

The Evolution of Grasse Town and Its Inspirations for China

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Abstract

Relying on unique natural conditions and profound cultural heritage, Grasse Town in France has successfully transformed from a traditional leather industry into a characteristic industrial cluster centered on the perfume economy. It has established a development model featuring in-depth integration of three industries: flower cultivation, perfume processing, and cultural tourism experience. Rooted in characteristic flower planting and centered on the perfume industry, the town has built diverse cultural tourism projects including perfume museums, perfumery schools and the International Perfume Festival. It has forged the world-famous cultural brand of the "Capital of Perfume", achieved industrial upgrading and promoted the sustainable development of the town. At present, the construction of rural tourism and characteristic towns in China is generally confronted with such problems as homogeneous industrial models, inadequate integration of primary, secondary and tertiary industries, and low recognition of cultural IP. Taking the development path of Grasse Town as the research object, this paper analyzes its successful experience in industrial integration, innovative development and cultural shaping. With the "China Tea Sea" scenic area in Meitan County, Guizhou Province as a case study, it discusses its current development status and the enlightenment of Grasse Town to the transformation and upgrading of rural tourism in China, so as to provide referable ideas for the high-quality development of characteristic towns and rural tourist attractions nationwide.

Keywords

Grasse Town; rural tourism; "China Tea Sea" Scenic Area.

1. Introduction

Rural development is the foundation of national development, and rural tourism serves as an important means to revitalize rural economies and improve farmers' livelihoods. In recent years, with the rising living standards of residents, a growing number of urban dwellers have been eager to travel to the countryside to experience natural scenery and local culture (Wang, 2014: 16). This creates enormous development opportunities for rural tourism. Nevertheless, alongside its rapid expansion, China's rural tourism has also revealed numerous problems. Tourist projects in many regions are homogeneous and lack distinctive features, with shallow cultural connotations and short industrial chains, making it difficult to build lasting appeal. Tourists often merely "take a quick look and leave", which fails to stimulate sustained consumption and restricts the high-quality development of rural economies. The key to resolving this dilemma lies in exploring local resources and creating distinctive industries with unique competitiveness.

Against this backdrop, studying internationally successful distinctive town development models carries great practical significance for providing references for the transformation of rural tourism in China. The small town of Grasse in France is world-famous as the "Capital of Perfume" (Hou, 2020: 14). It has transformed from an ordinary town in southern France into a world-class characteristic town integrating flower culture, perfume manufacturing and cultural tourism. Its development path and successful experience offer a reference model for China's

rural tourism to overcome development obstacles and achieve high-quality development. This paper takes Grasse Town as the research object and conducts an in-depth analysis of its industrial model and success factors. It adopts the typical case of the “China Tea Sea” scenic area to identify the current situation and shortcomings of rural tourism development in China. Finally, it summarizes the inspirations of Grasse Town for the “China Tea Sea” scenic area and even rural tourism development across China.

2. Industrial Model of Grasse Town and Its Success Factors

Grasse Town is a mountain town located between Nice and Cannes in southern France. Facing the Mediterranean Sea and backed by the Alps, it enjoys a mild, sunny climate ideal for flower growth. A variety of flowers bloom year-round here, including roses, jasmine and lavender, supplying high-quality raw materials for perfume production. Before the 16th century, Grasse was famous for its leather industry. To mask the unpleasant odour of leather, craftsmen began using spices, which gradually led to the emergence of the perfume industry. Today, it is home to well-known perfume factories such as Fragonard and Molinard, and many iconic international fragrances including Chanel No. 5 were born here (Wen, 2012: 56). Grasse Town is not merely a perfume production base but also a popular tourist destination. Visitors can tour perfume museums, experience the work of perfumers or stroll through flower fields. Over more than 300 years of history, this small town with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants has become the nerve centre of the global perfume industry thanks to its perfume sector, attracting millions of tourists every year. Its success is not accidental; it results from the combined effects of three fundamental factors: integration of the three industries, innovation-driven development, and cultural brand building.

