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A Study on Dissemination Methods of Yungang Culture in the New Media Era (Postprint)

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Abstract

Yungang culture possesses rich cultural connotations, and the Party and the state have consistently attached great importance to the protection of Yungang Grottoes and the dissemination of Yungang culture. However, current dissemination of Yungang culture faces two limitations: first, the existing dissemination models are relatively traditional and monolithic; second, the lack of holistic consciousness has resulted in the absence of citizens as the main audience for Yungang culture. Against the backdrop of the current era of rapid development of new media, and considering the advantages of new media such as diverse forms, portability, massive information capacity, and cost-effectiveness, this article argues that new media can be employed as one of the primary tools for disseminating Yungang culture in the new era, thereby further expanding the dissemination pathways of Yungang culture, stimulating residents' awareness of absorbing and protecting Yungang culture, fundamentally addressing the issue of audience lack of participation, and thus enabling Yungang culture to reach a broader scope.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on Communication Methods of Yungang Culture in the New Media Era

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Abstract: Yungang culture possesses rich cultural connotations, and the Party and state have consistently attached great importance to the protection of Yungang Grottoes and the dissemination of Yungang culture. However, current efforts to transmit Yungang culture face two major limitations: first, existing communication modes remain relatively traditional and monolithic, and second,

a lack of holistic consciousness has resulted in the absence of local citizens as primary audiences. Considering the rapid development of new media and its advantages—including diverse formats, portability, vast information capacity, and cost-effectiveness—this paper argues that new media should serve as a primary tool for disseminating Yungang culture in the new era. This approach would broaden communication pathways, stimulate residents' awareness of Yungang culture absorption and protection, fundamentally address the problem of audience disengagement, and thereby expand the cultural reach of Yungang culture.

Keywords: Yungang culture; communication media; new media; communication methods; communication effects

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As a cultural capital with thousands of years of history, the vicissitudes of time have endowed Datong City with rich humanistic and natural landscapes characterized by strong regional features. Among these, the Yungang Grottoes—hailed as “a brilliant pearl in the world’s cultural and artistic treasury”—are situated on the southern slope of Wuzhou Mountain in Yungang District, Datong City. As a representative masterpiece of world grotto art, the Yungang Grottoes were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in December 2001. Due to their precious historical and artistic value, the Yungang Grottoes have received significant attention. To strengthen the cultural inheritance and protection of the Datong Yungang Grottoes and ensure the continuity of Yungang culture, all sectors of society, including academia, have prioritized the maintenance and preservation of the Yungang Grottoes, undertaking extensive work. However, current protection efforts for Yungang culture focus primarily on the physical preservation of cultural relics, employing relatively monolithic approaches that have yet to achieve holistic and subjective protection. Most notably, local residents—as one of the primary subjects of protection—remain largely absent from these efforts. The author contends that truly effective protection of Yungang culture must fundamentally involve stimulating local residents’ awareness of preservation. Cultivating this awareness necessitates deepening their understanding of Yungang culture’s historical, artistic, and other values. To achieve recognition across all social strata, including local populations, it is essential not only to strengthen research on Yungang culture’s content but also to improve promotional methods and local popularization of Yungang culture’s value and significance in accordance with contemporary developmental characteristics.

1. Current Status of Yungang Culture Communication

Analysis of existing achievements reveals that current methods for transmitting Yungang culture primarily fall into three categories: paper material transmission, physical transmission, and mass media transmission.

1.1 Paper Material Transmission

As the most common communication method, paper materials have played a certain role in disseminating Yungang culture. The Yungang Grottoes have continuously attracted literati and scholars due to their historical value, resulting in numerous literary works centered on this theme. According to the National Library of China's Wenjin Search, 150 books have been created with the Yungang Grottoes as their subject, among which the *Complete Collection of Yungang Grottoes* series stands as the most representative. This collection comprises 20 volumes, utilizes [Figure 12710: see original paper] images, documents 59,265 sculptures, and catalogs 45 numbered grottoes, constituting a comprehensive pictorial canon that fully reflects the different periods, grottoes, artistic styles, and characteristics of the Yungang Grottoes [1]. Additionally, 62 records of precious visual materials, including photographic albums and video footage, have been produced with the Yungang Grottoes as their main subject, with photographic albums comprising the majority. A search for "Yungang Grottoes" on CNKI yields 1,626 relevant academic achievements, including 801 journal articles, 83 dissertations, 78 conference papers, 388 newspaper articles, and 3 other works [2]. These figures demonstrate that substantial paper-based research materials on Yungang culture are available.

