

# ***Cultural Symbols and Spatial Value: The Shaping of Urban Images in Cultural Tourism Micro-Short Dramas***

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**Abstract.** As an emerging form of online audio-visual content, cultural tourism micro-short dramas have become an important media carrier for shaping and disseminating urban images. Based on semiology and spatial production theory, this paper conducts an in-depth study on the generation logic and communication paradigm of urban images. The study finds that through symbolic narrative strategies, cultural tourism micro-short dramas transform regional culture into perceivable audio-visual language and arouse audience empathy by virtue of emotional resonance. Meanwhile, through audio-visual reconstruction of space and immersive experience design, they enhance the symbolic empowerment and communication effect of physical space, realize the symbolic empowerment and meaning appreciation of physical space, and significantly strengthen the communication efficiency and influence of urban culture. This paper holds that cultural tourism micro-short dramas not only expand the expression path of urban images but also provide an innovative carrier for the integration of culture and tourism.

**Keywords:** Cultural Tourism Micro-Short Dramas, Urban Image, Cultural Symbols, Spatial Value, Emotional Resonance

## **1. Introduction**

With the development of digital communication and the integration of culture and tourism, the paradigm for shaping and disseminating urban images has changed. Due to their characteristics of short length, easy dissemination, and strong interactivity, cultural tourism micro-short dramas have quickly become a carrier for bearing urban conditions, people's emotions, and reshaping urban images. The popularity of cultural tourism micro-short dramas such as *A Dream Lying on the Galaxy* and *The Wind Blows on My Way Home* has not only had a huge impact on driving tourism but also attracted attention from academia and industry. Existing studies on cultural tourism micro-short dramas mostly start from the perspective of communication, and there are few studies that combine semiology and spatial production theory with the internal logic of urban image construction in cultural tourism micro-short dramas. Starting from the above research gap, this paper attempts to examine and reflect on the practice of symbolic narration and spatial production in cultural tourism micro-short dramas from the perspective of comprehensive theories, so as to provide theoretical support for exploring the function of cultural tourism micro-short dramas in shaping urban images and offer new ideas for the innovative practice of culture-tourism integration.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Cultural symbols: the expression of urban images

Semiology, a modern philosophical school popular in the West in the 20th century, holds that man is a symbolic animal. The typical feature of human life lies in man's ability to invent and use various symbols [1]. Max Bense argues that the process of human consciousness is a process of symbolization, and thinking is an operation process of combining, transforming, and regenerating symbols, which makes symbols a medium for human beings to understand things [2]. Culture and symbols are inseparable, and human beings can construct and inherit culture through symbolic systems. Clifford Geertz, an American cultural anthropologist, holds that culture is the knowledge and attitude of life composed of symbols. In Lewis Mumford's view, the spirit of a city is consistent with its urban culture and the character of its residents, and it can provide a space for entertainment and communication for its residents [3]. Moreover, cultural symbols in a city are also very important in the urban spirit. Through on-the-spot visits to three cities in the United States—Los Angeles, Boston, and Jersey City—Kevin Lynch concluded that observers have a relatively unified cognition of the types and intensity of urban images, and any city is a general public image composed of many images; at the same time, he believed that people's understanding and formation of urban images are realized through observing the environmental form of the city [4]. And urban images are precisely the cultural symbols in the city. Manuel Castells mentions in *The Informational City* that "the symbolic marks of the city, the protection of identification symbols, and the expression of collective will in actual communication are all means by which the city continues to exist, without judging its existence through the operation of its functions [5]." Under the current mass communication, scholars have conducted more in-depth research on semiology. In the film and television space, the application and expression of urban cultural symbols are more abundant. It is precisely through symbolic narrative methods that cultural tourism micro-short dramas transform the cultural core of the city into perceivable audio-visual language, thereby promoting the cultural and tourism promotion of the city.

