

# Innovative IP Development and Industrial Integration of Yiwu Brown Sugar From the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage Activation<sup>\*</sup>

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Against the backdrop of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) activation in China, the innovative transmission and industrial integration of ICH have become increasingly significant. As an officially recognized ICH item of Zhejiang Province, Yiwu brown sugar embodies unique artisanal techniques and carries the cultural memory of Yiwu. However, it currently faces challenges such as discontinuity in transmission, insufficient market recognition, and inadequate industrial integration. Focusing on the construction of a youth-oriented IP system for Yiwu brown sugar within the framework of ICH activation, this study employs field investigations and literature research to excavate the historical, cultural, and craft-related foundations of Yiwu brown sugar. It proposes strategies for developing a youthful IP identity through visual system innovation, digital content creation, and social-media-based dissemination, and explores integrated development pathways across culinary innovation, cultural and creative industries, and digital marketing. The aim is to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the activation of Yiwu brown sugar as intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** intangible cultural heritage activation, Yiwu brown sugar, IP innovation, industrial integration

## Introduction

According to *The Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage*, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) activation refers to utilizing diverse approaches to ensure the continuity, development, and innovation of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary society, enabling it to better serve people's lives. Yiwu brown sugar, a representative ICH item of Zhejiang Province, is characterized by a long history and distinctive production techniques. However, under the influence of industrialization and cultural diversification, Yiwu brown sugar faces numerous challenges including declining transmission, limited public awareness, insufficient

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industrial integration, and a lack of diversified product forms.

IP development has become an effective approach to ICH activation. The concept of brand IP can be traced back to the mid-17th century, when the French scholar Capzoff (1623) argued that unique imagery and narrative storytelling could enhance brand appeal. This study aims to facilitate the upgrading of the Yiwu brown sugar industry and reinforce cultural confidence in Zhejiang by exploring its cultural connotations and proposing youth-oriented IP innovation strategies.

## Literature Review

### Domestic Studies

Chinese scholars have explored ICH activation, brand building, and industrial integration extensively. In studies on ICH IP development and new-media communication, researchers (Wang, 2023; Li, 2022) argue that IP construction is central to ICH activation, as creating IP images that combine unique personality with cultural depth significantly enhances cultural attractiveness and communicative power.

Research focusing on Yiwu brown sugar mainly examines transmission, protection, and industrial development. Zhang Lan (2022) identifies problems in brand development, such as insufficient enterprise awareness, talent shortages, and lack of systematic promotion, proposing a collaborative model involving the government, enterprises, associations, and farmers. Zhang Jingyu (2019) emphasizes expanding the industrial chain and optimizing resource allocation. Ding Ning (2025) suggests enhancing competitiveness through the reproduction and improvement of traditional foods and developing derivative products such as brown sugar-based cultural and creative goods.

### International Studies

Although international scholarship has not addressed brown sugar specifically, many countries offer valuable experience in ICH protection and culture-industry integration. Japan's *Traditional Craft Industries Promotion Act* links traditional craftsmanship with local natural and cultural resources, producing internationally influential brands such as Nishijin textiles and Nambu ironware (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, 2023). South Korea focuses on the digital preservation and dissemination of ICH through digital museums and derivative cultural products, including online games, to make ICH more youth-friendly and engaging (Kim & Lee, 2022). The Walt Disney Company provides an exemplary model of IP operation through cross-media adaptation and full-industry-chain development, achieving diversified value expansion (Iger, 2020).

Overall, existing research has achieved meaningful progress in ICH protection and IP marketing; however, studies exploring youth-oriented dissemination strategies and systematic practice pathways remain limited. This study therefore seeks to address these gaps by investigating practical routes for IP activation and long-term sustainable dissemination of Yiwu brown sugar.

## Cultural Connotations and Artisanal Traditions of Yiwu Brown Sugar

As a symbolic component of Yiwu's regional culture, Yiwu brown sugar embodies centuries-old craftsmanship and integrates elements of local commerce, customs, and everyday life. It serves both practical and cultural functions within ICH traditions of central Zhejiang.

### Historical Origins

Large-scale cultivation of sugarcane in Yiwu dates back to the Ming and Qing Dynasties, when brown sugar served both as a key food item and a commodity in external trade. Over time, a unique production system and related customs developed, embedding brown sugar deeply into local culture. “As Yiwu, my native county, has long been known as the ‘land of sugar’; in the wintry season its fragrance drifts for miles”, writes contemporary scholar Wu Yue (2020) in “Xingxiangzi: A Chant of the Sugar Land”. This line vividly captures the everyday warmth and festive ambience evoked by the pervasive aroma of brown sugar in the streets and alleys of Yiwu. It also reflects the extensive use of brown sugar in local seasonal customs, such as New Year brown sugar rice cakes and Lantern Festival sugar paintings, where sweetness symbolizes auspiciousness and good fortune.