2.1. Three-industry Integration Industrial Model

In-depth integration of primary, secondary and tertiary industries constitutes the essential foundation for the success of Grasse Town in France. Its development model centres on the perfume industry as the core pillar, closely integrating primary, secondary and tertiary industries to form a complete, distinctive industrial chain: cultivation – processing – R&D – experience – tourism. Its core features are as follows:

The primary industry is agriculture. Grasse’s industrial model is built upon aromatic flowers. Large-scale cultivation of fragrant plants such as jasmine, rose and lavender provides high-quality natural raw materials for perfume manufacturing. In addition, its contiguous flower fields create a unique rural landscape, laying an ecological foundation for cultural and tourism development.

The secondary industry is manufacturing. Grasse specialises in perfume and essence processing and production, gathering numerous historic perfumery workshops alongside modern manufacturing enterprises. It forms a full industrial chain covering raw material extraction, perfume formulation and R&D, and finished-product manufacturing. Outstanding craftsmanship and renowned brands build its core competitiveness. Moreover, it has opened production procedures to visitors and created experiential production sites.

The tertiary industry is tourism. Grasse develops themed cultural tourism built around perfume. Drawing on flower fields, factories, museums and festivals, it offers diverse activities: sightseeing, perfume-making workshops, cultural study tours, leisure and shopping, converting industrial resources into tourism products.

The three industries support and interconnect closely: agriculture supplies raw materials for manufacturing and creates scenic backdrops for tourism; manufacturing delivers core content and brand value for cultural tourism; cultural and tourist consumption in turn nourishes agricultural production and industrial activities. Ultimately, this enables full value realisation

across the industrial chain, from specialised cultivation to deep processing and cultural tourism. It forms a mature three-industry integration model, where one unique cultural IP drives development across the whole territory.

2.2. Innovative Development Thinking

Innovation is the driving force for Grasse Town's sustainable development. Through industrial transformation, technological innovation and product innovation, it has consistently remained at the forefront of global characteristic town development.

In terms of industrial transformation: in the 16th century, the leather industry formed Grasse's economic pillar. However, leather processing was highly polluting and produced unpleasant smells. To solve this problem, craftsmen started making aromatic essences to cover leather odours (CASTAREDE, 2014). Furthermore, facing rising royal and high-society demand for perfume, local residents of Grasse keenly identified enormous commercial opportunities within the perfume industry. They therefore voluntarily abandoned the heavily polluting leather industry and shifted to perfume manufacturing, which delivers far higher added value.

In terms of technological R&D: Grasse has preserved traditional distillation and extraction techniques such as hand-picking jasmine, while also incorporating modern technologies (LESZCZYŃSKA, 2010). It attracts famous international groups including Dior and Chanel to set up research centres here (DUFFAUD, PRÉVOST, 2016). Additionally, Grasse hosts one of France's most prestigious perfumery schools, continuously cultivating innovative talent to support technological R&D (Zhang, 2018:25).

In terms of product innovation: Grasse does not limit itself to traditional perfume production. It also develops a wide range of scented products: body care, home goods, flavoured food items, to satisfy diverse consumer groups. At the same time, Grasse offers customised products such as bespoke perfumes and perfumery workshops, meeting contemporary consumers' demand for personalisation and raising product added value and competitiveness.

It is this innovative mindset running through the whole industrial chain, from technology to products, that enabled Grasse Town to complete its transformation from traditional manufacturing to high-end cultural and creative industries. It consolidated the industrial foundation of the "World Capital of Perfume". With perfume IP as the core, it links the entire industrial chain combining agriculture, manufacturing, cultural and tourist services. It thus provides a replicable and generalisable innovative model for sustainable development of characteristic towns worldwide.

2.3. Building the Cultural Brand

Cultural brand is the soul of Grasse Town. Centred on perfume culture, it has created a globally influential cultural IP, realised deep integration of industry and culture, and made the town synonymous with perfume culture.

By deeply exploring the historical heritage of perfume culture, Grasse embeds it into every aspect of local life. Formally, its manual perfumery craft has been inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List, showcasing the "artisan spirit". In terms of carriers, the town built perfume museums and hosts festivals including the Rose Festival and Jasmine Festival, elevating perfume from a mere commodity to a cultural symbol (Zhang, 2018:23).

