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Cultural Activation: A Study of the Impact of the Image of Hutongs Shaped by Yao-Chinese Folktales on the Transformation of Cultural Spaces in Old Town Areas Postprint

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Abstract

This paper takes the transformation of the image of cultural space in the old city as the starting point, approaches from the perspective of “Beijing Hutong” in animation art, and based on the background of existing animation research across multiple fields, identifies the innovative point of new art facilitating cultural transformation. This paper focuses on the artistic presentation and logical conception of the work “The Kiosk” in the widely acclaimed Chinese animation “Yao-Chinese Folktales”, and further analyzes, through artistic creation, the effect of “Beijing Hutong” on enhancing residents’ cultural identity, promoting socially virtuous construction, and transforming cultural space in the old city. This paper adopts a questionnaire survey to investigate whether scenes of hutong life have enhanced residents’ cultural confidence and to analyze the unique artistic form and creation mechanism of the work “The Kiosk”.

Full Text

Preamble

Cultural Activation: A Study of the Impact of Hutong Imagery in Yao-Chinese Folktales on the Transformation of Cultural Spaces in Old Town Areas

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Abstract: This paper examines the transformation of cultural space in old urban areas, focusing on the representation of Beijing’s hutongs in animation art. Building upon existing multidisciplinary research on animation, it identifies the

innovative potential of new artistic forms in facilitating cultural transformation. The study centers on the artistic presentation and conceptual framework of “The Kiosk,” a work from the widely acclaimed Chinese animation series *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, analyzing how its depiction of Beijing hutongs enhances residents’ cultural identity and promotes the positive reconstruction of cultural spaces in old towns. Through questionnaire surveys, this research investigates whether scenes of hutong life strengthen residents’ cultural confidence and analyzes the unique artistic forms and creative mechanisms employed in “The Kiosk.”

Keywords: hutong culture, cultural identity, lifelike narrative

1 Introduction

As China’s economy develops rapidly, with continuous improvements in hard power such as science and technology, military strength, and economic capacity, cultural soft power has increasingly become a focus of attention. The Proposal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Visionary Goals for 2035 states that “we should focus on telling China’s stories well, innovating international communication strategies, and strengthening cultural exchanges and multi-level civilizational dialogue with other countries.” Telling Chinese stories effectively and promoting them globally must be based on tapping into the unique charm of our own culture, strengthening cultural confidence, enhancing cultural soft power, and building a strong cultural nation.

As a distinctive feature of Beijing’s cultural landscape, hutongs serve as a unique gateway for cultural promotion. Therefore, the preservation and enhancement of Beijing’s hutong culture plays a crucial leading role in strengthening the nation’s cultural soft power. This raises a key question: Does the artistic representation of hutong life scenes enhance residents’ cultural confidence, and if so, through what mechanisms? This paper addresses this central question.

2.1 Literature Review of Hutong Culture

A literature search for “Beijing hutongs” yields 829 documents, indicating a substantial research foundation. The primary research areas include hutongs as a whole or hutong culture specifically, brand marketing, spatial and landscape design, hutong literature, and hutong tourism analysis.

Domestic scholar Zhang Qiao Xue (2016), in “Designing the Brand Visual Identity System of Beijing Hutong Cultural Tour,” explores the inheritance and promotion of hutong culture through visual design, proposing a novel approach that integrates modern urban visual design with tourism brand identity systems. Chen Xiaohan and Zhang Wini (2020), in “Exploring the Landscape Design of Hutong Microspaces in Beijing,” conclude that hutong microspaces, as small-scale yet charming cellular components within the city’s macro-structure, significantly improve residents’ daily living environments. Li Peilin (2017), in

an article published in *Yihai*, examines the spiritual dilemma of “patience” in hutong culture, arguing that if “patience” transforms from a survival instinct into a national psyche, the entire nation becomes trapped in a whirlpool of spiritual dilemmas.

