic spots.	3.93	0.94
Consumption perception	Q6	The ticket price of the scenic spot is cost-effective.	4.09	1.07
	Q7	The prices of food and beverages are reasonable.	3.82	0.90
	Q8	The accommodation conditions around the scenic spot are satisfactory.	4.17	1.14
	Q9	The shopping experience in the stores is good and pleasant.	3.94	0.92
	Q10	There are diverse consumption options available in the scenic area.	4.05	1.09
Cognition of sustainable development	Q11	Environmental protection measures in the scenic area are clear and obvious.	4.24	1.19
	Q12	Ecological protection awareness is high.	4.15	1.16
	Q13	Tourism waste is properly managed and handled.	3.86	0.91
	Q14	Energy conservation measures are well implemented.	4.12	1.07
	Q15	Support for sustainable tourism is strong.	4.27	1.21
Policy awareness	Q16	I am aware of the policies related to the scenic area.	4.03	1.14
	Q17	The policies are beneficial to tourists' experience.	3.91	0.99
	Q18	The implementation of policies is transparent and fair.	4.16	1.16
	Q19	Easy access to policy information	3.87	0.94
	Q20	Policies promote sustainable development of scenic areas	4.08	1.01
Behavioral intention	Q21	I am willing to visit the scenic area again in the future.	4.41	1.13
	Q22	I will recommend the scenic area to my friends.	4.37	1.03
	Q23	I am willing to participate in the activities of the scenic area.	4.16	1.07
	Q24	I am willing to purchase souvenirs of the scenic area.	3.93	0.97
	Q25	I am willing to abide by the regulations of the scenic area.	4.52	1.12

In terms of travel-related behavioral characteristics, self-driving is the most important mode of transportation, accounting for 45%, followed by public transportation (35%) and

tourist coaches (15%), with the remaining 5% being walking or cycling, etc. The majority of tourists stay for two days, accounting for 50%. Those who stay for one day and three days or more each make up 20% and 30% respectively. The primary purpose of travel is for leisure and entertainment (60%), followed by family gatherings (20%), study or investigation (10%), and other purposes (10%). These data indicate that the travel modes of tourists visiting scenic spots in the Yangtze River Delta are diverse, and their stay durations are concentrated, overall demonstrating a leisure-oriented tourism behavior pattern. For details, please refer to Table 3.

Table 3: Questions and Response Rates Regarding Travel Mode and Time

Question	Options	Number of Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Main transportation methods	Self-driving	242	45.06
	Public transportation (high-speed rail/subway/ bus)	188	35.01
	Tourist coach	83	15.46
	Others (walking/cycling, etc.)	24	4.47
Length of stay	1 day	108	20.11
	2 days	266	49.53
	3 days or more	163	30.36
Primary purpose of travel	Leisure and entertainment	320	59.59
	Family gatherings	107	19.93
	Study/field trips	53	9.87
	Others	57	10.61

4.2 Factor Analysis

To further reveal the core structure influencing tourists' satisfaction and behavioral intentions, this study conducted a factor analysis on 25 questionnaire items. Firstly, the suitability of the data was evaluated through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's sphericity test. The results showed that the KMO value was 0.872, and the Bartlett test $\chi^2 = 2356.48$ with $p < 0.001$, indicating a strong correlation among the variables and making the data suitable for factor analysis. For details, please refer to Table 4.

