

The Dissemination of Intangible Cultural Heritage Along Beijing-Hangzhou Canal Based on Encoding/Decoding Theory^{*}

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The Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal carries a wealth of Chinese cultural symbols, showing the lifestyle and wisdom of working people through ages. The preservation and inheritance of its intangible cultural heritage can help to evoke cultural memories and cultural identification of the Canal and build cultural confidence. This paper applies Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory to analyze the dissemination of intangible heritage tourism culture. On the basis of a practical study of the villages along the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, this paper analyses the problems in the transmission of its intangible cultural heritage and proposes specific methods to solve them in four processes, encoding, decoding, communication, and secondary encoding, in order to propose references for the transmission of intangible heritage culture at home and abroad.

Keywords: dissemination, encoding, decoding, intangible cultural heritage

Introduction

The Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal was built during the Spring and Autumn Period, and it has a history of more than 2,500 years. With a total length of about 1,797 kilometers, it is a historical treasure that is closely related to the lifestyle of working people and traditional Chinese culture, including traditional music, traditional dance, traditional painting, traditional skills, etc. For many reasons, the Canal's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has not yet been effectively inherited and disseminated, and it is also in danger of being lost. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory model is able to break away from the shackles of subject-object linear transmission of culture communication, and view the process of ICH transmission from the perspective of encoding-communication-decoding. The study of the ICH tourism culture circulation through encoding and decoding theory has both practical and historical significance.

Method for Study

Stuart Hall argues that discourse is like a commodity that goes through the four stages of production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction described by Marxism (Chen & Lin, 2014), and suggests that individuals may resist or negotiate on the dissemination of an ideology (Evan, 2015). China is rich in ICH, but if it is not disseminated, the preservation of heritage would become completely impotent. As Foucault put it, "criticism" is one of the circulation mechanisms for knowledge to release its power (Claudia & Donna, 2021).

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Wu (2007) points out that cultural communication is both a social phenomenon and a fundamental part of tourism destination marketing, and the transmission of information is also an important form of tourism service.

The transmission of ICH tourism culture goes through three stages: encoding, communication, and decoding. The encoding process refers to the production of ICH tourism products, which emphasizes modern artistic processing while preserving the authenticity of ICH and presenting in a way that is pleasing to the audience. The Grand Canal ICH is not only an indispensable part of canal cultural heritage, but also a potential tourism resource for tourist destination development (Zhang, 2020). The communication process of ICH is to disseminate the encoded ICH information to the audience via various forms. In this process, the discourse of ICH is not a closed system, but consists of topics, treatments, issues, and events (Zou, 2014). The decoding process of ICH means that after the audience receives the ICH discourse, they decode the ICH elements in it according to their own cognition. In view of the decoders' different attitudes when they are decoding the symbolic meanings, Hall applies three scenarios to describe the three positions of the audience in the decoding process, namely, the dominant position, the negotiated position, and the confrontational position. The decoding process of ICH requires mutual feedback between encoding and decoding processes, in order to achieve good communication effects, and the secondary encoding is needed when necessary.

Findings

Lack of Encoder

At present, most of villages of the Grand Canal have not paid much attention to the cultivation of the ICH inheritors, and some masters of art have passed away, the problem of their aging being serious, and some kinds of ICH are facing the dilemma of no one to encode it, such as Work Song of Boatmen, Woodcut New Year Pictures. Fewer ICH tourism products are encoded for international tourists, resulting in the weakness of international dissemination. In encoding stage, important issues that need to be solved are how to keep the authenticity of traditional ICH while keeping up with the times, and how to extract potential ICH in each section of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal that can show the geographical characteristics and highlight the uniqueness of the Grand Canal ICH.