1.2 Physical Transmission

Building upon paper transmission, an increasing number of people have come to know and understand Yungang culture, leading to the development of a newer and more advanced stage: physical transmission. From the perspective of information communication content, physical transmission occurs when the object referenced by transmitted information is present or integrated with the actual entity it represents [3]. Currently, physical transmission of Yungang culture is primarily realized through on-site visits to the Yungang Grottoes. Based on different purposes, these visits can be divided into two main categories: research-oriented field investigations and tourism-oriented sightseeing [4]. Historical records indicate that scholars from both China and abroad have conducted cultural investigations of the Yungang Grottoes. French sinologist Édouard Chavannes visited northern China around 1907, undertaking a ten-month expedition during which he collected and photographed numerous inscriptions and images related to the Yungang Grottoes [5]. Chinese scholar Liang Sicheng conducted a cultural investigation in Datong in September 1933, subsequently authoring *A Catalog of Northern Wei Architecture as Represented in the Yungang Grottoes* [6]. According to information released by the Shanxi Provincial People's Government, the Yungang Grottoes received 1.98 million

visitors in 2019 alone [7]. Although visitor numbers plummeted in the first half of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they rebounded after the implementation of free weekday admission policies on July 14, with the scenic area receiving an average of 15,000 daily visitors and over 3,000 vehicles per day [8].

1.3 Traditional Mass Media Transmission

Based on physical transmission, traditional mass media transforms information into symbols such as images, sounds, and text, achieving media dissemination through various channels and actively promoting the timeliness of information communication. As early as 2014, China Central Television and Shanxi Television jointly produced the six-episode high-definition documentary *Yungang*, broadcast on CCTV-9, which narrated the historical development of the Yungang Grottoes and showcased the ethnic integration culture, Buddhist culture, and sculptural art contained within them [9]. In various lectures and forums themed around the Yungang Grottoes in Datong City, traditional media has played the role of publishing news reports in print media and local television stations. Both *Shanxi Evening News* and *Life Morning News* (Datong edition) covered the lecture “Yungang Grottoes—The First Holy Land of Eastern Buddhism” delivered by Zhang Zhuo, current director of the Yungang Grottoes Research Institute, at Shanxi University [10], as well as the “Scholarly Yungang” cultural lecture series held at the Yungang District Library [11], bringing these public welfare lectures into the view of community residents with the goal of popularizing Yungang culture.

2. Shortcomings in Yungang Culture Communication

Under the Datong Municipal People’s Government’s high priority on Yungang culture communication and protection, existing efforts have achieved considerable success. However, it must be acknowledged that the current communication system still exhibits multiple deficiencies in its approaches to disseminating Yungang culture.

2.1 Limited Book Resources in Datong

Although paper materials can comprehensively popularize knowledge about the Yungang Grottoes, the number of books on Yungang culture in Datong City is extremely limited. A search for “Yungang Grottoes” on the WeChat public platform of Datong Library yielded only 85 results, while the seventh national census recorded a total population of 3,105,591 in Datong City [12], revealing a severe disproportion between the vast population and available books. While physical transmission enables word-of-mouth dissemination and on-site experience, the Yungang Grottoes are located 16 kilometers west of Datong’s urban area on Wuzhou Mountain, making visits relatively inaccessible. Furthermore, Datong’s winter is exceptionally harsh, lasting over four months from November to January with minimum temperatures approaching -20°C and short, frigid

days. Summer extends from June through September with scorching heat near 30°C. Consequently, the peak tourist seasons are limited to spring and autumn, leaving winter and summer as “blank periods.” These two factors significantly diminish the effectiveness of physical transmission.