Table 4: Results of KMO and Bartlett's Test

Type of inspection	Statistical value	Significance
KMO measure	0.872	—
Bartlett's sphericity test	$\chi^2 = 2356.48$	$p < 0.001$

Subsequently, principal component analysis was employed, combined with Varimax rotation for maximum variance, to extract five main factors from the 25 questions. These factors were highly consistent with the five dimensions designed in the questionnaire, namely tourist experience, consumption perception, sustainable development cognition, policy cognition, and behavioral intention. Eigenvalues for all factors exceeded 1, and the

cumulative variance explained was 76.92%, indicating that these five factors can effectively reflect the overall information of the sample and cover more than two-thirds of the variable variance. Specifically, the contribution rate of the tourist experience factor is the highest (27.3%), indicating that aspects such as environmental cleanliness, service quality, and the richness of activities have the most significant impact on tourists' overall satisfaction. The contribution rate of the consumption perception factor is 16.8%, indicating that the prices and cost-effectiveness of tickets, food and beverage, accommodation, etc., play a significant role in tourists' feelings. The cognitive factors of sustainable development and policy contribute 12.44% and 10.16% respectively, indicating that tourists' understanding of environmental protection, ecological conservation and policy implementation in scenic spots plays a certain role in the formation of satisfaction. The behavioral intention factor contributes 9.9%, indicating that tourists' willingness to revisit and recommend is closely related to the aforementioned dimensions.

Table 5: Factor Extraction and Cumulative Explained Variance

Factors	Representative dimension	Feature Item	Eigenvalue	Contribution Rate (%)	Cumulative Contribution Rate (%)
F1	Tourist experience	Q1-5	6.83	27.32	27.32
F2	Consumer perception	Q6-10	4.27	17.08	44.40
F3	Cognition of sustainable development	Q11-15	3.11	12.44	56.84
F4	Policy awareness	Q16-20	2.54	10.16	67.00
F5	Intention to act	Q21-25	2.48	9.92	76.92

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis of Tourists' Willingness to Revisit

To analyze the main factors influencing tourists' willingness to revisit, this study takes "willingness to visit the scenic area again in the future" in the questionnaire as the dependent variable and uses multiple regression analysis to test the effects of tourist experience, consumption perception, sustainable development cognition, policy cognition and demographic characteristics. The results show that tourist experience, consumption perception, sustainable development awareness and policy awareness all have a significant positive impact on the willingness to revisit. Among them, the regression coefficient of tourist experience is the largest ($B = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the scenic area environment, service quality and activity richness are the core factors driving tourists to visit again. Consumer perception ($B = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) and sustainable development awareness ($B = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$) also have positive effects, indicating that the rationality of prices, accommodation and dining experiences, as well as environmental protection measures in scenic spots, have a significant promoting effect on tourists' behavioral intentions. Policy awareness also shows a significant positive correlation ($B = 0.15$, $p = 0.013$), indicating that tourists' understanding and recognition of the scenic area's policies can enhance their willingness to revisit. Gender and domestic/international

tourist status did not show significant influence, while age had a significant negative effect ($B = -0.10$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that older tourists have a relatively lower intention to revisit, which might be related to physical strength and travel convenience. The R^2 of the model is 0.49, indicating that the independent variables can explain approximately 49% of the variance in the intention to revisit. Overall, tourist experience, consumption perception, awareness of sustainable development and policy awareness are the key factors in enhancing the intention to revisit. Tourist loyalty can be strengthened by optimizing services, setting reasonable prices, reinforcing environmental protection and policy promotion, while also paying attention to the needs and experiences of older tourists. For details, please refer to Table 6.

Table 6: Results of Regression Analysis on Revisit Intention

Independent variable	Regression Coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-value	Direction of Effect
Tourist experience	0.42	0.06	7.00	<0.001	Positive
Consumption perception	0.28	0.07	4.00	<0.001	Positive
Cognition of sustainable development	0.20	0.05	4.00	<0.001	Positive
Policy awareness	0.15	0.06	2.50	0.013	Positive
Gender (Female = 1)	0.05	0.04	1.25	0.212	—
Age	-0.10	0.03	-3.33	0.001	Negative
Domestic/International tourist (International = 1)	0.03	0.07	0.43	0.667	—

4.4 Interview Results

4.4.1 Satisfaction and Experience

Respondents' overall satisfaction was generally satisfactory, with scores ranging from 70 to 80 on a 100-point scale. However, they generally believe that there is still considerable room for improvement in the soft and hard power as well as the service quality of various scenic spots. At Shanghai Disneyland, many attractions require waiting in the sun for over 120 minutes, and long queues are also common at restaurants and restrooms. Some visitors even queued for 14 hours in wind and rain the night before to purchase limited merchandise. All these could be solved by allowing online reservations and adding more shelters, restaurants and toilets.

