

THE INTERNAL LOGIC AND PRACTICAL PATHS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY EMPOWERING THE HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA'S TOURISM ECONOMY

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Abstract: Tourism is a people's livelihood and well-being industry with strong comprehensiveness and driving force, and a key lever for expanding domestic demand, boosting consumption, and stabilizing employment. In 2025, China's tourism economy got off to a strong start and continued to rise: domestic tourist trips reached 6.522 billion and total tourism spending reached 6.30 trillion yuan, up 16.2% and 9.5% year on year respectively, both setting new historical records; inbound visits by foreign nationals reached 82.035 million, up 26.4% year on year, and the tourism economy as a whole entered a new cycle of prosperity. Against the backdrop of "tourism power" being written into the 15th Five-Year Plan for the first time, digital technology is shifting from an auxiliary tool to a core engine, profoundly reshaping the supply, demand, experience, and governance structures of the tourism industry. Based on the latest developments in the tourism economy since 2025, this paper elaborates the internal logic of digital technology empowering the high-quality development of the tourism economy, and proposes practical paths in terms of digital infrastructure, cultivation of new business forms, cultural and tourism integration, governance and security, and policy support, with a view to providing reference for building a tourism power.

Keywords: Tourism economy; High-quality development; Digital technology; Cultural and tourism integration; Tourism power

1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a people's livelihood and well-being industry with strong comprehensiveness and driving force in the national economy, and a key lever for expanding domestic demand, boosting consumption, and stabilizing employment. In 2025, China's tourism economy got off to a strong start and continued to rise throughout the year: domestic tourist trips reached 6.522 billion and total tourism spending reached 6.30 trillion yuan, up 16.2% and 9.5% year on year respectively, both setting new historical records. Inbound tourism was equally robust, with 82.035 million inbound foreign visitors over the year, up 26.4% year on year, of whom 30.08 million entered under visa-free policies, up 49.5% year on year[1]. The blue book released by the China Tourism Academy shows that the tourism economy has steadily entered a new cycle of prosperity and a new stage of high-quality development.

From the perspective of development logic, China's tourism economy has passed the stage of mainly scale expansion and entered a critical leap-forward period from large to strong. Facing the profound changes in the domestic and international environment and the people's aspirations for a better life, relying solely on resource input and growth in visitor numbers is unsustainable. It is necessary to improve total factor productivity through quality reform, efficiency reform, and momentum reform. As an important carrier of new quality productive forces, digital technology is precisely the key variable driving the momentum reform of the tourism economy, and its enabling effect runs through all links of production, circulation, consumption, and governance.

At the same time, the Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan wrote "advancing the building of a tourism power" into the national five-year plan for the first time, placing the tourism industry in a more prominent strategic position. Under the combined effects of demand upgrading, technological change, and policy guidance, the tourism economy is undergoing a profound transformation from scale expansion to quality leap, from factor-driven to innovation-driven development, and from resource-driven to dual-wheel-driven development based on data and scenarios, in which digital technology plays a particularly critical role. Deeply grasping the internal logic of digital technology empowering the tourism economy and exploring practical paths that fit the requirements of the times are of important practical significance for accelerating the building of a tourism power and better satisfying the people's needs for a better life.

2 THE REALISTIC FOUNDATION FOR THE TOURISM ECONOMY ENTERING A NEW CYCLE OF PROSPERITY

2.1 The Scale of the Market Has Leaped to a New Level, Ushering in a New Cycle of Prosperity

In terms of overall volume, domestic tourist trips in 2025 set a new record on the basis of the historical high of 6.006 billion in 2019, maintaining double-digit growth for three consecutive years, and total tourism spending grew by 9.5% year on year. According to estimates by the World Travel & Tourism Council, the overall growth rate of the global tourism industry in 2025 was 4.1%, while the growth rate of China's tourism economy was about 9.9%, more than twice the global

average[2]. In 2024, the value added of the national tourism and related industries accounted for 4.35% of GDP, and the comprehensive driving effect of tourism on the national economy continued to strengthen.

