

The Birth of "Internet-Famous Cities": How Douyin Short Videos Construct and Disseminate New Local Cultural Images-A Case Study of Xi'an and Chongqing

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Abstract: In the mobile internet era, short videos, characterized by their brevity, visual appeal, and interactivity, have become a core tool for reshaping city images. As a leading domestic platform, Douyin leverages algorithmic recommendations and user-generated content to shift urban promotion from official-led to public participation. Xi'an and Chongqing have emerged as typical "internet-famous cities" in recent years-one relying on historical heritage, the other on unique topography-forging entirely new urban images on Douyin. This paper draws on semiotics, media construction theory, and participatory culture theory, combined with data and case studies, to analyze how Douyin produces urban symbols, constructs narratives, and facilitates dissemination. It compares Xi'an's "Guochao Chang'an" approach with Chongqing's "magical realism and hustle-bustle" model, identifies the benefits and problems brought by short videos, and finally offers suggestions for long-term development.

Keywords: Douyin Short Video; Internet-Famous City; Cultural Image; Symbolic Construction; Xi'an; Chongqing

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

(1) Rapid development of the short video industry

In recent years, the number of short video users in China has grown substantially. According to the 52nd "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of June 2023, China had 1.026 billion short video users, accounting for 95.2% of all internet users. Content has expanded from early comedy and daily life to tourism, culture, knowledge,

and more. Tourism content, being visually engaging, has become a key segment of these platforms. Douyin, through precise recommendations and topic-driven campaigns, has taken a leading role in urban tourism communication. [1]

(2) Transformation of city promotion methods

Traditionally, city promotion relied on official promotional videos, travel brochures, and TV commercials-methods that were singular in approach, grand in content, and less appealing to young people. For instance, Xi'an's promotion previously focused on the historical weight of the Terracotta Warriors and the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, while Chongqing highlighted established labels like mountainous terrain and hotpot. Short videos are different; their 15-to-60-second length suits mobile viewing, first-person and immersive shooting creates a sense of presence, and music/special effects add interest. More importantly, ordinary tourists and locals can also shoot videos, presenting the city's daily life from their perspectives, making the city image more relatable.

(3) The "internet-famous city" phenomenon warrants study

Since 2018, cities like Xi'an, Chongqing, and Chengdu have rapidly gained popularity due to viral videos on Douyin, forming a cycle of "seen online -> experienced offline -> recirculated via new videos". These cities have seen significant tourism growth, but issues like content homogenization and superficial culture have also emerged. Therefore, studying how Douyin shapes and disseminates new city images is highly necessary.

1.2 Research Significance

(1) Theoretical significance

This paper uses semiotics and media construction theory as core frameworks, combined with participatory culture and algorithmic dissemination theory, to analyze

how short videos transform city images. Existing research often focuses on the economic benefits of internet-famous cities or analyzes single strategies. This comparative study of two cities more clearly demonstrates how short videos process and reshape cultural symbols.

(2) Practical significance

Xi'an and Chongqing are representative of different types of internet-famous cities. Xi'an, through IPs like "Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City" and the "Tang Dynasty Sleeve Girl," has rejuvenated its ancient capital culture. Chongqing, relying on wonders like Hongyadong and the Liziba Light Rail passing through a building, has crafted an image that is "magical yet down-to-earth." Both have seen substantial increases in tourism revenue and visitor numbers. Summarizing their experiences while identifying problems like unstable traffic and superficial cultural representation can provide references for other cities.

1.3 Literature Review

Scholars have conducted considerable research on internet-famous cities, short videos, and urban communication. Regarding causes, algorithmic recommendations, visual impact, and emotional resonance are widely seen as key factors. On dissemination strategies, research focuses on symbol usage, narrative methods, and platform operations. Concerning cultural effects, studies primarily examine the boost to tourism economies and the promotion of local culture. However, existing research has shortcomings: first, a lack of in-depth analysis of cultural image construction; second, a scarcity of comparative dual-case studies; third, insufficient specificity in problem analysis and recommendations. This paper aims to address these gaps. [2]

1.4 Research Framework and Methods

(1) Research Framework

This paper follows the sequence: "Theoretical Basis -> Mechanism Analysis -> Case Comparison -> Problem Reflection -> Optimization Paths." It begins by reviewing relevant theories, then analyzes how Douyin produces symbols, constructs narratives, and facilitates dissemination. Subsequently, it compares the approaches and effects of Xi'an and Chongqing, identifies problems and benefits, and finally offers recommendations.

(2) Research Methods

- Literature Review: Synthesizes theories of semiotics, media construction, and research on internet-famous cities.

- Case Study: Analyzes the symbolic, narrative, and dissemination strategies of Xi'an and Chongqing on Douyin.