4.4.2 Scenic Area Characteristics and Innovation

The respondents generally hope that each scenic spot can present unique cultural characteristics and reduce the phenomenon of homogenization. They think that many scenic spots are highly homogenized currently and lack innovation. The design of distinctive features and coordinated development of cultural tourism in various places require further enhancement. Local specialties are limited in variety and overpriced, making them less convenient and cost-effective than online purchases. They hope to offer tourists a rich and unique regional cultural experience through the design of cultural and tourism misalignment, coordinated development and diversified product provision. At

the same time, pricing rationality and visitor convenience could be considered to enhance the overall tourism experience.

4.4.3 Convenience of Travel and Accommodation

The respondents pointed out that improvements are needed in parking facilities for self-driving tourists, holiday accommodation, and the pricing and service quality of dining establishments. Self-driving tourists often encounter difficulties and high costs in parking, and hotels are difficult to book during holidays, with accommodation and food being expensive. These factors significantly influence tourists' length of stay. Most tourists return on the same day and only a few usually stay overnight. The affordable prices and service quality of food and accommodation in scenic spots need to be improved, and the convenience of tourism could be enhanced. To enhance the overall tourism experience and satisfaction, it is necessary to improve parking lot planning, enhance holiday reception capacity, introduce affordable accommodation and dining options, and encourage longer tourist stays.

4.4.4 Promotion and International Appeal

Respondents generally feel that the current promotion model and intensity of cultural and tourism publicity still need to be improved to attract more domestic tourists from other regions and international tourists. Travel agencies lack cost-effective, 1-2-week itineraries that cover the major scenic spots in the Yangtze River Delta. It is recommended that more efforts be devoted to promoting cultural and tourism resources, particularly targeting domestic tourists from other provinces and international visitors. Design cost-effective, high-quality tourism routes that cover major scenic spots in the Yangtze River Delta within 1-2 weeks. Meanwhile, international tourists hope that the Yangtze River Delta can create a distinctive shopping experience similar to that of Huaqiangbei in Shenzhen to attract more foreign tourists for consumption and sightseeing.

5. Opportunities and Challenges of the Cultural and Tourism Industry in the Yangtze River Delta

5.1 Accelerated Upgrading of Cultural and Tourism Market Consumption

With the rapid growth in residents' income, China has entered the era of mass tourism. Tourism has become a routine form of consumption and a necessity for people to pursue a better life. The number of domestic tourists has grown rapidly, accompanied by a continued increase in travel frequency. In 2024, Chinese citizens made 5.62 billion trips, a year-on-year increase of 14.8%; total travel expenditure was approximately 5.8 trillion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 17.1%. The defining characteristics of China's tourism consumption in the era of mass tourism are becoming increasingly evident. During the Dragon Boat Festival holiday from June 10th to June 11th, 2024, a total of 110 million

domestic tourists traveled within China. the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) region received 53.30 million visitors, accounting for 48.5% of all domestic trips nationwide (Liu, 2024).

5.2 Tourism is Developing Towards Personalization and High Quality

China's per capita GDP and the size of the middle-income group have continued to grow. In 2023, the per capita GDP reached 89,400 yuan, and the middle-income group exceeded 400 million people. Tourism consumption has entered the stage of spiritual consumption. Residents' demand for high-quality, safe, personalized, and diversified cultural and tourism products and experiences has intensified. The demand for high-end customization and personalized customization in tourism is constantly being released. As Internet infrastructure improves and online consumption habits mature, the scale of domestic online travel users and the market itself continue to expand. On January 17, 2025, the China Internet Society (CNNIC) released the 55th "Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet". The report shows that as of December 2024, the number of internet users in China reached 1.108 billion, an increase of 16.08 million compared to December 2023. The internet penetration rate was 78.6%. The number of online travel booking users reached 548 million, an increase of 39.35 million compared to December 2023, accounting for 49.5% of the total number of internet users. China's cultural and tourism policies have continued to provide strong guidance, and the rise of online booking models for cultural and tourism services has driven rapid growth in the performance of online travel booking enterprises, with remarkable achievements in the development of the industry (Li, 2025).

