

Original Paper

Construction and Image Communication of Urban Cultural Space under the Collision of Modern Art Elements and Chinese Traditional Culture: A Case Study of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival

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Abstract

Since its inception in 2013, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival has gradually grown into one of the most influential theatre festivals at home and abroad. As one of the brand characteristic events, it has helped Wuzhen transition from a traditional Jiangnan ancient town to a well-known cultural landmark through media communication. This paper aims to analyze the multiple cultural spaces presented in the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, explore how this medium combines modern art elements with Jiangnan culture, builds a bridge between high art and ordinary people, thereby endowing Wuzhen with a more diversified international image. It also attempts to summarize the enlightenment of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival on the construction of urban cultural space and image in China today.

Keywords

Wuzhen Theatre Festival, Jiangnan culture, cultural space, urban image

1. Introduction

Listening to the stories of wanderers in street pubs in Chengdu, checking in at the same scenic spot as Ding Zhen in Litang, Sichuan, queuing up to have a cup of tea with joy on May 1st Square in Changsha, dodging crowds for a photo by the light rail in Chongqing, Weibo filled with “running water” from Henan TV... Every city has its own distinctive features and unique image, and with the empowerment of new media, the characteristics of each city are becoming more prominent. Behind the emergence of cities large and small, the role and significance of cities as subjects in the communication system are becoming increasingly prominent.

For both theatre enthusiasts and ordinary tourists, Wuzhen is a dreamlike cultural utopia. As a theatre festival that started in 2013, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival has gradually grown into one of the most influential theatre festivals at home and abroad over the past decade. In the past, most of the art festivals in China were held in economically and culturally prosperous big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Similar to the famous Avignon Theatre Festival held in a small town in southern France, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival is held in the typical Jiangnan water town of Wuzhen.

From a tourism town primarily focused on Jiangnan culture in the past to hosting the Wuzhen Theatre Festival since 2013, becoming the permanent site of the World Internet Conference in 2014, and hosting the International Contemporary Art Invitation Exhibition in 2016, Wuzhen has gradually transformed into an internationally renowned cultural ancient town. As the discourse power in the public discourse space has been redistributed in the context of all-media background, forming a dual or even multiple discourse space for disseminating reality (Huang, Chen, Zhou et al., 2019), Wuzhen has gradually moved away from the traditional image of “small bridges, flowing water, and households” in Jiangnan. It has injected various elements such as modernity, technology, and internationalism into the two labels of “Jiangnan” and “tradition”, making it a leader among Chinese ancient towns. More and more ancient towns are striving to imitate the Wuzhen model and image communication, eager to learn from this successful experience. In this process, the Wuzhen International Theatre Festival is undoubtedly a significant contributor.

As the 10th Wuzhen Theatre Festival unfolds, how does Wuzhen combine with the international theatre festival full of modernity and collide to present what kind of cultural space under the theatre festival? What inspiration does the Wuzhen Theatre Festival provide for the construction of new urban image communication and local culture? These are the questions the author wants to explore.

2. Constructing Cultural Space and Communicating Urban Image through the Wuzhen Theatre Festival

2.1 Communication Characteristics of Urban Physical Space: Coexistence of Traditional and Modern Cultural Landscapes and Symbols

Compared to other domestic and international theatre festivals, the Wuzhen International Theatre Festival has its unique characteristics. Its uniqueness lies in fully leveraging its distinctive humanistic and natural environment. By ingeniously selecting representative buildings and venues and meticulously arranging indoor theaters and outdoor public performance spaces, it presents a unique and eye-catching charm. Wuzhen outlines a quaint and Jiangnan-style physical picture with traditional elements such as green water, blue bricks, grey tiles, and black awning boats, injecting the festival with a unique historical heritage and Jiangnan artistic conception. At the same time, theatrical elements are cleverly integrated into the alleys and streets of the town, enriching the cultural connotation of the town and deeply embedding theatre into the daily cultural life of the town, forming a coexistence of traditional and modern cultural landscapes and symbols (Huang, 2020).

The experience of urban physical space often evokes emotional resonance among locals or tourists. Every corner and space of the city is constructed and determined by different emotions, meanings, and social relationships. The physical space where the Wuzhen Theatre Festival is located, as a product of the cultural exchange between East and West, is not only a medium but also a new paradigm for building interpersonal and social relationships (Cui, 2019).