### 2.2. Spatial theory: the generative field of urban images

Henri Lefebvre was one of the earliest scholars to put forward a relatively complete concept of social space. He pointed out that space is not merely manifested as a pure physical form; in the development and evolution of society, nature, society, economy, politics, and culture are intertwined, thus forming the social spatial form. Marxist theorists hold that time and space are the forms of material movement. Pierre Bourdieu replaced the relatively abstract and vague concept of "society" with "field" and "social space," and defined it as "a network of objective relations existing between various positions, or a configuration" [6]. Current scholars' discussions on space have transcended the physical form and are more closely connected with social life and urban life. Some scholars believe that imagery cannot fully reflect the appearance of a city, and people will have feelings for the city and its surrounding environment, so the urban image should be communicable and reflectable [7]. In the era of mass communication, modern mass media, especially electronic media, influence human consciousness in a more fundamental way. The media industry can overcome the limitations of time and space that non-media cannot overcome. Just as Castells said, the "networked society" is a historical trend and has brought great changes to modern society [8]. People understand the external environment through the pseudo-environment constructed by the network, so the network plays an important role in shaping the urban image. Through the mediatized spatial

narration, cultural tourism micro-short dramas transform the city into a field carrying collective memory and further promote the image of the city.

### 3. Audio-visual presentation of regional cultural symbols

#### 3.1. Visual coding of cultural symbols

Cultural symbols refer to the condensed symbols of cultural resources accumulated over a long period of time in a nation, country, or region. They are the essence of the material culture and spiritual culture of a nation, country, or region and reflect a series of unique spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional characteristics of a specific society or social group [9]. The so-called “coding” in film and television programs refers to the process in which TV program producers encode TV discourses according to their own intentions. Cultural tourism micro-short dramas creatively use audio-visual language to systematically code regional cultural symbols and enhance group identity by exploring collective memory.

A Dream Lying on the Galaxy is set in the water towns in the south of the Yangtze River and tells the story of Zhu Yiran, an inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of Su fans, and Shen Feng, a returnee engineer specializing in ancient city protection. In the process of narration, the drama creates a three-dimensional Su-style life, shows a strong Suzhou charm, and integrates Suzhou cultural elements into the drama from visual symbols to forms. There are not only the Jiangnan alleys with white walls and gray tiles but also intangible cultural heritages such as Su embroidery, Song brocade, kesi (silk tapestry), pingtan (story-telling and ballad-singing), and Kunqu opera. In addition, the ending song Meeting in Gusu sings the charm of the water town in the soft Wu dialect. Moreover, the street peddling sounds and the sound of water flowing under small bridges in the ancient town of Jiangnan all show the scenery of the town. The integration of various audio-visual symbols and pictures enables the audience to better feel the charm of Suzhou. The Wind Blows on My Way Home is one of the hit works of cultural tourism micro-short dramas, and People’s Daily praised it for “comforting the soul with ‘the taste of hometown on the tip of the tongue’.” The drama shows a variety of Sichuan intangible cultural heritage food cultures, including braised duck in chili sauce, golden preserved eggs, and shadow beef. Sichuan cuisine is famous at home and abroad for its spiciness, freshness, and aroma, and the drama spreads this culture precisely through food, the most down-to-earth cultural symbol. The drama shows the cooking process of the dishes, accompanied by the special effects of splashing oil and the “sizzling” sound, conveying the color, aroma, taste, and artistic conception of the food to the audience. It is not only a feast for the taste buds but also an inheritance of Sichuan culture. The food symbols of Leshan are not presented independently in the drama but integrated with regional landscapes and human feelings, endowing the food symbols with symbolic significance beyond taste. The rolling red oil and rising steam of the braised duck in chili sauce reflect the enthusiastic and simple folk customs of the Bashu land. “Shadow beef” is not just a meal but also the craftsmanship spirit and the life philosophy of meticulousness that the people of Leshan integrate into their daily lives. These symbols are embedded in the Leshan scenery, intangible cultural heritage food, and human feelings through daily and emotional narratives, connecting the collective memory of “the taste of hometown on the tip of the tongue” in the audience’s hearts and attracting a large number of audiences to “check in” in Leshan. The symbolic expression of cultural tourism micro-short dramas has realized the sublimation from regional heritage to regional narration. Through the representation of regional landscapes and intangible skills, and the exploration of emotions, aesthetic logic, and values in cultural symbols, the regional image is finally represented.