Furthermore, Grasse developed an "in-depth perfumery experience tour", weaving artisans' stories and legends of aromatic raw materials into tourist commentary and brand communication to endow products with emotional value. Visitors can explore historic perfumeries such as Fragonard, discover history at the International Perfume Museum (Manfredini, 2019), and even join creation workshops at perfumery schools. This turns perfume culture into tangible cultural experience and attracts millions of international tourists.

Moreover, Grasse attaches great importance to attracting world-famous brands. On one hand, leveraging the global influence of luxury giants like Chanel and Dior, it greatly raised its international reputation. On the other hand, it organises events including the International Perfume Festival and professional trade fairs, capturing global media and visitor attention and strengthening Grasse's brand image.

3. Current Status and Limitations of Rural Tourism Development in China (Taking the "China Tea Sea" Scenic Area as an Example)

China's rural tourism emerged spontaneously in the 1980s in the form of *nongjiale* (rural farm stays). Basic forms such as agricultural landscape sightseeing and folk custom experiences gradually arose in the 1990s. After entering the new century, supported by policy, it expanded rapidly with diversified activity types including picking, leisure and overnight tourism (Wang, 2024:1). Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, rural tourism development has been incorporated into the national rural revitalisation strategy. Rural tourism has thus entered a new phase of quality improvement, gradually shifting from simple sightseeing to new models featuring immersive experience and integration of agriculture, culture and tourism. Tourism products are becoming more distinctive, high-quality and standardised. Rural tourism has progressively become a key pillar industry for raising farmers' income and promoting urban-rural integration. Nevertheless, alongside the deep implementation of the rural revitalisation strategy, China's rural tourism faces many persistent difficulties amid rapid growth. As a typical representative of integrated tea and tourism development in China, the "China Tea Sea" scenic area in Meitan County, Guizhou Province, well illustrates the general challenges of China's rural tourism as it transitions from quantitative expansion to quality improvement through its current situation and limitations.

3.1. Critical Period of Transition from Quantitative Expansion to Quality Improvement

According to the *Circular on Promoting the Cultivation of Characteristic Towns* issued in 2016, China aimed to build roughly one thousand characteristic towns by 2020. These towns would feature unique strengths and vitality in leisure tourism, commerce and logistics, advanced manufacturing, education and technology, traditional culture, as well as beautiful and liveable towns (He, 2017: 1).

However, building such a large number of characteristic towns within fewer than four years proved extremely challenging. This led planners of many rural tourism projects to neglect the exploitation of local resource uniqueness, resulting in severe homogenisation in town construction (Shang, 2020: 2). In addition, some ancient villages abandoned their local characteristic resources to meet targets and pursue excessive commercialisation. They were uniformly renovated using modern materials, distorting distinctive local culture and reducing these sites to generic tourist towns lacking genuine cultural substance. Furthermore, due to overly uniform industrial models, most of China's rural tourism remains superficial sightseeing, lacking immersive experiences and clear local cultural identity. This results in low visitor engagement and low revisit rates.

Against this backdrop, China's rural tourism must shift from quantitative expansion to quality improvement, prioritising quality over quantity. It needs to move beyond homogeneous competition toward differentiated, characteristic development and evolve from single-industry operation to integration of the three economic sectors.

3.2. Overview of the "China Tea Sea" Scenic Area

The "China Tea Sea" scenic area is located in Meitan County, Zunyi City, Guizhou Province. It benefits from local natural advantages: humid subtropical climate, slightly acidic red soil and

high-altitude ecological environment. It contains the world's largest continuous terraced tea landscape and is China's first major tea-themed tourist zone integrating agriculture, industry and cultural tourism.

As one of China's primary tea-producing regions, Meitan County boasts over 400 square kilometres of tea plantations. The tea industry has long served as a pillar sector driving local economic growth and raising farmers' incomes, laying a solid industrial foundation for tourism development in the scenic area.