Being Poor in Communication Effect

The current dissemination of the Canal ICH is facing the problems of monotonous communication channel and weak interaction with the audience. According to the investigation, three reasons lead to these problems: Firstly, there is a lack of derivative products from the reprocessing and re-creation of ICH elements in tourism products or tourist attractions, resulting in tourists' unclear concept of intangible cultural heritage (Haleh, Mohammad, & Neda, 2019) and lack of proper ways to deeply understand ICH elements. Secondly, most of the ICH products are not targeted for different groups or through various channels when they are sold or exhibited, resulting in the weakness of dissemination. Third, there are few channels for communication and interaction between the encoders and decoders, and the weak interaction between decoders and encoders may lead to the insufficient understanding of ICH elements by decoders. The communication channel of ICH for the international public still remains in the traditional way of TV media, so it is difficult for the international public to receive the symbols containing Chinese ICH.

Decoders' Hardness to Stand in Dominant Position

From the perspective of decoding effect, the decoding of ICH in tourism products or tourism performances

in China generally suffers from the problem that the audience decoding the ICH is difficult to be in a dominant position (Guo & Wang, 2019). The main reason is that most kinds of ICH have its unique regional characteristics, but the audience lacks a certain understanding of ICH with local characteristics due to the limitations of geographic space and decoders' background knowledge. This will lead to deviations in their understanding of the connotations and values expressed by ICH elements in tourism products or performances. Secondly, the encoder will artistically create the ICH elements in tourism products or performances, while the decoder has a subjective understanding of the ICH elements in tourism products or performances due to their prior knowledge level and acceptability, which would lead to unsatisfactory communication effect. Thirdly, the audience's understanding of ICH is not fed back to the encoder through effective channels, or the encoder does not pay enough attention to the feedback and lacks targeted secondary encoding, which makes it difficult for the audience to be in a dominant position in the decoding process.

Solutions

Encoding: Inherit and Innovate Encoding Models, Educating Encoder

In this process, we should enhance the innovation of the encoding mode for ICH tourism products.

The first is to innovate the expression of the theme symbol of tourism products. Although ICH itself is intangible, it can be transmitted by means of physical ICH cultural products, which requires the encoder to have an objective and accurate understanding of the ICH involved in the product and avoid the subjective elements being blindly planted into it by the encoder.

Second, we should use symbols carrying meaning to transmit these codes innovatively. In the encoding process of ICH tourism products, the encoder should first clarify the thematic direction of the products, combine various carriers for transmitting symbols such as visual transmission or audio transmission, incorporate emerging technologies and equipment into the encoding process, and encode ICH suitable for different types of people, so as to achieve the best effect when transmitting symbols. Focusing on the excavation of potential ICH, the production process of ICH products can help to awaken the non-physical cultural memory of tourists and evoke their cultural memory and cultural identity. In this process, it is more important to excavate the discourse of potential ICH than simply disseminate the textual symbols.

In addition, there is a need to focus on the cultivation and education of intangible heritage inheritors. Most living ICH masters are old, and if their skills are not inherited, it will cause irreparable loss of intangible cultural heritage (Qi, 2006). The cooperation with local secondary schools or universities to set up special courses on intangible heritage culture will promote the inheritance of ICH.

In addition to hiring traditional talents of ICH, attention should be paid to finding modern talents who master emerging technologies and understand the frontiers of culture so as to achieve the integration of traditional culture and modern technology at the encoding process. It can systematically cultivate multi-talented ICH encoders who are dialectically unified between tradition and modernity, thus highlighting the core of ICH at the encoding stage.

Communication: Broaden Communication Channels & Refine Communication Content

The ways for ICH dissemination are still traditional and backward at present, and we should try to present and spread brilliant ICH of the Canal. Performing a series of arts activities and festivals in tourist destinations and uploading them to the Internet platform can surely evoke people's cultural memories and make them identify with the ICH. In this process, attention should be paid to breaking the barrier between different regions, and

harmonizing the relationship between regional characteristics of ICH and internationalization of its content to disseminate ICH abroad. We can also make documentary or online videos, spread coded cultural symbols on media platforms for foreigners, and concentrate on the follow-up work after the dissemination. To avoid aberrant decoding, it is important to consider what is missed or may misguide people in the description of ICH during dissemination, as mass travelers mainly rely on advertisements or brochures to learn about their tourist destinations, and they do not realize that they may subvert the stereotypes. Therefore, the description of ICH is equally crucial in this context (Ira, 1993).