### 3.2. Emotional resonance triggered by symbolic meaning

Emotional resonance, also known as emotional sympathy, refers to a state in which the emotional tendencies of the subject and the object of behavior can be perceived by each other in the process of social interaction, and the emotions of both parties can be exchanged effectively [10]. Emotional resonance needs to rely on a certain carrier. Culture and values are contained in distributed scenes and transmitted to different groups of people who come to perceive them through symbolic symbols and information source codes, thereby locking the individual's action goals in the pursuit of cultural values and reconstructing specific lifestyles and emotional structures [11]. The popularity of cultural tourism micro-short dramas is to a certain extent a reflection of the multiple emotional projections and interweaving of the audience. Through the constructed symbolic system and emotional narration, they can stimulate the audience's recognition psychology and trigger the emotional resonance of young people by conveying positive spiritual concepts and values.

Love in the Curl of Cooking Smoke arouses resonance with its delicate emotional and authentic life narration. Fang Yuan returned to the seaside courtyard where her mother passed away because of the pain of losing her mother. In the countryside, Fang Yuan healed herself and also overcame her workplace anxiety with the help of friends. The pain of losing her mother made Fang Yuan return to the embrace of her family. Fang Yuan's story is a rural story. Her experience of workplace anxiety and lack of family affection makes many audiences who work hard in the workplace find empathy. With the countryside as the narrative text, the actors in Love in the Curl of Cooking Smoke went up the mountains to dig wild vegetables and went down to the sea to harvest oysters. In the simple and plain life, the audience can not only understand the life of fishermen from them but also see the hardships of the younger generation working hard in the city. Love in the Curl of Cooking Smoke responds to the sense of value loss of the younger generation in the process of urbanization. When working and living in the city, young people will inevitably have a sense of loss about the value of life. In a highly modernized society, people tend to lose themselves and their direction. The rural life of characters like Fang Yuan is a metaphorical resistance to alienated labor, which can arouse the audience's yearning for another kind of life. The Lonely Tour Group tells the story of a tour group composed of strangers. They grow up during the trip and gradually get familiar with each other from being strangers. This process of getting familiar is also a simple and pure desire of people—to find their own belonging and resonance in the vast crowd. As the camera follows the characters through the mountains, the audience is also healed as the characters walk out of the mountains. The laughter and conversations of people in the scenery satisfy the audience's "imagination" and awaken the emotional desire hidden in each individual to be embraced by "species-being" together. The "emotional community" constructed by cultural tourism micro-short dramas through signifiers transcends the general empathy imagination between actors and audiences and establishes an emotional system based on common modern experience that can be experienced together by both audiences and actors. Just as Marx put forward in Theses on Feuerbach, "Feuerbach reduces the essence of religion to the essence of man. But the essence of man is not an abstract thing inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the sum total of all social relations [12]." The "emotional community" presented in the drama is precisely the essence of man, and at the value level, it is an emotional community in which the youth group overcomes the dilemma of alienated existence and moves towards an authentic social existence.

## 4. Visual reconstruction of physical space

### 4.1. Audio-visual reconstruction of geographical space

Local space exists not only as a material physical space but also contains unique regional culture and social significance [13]. To a certain extent, excellent film and television works bear the function of spreading regional images and shape the audience's landscape impression and basic cognition of these geographical spaces [14]. Micro-short dramas take the local real geographical, architectural, and natural landscapes as scenes, enabling the audience to understand the local core culture and tourism resources in a short time, and present the physical landscapes such as the architecture and natural scenery of the local tourist destinations to the audience through shooting in real locations.