- Semiotic Analysis: Decodes visual, linguistic, and behavioral symbols in videos to understand how cultural images are formed.

- Data Analysis: Combines data on Douyin views, likes, topic participation, and tourism revenue/visitor numbers for the two cities.

1.5 Definition of Core Concepts

(1) Internet-Famous City: Refers to a city that, through short video platforms and relying on unique cultural symbols, landscapes, or lifestyles, attracts widespread attention, prompts numerous check-ins, and achieves rapid tourism growth.

(2) Local Cultural Image: The holistic impression people form of a city's history, landscape, life, and character through watching videos and experiencing it firsthand.

(3) Cultural Construction of Douyin Short Videos: The process by which Douyin selects and disseminates city symbols through algorithmic recommendations, topic setting, and user-generated content, thereby changing people's perceptions of cities and forming new images.

2. Theoretical Basis: The Logic of Short Videos and Local Cultural Image Construction

2.1 Semiotics: Signifier, Signified, and the Construction of Cultural Myths

Semiotics studies how signs generate meaning. Saussure divided signs into "signifier" and "signified"-the signifier is the visible image, sound, text; the signified is the underlying meaning. Roland Barthes further developed the concept of "myth," suggesting signs can ascend from surface meaning to cultural values. [3]

On Douyin, urban elements are transformed into signs. For example, the Tang-style architecture and Hanfu performances at Xi'an's Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City are the signifiers, with the signified being the prosperity of the Tang Dynasty and the charm of traditional culture. For Chongqing's Hongyadong, the stilt houses and night lights are the signifiers, signifying the mountainous

terrain and local life. Short videos combine these signs, allowing viewers to develop emotional identification with the city through visual enjoyment.

2.2 Media Construction Theory: Media Framing and Reshaping of Urban Reality

Media construction theory posits that media do not objectively record reality but reconstruct it through selection, amplification, and downplaying. Douyin's role manifests in two ways: first, in content selection, algorithms prioritize visually striking and resonant content (e.g., the Sleeve Girl performance, light rail passing through building) while downplaying ordinary scenes; second, in cognitive guidance, fragmented videos lead people to form stereotyped impressions of cities (e.g., Xi'an as "Tang Dynasty Guochao," Chongqing as "Magical 8D").

2.3 Participatory Culture and UGC: Decentralized Cultural Co-creation

Henry Jenkins argues that in the new media era, users are no longer passive consumers but actively produce, disseminate, and interact with content. Douyin's UGC model exemplifies this; ordinary tourists and locals can shoot videos, breaking the official monopoly on defining the city's image. These micro-perspective contents are more authentic and relatable, and through likes, comments, duets, and imitations, everyone participates together, making the city image more vibrant. [4]

2.4 Algorithmic Distribution: Communication Logic of Precise Targeting and Traffic Amplification

Douyin's algorithmic recommendation is central to its dissemination power. Unlike traditional "broadcast" push, Douyin uses "interest-based recommendation," matching content based on users' age, location, interests, and browsing history. For example, videos of the Sleeve Girl are pushed to those interested in traditional culture and Guochao, while light rail videos are pushed to those interested in geographical wonders and travel check-ins. This allows content to quickly reach target audiences, creating viral hits. [4]

3. Douyin Short Videos: The Production and Dissemination Mechanism of Internet-Famous City Cultural Images

3.1 Symbol Production: From Urban Resources to Communicable Cultural Symbols

The first step in Douyin's construction of urban culture is transforming urban resources into symbols, primarily three types:

(1) Landscape Symbols: Xi'an's Terracotta Warriors, Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City; Chongqing's Hongyadong, Yangtze River Cableway, Mountain City Trails[5].

(2) Lifestyle Symbols: Xi'an's Shuaiwan wine, brush-shaped pastry, Qinqiang opera; Chongqing's hotpot, noodles, Sichuan opera face-changing.

(3) Emotional Symbols: Xi'an's "Tang Dynasty romance" and "profound culture"; Chongqing's "warm and inclusive" atmosphere and "hustle-bustle charm".

3.2 Narrative Transcoding: Adapting to Short Video's Expressive Logic

To fit the characteristics of short videos, urban content requires a new narrative approach:

(1) Time Compression: Only the most captivating moments (e.g., the Sleeve Girl holding hands, light rail passing through building) are featured within 15-60 seconds.

(2) Scene Immersion: First-person perspective, aerial shots, slow motion create a sense of presence.

(3) Musical Empowerment: Ancient style music for Xi'an, folk songs for Chongqing, enhancing mood and memorability.

(4) Interactive Design: Initiating hashtags like #CheckInXi'an, #MagicalChongqing to encourage duets, imitations, and sharing.

