

Research on the Path of Inheritance and Development of Traditional Hui Culture from the Perspective of Rural Communication: A Media Anthropology Paradigm

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Abstract:

Rural culture encapsulates the essence of the enduring Chinese culture and represents the nation's spiritual achievements. With the continuous advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, rural communication within the field of communication studies is increasingly becoming a significant area of research. The ancient villages in southern Anhui, represented by Jixi County, which are carriers of China's outstanding traditional culture, remain in the early stages of superficial development and face the issue of conventional media loss. This study selects the traditional ancient villages of Jixi County as the research object, adopts the research paradigm of media anthropology, and combines media practice with the research method of participatory ethnography investigation to study the current situation of traditional cultural media and the problems faced by media inheritance. Based on the data collected and evaluation, feasible paths are proposed for rural cultural communication from the media perspective.

Keywords:

Rural Communication, Traditional Culture, Media Anthropology, Ethnography

1. Introduction

Since the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017 explicitly pointed out the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, numerous studies have been published in rural communication, indicating a high level of research enthusiasm. Research trends show that rural cultural communication has received much attention from the new media perspective. A review of current research on rural cultural communication reveals that the media anthropology paradigm has become an essential theoretical shift. [1] However, most current media studies of rural cultural communication focus on the dilemmas and settlement countermeasures of

video media. In contrast, research on traditional artistic media in rural areas is relatively rare.

Before the widespread adoption of modern digital technology, media forms such as written media, visual arts, performing arts, oral traditions, crafts, and objects played essential roles in different cultural and historical periods, promoting cultural inheritance, education, and social communication. Wei Bu, in “Reconstructing Gender-Media Studies: Starting from the Local Women’s Media Usage Experience,” defines media in cultural dissemination activities, such as dance, folk songs, ballads, operas, and legends, as traditional media. [2]

Starting from this definition, targeting 26 villages in Jixi County, Anhui Province, participatory observation and research were conducted in April and July 2023, each time living continuously for two months. A large amount of text materials from traditional cultural media from ancient villages have been accumulated, from which the conventional cultural media of Jixi County faces significant loss, and the necessity of discussing related issues from the perspective of rural communication is highlighted. This directs the research towards exploring the functional transformation of traditional media that once played essential roles in rural dissemination activities on villagers’ interaction behaviors, the reasons for their loss during the inheritance process, and how to maximize their effectiveness in traditional cultural inheritance through media integration in the new media era, further helping to tell China’s story well. This article will start with reviewing and analyzing related literature, refining the theoretical framework, and therefore explicitly analyzing the issues above.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rural Communication: Becoming a Significant Field

The study of rural areas in the field of communication began in the mid-20th century in the West, primarily researching the role of external forces in the development of rural society. The localization practice of combining rural areas and communication studies can be seen as early as the 1990s in the Chinese Academy of Sciences study on the correlation between rural-urban audiences’ contact with news media behavior and modern concepts in Zhejiang Province. [3]

Currently, the main research content of rural communication focuses on three aspects: rural communication research under the background of rural revitalization, media-related rural communication research, and research on agricultural-related short videos. Haiyan Duan, in “Research on Short Video Practice in Rural Culture Communication,” believes that in the era of mobile internet, short videos, as an essential media form of contemporary rural culture communication, occupy a significant position in presenting rural life scenes and spreading rural culture, reflecting the new trend of rural culture expression and communication in the modernization process. [4] Taiping Xie from Southwest University of Political Science and Law in “Methods, Effects, and Participation Logic of Rural Cultural Communication” points out that from the viewpoint of rural residents, empowering farmers to carry out rural communication has much better effects than market-led communication. The communication perspective affects the extent of empowerment to a certain degree. It is crucial to fully mobilize farmers’ enthusiasm and form good interaction and circulation during rural communication. [5]

2.2. Media Studies of Traditional Culture: Multidisciplinary Intersection

As an essential component of rural traditional media, intangible cultural heritage is a crucial research focus across multiple disciplines. A CNKI search for the keyword “intangible cultural heritage” reveals that the disciplines with the most results are culture, fine arts, calligraphy, sculpture and photography, music and dance, tourism, drama, film, and television arts. Han Geng, in “Characteristics and Development Paths of Intangible Cultural Heritage Studies from the Perspective of Systematic Protection,” points out that intangible cultural heritage studies, based on the multiple concepts of systematic protection, have the characteristics of being cross-disciplinary, live, and open, and goal-oriented, adhering to the principle of protection first. [6] In “Brand Evaluation Research of Intangible Cultural Heritage Scenic Spots from the Perspective of Local Perception,” Tong Wen explores the relationship between tourists’ nostalgia tendencies, the quality of intangible cultural heritage tourism experiences, and scenic spot brand evaluations, incorporating local perception to discuss its internal mechanisms. [7]