The whole plot of *Hello, Su Dongpo* takes the time travel of Dingzhou Pagoda as the main line, and the close-up shots are taken from the vintage-style gray tiles and bricks. Under the projection of light and shadow in the four seasons, the changes of the city in the four seasons are slowly told in the light and shadow. The pictures can realize the dialogue between the ancient and the present and touch the context of history. The shooting locations of *Come to Fujian, Be Happy* range from eastern Fujian to southern Fujian, covering Fuzhou, Quanzhou, Ningde, and other places. The micro-short drama includes the most representative natural and humanistic landscapes of Fujian, such as Sanfang Qixiang (Three Lanes and Seven Alleys) in Fuzhou, Yangjiayi in Xiapu, Wulin Ancient Village, and Shishi Golden Coast. With the coastal scenic road of Fujian as the narrative clue, the drama connects the ancient and modern buildings on the scenic road. The sound of waves, the sound of wind, and the sound effects of the modern environment overlap, creating a "mountain and sea landscape" with geographical depth and emotional warmth. Through techniques such as cross-editing and color matching, the creators present buildings of different styles through the lens language in the drama, and finally complete the comprehensive presentation of the Fujian region. Compared with other video forms, micro-short dramas show prominent consumerist cultural characteristics in the production mechanism, communication mode, user emotional connection, and cognitive shaping due to their highly compact narrative rhythm and condensed emotional expression [15]. Micro-short dramas transform the physical real space into a perceivable spatial image through lenses, light, and audio-visual structure, thereby realizing the audio-visual reconstruction of regional cultural landscapes. However, reconstruction is not restoration; it is a conscious construction by creators, which includes the contemporary interpretation of regional culture. The presentation of regional cultural landscapes is an important material carrier for condensing history, humanity, and collective memory. Through a certain material space, the lifestyle, emotional structure, and cultural practices with specific regional characteristics are preserved, giving people a sense of the "locality" and continuity of real history.

### 4.2. Immersive design for multi-dimensional experience

The term "immersion" first appeared in the flow theory proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. "Flow" refers to "a unique pleasant and satisfying emotional experience that an individual obtains in the process when he develops a strong interest in something or some activity and devotes himself to it completely" [16]. In cultural tourism micro-short dramas, this sense of immersion is interpreted through multi-dimensional design, creating a richer way of experience.

First, there is immersive innovation at the media technology level. For example, the cultural tourism micro-short drama *Hello, Su Dongpo* innovatively integrates digital image technology with audio-visual art installations, vividly reproducing the prosperous scene of the Song Dynasty,

allowing the audience to personally experience the historical scene of the urban life in the Song Dynasty through an immersive experience. At the same time, the integration and application of artificial intelligence technology significantly enhance the audience's perception dimension and interaction depth. The continuous upgrading of AIGC technology and its in-depth integration with micro-short dramas have formed a new type of content productivity, opened up a new space for the development of the micro-short drama industry, and made it a new force in digital content [17]. AI Monkey King takes the Huaguoshan Scenic Area in Lianyungang as the core of creation and skillfully integrates AI technology with classical literature. The creative team conducted in-depth on-the-spot investigations, took detailed shots of the iconic landscapes in the scenic area such as the Great Sage Hall, Jiulong Bridge, and the thousand-year-old ginkgo tree, and then carried out artistic processing through digital image technology to transform these real landscapes into a mythical fairyland. This kind of embodied communication supported by future technology brings a sense of real presence, which greatly satisfies the audience's vision and hearing, enables them to feel as if they are on the scene, and further enhances the attraction and appreciation of cultural tourism micro-short dramas.