2.2 Literature Review of Scene Theory

Wang Yaqi (2019) analyzed the complex emotions of “love and hate” in Beijing’s hutongs from a literary perspective, focusing on the locational characteristics of imagery portrayed in *The Hall of Four Ages*. Xu Hong and Han Linjuan, working in literary tourism, compared artistic representations with tourists’ actual perceptions of Beijing’s hutong scenes, demonstrating the gap between literary artworks and lived experiences. However, research on hutong scenes in animation remains limited.

International media perspectives have also addressed Beijing’s hutongs. In 2003, Mark Steyn wrote in *Beijing with the Walls Down*: “Beijing mixes elements of resemblance and dissimilarity, modernity and antiquity. The removal of the city walls has given the city freedom, but it has also made the city a more confusing and largely stylistic mix.” The *New York Times*, in a February 22, 2015 article titled “What Do You Do in Beijing,” noted that “to really understand Beijing, you have to delve deep into its hutongs. The old Beijing hutongs around Yonghegong are excellent places to get a feel for the ecology of Beijing’s streets, even though many of them have been destroyed over the years.”

Domestic media have similarly reflected on the hutong experience. In 2014, *People’s Daily* reported that in Beijing’s traditional hutong area of Gulou, “traditional culture has found a more intimate interface with modern life, and the human image of the city of Beijing has become more three-dimensional.” Sun Huaizhong, a Beijing hairy monkey artisan, after featuring hutongs in his story “Heaven and Earth,” observed, “You can get out of Beijing, but you can’t get out of the hutongs.” Here, hutongs function as an intuitive, sensual, and transcendent landscape vehicle.

In 2010, Wang Xiaolu proposed a scale for assessing the image of urban historical and cultural districts in a study on Shichahai district, concluding that tourists’ perceptions and concerns focus primarily on cultural authenticity, visual authenticity, tourism services, and social environment perception. In 2008, Shan Jixiang argued in *Reinventing Urban Cultural Features and Cultural City Construction* that urban features possess both static and dynamic meanings. In today’s highly developed civilization, the culture of urban characteristics is gradually blurring, with many cultural imprints and traditional lifestyles being ruthlessly erased. The cultural transformation of old cities can create distinctive urban character according to different historical and geographical conditions.

2.3 Research Questions

In summary, existing scholarship on hutong imagery and old urban area planning has primarily approached the topic from historical, tourism, and urban planning perspectives, while neglecting the transformative and promotional effects on ethnic cultural characteristics achieved through animated artworks that reference and beautify reality. Consequently, there remains limited scholarly exploration of hutong imagery and the transformation of cultural spaces in old cities as portrayed in *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, presenting significant research opportunities in the field of animated works.

“The Kiosk” from *Yao-Chinese Folktales* embodies a strong and authentic hutong culture. This raises several key questions: Do viewers who rate *Yao-Chinese Folktales* more highly demonstrate stronger identification with hutong culture? Do viewers of the series identify more strongly with hutong culture than non-viewers? Are viewers with higher ratings more inclined to visit hutong cultural attractions in person? Furthermore, do objective conditions such as audience members’ economic, social, and educational status influence the formation of this cultural identity?

3 Research Methodology

This study employs a questionnaire survey to examine the impact of hutong imagery in *Yao-Chinese Folktales* on the transformation of cultural spaces in old urban areas, aiming to answer the research questions posed above.

3.1 Formulation of Hypotheses

Based on these research questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Viewers of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* identify more strongly with hutong culture than non-viewers.

H2: Higher ratings of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* correlate with stronger identification with hutong culture.

H3: Higher ratings of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* correlate with stronger inclination to visit hutong cultural sites in person.

To test these hypotheses, this study employed a questionnaire survey method, dividing the population into two target groups: viewers and non-viewers of “The Kiosk” from *Yao-Chinese Folktales*. A random sample of 269 participants was surveyed.