However, in communication studies, relevant research from the media perspective has only become a hot topic in the past five years, especially in the rapid development of intelligent technology. The media studies of traditional culture are changing rapidly. Xiaohong Wang, in “Media Logic of Short Video Platforms in the Dissemination of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture,” uses short videos and live broadcasts as examples to analyze their practical value and media logic in promoting the dissemination of excellent traditional Chinese culture from the aspects of “visibility,” “perceptibility,” “accessibility,” and “touchability.” [8] Xiaoguo Quan, in “Media, Object, and Method: Imitation Theory of Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance,” analyzes that imitation media, imitation objects, and imitation methods are the essential elements in the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage and the internal reasons for the distinction between different types of intangible cultural heritage. [9]

2.3. Rural Studies by Media Anthropology Paradigm

In the Western academic circles represented by British and American anthropology, the research practice of media anthropology began in the 1930s and 1940s. Still, the discussion of “media anthropology” emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Regarding the concept discussion, Chinese scholar Jianbin Guo published an article titled “Media Anthropology: Concepts, History, and Theoretical Perspectives” in the *International Journalism* in 2015, which synthesizes the discussions of American communication researcher Eric Rothenbuhler, American anthropologist Kelly Askew from the University of Michigan, and Austrian anthropologist Philipp Budka from the University of Vienna. He defines media anthropology as the ethnographic study of social practices related to media. [10]

One of the long-term core issues in media anthropology is studying the interaction between media technology and people in village societies. Xinru Sun, in “Mobility and Embeddedness: The Practice and Expansion of Media Anthropology in Village Studies in the Digital Age,” views mobility and embeddedness as operational paths for village studies from the perspective of media anthropology, focusing on and exploring human media practice activities, thereby providing new directions for rural communication in the digital age. [11] Weihua Wu, in “Construction of Youth Field and Meaning Production: A Media Anthropological Study on the Mobile Phone Use of Rural Middle School Students,” found that rural middle school students construct a

highly mobile youth field through mobile phone use, developing unique interaction experiences and mechanisms. [12] Zexiang Xie, in “Interactive ‘Departure’: Narration, Sharing, and Self-Realization - A Media Anthropological Study on the Use of Short Videos by Migrant Workers,” discovered that the short video use of migrant workers mainly includes three levels of meaning: narration, sharing, and self-realization. [13]

3. Research Methodology

Based on the media anthropology paradigm, this study primarily adopts the participatory ethnographic research method, combining literature analysis, interviews, surveys, and experiential summaries. The research focused on 26 villages listed in the Chinese Traditional Villages Directory in Jixi County, conducting documentary filming media practice and ethnographic writing research twice, in April and July 2023, each time living continuously for two months.

The study investigated the distribution and quantity of intangible cultural heritage projects in various villages and towns, focusing on Huiju (Anhui Opera) as a keyword in traditional media. It explored the past, present, and future of the Huiju Children’s Class at the central primary school in Fuling Town, including the story of the Huiju inheritor, Shao Xinxi, the story of the Fuling opera costumes that witnessed the rise and fall of Huiju for a hundred years, and the stories of the Huiju Children’s Class students. Conversations, interviews, and observations were conducted with intangible cultural heritage inheritor Shao Xinxi, the village head of Fuling Village, village elites, students and parents of the Huiju Children’s Class, other teachers of the Children’s Class, and the head and members of the Fuling Huiju Troupe. Through writing ethnography and video recording, key terms were extracted, such as the current state of traditional media, the influence of traditional media on villagers’ interaction behavior changes, and the reasons for the loss during the inheritance process, which provided a theoretical basis for constructing feasible paths.

4. Research Results

4.1. Analysis of the Current Situation and Issues of Traditional Cultural Media Transformation of Traditional Media Function

The Interaction Ritual Chain Theory, proposed by American sociologist Randall Collins, explains how people maintain and strengthen social relationships and emotional bonds through ritualized behaviors during daily interactions. The interaction ritual chain includes the shared focus of attention and emotional synchronization, the formation of emotional energy, the reinforcement of symbolic resources, and behavioral consequences.