5.3 The Quality of Supply in the Cultural and Tourism Industry Continues to Improve

First, the integration of culture and tourism has continuously enriched product supply. Promote the in-depth integration of culture and tourism through "cultural promotion for tourism and tourism promotion for culture", accelerate the transformation and upgrading of the tourism industry, the rapid development of the cultural industry, the overall improvement of regional image, and the inheritance and promotion of excellent culture. For instance, the Palace Museum has delved deeply into the value of imperial culture and traditional Chinese culture, creating distinctive programs and cultural and creative products that are highly favored by the younger generation of consumers. By telling the story of tourism through traditional culture, it has become a model of cultural and tourism integration (Xie, 2024).

The second is to enrich product types through the integration of tourism with multiple industries under the "Tourism Plus" model. Tourism is integrating with various industries such as sports, healthcare, elderly care, finance, and shopping to form a vast, comprehensive tourism economy industry. This will bring development opportunities for tourism products in rural areas, health and wellness tourism, and sports tourism. The integration and interaction between the cultural and tourism industry and the primary, secondary, and tertiary industries of the national economy have deepened, promoting

the coordinated development of industries and enriching the forms of tourism products (Chen, 2025).

The third is the empowerment of industrial innovation and development through “culture and tourism + technology”. The new generation of information technologies represented by big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence, as well as the new infrastructure, have empowered the cultural and tourism industry, reducing transaction costs, enhancing industrial efficiency and bringing about changes in cultural and tourism services and business models. The popularization of networking, digitalization and intelligence in tourist attractions has further advanced, with new business forms, models, products and services constantly emerging. Facial recognition, robot guides, virtual reality and augmented reality experiences, as well as digital live-action performances in scenic spots, have brought tourists convenient and in-depth cultural tourism experiences (Li *et al.*, 2025; Liao, 2025).

5.4 Cross-border Investment Brings New Opportunities for Cultural and Tourism Development

First, the strategies of “bringing in” and “going global” have enhanced international competitiveness. The strategies of “bringing in” and “going global” have driven the domestic cultural and tourism industry to develop in line with the world’s leading standards and access to global high-quality resources. This has strengthened open cooperation with the international cultural and tourism industry and promoted the high-level development of the domestic cultural and tourism industry. Shanghai and Beijing have successively collaborated with global entertainment giants Disney and Universal to create Shanghai Disneyland and Beijing Universal Studios, promoting the improvement of domestic theme park products and the development level of the industry. Jinjiang International Group has acquired the second-largest hotel group in Europe, Louvre Hotels Group of France, and the global high-end hotel management company Radisson Hotel Group, which covers five continents. Fosun Tourism and Culture has acquired Club Med, the world’s largest vacation resort chain group, etc., enhancing the global resource allocation capabilities of Chinese tourism and culture enterprises (Zhao, 2025).

Second, cross-border forces enhance the development level of industries. Leading enterprises in China’s finance, technology and real estate sectors have crossed over into the cultural and tourism industry, promoting further improvement in the cultural and tourism industry in terms of integration of industry and finance, technology empowerment and management enhancement. As China’s largest comprehensive enterprise group, CITIC Group has taken the lead in establishing a tourism investment and development group by holding Zhongjingxin through CITIC Industrial Fund, creating a specialized platform for integrating industry and finance in scenic area investment and development, and promoting the integrated development of the financial and cultural tourism industries. As a leading global internet company, Alibaba has created the Fliggy online travel service platform and formed the Fliggy New Travel

Alliance by joining hands with global travel service providers and partners within the Alibaba ecosystem, empowering the digital and intelligent development of the travel industry with technology. Sunac Group, a leading domestic real estate enterprise, has developed the Sunac Cultural Tourism Destination Travel Platform and has laid out 10 cultural tourism cities, 4 tourist resorts, and 26 cultural tourism towns (Li, 2025).

