

From Grassroots Performance to Urban IP: The Media Generation and Communication Logic of Changchun's "Snow Cake Monkey"

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Abstract. "Snow Cake Monkey" is a performative role played by Wang Qingfeng who graduated as a dance student and worked at the Changchun Zoological and Botanical Park in early 2024. It was first presented in a short video released by the personal self-media "Wang Tiezhu". Later, due to the incident that tourists feed snow cakes to him but he complained the snow cake 'too dry' and it triggered an emotional reversal and large-scale secondary spread, it quickly became widely known and evolved into an important cultural tourism symbol in Changchun. This article takes "Snow Cake Monkey" as a typical case to explore the transformation mechanism of this grassroots IP into an urban cultural symbol. The study found that its emergence was not accidental. It is based on grassroots performances. After dramatic events broke out, multiple subjects collaborated to complete symbol upgrades, and finally realized the transformation of traffic into cultural tourism consumption. At the same time, the construction of Changchun's urban image also showed a change from a single official dominance to a multi-subject interaction. It should be pointed out that this path has certain reference significance in terms of structure, but its specific content is still affected by factors such as individual characteristics, contingency of events, and regional differences, making it difficult to simply replicate. Therefore, local cultural tourism development and city brand building still need to be based on their own conditions and explore local expression methods.

Keywords: snow cake monkey, urban IP, changchun, cultural tourism integration, media communication

1. Introduction

The iteration of digital media technology is reshaping the communication ecology of the integration of culture and tourism. A group of cultural phenomena initiated by amateurs, grassroots performers or local ordinary people, driven by short video platforms, have spread beyond regional boundaries and have begun to reshape the construction of city images. From Ding Zhen in Litang, Sichuan, who became the a representative symbol of cultural tourism in western Sichuan with his original image, to the "Wang Po Matchmaker" in Kaifeng, Henan, who used folk performances to drive the popularity of local cultural tourism, and to Xi'an's "Datang Everlasting City" to shape urban IP

through immersive experiences, the phenomenon of a series of grassroots cultural symbols going viral shows that folk expressions derived from daily life are becoming an important driving force for activating urban cultural tourism.

On January 1, 2024, Wang Qingfeng, who graduated with a major in dance, began to play the role of "Snow Cake Monkey" in Changchun Zoological and Botanical Park, and released related performance videos using his personal self-media account "Wang Tiezhu". At first, this performance was more of a daily interactive entertainment project in the park and did not have significant public influence. However, the incident of "tourists feeding snow cakes but being criticized for being too dry" that occurred on January 30 unexpectedly triggered an emotional reversal in online public opinion: the "disgusted feeding" scene that might have triggered negative comments was interpreted as a manifestation of Northeastern-style humor and relaxation, and quickly spread on Douyin, Weibo, Xiaohongshu and other platforms, driving a large number of secondary creations and imitation videos, eventually making "Snow Cake Monkey" a phenomenal network IP, realizing the transformation from a personal performance to an urban cultural symbol, and becoming a typical case of grassroots IP participating in urban cultural tourism communication in the context of short videos.

Based on this, this article mainly uses literature analysis and case analysis methods to organize and analyze the short video content, communication data and media reports related to "Snow Cake Monkey", trying to explore: In the context of short videos, how does grassroots cultural expression transform from individual performances to urban IP? What kind of generation mechanism is shown in its propagation process? To what extent is this mechanism replicable, and what are its realistic boundaries? It is hoped that this study will supplement the existing urban communication research with specific cases and provide some reference experiences for local cultural tourism practice.