3.3 Dissemination Chain: Closed-Loop Communication with Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Urban communication on Douyin forms a cycle: Ordinary users post check-in videos -> Influencers and key opinion leaders amplify content -> Official accounts endorse it -> Platform algorithms boost visibility -> More people see and visit in person -> They post new check-in videos -> The cycle repeats[6].

3.4 Cultural Turn: From Grand Narrative to Micro Experience

Short videos have driven two shifts in urban communication: first, from official grand

narratives to micro-level experiences of ordinary people, focusing less on historical achievements and more on authentic life; second, from static display to dynamic experience, allowing people to move from "seeing culture" to "playing culture." [7]

4. Comparative Dual-Case Study: Construction of New Cultural Images in Xi'an and Chongqing

4.1 Xi'an: From Ancient Capital of Thirteen Dynasties to "Guochao Chang'an Immersive Tang Dynasty"

(1) Core Cultural Symbols and Presentation Methods

Xi'an has built a symbol system centered on Tang Dynasty culture on Douyin: Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City, Tang Dynasty Sleeve Girl, Terracotta Warriors, Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, Shuaiwan wine, "The Longest Day in Chang'an," etc. The Tang-style architecture, light shows, and Hanfu parades at Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City recreate the Tang Dynasty's splendor; the Sleeve Girl embodies Tang culture; the Terracotta Warriors and Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, combined with aerial and time-lapse photography, showcase the integration of ancient and modern; Shuaiwan wine combine food with history playfully [8].

(2) Government Guidance and Dissemination Strategies

Xi'an's government has been proactive, taking several actions: first, creating cultural tourism projects like Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City and "The Longest Day in Chang'an" to provide content for short videos; second, hosting events like "Xi'an Year · Most Chinese" and city wall lantern fairs, disseminated via Douyin live streaming and topics; third, official accounts of the Culture and Tourism Bureau and scenic spots releasing content and collaborating with influencers, forming an "official + public" communication matrix.

(3) Dissemination Effects and New Image

The #Xi'an hashtag on Douyin has garnered over 100 billion views, #Tang Dynasty EverBright City over 50 billion views, with a single video of the Sleeve Girl reaching over 200 million views. In 2023, Xi'an received over 300 million tourists, with tourism revenue exceeding 300 billion yuan. The new image of Xi'an shaped by Douyin is "tangible Tang Dynasty, a warm ancient capital, a benchmark

for Guochao culture."

4.2 Chongqing: Mountain City / River City to "Magical 8D · Hustle-Bustle Cyberpunk"

(1) Core Cultural Symbols and Presentation Methods

Relying on its unique mountainous terrain, Chongqing has created symbols centered on "magical wonders" and "local hustle-bustle": Hongyadong, Liziba Light Rail passing through building, Yangtze River Cableway, Mountain City Trails, hotpot, night views, etc. The stilt houses and night lights of Hongyadong resemble a "real-life Spirited Away"; the light rail passing through a building has become a nation-wide check-in icon; the cableway and trails showcase the three-dimensional transportation; hotpot and noodles convey local atmosphere and warmth [9].

(2) Public Spontaneity and Dissemination Characteristics

Chongqing's dissemination is primarily public-driven, with UGC content dominating. Locals and tourists film daily scenes and details-street hotpot, the bustle of mountain trails, the interesting sight of the light rail passing through a building-which quickly go viral. The government subsequently optimized facilities at popular spots and introduced "doting on tourists" measures (e.g., road closures, observation decks), reinforcing the image of a "city that spoils its tourists."

(3) Dissemination Effects and New Image

The #Chongqing hashtag on Douyin has over 100 billion views, #Hongyadong and #LizibaLightRail each exceed 10 billion views. In 2023, Chongqing received over 400 million tourists, with tourism revenue exceeding 400 billion yuan. The new image of Chongqing shaped by Douyin is "magical 8D three-dimensional city, cyberpunk co-existing with local charm, a warm and inclusive city that spoils its tourists."

4.3 Similarities and Differences

(1) Similarities

Both cities leverage unique urban resources to create core symbols, using visual, scene-based short videos to attract people; both have formed an "online -> offline -> re-dissemination" cycle; both target young people, driving the rejuvenation of urban culture [10].

(2) Differences:

· Cultural Core: Xi'an focuses on historical

culture, emphasizing the Tang Dynasty IP; Chongqing focuses on geographical features, emphasizing wonders and local life.

· Dissemination Subject: Xi'an is government-led with systematic operation; Chongqing is primarily public-led with government cooperation.

· Image Style: Xi'an leans towards "Guochao, profound, romantic"; Chongqing leans towards "magical, down-to-earth, lively."