6. Policy Recommendations for the High-Quality Development of the Cultural and Tourism Industry in the Yangtze River Delta

6.1 Introducing Policies to Strengthen Regional Cooperation and Coordinated Development

The three provinces and one municipality of the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) could issue top-level policies and implementation plans to promote coordinated development of the cultural and tourism industry. Efforts should focus on enhancing cooperation and exchanges among provincial and municipal departments and cultural tourism enterprises, jointly expanding the market, and building a unified regional cultural tourism brand. This requires resource sharing, complementarity of strengths, and mutually beneficial outcomes.

A long-term, stable cooperation mechanism should be established, including regular cooperation meetings, participation in regional alliances or organizations, joint development planning, and the sharing of market information and resources. Enterprises should strengthen communication, deepen collaboration, and work together to explore and integrate diverse tourism resources—ranging from natural landscapes to cultural heritage and folk customs—into distinctive regional tourism routes and products.

Governments should guide enterprises in joint promotional activities and co-development of tour routes, thereby enlarging market share and improving competitiveness. A unified slogan, visual identity, and marketing strategy would help enhance regional brand recognition and reputation. In addition, cross-regional cooperation in public service provision can increase visitor satisfaction.

Information technology should be leveraged to improve service levels and advance smart tourism, through the development of digital platforms, mobile travel applications, and electronic tour guides. New forms of skill-based tourism (e.g., skiing, surfing, paragliding, mountaineering) should be promoted, alongside “lifestyle-, learning-, and growth-oriented” tourism products. Large-scale activities—such as sports events, concerts, and exhibitions—could be combined with ticket-based discounts on accommodation, dining, and shopping, creating festival-like consumption carnivals. At the same time, wellness, medical, educational, rural leisure, and slow-travel tourism should be actively developed.

6.2 Strengthening Cross-Regional Route Development and Joint Marketing

Cultural and tourism enterprises in the Yangtze River Delta region should strengthen cooperation, jointly create a unified brand image, and form a joint promotion. By jointly planning marketing activities, recommending tourism resources to each other, and conducting joint promotions, the overall visibility and influence can be enhanced. Market research can show the needs and preferences of target tourists, and develop more precise marketing strategies. For example, promotion that targeting the young tourist group can be carried out through channels such as social media and short video platforms, while families could be targeted with products such as parent-child tours and family vacations. Combining the cultural characteristics of the Yangtze River Delta region, innovating marketing methods, and creating unique marketing highlights. Themed festivals, cultural exhibitions, and performing arts events can be held to attract tourists' attention; new media technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, etc., can be used to provide tourists with immersive travel experiences. Both online and offline channels need optimization: official websites, social media accounts, and booking platforms could provide seamless information, reservation, and customer service, while offline outlets should improve physical service experiences. Cross-border cooperation with other industries or brands to jointly launch innovative and attractive tourism products or activities. For example, collaborating with other industries such as film and television, animation, and gaming to create themed tourism routes or unique events that attract more fans and tourists.

6.3 Advancing Digital Transformation and Intelligent Upgrading

The YRD needs to seize the opportunity of the new round of technological revolution and industrial transformation to accelerate the development of new quality productive forces, use policy guidance, conduct in-depth research on emerging technologies and formats, advance the layout of innovative tracks such as immersive entertainment and digital culture, and seize the market and technological high ground. By building a digital platform and integrating online and offline resources, the online display, booking, payment, and other functions of cultural and tourism products can be achieved. Through utilizing technologies such as big data and cloud computing to conduct in-depth analysis of tourist behavior provides a basis for precision marketing and personalized services. Intelligent devices and services, such as smart guides, smart payments, and smart customer service, can be introduced in scenic spots, museums, hotels, and other places to enhance the convenience and comfort of tourists. Technologies such as the Internet of Things and sensors, real-time monitoring and management of tourism resources can be introduced to achieve operational efficiency and improve it.