2. Literature review

2.1. Review of research on urban IP and city brand

Urban IP, as the core concrete carrier of a city brand, is a form of expression that symbolically integrates urban cultural genes and spiritual core. Its empowering value in cultural tourism integration and urban communication has gradually been recognized by the academic community. Existing research mainly focuses on three aspects. First of all, in terms of connotation definition, some scholars pointed out that a mature urban IP should be identifiable, emotional and commercial [1]. In other words, it must have clear visual and cultural recognition, be able to stimulate public emotional resonance, and have the ability to continuously transform into industrial resources. Secondly, in terms of the construction path, most research starts from practical experience and summarizes the generation model of urban IP into official-led, culturally empowered, media-catalyzed, etc. types [2-5]. It can be seen that the formation of urban IP is inseparable from the joint effects of institutional support, cultural resources, communication and promotion, etc. Thirdly, at the level of communication mechanism, the collaborative logic of "PGC+UGC" is regarded as the key to improving the efficiency of urban IP communication [6]. Jenkins' "participatory culture" [7] theory emphasizes that users are both content consumers and meaning producers in the new media environment.

2.2. Review of research on the integration of new media and cultural tourism

The new media brought about by the rapid development of Internet technology have become the core driving force for the integration of culture and tourism. Especially after the rise of social media, the communication method of city image has changed significantly. Some studies have pointed out that the collaborative logic of official discourse construction and folk communication model can be used to realize the landscape communication of Internet celebrity cities [8]. The generation of city image is constantly reshaped through the participation of multiple parties. The multi-party linkage ecology of the government, media platforms, MCN institutions, users, etc. provides an operating paradigm for the integration of culture and tourism [9]. Academic circles generally believe that new technologies and new content forms provide important support for the integration of culture and tourism. The use of new technologies such as AR and VR to bring immersive experiences, the use of emerging content creation ecosystems such as short videos, micro-short dramas, and cultural tourism variety shows to activate cultural resources, and the need to achieve cross-border integration of media and culture on the industry side have formed a consensus in the academic community [10-12].

Overall, existing research has provided rich experience in understanding the construction of urban IP, but there are still certain limitations. First, most studies focus on mature IP cases led by the government, such as Chengdu's "Panda", Xi'an's "Datang Everlasting City", Jiangsu's "Grand Canal", etc. Bourdieu's "symbolic capital" theory points out that the higher the symbolic capital of one's own, the more "recognition" they give will also have more symbolic capital [13]. However, the existing research on how grassroots cultural symbols accumulate symbolic capital and embed it in the city brand system is still relatively limited. Second, at the regional level, relevant research mostly focuses on developed cities or traditional tourist cities. Although there has been some attention paid to Northeastern cities in recent years, the cultural tourism phenomenon in Harbin is mostly used as a case study, and research on other ice and snow cities is still relatively insufficient. Therefore, there still has space for further exploration into the role of grassroots cultural symbols in the generation of urban IP.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Grassroots starting point: personal IP prototype construction and regional cultural background

From the perspective of Bourdieu's symbolic capital theory, the reason why cultural symbols can gain communication value in society often stems from the recognition and attention they gradually accumulate in a specific cultural context [14]. The formation of the "Snow Cake Monkey" IP reflects the process of grassroots cultural symbols gradually accumulating symbolic capital in the media environment.

The performer Wang Qingfeng has a professional foundation in dance, as well as performance experience in Ji opera, monkey opera and other performances. He is able to perform a localized interpretation of the classic cultural symbol "Sun Wukong" and gradually form a performance style with personal recognition. He established the Douyin account "Wang Tiezhu" in 2023. After joining Changchun Zoological and Botanical Park in 2024, he began to publish scenic performance content, and the prototype of his personal IP was formed. From the perspective of cultural symbols, "Sun Wukong", as a well-known classic image, has a broad mass base and cultural identity, which lowers the understanding threshold for grassroots performances; and regional cultural characteristics such

as Northeastern accents and humorous expressions give the performance an obvious local style, which is also in line with the communication context of Northeastern cultural tourism on the Internet platform in recent years. At the same time, Changchun Zoological and Botanical Park relies on the genuine authorization of the 86 version of "Journey to the West" to create a Journey to the West theme park, which provides clear space and content support for the performance, allowing tourists to interact with the characters on the spot. With the popularity of short video platforms, these interactions are recorded and disseminated, and grassroots performances gradually enter wider public view.

Therefore, in the initial stage of IP generation, "Snow Cake Monkey" actually formed a cultural image composed of personal performance capabilities, classic cultural symbols and regional cultural expressions, and gradually accumulated preliminary symbolic capital in media communication.