5. Effects and Problems of Douyin's Construction of New Local Cultural Images

5.1 Positive Effects

(1) Boosting Tourism Economy and Driving Industrial Transformation

Xi'an and Chongqing have seen significant year-on-year growth in tourist numbers and revenue for several consecutive years, making tourism an economic pillar. This has also driven related industries like catering, accommodation, and cultural creativity, shifting tourism from sightseeing to experience.

(2) Rejuvenating Local Culture and Enhancing Cultural Confidence

Short videos have brought Tang Dynasty culture and Bayu culture out of museums, attracting many young people. By filming Hanfu videos, checking in, and learning dialects, they actively participate in cultural dissemination, giving traditional culture new vitality.

(3) Activating Local Culture and Intangible Cultural Heritage Resources

Intangible heritage items like Xi'an's Qinqiang opera and paper-cutting, and Chongqing's Sichuan opera and Tongliang Dragon Dance, gain visibility through short videos. Local street food and teahouse culture are also widely spread, enriching the urban cultural ecosystem.

5.2 Existing Problems

(1) Symbol Homogenization and Superficial Content

Video content in both cities is relatively monotonous—mostly the Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City and Sleeve Girl in Xi'an, mostly Hongyadong and the light rail in Chongqing. Most videos are simple check-ins, lacking interpretation of cultural depth, leading to superficial understanding.

(2) Fluctuating Traffic and Lack of Sustained Operation

Traffic from going viral can dissipate quickly. Once new content dries up, attention declines. Both Xi'an and Chongqing face this issue, overly relying on single symbols and lacking systematic IP operation and content innovation.

(3) Spatial Congestion and Deteriorating Tourist Experience

Popular spots like Hongyadong and Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City suffer from overcrowding, long wait times, and inadequate services. Simultaneously, over-commercialization has eroded some of the authentic charm of these attractions.

(4) Cultural Stereotyping and One-Sided Images

Fragmented dissemination leads to cities being tagged. Many people believe Xi'an only has "Tang Dynasty Guochao" and Chongqing only "Magical 8D," overlooking other cultural aspects like red culture (revolutionary heritage), War of Resistance culture, and immigrant culture.

6. Optimization Paths: From Short-Term Internet Fame to Long-Term Cultural Brand

6.1 Excavate Diverse Cultural Symbols for Differentiated Dissemination

Cities should deeply explore more cultural resources to create diverse symbols. Xi'an can highlight red culture and Guanzhong folk customs; Chongqing can explore War of Resistance culture, immigrant culture, and intangible heritage. Simultaneously, innovate content based on unique characteristics to avoid following trends.

6.2 Deepen Cultural Connotation and Enhance Content Depth

Encourage creators to produce in-depth interpretive content—historical explanations, intangible heritage showcases, urban stories—allowing viewers not only to see the spectacle but also understand the culture. Government and platforms can jointly launch cultural topics and support quality creators.

6.3 Build a Long-Term IP System and Strengthen Sustained Operation

Avoid relying on just one or two viral hits; instead, develop systematic urban cultural IPs. Xi'an can build a comprehensive IP chain around "Tang Dynasty culture," while Chongqing can establish an IP matrix around

"mountain city life." Establish a regular content operation mechanism to continuously launch new activities.

6.4 Optimize Tourism Infrastructure and Enhance Experience Quality

Reasonably plan visitor flow at check-in spots, improve transportation, dining, accommodation, and other facilities, and enhance service quality. Balance commercial development with cultural preservation to retain the city's original charm.

6.5 Learn from International Experience and Promote Global Dissemination

Draw lessons from practices in Kyoto, Seoul, etc., combine them with Xi'an and Chongqing's unique characteristics, and create international content. Leverage platforms like Douyin's international version (TikTok) to promote Chinese urban cultural symbols globally.

7. Conclusion

Through symbolic production, scene-based narration, algorithmic recommendations, and public co-creation, Douyin has successfully helped Xi'an and Chongqing shape new urban images, transforming these traditional cities into internet-famous destinations that are both culturally rich and popular among young people. Short videos have not only brought traffic and economic growth but also facilitated the rejuvenated dissemination of local culture, reshaping urban brand value.

However, problems like symbol homogenization, shallow content, and unstable traffic have also emerged. In the future, cities should move beyond short-term traffic thinking, focus on culture, excavate diverse symbols, deepen content, build long-term IPs, optimize tourist experiences, and learn from international experience to transition from "internet fame" to "lasting renown," allowing short videos to become a sustainable driving force for local cultural dissemination.

Future research can further explore the international dissemination paths of short videos, cognitive differences across age groups,

and the impact of algorithmic ethics on urban cultural construction.

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