2.2 Funding Shortages for Yungang Culture Communication

Economic foundations determine superstructures, making state and government policy and financial support crucial for Yungang culture communication. An examination of the *2020 Datong City National Economic and Social Development Statistical Bulletin* released on the Datong Municipal People’s Government website reveals that in 2020, the municipal government invested merely 310 million yuan in culture, sports, and entertainment—a 21% decrease from 2019 [13]. This reduction stemmed from the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact, which caused a sharp decline in cultural and entertainment venue attendance and forced scenic areas and cultural institutions to close, thereby drastically cutting relevant budgets. This funding reduction and the scenic area’s “hibernation” have further disadvantaged Yungang culture communication. Another detrimental factor is the uneven distribution of Yungang culture development funds. According to the 2021 departmental budget document of the Datong Municipal Cultural Heritage Bureau, the Yungang Grottoes Research Institute’s funds are allocated across three areas: promotional activities, Yungang Grottoes protection projects, and scenic area operation and maintenance. Scenic area operation and maintenance receives the largest investment at 24.56 million yuan, followed by Yungang culture protection projects at 12 million yuan, while promotional activities receive the smallest allocation of only 3 million yuan for printing paper promotional materials, books, and archival documents [14]. The Datong Municipal Cultural Heritage Bureau allocates substantial funds to the physical restoration of the Yungang Grottoes relics themselves while limiting promotional funds to paper material production without any budget for online promotion. This demonstrates a clear problem of uneven fund distribution in current Yungang culture development.

2.3 Yungang Culture as an Isolated Cultural Phenomenon

As described above, recent Yungang culture communication has relied primarily on three methods: paper material transmission, physical transmission, and mass media transmission. While citizens initially show strong interest when first encountering Yungang culture, this interest often remains superficial and gradually diminishes over time, constituting a major shortcoming in its dissemination. Examining current development models reveals that Yungang culture communication has become detached from its local environment and isolated as a separate cultural category, which proves highly detrimental to its transmission and protection. Regarding protection measures themselves, current efforts emphasize physical preservation while neglecting measures that foster original protective consciousness, with even fewer initiatives aimed at stimulating local

residents' awareness. Restricted to these current measures, physical protection of the Yungang Grottoes can only address symptoms rather than root causes. Fundamental protection and inheritance of Yungang culture requires strengthening citizens' subjectively generated protective consciousness. From the perspective of protection communities, current efforts focus on partial protection while neglecting holistic preservation. Protecting Yungang culture is not merely a task for the state and government but also a responsibility of collective society. Without community cooperation and implementation, policies remain empty talk. From a comprehensive development perspective, Yungang Grottoes transmission cannot succeed without local participation, making the choice of cultural transmission venues critically important. According to Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, habitus, field, and socialization are closely interconnected. Habitus represents socialized subjectivity, shaped within fields and constructed in the objective world [15]. Therefore, Yungang culture transmission and protection should be based on holistic preservation. Implanting Yungang culture into the fertile soil of communities, leveraging community integrative functions, and enhancing residents' awareness of cultural relic protection and acceptance are paramount.

3. Advantages of New Media and Path Construction

The numerous bottlenecks in Yungang culture communication demand timely reform in response to contemporary development. New media represents the sum of highly interactive media forms relying on network technology, digital technology, and mobile communication technology [16]. Compared with traditional media, new media enables multiple novel patterns in information transmission. Vivid, colorful pop-ups enrich information dissemination, added comment channels facilitate online-offline communication, and information can be stored permanently and accessed repeatedly anytime and anywhere. These functions break the inherent "authoritative" model of traditional media, diversifying and flexibilizing information channels. Moreover, full utilization of new media can achieve superior communication effects with less financial investment. New media offers higher return on investment than traditional media. Traditional media, represented primarily by print, radio, and television, require significantly greater financial investment, time costs, and human resources in news production than new media. Traditional media's most important challenge involves dispersed target audiences and delayed information despite certain timeliness. In contrast, new media mobile platforms encompass everything through multi-channel, multi-terminal models that allow users to access information anytime and anywhere. Although initial investment may be substantial, the broad audience reach and high click-through rates yield highly considerable returns. Most importantly, in this new era of rapid information development, new media has permeated residents' daily lives and become considered a "daily necessity." The emergence of mobile media has made unlocking phones upon waking, during meals, on buses, and before sleep to browse WeChat public accounts or watch short videos on Douyin and Kuaishou a daily routine. In her article "Analy-