3.2. The event went viral: the spread of the "snow cake feeding" incident broke out

In the new media environment, the fragmented communication characteristics of short videos provide conditions for the proliferation of grassroots cultural symbols, and accidental events with dramatic conflicts and regional characteristics often become key nodes for communication amplification. In late January 2024, Sun Wukong, played by Wang Qingfeng, complained during an interaction in the park that the snow cakes fed by tourists were "too dry" and "irritated their throats". The relevant video quickly became popular after it was posted to the platform by tourists. The popularity of the topic exceeded 4 billion in a short period of time, and his account gained nearly 400,000 followers in a week.

The reason why this incident was able to quickly break through the circle is closely related to its content characteristics and platform communication logic. The "emotional public" theory proposed by Zizi Papacharissi believes that emotions are an important driving force for network connections and information diffusion [15] In the context of short videos, user emotions are more likely to be amplified, and the performance of "Snow Cake Monkey" stimulates emotional resonance through exaggerated movements and interactive situations, thereby driving the rapid spread of content. On the one hand, the complaining interaction and the feeding behavior form an obvious dramatic conflict, which enhances the attraction of watching; on the other hand, the humorous expression provides the audience with a relaxed emotional experience; at the same time, Northeast dialects such as "Tai Ganba" and "La Sangzi" give the classic image of Sun Wukong a distinctive regional character, forming a recognizable "Northeast style Sun Wukong".

This "Snow Cake Feeding" event became an important turning point in the spread of "Snow Cake Monkeys". Not only did this grassroots performance break through the scope of offline scenic spots and enter a wider public view, it also completed the change from "individual performance" to "public attention" and accumulated basic traffic and recognition for its subsequent transformation into an urban cultural tourism symbol.

3.3. Collaborative boost: from personal IP to city symbol

The key to transforming "Snow Cake Monkey" from a personal performance IP into a symbol of Changchun's urban cultural tourism lies in the synergy formed by the traffic mechanism of the short video platform and official empowerment, thereby driving an increase in the scale of communication and symbolic value.

At the platform level, short video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou have certain traffic support for cultural and tourism content. Taking Douyin as an example, whether it is the "Mountain

DOU is a Good Scenery" project in 2024, or the "Heart-moving Content Creation Plan" and "Special Support Policy for the Wine and Tourism Industry" in 2025, they all reflect the platform's continued support for local cultural and tourism content production. At the same time, the platform will grade and recommend content based on indicators such as playback volume and interaction volume. The video related to "Snow Cake Monkey" received a large number of user interactions in a short period of time and was widely reposted by marketing accounts, indicating that it has entered a higher traffic communication level and complies with the platform's recommendation logic, thereby achieving continuous diffusion and exposure of the content.



(a) The actor himself (b) The actor was receiving honors

Figure 1. The actor who played "Snow Cake Monkey" was awarded the "Changchun Cultural Tourism Recommendation Officer Certificate"

At the same time, official-level participation is also an important driving force for the transformation of grassroots IP into cultural tourism symbols. In February 2024, Wang Qingfeng co-created cultural tourism content with Xinhuanet, Youyujilin and other platforms, and began to enter the mainstream communication field; the Changchun cultural tourism department awarded him the title of "Cultural Tourism Recommender Officer" and provided official endorsement (see Figure 1). Since then, media at all levels have continued to report on it, and have continuously strengthened its connection with the city's image by linking up with intangible cultural heritage inheritors and participating in cultural, tourism, film and television activities. In July 2024, he successively won the titles of "Positive Internet Celebrity", "Special Anti-Fraud Network Propaganda" in Jilin Province, and "One Hundred Accounts with Outstanding Achievements in Taking the Online Mass Line" by the Central Cyberspace Administration; in October, he was awarded the title of "Safety Propaganda Officer of the Emergency Management Bureau" of Changchun City. In May 2025, he was appointed as the "Public Welfare Ambassador for Disabled Persons of the Disabled Persons Welfare Foundation" of Jilin Province. In November, he was awarded the "2026 Public Welfare Ambassador for National Insurance Promotion" of Changchun City. In March 2026, he was shortlisted for the "China Youth May Fourth Medal and New Era Youth Pioneer Award". With the combined effect of platform traffic and continued official empowerment, "Snow Cake Monkey" has gradually transformed from a grassroots performance into a cultural symbol with public significance, and has also completed the transformation from a personal IP to a city's cultural tourism business card.