“During the Spring Festival every year, people in Fuling who turn thirty, also called ‘those on duty for the year,’ need to organize a ‘Wuhui’ including lantern parades, lion dances, and Huiju performances, which is the Spring Festival gala of Fuling. ‘Wuhui’ is a unique term created by Fuling Village, originating from exorcism. ‘On duty for the year’ is almost universally recognized by the people of Fuling as an important reason why Huiju has not been ‘extinguished.’ The tradition of Fuling is that every year during the Spring Festival, there must be a Huiju performance, called ‘on duty for the year,’ and the performances require rehearsals, dress, and final staging. Every year, it takes one or two months. Over time, Huiju has been integrated into the lifeblood of Mr. Shao’s generation, becoming an inseparable part. ‘Fuling

Village is the birthplace of Huiju. Huiju has influenced people like Mr. Shao since childhood. There is a saying in Fuling: ‘Gongs and drums sound, singing, speaking, doing, and dancing,’ meaning that hearing the gongs and drums means it’s time to go out and perform.””

Huiju, as a typical interaction ritual, attracted the collective attention of the village at the fixed nodes of the Spring Festival over seventy years ago. It fulfilled functions of entertainment and emotional resonance, fostering the formation of emotional energy and bonds among villagers and becoming a medium for transmitting emotions and information. This symbolic resource was continuously used and reinforced with each annual fixed ritual, forming a unique cultural symbol system.

However, the process of media transformation has accelerated over the decades. “Mr. Shao Mingqin is 76 years old this year. He and Mr. Shao Qianfeng joined the Fuling Huiju Troupe at 12 when the troupe had 33 young actors. Around 2000, although the performances for ‘on duty for the year’ were still held annually, they could no longer achieve the grandeur of earlier times, with only a few selected scenes performed.” From radio and television to new media, traditional media as a transmission ritual can no longer compete with the evolution of media, rapidly diminishing its influence on social relationships and emotional connections, leading to a decline in emotional energy and ritual failure, thereby causing the interaction ritual chain to lose stability.

4.1.2. Meme Elements of Traditional Media

Richard Dawkins’ meme theory provides a framework for understanding cultural transmission and change, revealing how cultural elements are selected and retained during transmission. Meme theory suggests that cultural elements, like genes, are propagated through imitation and dissemination within society. Those cultural elements that can adapt to environmental changes and resonate with people are more likely to be widely disseminated and retained for a long time. “Around the year 2000, although the performances for ‘on duty for the year’ were still held annually, they could no longer achieve the grandeur of earlier times, with only a few selected scenes performed. Around 2009, even Huiju enthusiasts advocated for re-establishing Huiju study societies. Still, those limited classic Huiju scenes such as ‘The Flood of the Armies,’ ‘The Battle of Dragons and Tigers,’ ‘Offering Flowers to Rui,’ and ‘Beauty and Wild Phoenix.’ were taught monotonously.”

From the subject's perspective, according to Richard Dawkins’ meme theory, traditional cultural media face the challenge of adapting to the modern communication environment under the impact of technological media. Due to the lack of in-depth research and mining of memes, the inheritance of traditional culture often stays in the surface form and fails to touch the communication mechanism of the core elements of culture.

4.1.3. Social Construction of Traditional Media

The Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) theory as a framework for analyzing the relationship between media and society emphasizes that the development and form of media are the results of various social factors working together. The concept of interpretative flexibility indicates that different social groups define the meaning and use of technology based on their viewpoints and interests.

Viewed from the object's aspect, "Mr. Shao has trained many Huiju apprentices. Some are now in college, some in middle school, and others have entered society, but none of the apprentices have pursued Huiju as a profession, only treating it as a hobby. In the scene 'The Hunt: Excerpt from The White Rabbit Story,' the student Wang Jinrou, who played the leading role, quickly attracted everyone's attention. Mr. Shao later told us that Wang Jinrou was particularly talented; she could grasp the essence of Huiju with just a few words and steps. During the rehearsals, we happened to meet Wang Jinrou's mother, who had been working outside, coming to watch her practice. Wang Jinrou's mother told us that the Huiju Troupe of Anhui Province had come to recruit students from the Fuling Children's Class several times, and they wanted Wang Jinrou to go to their art school to specialize in Huiju after graduating from primary school, with their troupe responsible for her training. However, she firmly refused, thinking that her child was too young and immature, and she was often away working as well as learning Huiju wasn't a promising decision for her daughter's future, making it impractical to learn Huiju."

