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Online Communication Strategies for Chinese City Image: A Case Study of Hefei (Postprint)

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Abstract

Purpose: This article takes Hefei as a case study to analyze the international community's overall perception of Chinese cities, aiming to propose targeted recommendations for further enhancing the international image of Chinese cities. **Method:** Based on three overseas websites—Merriam-Webster, Encyclopædia Britannica, and TripAdvisor—this study investigates the main content and existing issues of English-language webpages related to Hefei. **Results:** The international community still lacks adequate understanding of Chinese cities; urban-related data and information are neither accurately grasped nor comprehensively presented, and thus fail to fully display the complete and authentic image and character of Chinese cities on the Internet, an important platform. **Conclusion:** It is recommended that relevant departments, institutions, organizations, and individuals from all sectors who care about the development of Chinese cities and the international dissemination of urban image establish connections with major foreign websites and platforms, conduct exchanges and cooperation, and actively participate in the construction and dissemination of cities' international image; pool together all forces, integrate existing resources, and build China's own, globally influential national portal website or large-scale comprehensive platform for international city publicity; devote meticulous thought to considering how to tell China's stories and Chinese cities' stories well to overseas audiences.

Full Text

Preamble

China's City Image Communication Strategies on the Internet: A Case Study of Hefei

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Abstract

[Objective] This article analyzes the international community's overall perception of Chinese cities, using Hefei as a case study, to propose targeted recommendations for further enhancing China's urban international image. **[Method]** Based on three major overseas websites—Merriam-Webster, Britannica, and TripAdvisor—the study examines the main content of English-language webpages about Hefei and identifies existing problems. **[Results]** The international community still lacks sufficient understanding of Chinese cities, with inaccurate data and information, incomplete presentation, and an inability to fully showcase the complete, authentic image and character of Chinese cities on the important platform of the internet. **[Conclusion]** It is recommended that relevant departments, institutions, organizations, and individuals concerned with Chinese urban development and international city image communication establish connections with major foreign websites and platforms to conduct exchanges and cooperation, and actively participate in the construction and dissemination of cities' international images. Additionally, efforts should be made to pool resources and consolidate existing assets to create a nationally-owned, world-influential portal website or comprehensive platform for China's urban external publicity. Finally, careful consideration should be given to how to effectively tell China's stories and urban stories to overseas audiences.

Keywords: Chinese cities; city image; international image; internet; Hefei

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Introduction

City image represents the concrete perception, overall view, and comprehensive evaluation of a region's internal comprehensive strength, external vitality, and future prospects by both internal and external publics. Some scholars argue that city image comprises people's subjective views and concepts about a city, along with the resulting visual representations or reflections, consisting of three levels: spiritual image (beliefs, concepts, etc.), behavioral image, and visual representation (image and identification systems). Numerous similar definitions or interpretations of city image exist, most involving people's views or evaluations of cities. Such perceptions are not innate but formed postnatally through the influence of various factors. Therefore, scholars have noted that city image is constructed through the combined effects of mass media, personal experience, in-

terpersonal communication, memory, and environmental factors. In the current era of rapid information technology development, the internet plays a crucial role in the construction and dissemination of city image, applicable not only to domestic city image but also to international city image.

According to the above definition, a city' s international image refers to the international community' s overall perception and comprehensive evaluation of a city. Like domestic image, a favorable international image constitutes important intangible assets for a city, serving as a vital foundation for expanding external exchange and cooperation, attracting overseas investment and talent, and enhancing international influence and national image. Regarding the topic of city international image from an internet perspective, domestic scholars have conducted considerable reflection and discussion in recent years. For instance, some have analyzed the role of websites in urban international image communication using the "hello-guizhou" website as an example, while others have examined translation issues in urban external publicity portal websites using Chengdu' s city image promotion website "GoChengdu" as a blueprint. Additional studies have explored the shaping of Shanghai' s international image from the perspective of global mainstream print media and news websites, and discussed the construction of Guilin as a world-class tourism city with a focus on new media application. These studies have provided valuable insights to the academic community. Shifting focus from domestic to overseas perspectives and leveraging the internet as a foundation has become a consensus among an increasing number of city image researchers. This study takes Hefei as an example, focusing on the presentation of Chinese cities on the internet.

Current academic research on Hefei' s image primarily concentrates on city image positioning and design, construction and shaping, and dissemination and enhancement, with research on the city' s international image remaining absent. Some researchers have discussed the new normal of Hefei' s city image external communication under media convergence, touching upon its international image but without fully elaborating on Hefei' s specific online presentation and image display. This study hopes to make an attempt in this regard. Specifically, based on an analysis of the main content and existing problems of English-language webpages about Hefei, this research analyzes the international community' s overall perception of Chinese cities to propose targeted suggestions for enhancing Chinese cities' international image.