The "China Tea Sea" traces its origin to the National Tea Experimental Centre founded in 1939 during the Republic of China era (Yan, Xie, Yang, 2022: 173). It is an important cradle for modern Chinese tea scientific research and large-scale tea cultivation, possessing profound tea cultural heritage and unique scientific and cultural value. Within the scenic zone, rolling rows of tea bushes form lush green undulating landscapes with distinct scenery across four seasons. It not only features striking natural ecological scenery, but also integrates multiple functions including eco-tourism, tea culture experience, tea industry display, leisure accommodation and educational sightseeing. A typical example of integrated tea-tourism development in China, it also serves as a highly representative research sample for subsequent comparative analysis with Grasse Town, France.

3.3. Inadequacies in the "China Tea Sea" Scenic Area

Although the "China Tea Sea" scenic area has achieved certain development outcomes, it still has numerous deficiencies compared with Grasse Town. These also concentrate on the common challenges facing rural tourism development across China.

First, the integration level of the three economic sectors remains superficial, and a complete industrial chain has not yet been fully formed. The scenic area's main activities are still tea cultivation and basic sightseeing, so its three-industry integration model is imperfect. The primary sector relies mainly on traditional cultivation; refinement and standardisation levels are insufficient, and tea quality fluctuates greatly. The secondary sector focuses on tea processing, mostly conventional green tea processing, leading to a homogeneous product structure and insufficient development of high value-added products. Moreover, processing enterprises are small and scattered, lacking leading enterprises to drive growth, and industrial agglomeration effects are weak. For the tertiary sector, activities are mostly limited to tea plantation tours, tea picking and tea product sales. Tourism products suffer from serious homogenisation, with a shortage of immersive, experiential cultural tourism projects.

Second, innovation momentum is insufficient. Tourism products lack customisation and diversity and fail to meet visitors' varied demands. In addition, tea cultivation and processing techniques in the scenic zone remain relatively traditional. The application of modern intelligent technologies is limited, restricting improvements in production efficiency and product quality.

Third, tea culture is insufficiently exploited, and cultural brand construction is weak. The scenic area enjoys a long tea history and rich cultural heritage linked to the old tea experimental farm, yet it has not successfully converted these assets into a cultural IP (Song, 2025: 3). Tea cultural presentation mostly relies on display boards and artefact exhibits. Exploration of the scenic area's unique cultural content is inadequate, with a lack of immersive, narrative and scenographic expressions. Its brand promotion mainly depends on natural scenery without differentiated positioning. Its international influence and national benchmark status have not been fully established, leaving a substantial gap compared with Grasse's brand as the "World Capital of Perfume".

4. Lessons from Grasse Town and Inspirations for the "China Tea Sea" Scenic Area

France's Grasse Town transformed from an ordinary village into the "World Capital of Perfume". Through deep three-industry integration, continuous innovation and creation of a powerful cultural IP, it forged a replicable and referential development model for characteristic towns and rural tourism. Its successful experience carries revealing implications for Meitan's China Tea Sea scenic area in Guizhou, helping it break through development bottlenecks and achieve high-quality development.

4.1. Deep Integration of the Three Industries

Grasse's three sectors reinforce one another and connect coherently, forming a complete chain from flower cultivation and perfume processing to olfactory cultural tourism. This not only consolidated industrial foundations and raised revenue, but also built a distinctive brand, turning this little-known agricultural town into a world-famous cultural tourism destination.

The "China Tea Sea" scenic area may likewise place the tea industry at the core of its development and promote deep integration between the primary tea cultivation sector, the secondary tea processing and R&D sector, and the tertiary sector of tea-themed tourism project development.

For the primary industry: focus on demand for high-end tea products to modernise tea cultivation. Establish strict standards for tea growing and picking, promote eco-friendly, green and organic cultivation models, improve tea quality and build a high-quality raw material base for premium tea.

For the secondary industry: extend the industrial chain around the tea sector. On one hand, upgrade traditional tea processing by introducing modern intelligent processing technologies to boost tea quality and production efficiency. On the other hand, vigorously develop high value-added products such as tea-based cosmetics, tea dietary supplements, tea food products and tea beverages to diversify product structure and satisfy varied market demand. In addition, foster leading enterprises, build industrial clusters, promote the agglomeration of tea processing firms and strengthen industrial competitiveness.

