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The Digital Translation of Han Dynasty Cosmological Views on Life: Spatial Narrative and Symbolic Construction in the 'Art of Life'—The Mawangdui Immersive Exhibition

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Abstract. Under the impetus of the national cultural digitization strategy, immersive digital exhibitions have become a significant direction for innovation in museum curation, providing a feasible path for the contemporary expression of ancient philosophical thought. "Life Art - An Immersive Digital Exhibition of Han Dynasty Culture from Mawangdui" serves as a typical case of digital translation of Han Dynasty cosmological and life views; however, existing research has insufficiently explored its underlying cultural translation logic. This paper employs a single-case qualitative research method, using spatial narrative analysis and spatial semiotics as a dual-dimensional coding framework. It analyzes the official curatorial texts and on-site public materials of the exhibition, focusing on the meaning-production logic of the curators' encoding rather than the actual reception effects of the audience. The study demonstrates that the exhibition achieves embodied translation of Han Dynasty philosophy through a three-tiered progressive narrative (spatial-temporal, yin-yang, life) and a three-level spatial sign system. This validates the applicability of spatial narrative and value rhetoric theories in archaeological digital curation, offering theoretical reference for similar archaeological-themed immersive digital exhibitions.

Keywords: Mawangdui Han Tombs, spatial narrative, digital exhibition, value rhetoric, Han Dynasty cosmological and life philosophy

1. Introduction

The rise of immersive digital exhibitions, driven by the national cultural digitalization strategy, has now been regarded as an important form of contemporary museum exhibition innovation. The museum's interpretation of archaeological relics and abstract concepts is being profoundly changed by digital technology: the traditional fixed paradigm of "classification of artifacts and piece-by-piece display" has been broken through, and means such as spatial reconstruction, visual narrative and physical interaction have injected new perception dimensions into cultural heritage, and also opened up skills for the contemporary expression of ancient ideas. Art path. In 2024, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the archaeological excavation of Ma Wangdui Han Tomb, the "Art of Life - Ma Wangdui Han Dynasty Cultural Immersive Digital Exhibition" was jointly launched by Hunan Museum and Harvard Chinese Art Laboratory. Focusing on the theme of "the operation of the

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universe - the sublimation of life", the exhibition uses the three plates of "time and space", "yin and yang" and "life" to progressively spread the narrative layer by layer; ball screen projection and other technologies transform the cosmology of the "unity of heaven and man" in the Han Dynasty into an immersive environment, making the exhibition a typical case of digital translation of ancient philosophy. At present, the research focus of the academic community is mostly occupied by the audience experience and technical effects of digital exhibitions, and the deeper cultural translation logic behind archaeological exhibitions has not been fully explored. The existing research has formed three main academic veins: first, the research on the production of exhibition meaning with the theory of value rhetoric as the core provides an analytical framework for analyzing the mechanism of exhibition value transmission; second, the art archaeological research around the Mawangdui silk painting and the layout of the tomb has laid the foundation for the interpretation of the cosmology and the concept of life in the Han Dynasty. Third, the series of achievements on immersive experience and physical interaction in the field of digital exhibition provide a practical reference for technology-enhanced cultural interpretation. However, the connection between the three veins has not been established, and the special discussion on the deep philosophical translation logic of the immersive digital exhibition on the theme of archeology is still missing. How was the philosophical system of "universe-life" in the Han Dynasty translated into contemporary discourse by the exhibition through narrative framework and spatial symbol design? This is the core issue that this study focuses on. Focusing on this problem, the research introduces spatial narrative analysis and spatial semiotics methods into the analysis process, carries out empirical investigation from the two dimensions of narrative structure and spatial symbols, and summarizes the results and practical limitations of digital exhibitions to explain ancient philosophical thought. The purpose of this study is to take the spatial narrative and symbol construction of Ma Wangdui's "Art of Life" exhibition as the object of analysis, explore the path of digital technology embodization and reconstruct the traditional cultural translation framework, in order to fill the gap in the comprehensive research of philosophical core, spatial narrative and immersive experience of Ma Wangdui theme digital exhibition. At the theoretical level, the applicability of theories such as value rhetoric and physical interaction in digital exhibitions with archaeological themes has been verified by this study. The field of vision of Ma Wangdui's research also extends from the artifacts themselves to the field of digital translation of traditional philosophy, which further enriches the cultural interpretation dimension of museum digital exhibitions. At the practical level, the exhibition narrative logic and symbol translation strategy refined in this study can be learned from the planning and design of immersive digital exhibitions with similar archaeological cultural themes, thereby promoting the innovative development and modern inheritance of China's excellent traditional culture.