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1. Internet-Based Image Presentation of Hefei

Hefei represents a typical example of China' s rapid urban development since the reform and opening up. According to statistics, Hefei' s economic output in 2021 was 28 times that of 2000. The "Hefei National Economic and Social

Development 14th Five-Year Plan and 2035 Long-Range Goals Outline” released in 2021 emphasizes strengthening and optimizing the Hefei metropolitan area, making good use of major platforms for opening up to the outside world, and enhancing the city’ s internationalization level. These all impose higher requirements on the construction and dissemination of Hefei’ s international image. Additionally, conducting research on Hefei’ s international image can provide insights and references for other Chinese cities.

The English-language webpages about Hefei examined in this study are drawn from three major overseas websites: Merriam-Webster, Britannica, and TripAdvisor. Merriam-Webster.com is a commonly used reference website; Britannica.com is an encyclopedia-style website; and TripAdvisor.com is a popular tourism website. All three websites rank highly in global website traffic. According to relevant statistics, Merriam-Webster ranks 374th globally with 1.41 million daily visitors; Britannica ranks 242nd with 1.11 million daily visitors; and TripAdvisor ranks 207th with 2.65 million daily visitors. Consequently, these three websites are representative in terms of both type and coverage, boasting broad international audiences. Furthermore, to provide reference points and make the analysis more intuitive, this study also incorporates relevant information about two other cities—Mumbai, India, and Osaka, Japan—for comparative purposes. According to the University of Tokyo’ s 2022 Asian Top 100 Cities Ranking, all three cities rank among the top 50 in Asia, making them sufficiently comparable.

1.1 Merriam-Webster Website

The Merriam-Webster webpage about Hefei provides pronunciation guidance for the term “Hefei,” along with information on the city’ s location and population. The website states: “Hefei is a city in eastern China, located west of Nanjing, with a population of 733,278,”supplemented by the note that “Hefei is the capital of Anhui Province.” The explanation and notes total only a few dozen words, reflecting the limited information characteristic of this website, which presents key information related to search terms through concise explanations. Like Hefei, the descriptions of Mumbai and Osaka on this website are also extremely brief.

Upon closer examination, two problems emerge. First, the population data for Hefei seriously deviates from reality. According to statistics released by the Hefei Municipal People’ s Government in 2022, the city’ s total permanent population currently stands at 9.465 million, making it a large city with nearly ten million inhabitants. The figure of 733,278 on the Merriam-Webster website is inexplicable and falls far short of one million. Second, the description of Hefei’ s location is questionable. Based on searches for cities like Mumbai and Osaka, website descriptions of city locations generally reference large rivers, lakes, seas, or bays within or near the city—such as “Mumbai is located on Mumbai Island in the Arabian Sea.” When such geographical features are absent, other cities are generally not used as reference points. The description of Hefei as “located

west of Nanjing” is therefore inappropriate, as overseas audiences likely have equally limited knowledge of Nanjing.

1.2 Britannica Website

The Britannica webpage on Hefei introduces basic information about the city, including population, geographical environment, water and land transportation, industrial development, higher education, the timing of its designation as Anhui’s provincial capital and resulting changes, and the city’s development since the Han and Tang dynasties. Compared to the Merriam-Webster website, this introduction is considerably more comprehensive and includes photographs that help enhance overseas audiences’ understanding of the city. For example, the introduction tracing the city’s development since the Han and Tang dynasties recounts the historical establishment of Hefei as a county, its strategic importance during the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties, and the historical evolution of the city’s name.

However, the webpage also exhibits deficiencies. First, there are accuracy issues with the content. For instance, in the city summary, the University of Science and Technology of China is rendered as “China’s University of Science and Technology,” while in the final paragraph of the introduction it appears as “University of Science and Technology of China” –the latter being the official name. Second, the content is updated infrequently. Using Hefei’s population data as an example, the statistics on the webpage date from 2003, showing a population of 1.17 million (in the summary section), lagging nearly two decades behind. Clicking on the Edit History link reveals that the webpage’s last update occurred on June 20, 2012, far behind the update times for foreign city pages such as Mumbai (October 22, 2021) and Osaka (July 21, 2022), which have been updated within the past one to two years. Third, there are issues with content emphasis. Overall, the website’s introduction to Hefei emphasizes the city’s history while providing limited coverage of its present situation. The final paragraph describes Hefei’s transformation from an obscure small county town to a provincial capital and regional center since the 1930s, along with its industrial development history, but only covers the city’s development up to the 1970s. In contrast, pages for cities like Mumbai include comprehensive information on urban landscapes, climate, planning, economy, transportation, administration, education, health, and culture.