3.4. Transformation of cultural tourism: from online traffic to offline economic benefits

Simon pointed out that in the era of information overload, attention has become a scarce resource, and the core of media communication lies in the acquisition and transformation of user attention [16]. The spread of "Snow Cake Monkey" has accumulated a lot of online attention in a short period of time, and has further been converted into offline tourism consumption. Data from the Douyin

platform shows that topics related to "Snow Cake Monkey" have been viewed more than 10 billion times, and topics related to Changchun Zoological and Botanical Park have been viewed more than 50 billion times. The number of fans on his personal account has exceeded 4 million, forming a strong communication foundation. This traffic advantage has significantly improved the park's passenger flow and operating efficiency. Before the renovation, the park received about 700,000 tourists a year, which increased to 1.85 million in 2024 and further exceeded 3 million in 2025 [17]. At the same time, online attention is converted into actual income through group purchases and check-in consumption, and drives the growth of surrounding catering and cultural and creative consumption, forming a certain linkage effect.

As "Snow Cake Monkey" continues to become popular, other NPC characters in the park have gradually attracted attention. "Tang Monk" and "Northeast Peacock" have been released one after another, forming an attractive Westward Journey IP ecosystem. Data show that the repurchase rate in the park exceeds 15%, of which tourists who have repurchased more than 10 times account for 10% of the total repurchase visits [18].

From an urban perspective, the "Snow Cake Monkey" has become one of the important symbols of Changchun's cultural tourism. In 2024, the city will receive 172 million tourists and achieve tourism revenue of 302.6 billion yuan; in 2025, this will increase to 210 million and 325.03 billion yuan respectively [19]. It can be seen that grassroots IP with regional characteristics has transformed from online attention to offline benefits through platform dissemination and multi-party promotion, and has driven the development of local cultural tourism to a certain extent.

4. Discussion

4.1. The replicability and boundaries of grassroots IP

From the overall communication process, "Snow Cake Monkey" has developed from a grassroots performance to Changchun's urban IP, showing a clearer context. Taking grassroots cultural expression as the starting point, the spread is triggered by an accidental interactive event. Under the collaborative promotion of users, platforms and officials, the symbol upgrade is gradually completed, and finally transformed into cultural tourism consumption resources. This path is reflected in the cases which gain popularity in many cities.

But if we look further, this mechanism is difficult to simply replicate at the specific content level. First of all, individual performers' language style, interaction ability and on-site performance often have strong personal characteristics. This "human" factor is difficult to obtain through imitation. For example, the emergence of the "Snow Cake Monkey" largely relied on Wang Qingfeng's impromptu reactions and performance status, rather than a pre-designed script. Therefore, netizens nicknamed him "a monkey who became popular all over the country with his mouth under the Five Elements Mountain." Secondly, events with high propagation potential are usually accidental. Expressions such as "too dry" and "irritating the throat" occur naturally in interactive situations. Once imitated deliberately, it is easy to lose the sense of reality. In addition, the cultural resources and social context of different cities will also affect the communication effect. Similarly, grassroots performances, "Wang Po Matchmaking" in Kaifeng, Henan relies on a strong interactive on-site atmosphere to attract audience participation, "Chicken Pai Brother" in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi relies on his personal style to form a memory point, and Ding Zhen in Litang, Sichuan has gained attention because of his image and the temperament of his hometown. Although these cases have similarities in their communication paths, their specific content, form, and moments of emergence are difficult to replicate.

Therefore, the significance of the "Snow Cake Monkey" case is not to provide a template that can be directly applied, but to suggest a possibility: grassroots cultural expression can also become an important resource for urban communication. For local places, instead of deliberately creating the "next hot item", it is better to leave space for diverse content creation in the actual environment, allowing expressions with local characteristics to grow naturally through continuous attempts, and then gradually form recognizable urban cultural symbols.