2. Literature review

Existing research on museums and exhibitions can be organized into three major dimensions: the translation of digital heritage, spatial narrative, and spatial symbols and immersive media, which collectively form the theoretical and empirical framework for this study.

2.1. Digital heritage and cultural translation

The essence of the integration of digital technology into cultural heritage exhibition is not a direct copy of the original intention, but a cultural translation process. Kratz put forward the "value rhetoric" theory, which believes that the value of the exhibition is contained in the details and conveyed through multiple media; the theory integrates sensory and communication resources into a

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persuasive mechanism, and its persuasiveness comes from the interaction of multiple elements such as aesthetics, intelligence, emotion and cognition [1]. This theory builds an analytical framework for understanding the meaning reproduction in digital exhibitions. Digital translation necessarily includes the selection, reorganization and omission of original materials: Li Zhuo took the digital exhibition of tomb murals in the Tang Dynasty as an example and pointed out that digital technology transforms static historical materials into perceptible life stories, so as to realize the contemporary translation of cultural memory [2]. The research of Luo Hong and others on the exhibition of the three-star pile confirms that digital reconstruction is the reconstruction of content under the dual goal of preservation and dissemination, and its essence is an attempt to translate archaeological discoveries to the public [3]. Wu Ruoming's research on the Dunhuang Digital Exhibition shows that the mural elements are extracted in layers in the exhibition, and the artistic connotation is reconstructed by combining virtual reality, thus generating a new narrative that is different from the physical object itself [4]. Xu Runxian believes that the boundaries of time and space are broken by digital exhibitions, and cultural communication is extended from "temporary" to "long-term", and the reproduction of meaning can be realized in the contemporary context [5].

2.2. Spatial narrative in museum exhibitions

Exhibition narratives unfold through spatial frameworks; space not only carries content but is itself a core narrative medium. Wang Yuejin's research on the Mawangdui silk paintings and the layout of the burial chamber reveals that as early as the Han Dynasty, visual narratives were constructed through the arrangement of artifacts and imagery. Artifacts in the burial chamber were arranged according to the sequence of the four seasons and the four cardinal directions, using spatial order to convey the core themes of life, death, and ascension to immortality, thereby establishing a tradition of spatial narrative in archaeological heritage [6]. Traditional exhibitions continue this logic, organizing stories through spatial sequence, visitor pathways, pacing, and visual focal points; the audience's movement through the space is the very process by which the narrative unfolds. Digital technology further enhances the narrative attributes of space: He Weiming argues that digital media can transcend the physical limitations of traditional exhibitions, reconstruct multidimensional layers of spatial narrative, and break down the barriers between physical and digital spaces [7]. Deng Shiyu points out that exhibition spaces with intrinsic logic guide visitors toward a progressive experience, with the spatial sequence directly determining the pace at which the narrative is received [8]; Wu Ruoming argues that digital technology drives the creation of narrative contexts, and variable spatial sequences transform exhibitions into interconnected fields with an intrinsic narrative logic [4].

2.3. Spatial symbols and immersive media

Symbols are the ultimate presentation carrier of spatial narrative; and the digital media is profoundly rewriting the presentation form and perception of exhibition symbols. Static symbols such as objects, patterns and colors constitute the core resources of traditional exhibitions; new elements such as dynamic images and surround sound are introduced into the exhibition hall by digital technology, and the boundaries of symbol expression are greatly expanded. Chen Yi proposed from the perspective of physical interaction that immersive digital narrative mobilizes the audience's body sensory system as a whole. The narrative process is triggered by physical movement, and symbol reception shifts from a single visual mode to multi-sensory and whole-body participation [9]. Pan Yulin's research shows that digital exhibitions are saying goodbye to one-way visual display and moving towards "full-body immersion"; through digital media, a stronger sense of spatial wrapping