Today, the Yiwu brown sugar industry continues to flourish: In 2024, sugarcane plantations in Yiwu covered 5,000 mu, with annual brown sugar production exceeding 4,000 tons and an industrial output value surpassing 300 million yuan (Official Website of the Yiwu Municipal People’s Government, 2024). While preserving its historical legacy, Yiwu’s intangible cultural heritage brown sugar industry simultaneously demonstrates robust contemporary vitality.

### Craftsmanship Characteristics

Yiwu brown sugar production involves multiple stages—sugarcane cultivation, pressing, boiling, and molding—each with unique features. The area’s sandy red soil and subtropical monsoon climate are ideal for cultivating Qingpi sugarcane, known for high sugar content and soft fiber, improving juice extraction efficiency.

Boiling is the core stage, characterized by the traditional “nine-pot connected boiling” method, which requires experienced artisans to precisely control heat and timing. The molded sugar is then placed in bamboo trays for 72 hours of natural air-drying, ensuring its characteristic fine, crumbly texture. The resulting brown sugar is warm in nature, sweet in flavor, and known for invigorating qi, nourishing blood, and relieving pain.

### Cultural Value

Yiwu brown sugar embodies both tangible and intangible values. First, it symbolizes the entrepreneurial spirit of Yiwu: Early peddlers in the famous “feather-for-sugar” trade relied on brown sugar as a core commodity, reflecting the city’s bold and enterprising ethos. Second, it represents craftsmanship, requiring years of training in techniques such as foam observation and heat control. Yiwu brown sugar stands as a cultural emblem integrating both industriousness and artisan excellence.

## Youth-Oriented IP Design and Communication Strategies

Yiwu brown sugar suffers from low recognition and limited appeal among young consumers. Research shows that consumers’ cultural identification with ICH products positively influences their purchase intentions (Yu, 2024). Therefore, innovative IP design tailored to youth aesthetics and media habits is essential for revitalizing this traditional craft and expanding its market reach.

### Visual System Innovation

Traditional brands such as Yihong, Qiutian, and Suoyi Ren remain locally known but lack modern IP-based visual appeal. A “tradition + trendy expression” strategy is proposed: designing an IP figure inspired by Yiwu’s

Qingpi sugarcane, incorporating elements of the feather-for-sugar trade such as the rattling drum. Packaging may use warm red-orange tones and include stories about brown sugar production or Yiwu folklore, strengthening cultural resonance and enhancing visual identity.

### **Digital Content Creation**

Short-form situational videos can vividly present historical stories, production techniques, and interviews with inheritors. Through hashtags such as #FindingFlavorInYiwuBrownSugar, interactive activities—knowledge quizzes, creative challenges—can be launched to increase engagement and expand brand influence on social platforms.

### **Social Media Operations**

A student-led new media team can organize festival promotions and ICH cultural month activities. Through livestreaming sessions featuring store visits and dialogues with inheritors, brand visibility can be enhanced. Live demonstrations of brown sugar craftsmanship, real-time Q&A, and exclusive promotional bundles can further stimulate sales.

## **Pathways to Multi-dimensional Industrial Integration**

### **Culinary Innovation**

Through collaboration with university food science departments, creative products such as brown-sugar mochi or brown-sugar beverages can be developed. A “ICH food stall” may be set up in university canteens, while nearby restaurants can offer brown-sugar-themed menus, expanding consumption scenarios and promoting the culinary culture of Yiwu brown sugar.

### **Cultural and Creative Product Development**

University cultural and creative societies may design products such as bookmarks featuring traditional sugar-craft imagery or silk scarves inspired by brown sugar patterns. Promotion can be strengthened through government ICH events, campus fairs, alumni networks, and partnerships with local enterprises and e-commerce platforms, facilitating market entry for these products and fostering entrepreneurship.

### **Digital Marketing Innovation**

Using big data, consumer preferences can be analyzed to enable targeted marketing. For instance, personalized “brown-sugar-ginger tea” packages may be recommended to female consumers, while heritage enthusiasts may receive content on traditional sugar-making. Livestreaming with influencers can further expand sales channels. Official websites and online stores can provide accessible information and convenient purchasing options.

## **Conclusion and Prospects**

This study systematically explores the cultural foundations of Yiwu brown sugar—its historical origins, artisanal features, and cultural significance—providing the basis for IP innovation. Through visual innovation, digital storytelling, and social-media-based communication, a youthful and trend-aligned IP identity can be constructed. Combined with culinary innovation, cultural-creative development, and digital marketing, these measures facilitate the diversification and upgrading of the Yiwu brown sugar industry.

Findings indicate that an ICH activation model driven by university students, cultural creativity, and industrial integration is feasible. It can alleviate transmission challenges, strengthen cultural identity, improve brand competitiveness, and promote regional economic development.

Future work may explore applications of VR, AR, and other emerging technologies to create immersive ICH experiences, thereby further enhancing the attractiveness and communicative power of Yiwu brown sugar culture.

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