1.3 TripAdvisor Website

The TripAdvisor webpage on Hefei provides a multi-faceted introduction from a travel perspective, covering major sections such as city hotels, city tours, restaurants and dining, travel forums, travel guides, and flight information. The city hotels section, for example, displays information on 1,412 hotels in Hefei, ranging from five-star hotels to budget accommodations, with details on accommodation costs and customer reviews. In the “Things to Do” column, website users have recommended numerous attractions and leisure destinations in Hefei,

including Swan Lake, Xiaoyaojin Park, Bao Park, Anhui Provincial Museum, Li Hongzhang' s Former Residence, and Huaihe Road Pedestrian Street, totaling 106 recommendations.

Like the other two websites, TripAdvisor also has shortcomings. First, translation inaccuracies are particularly prominent. For example, in the “Things to Do” column, Huaihe Road Pedestrian Street is rendered as “HuaiHe Lu BuXingJie,” essentially a pinyin transliteration; Sanguoxincheng Historic Sites Park is similarly rendered as “Sanguoxincheng Historic Sites” ; and Hefei University of Technology appears as “Hefei University of Science and Technology of China.” Such obvious errors are numerous throughout the webpage. Second, the advisory information is incomplete. In the “Popular Things to Do” section of the “Things to Do” column, the website provides only limited suggestions such as walking tours, park visits, holiday and seasonal tours. Moreover, there is only one walking tour route, only eight parks are recommended, and there are merely two holiday tour routes, one of which duplicates the walking tour route. In fact, the website has recommended over 100 attractions and leisure destinations in Hefei in its “Things to Do” column; with slight reorganization, the number of recommended routes would not be so limited. By contrast, the “Things to Do” sections for Osaka and Mumbai are much richer. For instance, in Mumbai' s “Popular Things to Do” section, five activities are recommended, including city tours (164 attractions) and cultural tours (326 attractions).

2. Analysis of Problems and Causes in Online Presentation of Chinese Cities

Based on the main content of Hefei-related webpages on Merriam-Webster, Britannica, and TripAdvisor, although these three overseas websites differ in type and orientation, they all demonstrate attention to this rapidly developing emerging Chinese city and provide multi-faceted, multi-perspective introductions. Simultaneously, the identified problems reflect that the international community still lacks sufficient understanding of Chinese cities, with inaccurate, untimely, and incomplete data and information. These issues are not unique to Hefei; many aspects of first-tier cities like Beijing and Shanghai, as well as second-tier cities like Chongqing, Nanjing, and Zhengzhou, exhibit similar problems. For example, on the Merriam-Webster website, the population data for Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing also seriously deviates from reality. Other scholars using data from different websites have similarly identified significant problems in how Chinese cities are presented on domestic and foreign websites.

Multiple factors contribute to these problems. From an internal-external perspective, external factors primarily involve deep-rooted “arrogance and prejudice.” “Arrogance” manifests as persistent notions of “Western centrism” and “cultural superiority,” leading to institutional, cultural, and ideological biases that emerge repeatedly. This attitude is not directed solely at China but includes many other developing countries. Scholars have noted that while Chinese people can more inclusively and objectively recognize Western systems and

appreciate their merits, Western citizens generally hold negative perceptions of China's social system. When Chinese people can overall maintain an objective attitude toward the West and its citizens, Western citizens often fail to correctly understand Chinese society.

Internal factors relate to shortcomings in China's external publicity work. In the traditional media era, China emphasized quantity and momentum, but the internet has accelerated the flattening and flow of information, becoming the main battlefield for information dissemination. Scholars argue that in the internet era, China's external publicity work should target specific audiences, focus on specific topics, address specific issues, and engage in discussions with audiences to achieve "precise external publicity." To this, we might add the need to select clear and most effective channels—a point often overlooked. Once channel selection is inappropriate, one can easily fall into the awkward situation of having reasonable arguments but no one listening, or having listeners but no believers. Therefore, while maintaining self-reliance, attention should also be paid to "borrowing sails to go to sea," with major internet platforms undoubtedly representing a huge "sail." The problems in Hefei's webpages on the three websites mentioned above, to some extent, reveal blind spots in channel awareness, platform awareness, and precision awareness.