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and emotional impact are injected with symbols [10]. Tan Yewen took the exhibition of Maijishan Grottoes as an example: digital technology can construct immersive experience scenes, and use light, shadow and visual hierarchical design to strengthen the overall perception of symbols layer by layer, thus improving the communication efficiency [11]. Generally speaking, the scale, dynamism and envelopping of symbols are rewritten one by one by digital media, thus transforming static entities into dynamic, immersive and composite exhibition symbols. In summary, the existing research has reaped multi-dimensional results, but the effective integration between value rhetoric theory, archaeological heritage space narrative and digital immersion practice has not been completed so far; the deep philosophical translation logic of the archaeological theme immersive digital exhibition still lacks special discussion. This research puts Ma Wangdui's "Art of Life" exhibition in the case position, and comprehensively uses spatial narrative and semiotic methods to reveal the digital translation mechanism of the Han Dynasty's cosmology and philosophy of life: the gaps in relevant research are filled, and similar exhibitions can also be used for practical reference.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case selection

This study takes "Life Art - Ma Wangdui Han Dynasty Cultural Immersive Digital Exhibition" as the core case and carries out empirical analysis. In terms of basic attributes, the exhibition period is from June 8, 2024 to February 16, 2025. The exhibition hall is located in the first special exhibition hall on the first floor of Hunan Museum, with an exhibition area of 1,500 square meters. Meters, the investment scale is at the forefront of the single digital exhibition in the field of cultural heritage in China. In terms of the background of the project, the planning of the exhibition is to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the archaeological excavation of the Han Tomb of Mawangdui in 2024: on the one hand, it shoulders the cultural mission of commemorating the archaeological achievements of Mawangdui and promoting the contemporary dissemination of Han Dynasty culture, and on the other hand, it is also in line with the innovative direction of museum exhibitions under the national cultural digitalization strategy. In terms of curatorial organization, Hunan Museum and China Digital Library co-sponsored the exhibition, and Professor Wang Yuejin's team (Harvard University Chinese Art Laboratory) participated in the collaboration; the collections and curatories of domestic cultural and exhibition institutions, the technical capabilities of digital platforms and the cutting-edge research results of top international academic teams have all been integrated and progressed. In the future, academic research, cultural heritage resources and digital technology can achieve deep cross-border integration.

The outstanding typicality and representativeness are the main basis for this study to identify this case. First, the digital translation of the cosmology and the philosophy of life in the Han Dynasty was put into practice by the exhibition: the exhibition focuses on the cosmology and philosophy of "the unity of heaven and man", and spreads "the operation of the universe - the sublimation of life" as a complete narrative chain, positively responding to "how ancient abstract philosophical ideas use digital exhibitions in the contemporary context The core issue of "expression" is highly in line with the research objectives. Second, the two ends of the academic interpretation and the exhibition form witnessed the paradigm breakthrough of the exhibition at the same time: academically, the Mawangdui Han Tomb was constructed as a "cosmic model" for the first time, and the quadruple coffin of Tomb No. 1 was reinterpreted as a "materialized model of the four seasons". The traditional archaeological exhibition logic classified according to the type of artifacts was thoroughly The bottom is broken; technically, cutting-edge technologies such as ultra-high-definition cultural relics

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scanning, 3D projection, immersive LED ball screen, etc. have been mobilized, and static cultural relics have been transformed into an immersive environment. Third, the practical results and social impact of the exhibition are obvious to all: during the 176-day exhibition period, more than 370,000 spectators entered the exhibition hall, and the media reported a total of 11,739 times; its narrative and symbol design have been double tested by the market and the audience, and the condensed translation logic from the project can be sunken by similar archaeological themes. Immersion digital exhibitions are commonly learned from, and this exhibition has also become an ideal sample for the study of digital exhibition cultural translation.

3.2. Data collection

All data for this study were collected from official texts and on-site materials released by the exhibition organizers; subjective content such as visitor comments was excluded to ensure that the analysis is based entirely on the exhibition's original curatorial logic and official academic interpretive framework. This study collected a total of 10 exhibition panels, 14 photographs, and 17 curatorial texts; the official website and news reports were retrieved on April 27, 2026.