It is worth noting that tourism has shifted from a "holiday economy" to "daily consumption". Travel frequency and repeat-visit rates have risen significantly, and tourism consumption has gradually become a "rigid demand" for the people's better life, laying a solid market foundation for the long-term prosperity of the industry.

2.2 Diversified Upgrading of the Demand Structure, with New Customer Groups and New Scenarios Continuously Emerging

On the one hand, consumer demand is shifting from "checking in at a destination" to "in-depth experience", with emotional value becoming an important driver. It is estimated that by the end of 2025, the number of young, healthy senior citizens with a high travel rate in China had exceeded 100 million, making silver tourism a new blue ocean for cultural and tourism consumption. On the other hand, domestic tourist trips by rural residents grew by 22.6% year on year, county-level and rural tourism continued to heat up, and lower-tier markets contain huge consumption potential.

At the same time, segmented business forms such as study tourism, nighttime cultural tourism, and wellness and health-oriented stays are growing rapidly. Tourism is being integrated across industries with sports, industry, and agriculture, continuously giving rise to new growth points and reflecting the evolving trend in which the demand side advances diversification, personalization, and quality enhancement simultaneously.

2.3 The Release of Policy Dividends in Inbound Tourism and the Acceleration of Two-Way Exchange

In 2025, China increased the number of countries covered by unilateral visa-free policies to 48, expanded mutual visa exemption to 29 countries, and increased the ports applying the 240-hour transit visa-free policy to 65. In that year, visa-free inbound foreign visitors accounted for 73.1% of all inbound foreign visitors. "China Travel" and "China Haul" continued to gain popularity, and China has become an important destination favored by global tourists.

2.4 A Clear Top-Level Strategy, with the Goal of Building a Tourism Power Anchoring the Direction

The National Conference on Tourism Development and the 15th Five-Year Plan jointly clarified the strategic direction of shaping tourism through culture, promoting culture through tourism, and advancing the building of a tourism power, providing fundamental guidance for the high-quality development of the tourism economy.

3 THE INTERNAL LOGIC OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY EMPOWERING THE HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM ECONOMY

3.1 Supply Side: Shifting from Resource-Driven to Dual-Wheel-Driven Development Based on Data and Scenarios

Traditional tourism supply relies heavily on resource endowments such as landscapes and cultural relics, and product forms are relatively fixed. Digital technology has brought about a fundamental shift in the logic of supply: cutting-edge technologies such as large AI models, digital twins, and extended reality are shifting from auxiliary tools to core engines, driving the cultural and tourism industry from resource-driven to dual-wheel-driven development based on data and scenarios. Museums and scenic areas rely on VR and AR to build immersive new scenarios, bringing static resources "to life" and realizing the deep integration of cultural cores with technological forms of expression[3].

Under this logic, data has become a new factor of production as important as landscape resources, and scenarios have become the core carrier of product value. The creative space of tourism supply has expanded from "what resources are available" to "what experiences can be created".

3.2 Demand Side: Shifting from Mass Sightseeing to Personalized and Precise Matching

Digital technology has reconstructed the demand-matching mechanism. AI agents can provide personalized itinerary customization, multilingual scenic spot explanations, and immersive guided tour services based on tourists' preferences. Platforms such as Ctrip and Tongcheng Travel have integrated AI agents, realizing full-process operations from itinerary planning to ticket booking. Big data analysis enables scenic areas to accurately identify the interests and consumption structures of different customer groups, promoting refined alignment between supply and demand[4].

3.3 Experience Side: Shifting from Merely "Watching the Excitement" to Immersive Consumption Driven by Emotional Value

Cultural and tourism consumption is shifting from "buying products" to "buying experiences and emotions". New business forms such as cloud tourism, cloud performances, cloud exhibitions, and immersive theaters transform cultural resources into tangible, playable experience products, enabling tourists to gain satisfaction through emotional resonance. Digital technology has significantly enhanced the depth and stickiness of experiences, becoming an important lever for releasing consumption potential and extending tourists' length of stay.