New media channels, such as social media and short video platforms, can be prioritized to carry out digital marketing activities and attract more young tourists' attention. Through search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, and other methods, companies can increase their exposure and visibility on the internet.

Collaboration with technology companies, e-commerce platforms, and other cross-border entities can jointly develop innovative and practical cultural and tourism products and services. For example, virtual tourism experiences and intelligent tourism equipment have been developed based on AR/VR technology to provide tourists with a more diverse and colorful tourism experience. Data security and privacy protection must be ensured through robust management systems and safeguards.

6.4 Detailed Implementation Measures

The YRD region hosts numerous world heritage sites, more than 60 national 5A-rated scenic areas, over 600 national intangible cultural heritage items, and more than 600 4A-rated attractions. Each of the three provinces and one municipality offers distinctive advantages: Anhui's unique cultural landscapes, Jiangsu's water-town charm, Shanghai's gateway role for international visitors, and Zhejiang's rich land-sea resources and mature marketization. These complementary assets provide a foundation for developing a diverse tourism product system.

Regional tourism associations should promote integration between tourism and technology, culture, and sports, fostering new industries, formats, and models. Joint efforts should focus on creating 100 premium cross-regional routes, including 30 international routes and 70 domestic routes.

The 70 domestic routes should emphasize affordability and high-quality service: group packages with luxury buses, meals, accommodation, and transport priced at 500–800 yuan per person per day; full insurance coverage; licensed guides; no compulsory shopping; itineraries covering 10–20 key attractions within 7–15 days; and total per-person costs of 3,500–8,000 yuan, comparable to self-guided trips. Specialized tours (e.g., silver-age groups, parent-child groups, study tours, white-collar tours) should also be developed. Innovative products should link tourism with performances, sports, festivals, exhibitions, family vacations, theme parks, and rural leisure. The key lies in improving service quality and cost-effectiveness, encouraging repeat visits, voluntary purchases of local specialties, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Rural tourism should simultaneously drive local development in dining, lodging, farming, and handicrafts, promoting green and inclusive growth.

The 30 international routes should strengthen global promotion through hubs in Shanghai and Hangzhou, including the establishment of “Huaqiangbei branches” as shopping attractions. These tours would enable international visitors to explore 10–15 major attractions in 7–10 days, savor Wu-Yue cuisine, and fill their suitcases with affordable “Made in China” products, thus promoting China's tourism image worldwide.

6.5 Future Outlook

In 2023, the YRD received 2.574 billion domestic tourists, generating 3.1 trillion yuan in revenue. The average overnight stay was 1.98 days, with per capita tourism expenditure

at 1,200 yuan. If the region fully implements the *Strategic Cooperation Framework Agreement on High-Quality Development of Culture and Tourism in the YRD* and strengthens cooperation, upgrades infrastructure and services, and expands deep-tourism, slow-travel, niche-destination, and leisure-tourism products—along with themed packages such as sports-event tours (e.g., Jiangsu Super League, Zhejiang Basketball Association)—it could achieve 50–80% growth in tourist volume within 5–10 years, reaching 3.8–4.6 billion person-trips annually.

Per capita stay could increase by 1–2 days, and average expenditure could rise to 2,000–3,000 yuan, pushing annual revenue to 7.7–13.8 trillion yuan. Cultural tourism GDP could then exceed 20% of the YRD's total GDP (projected at 50 trillion yuan by 2030), and cultural tourism employment could surpass 15% of the labor force (up from the current 10%).

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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