This study divides the materials into three categories according to their attribute characteristics: the three categories complement and confirm each other. The narrative text of the official exhibition board at the exhibition site constitutes the first category, which is also regarded as the core basis for analysis in this study; the official text officially released by the exhibition is all gathered here, which can be divided into three parts: First, the archaeological value of the Mawangdui Han Tomb and the philosophical core of "the unity of heaven and man" are systematically explained by the text of the exhibition board in the preface hall. The core concept of the Han Dynasty that "the human body is closely related to the universe, and the life course is like the growth and change of the four times of the universe" is also clearly pointed out by it. The narrative framework of the three themes of "time and space - yin and yang - life" is first announced by the text; second, under the three themes, there are other explanatory texts in each section, Chapter 1 "Time and space "The spatial narrative is developed gradually according to the space of the bowl room and the excarated artifacts. The official explanation is presented through the four scenarios of "Architecture-Artins-Dao-Environment". The microcosmic nature of the chamber created by Seiko, the cultural connotation of the burial utensils in the four corners, and the cosmic law and the concept of homomorphism of heaven and man behind the mathematical scheme are all explained in turn. ; The second chapter "Yin and Yang" corresponds to the four-hour cycle of life symbolized by the quadruple coffin one by one. From the plain black lacquer coffin to the decorated feather brocade coffin, the color and pattern progress layer by layer, and the complete transformation process of "hident-resurreval-prosperity-ascent immortality" is clearly presented; the third chapter "Life" is centered on the immortal narrative drawn by the T-shaped silk painting, and The path of immortality is interpreted in four acts: "underworld", "sacrifice", "heqi" and "long-term travel": the breath of life sprouts in the cold land of the northern capital. Through the sacrificial ceremony, it gathers qi and condenses the god, until the harmony of yin and yang, the dragon flies, and finally merges and returns to the way of Taichu; Third, the famous sentence of "Zhuangzi · Zhile" - "Miscellaneous, change and has Qi, qi changes into form, forms into life, and now changes into death, which is the phase and the four seasons of spring, autumn, winter and summer" - Derivation from the text of the exhibition board at the end, the summary of the universe of life in the Han Dynasty is also attached, and the core idea of the exhibition is fully presented. The whole text content of the exhibition narrative is covered by such materials, which is the core basis for deconstructing its narrative structure and symbol translation logic.

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The official academic discourse published by the curator constitutes the second type of materials, that is, the content displayed in the "curator's language" column at the exhibition site, and the overall design concept of the three curators is presented; among them, Duan Xiaoming, dean of Hunan Museum, expressed on the positioning of the exhibition curation: "Bringing cutting-edge academic achievements, top art Presentation and innovative technology application, interpret ancient history with contemporary vocabulary, tell Chinese stories with international narrative, and let the splendid culture and profound thought of early Chinese civilization carried by the cultural relics of Mawangdui Han Tomb travel through time and space and connect the world.

As for the third type of materials, it is the official statistical data of exhibition space, technology and achievements, which is also the factual basis for carrying out spatial analysis and argumentation of the value of the case; the spatial layout, installation structure and immersive audio-visual design of the three major plates - time and space, yin and yang, and life - are covered by such materials, and a variety of digital exhibitions The description of the application scenario of the technology and the high-definition digital collection results of the Ma Wangdui Museum are also included. The background of the project, the basic information of the exhibition and the scale of the exhibition are all clearly recorded. With the help of the above information, the physical space structure, the media presentation form and the technology implementation plan can be reconstructed, and the spatial narrative and spatial symbol analysis are With this support, the industry representativeness and practical value of the case have also been confirmed, and the overall positioning of the exhibition has become clearer.

4. Research findings

4.1. Narrative reconstruction: from archaeological remains to the cosmic journey of life

Around the center of "Time and Space - Yin and Yang - Life", the exhibition builds a three-layer progressive narrative framework. The whole exhibition adopts a declarative narrative style. With differentiated narrative sequences and multiple digital media, it integrates the originally scattered archaeological relics such as tombs, artifacts and images into a complete linear narrative chain of "universe operation - life sublimation". Rather than saying that this narrative is an objective reproduction of archaeological materials, it is a curatorial construction centered on the cosmology and the belief in life of the unity of heaven and man in the Han Dynasty, and the contemporaryization and interpretation of ancient thought can also be realized.