Second, there is an upgrade in the sense of experience in offline spaces. Micro-short dramas can develop offline activities by virtue of their own IP. Taking *Love in the Tea Garden* as an example, the production team set up a wish-making area at the original shooting location in the Guyan Huaxiang Scenic Area, transforming the plot where the hero and heroine prayed under the ancient tree into an offline physical interactive experience. Couples of tourists can tie prayer ribbons with their own hands, recreating the romantic and warm atmosphere in the drama. This design that deeply integrates film and television IP with tourism experience not only continues the emotional context in the drama and creates a unique cultural consumption experience for tourists but also injects new cultural connotations into the scenic area. The micro-short drama *The Sound of Bone Flutes in Hemudu* tells the story of the discovery of the Hemudu Site. On March 22, 2024, Yuyao held the "Travel with Micro-Short Dramas" themed forum and launched the release ceremony of the "Travel with Micro-Short Dramas · Bond with Hemudu" plot-based tourism route. Starting from the Hemudu Site Museum, this tourism route connects the rich cultural and tourism attractions of Yuyao along the way, and tourists can experience the unique "Amu" digital guide. "Amu" is a virtual character restored based on the skull unearthed from the site, which vividly reproduces the appearance of a Hemudu girl 7,000 years ago.

Through the integration of technological innovation and the development of online immersive experience activities, cultural tourism micro-short dramas not only create a new way to reshape urban images but also change the spatiality and cultural nature of local landscapes. Local landscapes have become fields for experience, and travelers complete the meaning production and reproduction of local culture through embodied practice. At the same time, the reconstruction of local cultural identity also promotes its reactivation in the new context of globalization, making it a living heritage with universal perception and dialogue significance.

## 5. Conclusion

As a new form of cultural communication, cultural tourism micro-short dramas have provided an inexhaustible driving force for the development of the cultural and tourism industry since their birth. They not only provide a new channel for the construction and dissemination of urban images but also offer new ideas for people to understand the quality of cities. First, in terms of cultural symbols, cultural tourism micro-short dramas can transform abstract concepts into audio-visual content. Through urban landmark buildings, landscapes, customs, and culture, they realize the "symbolic

construction” of urban culture, making urban landscapes “visible” when viewing the images and urban temperament “knowable”. Moreover, micro-short dramas can tell various stories through unique audio-visual language and narrative paradigms, and arouse the audience’s cultural resonance through the value system contained in the signifiers. Second, in terms of technological empowerment, they can realize the narrative innovation of micro-short drama works and the “three-dimensional” reproduction of local cultural and tourism resources supported by technology. On the one hand, due to the “short” nature of their narration, micro-short dramas reproduce the landmark landscape resources of tourist destinations through condensed image language, enabling the audience to achieve an intuitive perception of the region in a short time during fragmented viewing. On the other hand, new technological means empower cultural tourism micro-short dramas. Through emerging technological means such as AI production, virtual reality spaces, and 5G, the boundaries of traditional media are broken, a cultural atmosphere of immersive experience is created, new vitality is endowed to localized culture, the boundaries of urban cultural communication are expanded, and more possibilities are added to the integration of culture and tourism.

Looking forward to the future, micro-short dramas still need to take root in the local cultural soil, base themselves on regional cultural characteristics, and explore core elements such as culture, language, landmark buildings, and intangible cultural heritage with urban characteristics. They should be good at capturing the cultural genes with the most regional characteristics and transforming the cultural symbols that carry the true soul of the city into creative materials, so as to effectively avoid cultural tourism micro-short dramas falling into the dilemma of superficial and homogeneous expression. In terms of creative concepts, a balance should be found between the inheritance and innovation of culture, and the authenticity of culture should always be maintained. We can try to reinterpret tradition from a contemporary perspective, allow tradition to continue its spiritual core in innovation, endow it with new vitality, and make it easier for the audience to understand and accept. In terms of communication strategies, it is necessary to establish an emotional connection between urban culture and the audience, conduct in-depth research on the public’s tourism demands, focus on the emotional resonance points of the audience, and promote the in-depth integration of cultural connotations and tourism resources through the integration of infectious narrative techniques. At the same time, attention should be paid to the linked communication between online and offline to form a communication synergy and improve the communication effect. In terms of technology application, a variety of emerging technological means should be integrated to present the urban style in a three-dimensional way with rich audio-visual language. It is also necessary to create immersive experience scenarios to enable the audience to deeply feel the charm of the city. Through continuous innovation in emotional narrative techniques, application of emerging technologies, and upgrading of communication methods, cultural tourism micro-short dramas will become an important media platform for spreading regional culture and promoting urban publicity.

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