In terms of economic effects, immersive experiences can effectively extend tourists' length of stay, drive secondary consumption, and increase repeat-visit willingness, promoting the transformation of tourism revenue from a "ticket

economy" to an "experience economy". They are an important fulcrum for improving the quality and expanding the scale of cultural and tourism consumption.

3.4 Governance Side: Shifting from Experience-Based Decision-Making to Data-Driven Smart Regulation

Digital technology also empowers the modernization of governance capacity. Applications such as crowd heat-flow monitoring, ticket reservation systems, and smart tourism platforms enable scenic areas to scientifically manage capacity, optimize resource allocation, and handle risks in a timely manner, safeguarding tourists' safety and experience. Data elements run through the entire process of management decision-making, driving industry governance from experience-based judgment to precise policy implementation.

Taking all-for-one tourism platforms such as "Smart Travel Ningxia" as an example, they attract offline consumption through online experiences and provide one-stop smart services, offering a digital model that can be referenced for the high-quality development of the cultural and tourism industry.

4 THE PRACTICAL PATHS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY EMPOWERING THE HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM ECONOMY

4.1 Consolidating Digital Infrastructure and Smoothing the Flow of Data Elements

Accelerate the construction of smart scenic areas and promote deep 5G network coverage in tourist attractions of level 4A and above [4]; build a unified and open tourism data platform, break information silos, and realize the interconnection and intercommunication of data on visitor flow, consumption, and public opinion. With digital infrastructure as the foundation, support the digital upgrading of the entire chain of tourism products, services, and management.

4.2 Cultivating New Digital Cultural and Tourism Business Forms and Expanding New Immersive Consumption Scenarios

Actively develop "AI + cultural tourism", promote the deep integration of artificial intelligence with the entire chain including itinerary planning, ticket handling, tour guiding, and hotel booking, build "AI + real-scene experience" projects, and support scenic areas in equipping themselves with smart products such as AI glasses and AI earphones. Promote digital cultural products such as micro-dramas and VR experiences, and transform technological advantages into product and market advantages[5].

4.3 Deepening the Integration of Culture and Tourism and Building Differentiated High-Quality Supply

Adhere to the principle of shaping tourism through culture and promoting culture through tourism, transform cultural resources into tourism products and consumption scenarios, and avoid homogeneous competition[6]. For different customer groups such as senior citizens, parent-child families, young people, and inbound tourists, develop segmented products such as wellness and health-oriented stays, study tourism, industrial tourism, and nighttime cultural tourism, and meet diverse demands through differentiated supply.

Through big data, accurately identify customer group preferences and drive tourism products from "one size fits all" to "tailored to each individual", which not only enhances tourists' sense of gain but also strengthens the core competitiveness of regional tourism.

4.4 Coordinating Development and Security and Bridging the Digital Divide

Digital technology empowerment is not about "technology first". We should simultaneously strengthen data security, personal information protection, and online content governance, and regulate data collection and use. Attention should be paid to the digital adaptability of elderly and rural tourists, necessary traditional service channels should be retained, and technological progress should benefit all tourists[7].

4.5 Improving Policy and Talent Support and Strengthening Collaborative Support

Give play to the guiding role of fiscal and financial policy tools and promote the flow of financial resources into key service industries such as culture and tourism; strengthen the cultivation of digital cultural and tourism talent and the integration of industry and education, cultivate interdisciplinary talent who understand both technology and culture and tourism, and provide solid talent and institutional support for the building of a tourism power[8].

5 CONCLUSION

Since 2025, China's tourism economy has entered a new cycle of prosperity amid scale leaps and structural upgrading, and digital technology has become the core driving force for high-quality development. By consolidating digital infrastructure, cultivating new digital cultural and tourism business forms, deepening the integration of culture and tourism, and coordinating development and security, China's tourism industry will accelerate its transformation from scale expansion to quality leap, play a greater role in serving a better life, promoting economic development, showcasing

China's image, and enhancing mutual learning among civilizations, and steadily advance toward the goal of building a tourism power. In the future, with the deep application of technologies such as artificial intelligence and digital twins, the level of digitalization, intelligence, and green development of the tourism economy will continue to improve, and the space and value of digital technology empowering the building of a tourism power will become further apparent.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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