The cognitive foundation of the entire exhibition is first laid out in the "Space and Time" section through a causally progressive sequence. Physical artifacts—such as the tomb chamber structure, burial objects, numerological diagrams, and bamboo-silk inscriptions—are placed at the center of this area. The narrative unfolds in four successive acts: "Structure—Objects—Dao—Realm," moving progressively from the tangible to the abstract. At its core lies the Han dynasty concept of "correspondence between heaven and humanity"—the alignment between the form of the tomb chamber and the cosmic order—which serves as the ultimate focal point. Archaeological interpretation and textual analysis of cosmological ideas function as the narrative framework for this section, while immersive elements such as 3D projections, digital models of the tomb chamber, and mirrored spaces provide supplementary visual support. Thus, static archaeological structures are transformed into spatial environments that visitors can traverse, and abstract philosophical concepts described in texts are reinterpreted as embodied spatial experiences. The correspondence between the tomb's architecture and the cosmic model is firmly established, anchoring the overall cosmological framework of the exhibition.

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The "Yin-Yang" exhibition centers on elements such as nested coffins, cloud-and-vapor patterns, and mythical beast motifs. Its narrative sequence unfolds inclusively and progressively, deepening the philosophical implications of life themes layer by layer. The exhibition posits that yin and yang energies are the source of life; the decorative sequences on the nested coffins then illustrate philosophical conceptions of life through the transformation between yin and yang. The physical layers of the four-tiered coffins are integrated into the overarching framework of yin-yang convergence and dispersion, corresponding respectively to the life cycle stages of "stillness—germination—flourishing—ascension." Funerary objects thus become material vessels for the metamorphosis of life. Through projections onto 16 suspended semi-transparent screens, mirrored spaces, and gesture-based interactive technology, the physical weight of the artifacts is dissolved. Visitors transition from passive observers into active participants within the flow of vital energy. Consequently, the narrative evolves from artifact studies to a profound exploration of life philosophy.

The progressive sequence of the "Life" exhibition culminates in a narrative climax: at its heart lies a T-shaped silk painting, whose theme—depicting the complete journey from the underworld to the heavens—visually embodies Han dynasty beliefs in posthumous ascension. A 15-meter-diameter immersive LED dome screen creates a panoramic experience, fragmenting the silk painting into four acts—"Underworld, Sacrifice, Union of Qi, and Ascension"—thereby dissolving the physical boundary between audience and image. Spectators thus transform into active participants within the scene, while ritual music enveloping them with the sounds of bells and chimes elevates the narrative from mere knowledge transmission to emotional resonance. Overall, the three exhibition zones advance in a coherent progression—"constructing the cosmic framework, enacting life transformation, and reaching ultimate ascension"—with digital media consistently serving the central narrative thread. Dispersed archaeological remains are integrated into a unified journey through the universe of life, offering a systematic response to the core question: how can digital exhibitions reconstruct the narrative logic of archaeological materials and interpret the Han dynasty's cosmology of life?

4.2. From material remains to spatial symbols

This exhibition transforms the "cosmos-life" philosophical system of the Han Dynasty into a three-tier progressive spatial symbol system; these symbols are all based on the unearthed artifacts from Mawangdui and are transformed through digital technology from material forms to cultural concepts, ultimately enabling the philosophical concept of "harmony between heaven and man" of the Han Dynasty to be understood spatially. The first layer of spatial order symbols lays the foundation for the entire exhibition's spatial logic: using the "time-space" display boards as the medium, the concept of the Han Dynasty's universe and time-space was translated into the spatial order of the physical exhibition hall - as shown in Figure 1, the three-dimensional projection of the "four directions and four chambers" coffin structure recreates the cosmic model of the Western Han Dynasty; the mirror-ground that extends the spatial depth cooperates on the side, and the closed underground tomb is transformed into a walkable exhibition space, presenting the spatial cognition of "correspondence between heaven and man" of the Han Dynasty; the five-direction layout of the exhibition hall corresponds to the coffin structure, the "board game" chessboard and the "four seasons and four directions" cosmic schema derived from the numerology silk scrolls, the abstract concept of direction is transformed into a tangible visiting path, and the physical space is also translated into the representation of the cosmic scene; combined with the dynamic visual effects of the numerology patterns, the digital images of the burial objects and the flowing transformation of

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the light and shadow of the bamboo slips, the exhibition successively conveys the "as if dead to be alive" funeral concept and the "living as long as the sun and moon" life ideal from three dimensions of material life, cosmic numerology, and philosophical texts, and thus the symbolic foundation of "space is the universe" is established.