4.2. Media Reconstruction: mediated generation of city image in the context of short videos

Mediatization theory points out that as media technology is deeply integrated into social life, media has increasingly become the core force in shaping culture and social changes, constantly promoting the transformation of the social field [20]. In the field of urban communication, this means that the city's image is no longer just constructed by the government or mainstream media, but is constantly generated and reproduced in a media environment in which multiple subjects participate.

In the context of short video platforms, urban space has gradually transformed from a traditional physical space into a "mediated space" that can be viewed, discussed and recreated [21]. Tourists' experiences in scenic spots can be recorded and uploaded to the platform, and these contents are continuously diffused and recreated through algorithm recommendations and user interactions. As Jenkins's "textual poaching" point of view points out, users will actively reproduce media texts, thereby constantly expanding the boundaries of their meaning [7]. At the same time, the role of official institutions in this communication structure has also changed. Compared with the government-led image shaping method in the traditional communication model, in the context of short videos, official agencies play more of a collaborative role [22]. On the one hand, the involvement of official accounts and media platforms can improve the level of content dissemination; on the other hand, through policy support and cultural event planning, online attention can also be further transformed into a driving force for cultural tourism development.

4.3. Development path and future prospects

From a broader cultural context, the "Snow Cake Monkey" phenomenon can be understood as a manifestation of urban cultural expression in the context of national creation. The "participatory culture" proposed by Jenkins emphasizes that ordinary users are not only recipients of content, but also important participants in the production and dissemination of meaning [7]. With the popularization of digital media technology, the threshold for cultural production continues to decrease. Compared with traditional cultural and tourism communication methods that mainly focus on promotional videos and TV advertisements, the short video platform allows more ordinary users to participate in the expression of the city's image by recording their daily life, making urban culture present a more concrete and life-oriented appearance. For example, whether it is tourists' casual interactions with scenic spots or local creators' content around daily life, they are constantly enriching the outside world's understanding of a city. This kind of cultural expression, constructed with the participation of ordinary creators, is called by some scholars an important form of expression of "New Mass Literature and Art." [23]

Against this background, the development path of urban cultural tourism IP also needs to be adjusted accordingly. On the one hand, we should pay more attention to the communication value of ordinary creators, and provide space for diverse expressions through institutional support and platform cooperation, instead of relying only on a few official content; on the other hand, we can use short videos, micro-short plays and other forms to transform local cultural resources into more

disseminating content, such as creating interactive performances or immersive scenes, so that Internet popularity can be transformed into actual experiences. This has a certain similarity with the development path of "Snow Cake Monkey".

It should be pointed out that the cultivation of urban IP should not simply copy existing Internet hot spots, but should be based on local cultural resources and public recognition, and gradually form its own unique expression method in specific situations. How to stimulate the participation of more ordinary people while maintaining the uniqueness of cultural symbols, so that the content is both disseminable and realistic may be a problem that the future development of urban cultural tourism needs to continue to face.

5. Conclusion

The popularity of "Snow Cake Monkey" is not an isolated case. From Ding Zhen to "Fried Chicken Brother", from Zibo Barbecue to Harbin's tourism about ice and snow, these seemingly scattered phenomena actually point to an ongoing change: the construction of city image is shifting from an official-dominated model to a new communication pattern with the participation of multiple subjects. Grassroots performances are no longer a marginal role in urban communication, but have become an important force in activating the city's image. An accidental interaction, a recorded moment, and then being continuously forwarded and re-created, finally converge into a cultural symbol with public significance, which truly occurs in daily life.

What may be worth continuing to ask in the future is: when more and more ordinary people participate in urban expression, what content can be precipitated into truly representative cultural symbols? And does the city itself have the ability to accept these expressions and transform them into long-term value? Perhaps, urban IP slowly grows out of the process of being constantly told and participated in. How to retain authenticity and difference in this generation process instead of being replaced by the homogeneous "hit logic" may be a longer-term problem that urban cultural tourism needs to face in the future.

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