A total of 269 valid questionnaires were collected, with 100 respondents having viewed “The Kiosk” from *Yao-Chinese Folktales* and 169 having not. The sample was predominantly female (80%) and highly educated, with 211 respondents (78.44%) holding bachelor’s degrees.

The questionnaire comprised 15 items, including 14 single-choice questions and one rating-scale question. Data were collected online through WeChat Moments, Weibo, and QQ Zone. Analysis of viewers revealed that the primary viewing platforms were Bilibili and iQiyi, accounting for 72% of respondents. Viewers rated the work highly, with 89% assigning a score of 4 or above on a 5-point scale. While 75% of viewers reported limited prior knowledge of hutong culture as depicted in the animation, 71% indicated increased interest after viewing. Among non-viewers, the primary reason for not watching was lack of awareness about the work.

4.1 Unique Visual Style Enhances Perceptibility of Hutong Culture

This paper analyzes the degree of acceptance and approval of hutong culture by examining viewers' perception after watching *Yao-Chinese Folktales*. In a 2021 empirical analysis of the Technology Acceptance Model, Liu Xuhui affirmed Davis's theoretical framework, which analyzes individuals' attitudes toward the perceived usefulness and ease of use of information technology to determine their acceptance of it. Building upon this model, our study employs hutong culture as an external variable and *Yao-Chinese Folktales—The Kiosk* as a moderating variable.

Reliability analysis of our scales revealed that the unique visual style of *The Kiosk* significantly enhances perception of hutong culture. An independent samples t-test examined differences in hutong culture perception between viewers and non-viewers, finding that viewers identified significantly more strongly with hutong culture than non-viewers. This demonstrates that exposure to *Yao-Chinese Folktales—The Kiosk* strengthens cultural identification.

4.2 Lifelike Narratives Strengthen Audience Cultural Identification

The correlation between ratings of the work and hutong cultural identity was $r = 0.461$, $p < 0.01$, indicating that higher ratings correspond to stronger cultural identification.

Lifelike narrative constitutes a key element of the work's high acclaim. Scholar Zhang Wei Ling (2022) attributes cultural identity to an attitude or psychological perception, noting that both the physical environment and the intangible states of people within cultural spaces serve as crucial raw materials for shaping cultural identity. Cultural identity also plays a pivotal role in conserving historical and cultural districts, spaces, and environments.

Yao-Chinese Folktales—The Kiosk begins with the daily life of Master Yang in the hutongs, capturing both the material environment and intangible human experiences within an interchangeable space to create a realistic and richly textured animated work. The opening scene features the jagged, grid-like eaves of

hutongs, while the kiosk itself is filled with nostalgic snacks and items such as newspapers, candy wrappers, and Wangshi milk, establishing a strong sense of living customs within hutong culture. Details like garbage sorting, the transparent tape in Master Yang's hands, the alley cat, and car dust covers are all drawn from authentic hutong life. The artist stylizes these symbols and presents them through a lifelike narrative, achieving spatial interchange and empathy between viewers and animated characters. Transitional scenes—such as a horse-rider passing through Beihai Park, the neighborhood committee, and roadside card games—break temporal and spatial limitations, realizing an interchange between living memories and emotional identification.

4.3 Artistic Means Facilitate Cultural Transformation into Modernity

The creative team behind *Yao-Chinese Folktales—The Kiosk* conducted realistic examinations and references of hutong culture, presenting a believable and highly authentic representation. The work achieves a unique visual communication effect by combining artistic creativity with the smoldering atmosphere of everyday life, resulting in a distinctive new style.

Qin Hongling, Dean of the School of Humanities at Beijing Architecture University, has proposed the principle of adaptive use for urban architectural heritage conservation based on strengthening cultural identity. This principle emphasizes the importance of community and public participation in heritage conservation and enhances “accessibility” in the planning and development of architectural heritage resources. “Visitability” refers to the capacity of cultural heritage and public cultural spaces to be visited, appreciated, experienced, and consumed by the public, representing a secondary value exploitation in the context of economic and network development across all sectors. Visitability allows residents and visitors to experience architectural and cultural heritage more easily and conveniently, thereby achieving mutually beneficial economic and cultural revitalization.