For the tertiary industry: centre development on tea culture and build a complete cultural tourism service system. Develop immersive experiential projects allowing visitors to deeply experience tea culture. Meanwhile, create tea culture festival IPs, advance the integration of tea tourism with wellness, educational tourism and creative industries, design diversified cultural tourism products and raise the scenic area's overall competitiveness.

4.2. Strengthen Innovative Development Thinking

Grasse Town succeeded in transitioning from the traditional leather industry to perfume production and becoming the world-famous perfume capital through continuous development and innovation.

The "China Tea Sea" scenic area may introduce modern technologies to promote upgrading of tea cultivation, processing and tourism. For cultivation, deploy technologies including smart irrigation and ecological pest control to raise cultivation efficiency and tea quality. For processing, adopt intelligent processing equipment and digital management systems to increase processing efficiency and product standardisation. For tourism, develop smart scenic infrastructure, implement functions such as online booking, intelligent guided tours and smart services, and enhance visitor experience. Moreover, strengthen cooperation with research institutes and universities to advance technological R&D and commercialisation of research outcomes, providing technical support for industrial upgrading.

The scenic zone can renew its products in response to visitor demand. First, upgrade existing offerings and launch premium experiences such as custom tea-themed travel routes, exclusive tea products and tea-themed stays to satisfy personalised needs. Second, develop new offerings such as tea creative derivatives, digital experiences and tea wellness programmes to expand product portfolios. Meanwhile, enrich tea product lines: develop fruit teas and tea bags targeting young consumers, alongside collector's teas and gift teas for the high-end market to cater to different audience groups.

4.3. Forge Distinctive Cultural Brands

Grasse Town became globally renowned as the perfume capital precisely because it deeply merged its unique culture with the perfume industry and built a characteristic cultural brand with strong identity. First, systematically organise local tea history, the development story of the tea experimental farm, oral heritage of intangible tea-making craftsmanship, and folk customs related to tea. Fully integrate these cultural elements into scenic landscape design, tourism product development, service details and themed activities, so visitors can feel the charm of tea culture through immersive experience.

At the same time, pass on the artisan spirit inherent in tea culture. Establish training centres for tea masters and tea processing craftspeople to cultivate qualified professionals, providing human support for intergenerational inheritance of tea culture and consolidating the cultural foundation of the brand.

Next, on one hand, the "China Tea Sea" scenic area can actively cooperate with famous domestic and international tea brands to expand brand communication channels. On the other hand, organise events such as international tea culture and tourism festivals and tea culture expositions to attract global media and visitor attention and strengthen its brand image. In addition, leverage new media platforms for online brand communication, create dedicated tea culture IP accounts, disseminate tea knowledge and promote scenic tourism products to lift online brand influence (Zhang, 2025:24).

5. Summary

As discussed, France's Grasse Town took deep three-industry integration, continuous innovation and cultural brand building as core strategic directions. It successfully transformed from a traditional industrial town into a world-class cultural tourism destination, offering a mature, referential model for characteristic towns and rural tourism development worldwide. By comparison, although the "China Tea Sea" scenic area in Meitan, Guizhou, possesses outstanding ecological resources and rich tea cultural heritage, it still faces concrete bottlenecks: incomplete industrial integration, insufficient innovation momentum, inadequate cultural exploitation and weak brand influence.

In the contemporary context of rural revitalisation and high-quality development, the "China Tea Sea" scenic area can only escape the dilemma of homogeneous, low-end development by fully drawing lessons from Grasse Town. It must take the tea industry as the foundation to promote coordination and interaction among the three industries, activate development momentum through technological and product innovation, and build an exclusive cultural brand rooted in local tea culture. From tea plantation landscapes to tea-tourism integration; from traditional processing to high value-added industrial extension; from simple cultural display to immersive experience; from a regional tourist site to an international benchmark, the "China Tea Sea" scenic area needs continuous progress to complete its transformation and elevation and become China's iconic model of tea-tourism integration.

Grasse's experience tells us that the vitality of characteristic towns lies in industry as the foundation, culture as the soul and innovation as the driving force. Only by rooting in local

territory, highlighting regional uniqueness and reconciling heritage and innovation can rural resources be turned into industrial strengths, cultural heritage converted into brand value, and sustainable development momentum injected into China's rural tourism.

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