3. Strategic Recommendations for Enhancing Chinese Cities' Online Image

In response to the above problems, it is recommended that relevant departments, institutions, organizations, and individuals concerned with Chinese urban development and international city image communication make improvements in the following areas.

First, establish connections with major foreign websites and platforms to conduct exchanges and cooperation, and actively participate in the construction and dissemination of cities' international images. Many websites like Britannica and TripAdvisor are open or semi-open platforms with dedicated personnel responsible for webpage management and updates, and even ordinary internet users can directly participate in content construction and improvement. The Edit History link on the Britannica website shows that Mumbai's page has been updated 23 times since 1998, while Hefei's page has only been updated six times, with the most recent update being over a decade ago—a gap that demands attention. Similarly, in TripAdvisor's "Things to Do" section for Hefei, although users have recommended 106 attractions, 79 of them have not yet received any introduction or user reviews of their experiences. The same is true for the website's "Hefei Travel Forum," which has seen only 17 participants in discussions since 2007, presenting a stark contrast to foreign cities like Mumbai. Changing this situation is not difficult; it can be achieved through active engagement. One can provide error correction feedback or improvement suggestions to major websites and platforms, or directly participate in discussions and reviews in relevant sections.

Second, pool resources and consolidate existing assets to create a nationally-owned, world-influential portal website or comprehensive platform for China's urban external publicity. As the saying goes, "one knows one's own affairs best." Only we ourselves are most familiar with our own characteristics and strengths. Chinese cities' external publicity and international image communication cannot entirely rely on others. In an era where information is so readily accessible, the fact that the three major websites still have considerable limitations in their understanding of Chinese cities proves the need for proactive action. Currently, all major Chinese city governments have foreign-language versions of their websites, but for various reasons, they are not frequently visited by overseas audiences. Some cities have also established specialized external publicity websites or platforms, such as "hello-guizhou" and "GoChengdu," but they have not yet formed a powerful synergy. Therefore, it is necessary to build an external publicity portal website or comprehensive platform that encompasses all major Chinese cities. If construction proves difficult, existing websites or platforms with good foundations and influence can be repurposed and modified to meet international audiences' needs and expectations for understanding Chinese cities. Moreover, such websites or platforms cannot be built and then left alone; measures must be taken to push them to the forefront of internet searches and usage, making them readily accessible to overseas audiences.

Third, engage in careful consideration of how to effectively tell China's stories and urban stories to overseas audiences. This requires not only making good use of cities' own cultural symbols and resources but also transforming communication thinking from a "propaganda mindset" to a "storytelling mindset," enabling foreign audiences not only to "hear" but also to "understand, accept, and believe." Hefei is a city with over 3,000 years of history, rich in historical and cultural resources such as Chaohu culture, Three Kingdoms culture, Bao Zheng culture, and Huai Army culture, while simultaneously exuding modern vitality and innovative charm. The three websites' introductions to Hefei barely scratch the surface when addressing the city's history and only provide generalities when discussing its present, lacking focus and vivid storytelling that leaves lasting impressions. Britannica is a "serious" website, yet its introductions to Mumbai and Osaka include vivid accounts of the "Gateway of India" and the "Kobe Earthquake of 1995," respectively, bringing the historical memories of these two cities to life. The international image construction and external communication of Chinese cities should also be based on cities' own traditions, culture, history, customs, humanities, education, and environment, excavating compelling and relatable urban stories and endowing cities with personalized characteristics through various "narratives" to present amiable, lovely, and respectable Chinese city images.

City image represents the concentrated embodiment of a city's cultural characteristics, will and character, and spiritual values, playing an important role in shaping national image and consolidating national spirit. Currently, international society's perception of China is undergoing a transformation from superficial to in-depth, from macro to micro, thanks to the joint efforts of all Chinese

cities. The road ahead is long, but progress will come through action, and perseverance will yield results. In the future, all Chinese cities must further leverage internet advantages to create easily comprehensible international images that highlight their own cultural values, presenting a true, multi-dimensional, and comprehensive China to the international community.

Notes:

This data represents statistics from the domain data statistics website Easy-Counter (<https://www.easycounter.com>) as of July 28, 2022.

The specific link for the Merriam-Webster webpage on Hefei is <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Hefei>, accessed July 28, 2022.

The specific link for the Britannica webpage on Hefei is <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hefei>, accessed July 28, 2022.

The specific link for the TripAdvisor webpage on Hefei is https://www.tripadvisor.com/Tourism-g297403-Hefei_{Anhui}-Vacations.html, accessed July 28, 2022.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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