What truly brings the Wuzhen Theatre Festival and Wuzhen itself into the limelight and popularity is not only the universally appreciated theatrical performances but also the lively and Jiangnan-style urban spaces. The 'Theatre Bazaar' unit of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival not only extends the cultural atmosphere of the festival from day to night but also enhances proximity and interaction with tourists. It allows more ordinary people to have close contact with avant-garde art and traditional Chinese intangible cultural heritage, feel the warmth and charm of art amidst the hustle and bustle, and turn the festival into a cultural carnival accessible to everyone. Another feature of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, the "Long Street Banquet", also fully reflects the dissemination of urban image brought about by this combination. The Long Street Banquet is a folk celebration in Wuzhen, used during the festival to host guests, troupes, artists, media reporters, etc. The ancient festival ceremony shines brightly in the new cultural space, reflecting Wuzhen's traditional hospitality and organically integrating Jiangnan town's traditional customs with modern elements. Media and public figures further spread and promote this unique model of Wuzhen.

The Wuzhen Theatre Festival extends the performance venues of theatre to broader spaces, making changes and transformations in communication from physical space. The most typical representation is the "Ancient Town Carnival". The Ancient Town Carnival is a street performance form in the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, where invited teams may appear at various locations in the Xizha Scenic Area to perform street theatre at any time. As playwright and critic Shi Hang said, "The biggest difference of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival is that it no longer confines theatre to the theater". Through street performances, theatre performances are not limited by time and are omnipresent in space, creating a mobile theatrical cultural field in Wuzhen and truly making Wuzhen a paradise for theatre. The unique Jiangnan temperament of Wuzhen combined with the carnival of theatre not only creates an immersive experience blending tradition and modernity but also revitalizes traditional high art forms at the grassroots level. At the same time, this highly inclusive performance style also allows some traditional theatrical forms, such as Tibetan opera and Nuo opera, to shine brightly, expanding the display space for intangible cultural arts.

In the construction of physical space, architecture and various cultural landscapes serve as cultural symbols in the communication process. Influenced by Pierce's semiotics, the German philosopher Cassirer proposed the theory of cultural semiotics, pointing out that human cultural phenomena originate from the use of symbols. The annual theme posters of the theatre festival further disseminate the thematic significance of the festival by concretizing these cultural symbols. For example, the theme of the third Wuzhen Theatre Festival was "Inheritance", with the meaning of "inheriting and

innovating”. The poster depicted a large fish tail emerging from the sea, with the tail wings carrying the waterside scenery of Wuzhen, where the town’s rivers and the ocean converge, and a black awning boat seemingly sailing from Wuzhen towards the sea. This poster vividly expresses the theme of “Inheritance”, symbolizing that the Wuzhen Theatre Festival will gradually integrate into the international stage based on traditional culture and the Jiangnan town, embarking towards a broader cultural ocean.

2.2 Virtual Images in Urban Image Communication: New Media Expands Theatrical Carnival to Cyberspace

The urban communication network presents a co-constructive relationship between physical space and virtual space, allowing individuals to move within or between cities and communicate information through media networks while in a state of “physical absence”. Castells deepened this viewpoint by using the concept of “space of flows”, stating that cities are simultaneously constructed and reconstructed by the competitive logic of flow space and place space, cities have not disappeared into the virtual network but have been transformed at the intersection of electronic communication and material interaction.

As a form of virtual image, mass media images not only serve as instrumental representations of urban images but also profoundly shape urban images through popular culture media such as television, movies, and music. In addition to the physical and cultural spaces of the live events, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival also has a media space used for promotion and documentation. Each festival holds two press conferences to announce the theme, scale, and program content, inviting major media outlets for interviews and coverage. Due to the limited availability of tickets for major performances and events, the organizers open live streaming channels to provide online visual and auditory feasts for remote audiences. The festival also produces special publications in the form of magazines to review and document the event. Additionally, the festival has established official websites, WeChat public accounts, Weibo, Douyin, and other social media accounts for long-term promotion, announcements, and showcasing, expanding the theatrical carnival to cyberspace, establishing closer connections with theater enthusiasts, and providing authentic and vivid records of this cultural celebration, thereby promoting the image of Wuzhen due to factors such as transportation and accommodation. As McQuail said, movies transform a series of fragmented perceptions and intuitions about cities into concrete emotional experiences. Media plays a significant role in people's urban experiences, going beyond merely “representing” the city.

Furthermore, as subcultural resistance weakens, youth subcultures dominated by “interest” and “entertainment” gradually shape their sense of identity towards the city. Theater enthusiasts and some fans consider Wuzhen as their personal 'second hometown' and regularly participate in the Wuzhen Theatre Festival. The unique style of subcultures undoubtedly absorbs and integrates local cultures, namely the daily living space of young groups. By integrating local culture into subcultural practices, the local identity of young groups gradually forms. Meanwhile, through carefully crafting new media

images, these local subcultures may potentially form close interactive ties with mainstream culture and local cultural industries.

2.3 Media Pilgrimage: Personalized Dissemination and Diffusion of Urban Image

Media pilgrimage refers to “traveling to important locations in media narratives”. In the increasingly prosperous trend of traveling to internet-famous destinations, after years of development and promotion, Wuzhen has become one of the pilgrimage sites for theater enthusiasts or ordinary tourists.