The second layer of visual pattern symbols expands the meaning from decorative function to philosophical connotation: Around the "Yin-Yang" display board, the decorative patterns on the surface of the objects are transformed into visual symbols carrying the philosophy of life - the sequence of four-layered coffins is at the core, with plain black lacquered coffins, black-ground painted lacquered coffins, red-ground painted lacquered coffins, and decorated plumage-coated coffins successively arranged, corresponding to the four stages of life - "hibernation - revival - prosperity - ascension", thus establishing the "materialized model of the four seasons", and the burial objects are also transformed into the material carriers of life's transformation; The dynamic projection of the cloud pattern serves as a unifying visual clue, integrating various cloud patterns on the lacquered objects, silk fabrics, and coffins， presenting them as a flowing and ever-changing state through the generation algorithm， symbolizing the transformation of the two types of qi (yin-yang qi) and the life cycle of all things in the universe； Additionally， 16 hanging semi-transparent curtains and mirror-like spaces are added， creating a multi-layered illusionary field， and the physical heavy sense of the objects is thus dispelled， and the physical space is transformed into a spiritual realm of life's circulation.

The third layer of immersive symbolic elements creates a closed loop between cognitive understanding and physical experience: Around the "Life" section, two-dimensional images are transformed into embodied experiences through a surrounding immersive space - a 15-meter-diameter, sound-permeable immersive LED sphere curtain that enlarges the static T-shaped silk painting into a panoramic digital interpretation and dissects it into dynamic narrative nodes such as the northern abyss, sacrificial ceremonies, the ascent of the two dragons, the union of jade discs, and ascending to the celestial realm; The 360-degree surround wrapping sensation smooths out the boundary between the viewer and the image, and the scenes such as the ascent of the yin-yang dragons, the gathering of jade discs, and the celestial realm with the same brilliance of sun and moon are transformed from two-dimensional images into perceptible physical experiences. The onlookers watching the ascension become participants in the scene, and the Han Dynasty belief in ascension also moves from a textual concept to a tangible experience.

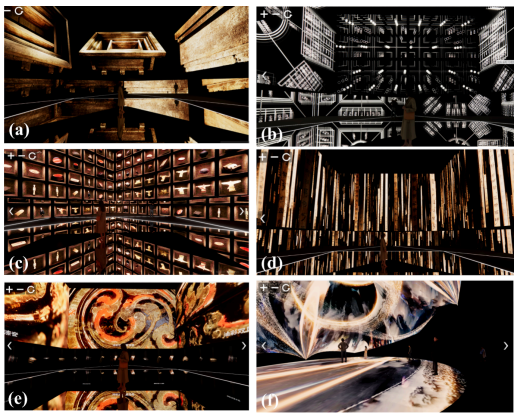


Figure 1. Typical spatial scenes of the digital immersive exhibition of Mawangdui Han Tomb culture [12]

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Finally, the sequence of the four seasons (winter, spring, summer, and autumn) is used throughout the exhibition as a unified narrative framework, with the sound atmosphere of the gong-chime ritual music providing a backdrop; the three-layer symbol system progresses from the whole to the part, from visual to physical, and always relies on the unearthed artifacts and the cultural concepts of the Han Dynasty. The practical path of spatial translation realized through digital technology is thus fully presented, and the research question "How does digital technology achieve this spatial translation?" has also received a positive response.

5. Conclusion

The study found that the "Art of Life" exhibition takes the three-layer progressive narrative of "time and space-yin and yang-life", with a three-level spatial symbol system, transforming the Han Dynasty's cosmology into a sensible and immersive experience. The re-contextualization of meaning is thus achieved, and the archaeological remains are also included in the narrative of life sublimation; this conclusion is a positive response The core problem of this study - the exhibition did not simply copy the framework of traditional archaeological display, but used digital technology to embody the philosophical concept of the unity of heaven and man in the Han Dynasty, and the applicability of spatial narrative and value rhetoric theory in archaeological digital exhibitions was verified; this study condensed narrative translation and symbol construction It can provide practical reference for immersive digital exhibitions of similar archaeological themes, and the breadth of digital cultural heritage dissemination has also expanded. Due to the objective conditions that the exhibition has been closed, the on-site observation data and audience feedback have not been obtained, and the analysis only relies on the official text and public information. Follow-up research can be combined with the investigation of similar exhibitions to further explore the communication effect and cultural acceptance mechanism of digital translation.

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