This study found a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.609$, $p < 0.01$ between work ratings and willingness to visit hutongs in person, indicating that viewers who rated *The Kiosk* more highly demonstrated stronger intention to visit hutong cultural sites. The development and utilization of hutong architecture and cultural promotion can not only impart new value to relatively backward architectural cultures but also connect architectural spatial structures with cultural and historical clues during processes of perception and sensation. This facilitates systematic, continuous, and objective transformation of cultural spaces in old cities, improves cultural identity among residents and visitors while displaying and promoting hutong culture, and ultimately enhances national cultural soft power.

4.4 Modern Interpretation of Animated Works Holds Educational Value

The primary reason respondents had not viewed “The Kiosk” from *Yao-Chinese Folktales*—a widely acclaimed and promoted animated short film from 2023—was lack of awareness. This suggests the work still faces publicity limitations and has not achieved deeper narrative interpretation.

Narrative interpretation is fundamentally an educational activity. As scholars note, “narrativization is itself a system of meaning production with value orientation, where the narrative subject embeds value judgments, power relations, and ideologies into the narrative text, making interpretation of buildings or cultural heritage through this vehicle an activity with value positions and edifying messages.” Nigel Walter (2014) views the preservation value of cultural and historical buildings as dynamically evolving, arguing that effective narratives can evoke in viewers a sense of need—even responsibility—to carry the “story” forward.

Domestic scholar Rao Shuguang observes that “nationalization” represents a more “original” statement in animation creation, while contemporary Chinese animated films should pay greater attention to modernization—a transformation inseparable from realistic animation aesthetics. Chinese animation needs to face life, face the people, draw nutrients from real life, synchronize with the times, and develop alongside the people. This modernization is reflected in conceptual innovation in storytelling from the perspective of animation art and in the transformation of cultural space through narrative interpretation of the “relationship between things and people.” Architectural emotions serve as human bearers of historical and cultural memory. As David Lowenthal (1985) argues, heritage from the past represents both the “historical other” and the “cultural other,” with authenticity subject to both temporal and cultural change, such that “the uncertain and discontinuous facts of the past can only be understood by interweaving them into stories.”

Our study found that the hutong-themed production in *Yao-Chinese Folktales* effectively activated cultural identity. The shift in viewers’ attitudes toward hutong culture after watching demonstrates that hutong culture, as a distinctive Chinese cultural form with deep historical deposits, can be packaged and promoted through Chinese animation to effectively spread and preserve culture.

5 Summary and Reflection

In conclusion, hutong culture possesses important cultural values and emotional connotations. *Yao-Chinese Folktales* explores new narratives and inspirations to “tell” viewers about the historical and spiritual dimensions of China’s excellent traditional culture. As an architectural carrier that embodies both history and modernity, hutong culture represents a crucial breakthrough for enhancing national cultural soft power.

The strength of hutong cultural identity in contemporary society can indirectly influence the transformation of architectural cultural spaces in old towns. Different cultural spaces feature different architectural styles, and people's feelings toward various types of historical and cultural spaces can vary significantly. As society's economy, politics, laws, and regulations continue to develop, how can the architecture of cultural spaces in old urban areas build on their strengths and avoid their weaknesses within the future economic and cultural sphere to embark on the right developmental track? One root of cultural identity lies in the rapid pace of social structural development.

People are the creators of culture, and everything that constitutes culture is realized through human activity; the cultural structure is ultimately the result of cultural activity. If every individual within the social structure loses their cultural identity, people lose their roots in one another. The work "The Kiosk" from *Yao-Chinese Folktales* employs the most authentic and grounded approach, using its unique visual symbolic style to lead viewers to rediscover the initial touch of life and the original heart of culture across the horizontal plane of time, preserving nostalgia within the hutongs and promoting the inheritance and development of cultural characteristics.

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