Individuals participate in the construction of media territorial landscapes through self-display. In the social media environment, people “check in” at locations “inside” the media, take photos imitating characters from the media, and finally share their pilgrimage experiences on social media in the form of images. (Wu, 2014) During the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, the fan groups are a special attraction, as they seem to spontaneously engage in orienteering or escape room activities in Wuzhen, with this year’s mission named “Let’s Find Wang Yibo Together”. In addition to Wang Yibo, during this year’s theater festival, one might also encounter Zhang Yixing, Wei Daxun, Chen Li, Wan Qian, Qu Chu Xiao, Sun Honglei, and others. Besides, it's unclear whether the girls singing on the gondola boats dressed in European court costumes are ordinary tourists or carnival actors, or whether the boys wandering around with selfie sticks collecting material are media personalities hired by the organizers or just regular tourists. Short videos and posts on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu have replaced traditional media as more direct and immediate means of communication. It can be said that in the increasingly fervent atmosphere of media pilgrimage, Wuzhen’s urban image, apart from theater, has also gained popularity through social media, with its significance constantly being constructed and reconstructed in the process of dissemination. This also explains why Wuzhen has become a symbol of culture and art in the eyes of theater enthusiasts or young people. As mentioned in class, a city is not merely a container of social life but a constructor of social life and interaction.

3. Insights from the Wuzhen Model for Urban Space Construction and Communication

3.1 Urban Managers: Top-Level Design Reflecting Local Characteristics with Cultural Core

Urban managers need to consciously shape urban visual symbols according to the city's characteristics. They should evaluate from two dimensions: the cultural value of the city and its potential spread on new media platforms. This lays the foundation for the precise positioning of the city's image and timely captures or creates hotspots for effective communication. When it comes to tourism landscapes, the water-town features of Wuzhen can be seen in other Jiangnan towns as well. Choosing theatre as an entry point is because it meets the cultural demands of modern young people. As a modern cultural event, the theatre festival has indeed brought new vitality to this millennium-old town. It not only provides fertile ground for various avant-garde arts and youth cultures but also creates a broader space and environment for the protection and inheritance of traditional culture, making Wuzhen's unique cultural brand known at home and abroad. Local development needs to identify local characteristics, and cultural core is an important lever for sustainable development.

Moreover, as Castells pointed out, the competition in urban network infrastructure construction may widen the gap between the flow space and the local space, leading to a new urban dichotomy: on the one hand, the flow space connects distant places prioritized by market value, on the other hand, people in isolated local spaces have fewer opportunities to engage globally. (Wu, 2014) The construction of a cultural core also needs to keep up with the times, using new media and online platforms for digital dissemination and shaping, integrating Wuzhen's international image into globalization and the world stage. The shadow of the "digital divide" not only looms over individuals but also becomes a threat to cities. Cities that have not entered the information age will eventually face the fate of being eliminated. Cities that lag behind in the digital trend gradually lose competitiveness and face inevitable pressure of elimination.

3.2 Local Cultural Development: People-oriented Approach to Build Urban Public Cultural Spaces

The most active participants in the city are its people. Unlike organizational communication and mass media dissemination, individual communication with citizens as the main body is particularly important in today's urban communication. Its value lies not only in the traffic contributed by citizens to Internet communication but also in the pride and cultural identity demonstrated by citizens in their communication about their city, which constitutes a profound reflection of communication effectiveness. (Ren, 2021) The purpose of constructing cultural spaces is to serve ordinary people. It should not only be confined to inaccessible halls but should also "enter the homes of ordinary people". The popularity of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival lies in its approachable demeanor. Mobile theatrical forms like the Ancient Town Carnival make high art no longer aloof, while public cultural spaces like the Muxin Art Museum fulfill the cultural needs of town residents in a localized manner. Local cultural development needs to maintain an approachable attitude, fully consider the needs of local people, provide more localized public cultural spaces, and balance commercialization with public interests.

4. Conclusion

The expanding realm of mobile spaces is gradually eroding traditional urban public spaces for people to linger, connect, and converse. However, in the dual realm of physical and virtual spaces, people are rediscovering the millennium-old Wuzhen in the era of mobile internet, breaking free from the uniform urban ambiance and Jiangnan impressions. Whether theater enthusiasts or ordinary individuals, everyone can find meaning in Wuzhen. Wuzhen is no longer merely a space for traffic flow but serves as an important bridge for communication and dissemination functions. The construction of multiple cultural spaces during the Wuzhen Theatre Festival integrates and ignites traditional, modern, and international elements in this Jiangnan town, providing grassroots spaces for appreciating art and exchanging ideas for the general public. Representing characteristic towns like Wuzhen play a significant role in China's new urbanization efforts, and their experiences in cultural development can serve as a reference and inspiration for regions across the country.

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