sis of Community Culture Construction Based on WeChat Application in the New Media Era,” Wang Mengdie discussed how WeChat has brought numerous conveniences to public life. WeChat Pay has revolutionized the cumbersome nature of traditional cash payments, enabling residents to handle utility bills, transportation bookings, and grocery shopping on their mobile devices. Furthermore, WeChat has expanded cultural promotion platforms by moving offline activities to online WeChat groups, helping narrow emotional distances and achieve affective integration [17]. Consequently, the social network woven by new media possesses powerful cohesive force. Precisely because new media offers unique advantages in cultural transmission that traditional media lacks, we should fully leverage these strengths in disseminating Yungang culture to achieve maximum results with minimal effort.

First, WeChat. As a social platform blending commercial and social functions, WeChat features broad audiences and strong interactivity, making it an ideal channel for Yungang culture transmission. Traditional WeChat communication facilitates interpersonal exchange, while the rise of WeChat public account platforms has stimulated the activation of self-media subscriptions, expanding communication audiences to group levels. Since 2014, the “Yungang Grottoes Official WeChat” public platform has been in formal operation. Its menu bar features three sections— “Tour Yungang,” “Appreciate Yungang,” and “Enjoy Yungang” —providing convenient services such as online ticket purchasing, tour reservations, and guide explanations, while also employing VR technology to achieve 360° cloud-based introductions to Yungang venues, actively promoting Yungang culture transmission. However, to date, most articles on this subscription account have only approximately 1,000 views, considerably less than the 10,000+ views typically received by articles on the comparable Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes official WeChat subscription account “Dunhuang Research Institute.” The author believes that the urgent priority in using the “Yungang Grottoes Official WeChat” public platform for Yungang culture transmission involves not only enriching content but also addressing the issue of low readership. Key to success is innovating functions and content while maintaining the platform’s functional advantages, transforming the subscription account into a warm, interactive, and well-structured media platform. First, it must consistently engage with the masses, promoting and publishing Yungang culture-related information in forms that resonate with popular tastes. Second, content must be down-to-earth, understanding public interests and using plain content to connect with audiences while weakening authoritative media tones.

Second, Weibo. The official Weibo account for Yungang Grottoes, named “World Heritage Yungang Grottoes Official,” boasts 120,000 followers, yet each post receives only a handful of reposts, likes, and comments. Reviewing the account’s historical content reveals that reposted content from other accounts predominates, with relatively little original content, and the original posts feature somewhat thin copywriting—mostly two or three sentences without careful composition that fail to attract audiences. Additionally, original content selection appears random and fragmented, lacking fixed sections or columns, making

it less appealing to the public and resulting in minimal engagement. The author suggests improving this situation through: (1) enhancing content quality on the official Weibo account and systematically organizing posted content into sections, such as “Yungang News” or “Interpreting Yungang,” using subheadings to categorize Weibo content and enriching posts with fresh images and text; and (2) emphasizing audience interaction to boost the popularity of the “Yungang Grottoes Super Topic.” This super topic could be developed into a platform for public “suggestion books” or “travel guide notes” about the Yungang Grottoes, enabling free expression. Weibo’s city-based real-time location function can be utilized to post Yungang culture-related announcements, promoting activities and informing citizens about content, timing, and locations to stimulate participation enthusiasm.

Third, Douyin. Douyin focuses on short video functionality, catering to contemporary fragmented reading patterns. For this short video platform, we can: (1) create classic promotional films and thematic series, producing a series of concise, high-quality, content-rich short videos about Yungang culture that tell stories accessible to the masses; and (2) conduct regular live broadcasts within the Yungang Grottoes scenic area, real-time guiding the public through the magnificent beauty of the grottoes while explaining their cultural significance, thereby attracting on-site visits and disseminating Yungang culture.

In summary, new media presents new opportunities for Yungang culture transmission and development. By cleverly addressing contemporary public pain points, new media compensates for deficiencies in traditional Yungang culture communication methods, broadens transmission pathways, promotes holistic protection and development of the Yungang Grottoes, and achieves maximum benefits with minimal funding. Therefore, accelerating the construction of new media platforms for Yungang culture transmission is imperative to fully protect this national intangible cultural heritage and promote Yungang culture—a traditional culture with a millennium-long heritage—using new media technology.

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

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