Decoding: Increase the Depth of Traveler Participation & Prevent Decoding Mismatches

In order to achieve a better circulation effect, the audience's decoding of the ICH should be oriented to the dominant position. In the dominant position, the decoder can accurately understand the meaning expressed by the Grand Canal ICH performance encoder and can maintain the same understanding of ICH with the encoder. The authenticity of the ICH performance connects encoder and tourists in their spirit, thus seeking deep integration and promoting the cultural identification of the tourists (Miguel, 2008). Experiential ICH tourism allows decoders to participate in ICH tourism actively, shifting decoders in negotiated position or confrontational position to the dominant position. At present, the participatory and experiential aspects of canal ICH tourism products are generally not well enough, tourists basically appreciating them passively. Therefore, we should promote the development of experiential ICH tourism products to integrate touring, entertainment, experience, and learning through engagement, connection, and creation, so as to enhance the participation, interaction, knowledge, and fun of the Grand Canal ICH tourism process and enter into a shared ritualized field (Han, 2014).

Secondary Encoding: Collect Feedback & Enhance Consumer Stickiness

Secondary encoding seems to be a feedback process that may be neglected by the encoders at the end of the circulation, but it is actually significant. In the ICH tourism circulation, some traditional customs of the Canal like Fisherman's Wedding Ceremony or Sacrifice to the River God are quite ritualistic but it may bring a sense of distance and strangeness to the decoder at the same time. ICH tourism should not only focus on the mode of transmission, but also on the interaction and the feedback of audience (Zhou & Zhang, 2022). Encoders need to focus on post-communication feedback when facing mismatch that occurs between the encoder and the decoder, so as to improve the quality of secondary encoding. In the late stage of circulation, establishing a reasonable feedback mechanism is an urgent issue to be solved, and only when the feedback is really received by the encoder can the secondary encoding be improved. Before the ICH performance, the encoder can design a questionnaire according to its theme, and when the audience enters, the staff distributes the questionnaire to them and collects the feedback from the audience, and then carefully sorts out the feedback. Then the encoders reflect on the results and transform the feedback into the ideas of secondary encoding. Through some new and popular ways such as social media, surveys, or prize quizzes, to keep abreast of the audience's thoughts and preferences for ICH products. In this way, it is possible to verify the dissemination of encoder's pre-determined meaning of the ICH symbols after the communication process. So that the understanding of the decoder will be consistent with the encoder's original intention, and the decoder is always in the dominant position, and thus the dissemination effect can be maximized. The secondary encoding experience of other cultural products also can be used for reference in the development of derivatives and enhancement of consumers' stickiness. On the basis of catering to decoders' preferences, combining with aspects of decoders' daily life and online platforms, we can disseminate the encoded ICH symbols into all aspects of decoder's life.

Conclusion

The Grand Canal culture has a long history, and various kinds of ICH with regional characteristics record the way of Chinese lifestyle for thousands of years. By analyzing the dissemination of ICH along the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, we can find that the transmission of its ICH is suffering from the lack of encoder, poor communication effect, and the decoders' hardness to stand in the dominant position. In the encoding stage, ICH circulation should focus on the inheritance, the cultivation of ICH encoders, and the encoding of tourism cultural products. In the communication stage, it should broaden the dissemination channels and refine the contents. In the decoding stage, it should increase the participation of decoders to prevent decoding mismatch and collect feedback from decoders to improve the secondary encoding quality. We should improve the universality and accuracy of ICH in terms of encoding, communication, decoding, and secondary encoding with the help of its immaterial attributes, use modern technology and diversified ways to inherit ICH with its historical connotation, so that decoders are in the dominant position to make ICH of the Canal better inherited and developed.

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