The cultural values of traditional media (intangible cultural heritage) students and their parents have changed, leading them to choose to "depart" from the conventional media inheritance. "The national-level intangible cultural heritage Huiju Inheritance Base is the Huiju Children's Class at the central primary school in Fuling Village. Unlike what we imagined as a 'base,' the Children's Class is only set up as a 'micro' Huiju interest class." The interpretation of the government and cultural institutions suggests a need for more traditional media inheritance resources and awareness. From the audience's standpoint, the media tendencies of digital natives who grew up in the new media era have been shaped and fixed. The slow-paced traditional culture requires changes in behavior, habits, values, and cognitive styles to adapt, and the habitus limits the audience base for conventional media like Huiju.

4.2. Feasible Paths for Rural Cultural Communication from the Perspective of Media

The non-linear historiography of media archaeology opposes the traditional progressive historical view, positing that each generation of technology possesses unique value and impact. Past, forgotten, or marginalized media forms and technologies influence the modern media landscape and culture. Scholars have introduced the "mediated traditional culture" [14]. Within the scope of this discussion, traditional media involved in mass communication practices are included in the category of excellent traditional culture. Thus, extending their research outcomes, the theoretical feasibility of integrating traditional media with various media forms is validated. On this basis, addressing the challenges of ritual failure, lack of meme elements, and the social causes of interpretative flexibility in the inheritance of traditional cultural media, this paper proposes media convergence as a path for media inheritance and the dissemination of conventional culture.

4.2.1. Intelligent Media to Recreate Rituals

The deep integration of traditional media and emerging technologies will empower traditional culture's high-quality development and innovation, reconstruct cultural identity and emotional resonance, and recreate a shared space of meaning and transmission rituals. Meyrowitz's "Media Situation Theory" proposes that media influence interpersonal interactions by changing the "geographical situation" of social life. Mobile innovative media connect application scenarios and the interaction among

people, and therefore traditional media as well as technology in mobile situations can profoundly evoke users' collective attention, synchronizing, localizing, and personalizing rural cultural communication.

Virtual reality wearable devices' multi-sensory stimulation, immersive experience, and interactivity can achieve emotional synchronization in specific fields, triggering the accumulation of emotional energy and achieving the reconstruction of rituals. The landscape construction of traditional culture, relying on the affordance of visual technology, can symbolize the distant, profound, and abstract meanings condensed in conventional culture, further strengthening the construction of cultural symbol systems. Audiences with high emotional energy participate more frequently in ritual co-creation, forming a stable interaction ritual chain, continuously expanding and consolidating the development of traditional cultural communication.

4.2.2. Exploring Memes and Integrating Communication

Exploring memes involves identifying potential elements, analyzing their characteristics, classifying and summarizing them, optimizing their creation, and promoting their dissemination. In the dissemination and promotion stage, integrated communication coordinates and unifies various communication tools and channels to ensure the consistency and effectiveness of information transmission. Integrated communication maximizes the dissemination effect across different channels through consistent brand information and image. So far cultural researchers focus on preserving traditional media and their related material media. In contrast, the understanding and research on promoting conventional media in communication must be more profound and deeper.

Exploring memes inspires cultural researchers' content studies and strategic perspectives. Integrated communication requires strategies for communication channels, execution, implementation, monitoring, feedback, etc. In terms of communication channels, it integrates traditional media, digital media, and intelligent media. Digital technologies such as cloud computing and big data promote platform integration. Different evaluation indicators should be set for effect evaluation, and methods such as social media data indicators, questionnaires, and focus groups are designed to be used to implement timely feedback for adjustments.

4.2.3. Agenda Setting to Reshape Views

In the decentralized internet era, Weibo users, WeChat public accounts, and various information platforms have become the central bodies of agenda-setting, with part of opinion leaders and many netizens jointly participating. Unlike serious and in-depth hard news, agenda-setting content tends to be soft news and personal interest network communities nowadays. The agenda-setting guides the audience on "what to think about" and influences their "how to think about the news." The interpretative flexibility of social construction theory means that different groups may have different interpretations of the same object based on their positions.

In establishing a diversified agenda-setting mechanism, integrating traditional media and new media platforms encourages relevant groups to participate in content production and meaning construction widely. Even without the affordance of media practice, various subjects can still "voice their own opinions" on traditional media from their viewpoints and positions. Mainstream media conduct macro-regulation and micro-adjustment in this process, guiding the voice of conventional media inheritance

publicity to be accurate and reliable, with positive emotions, and promoting positive energy. This further coordinates and reshapes the consistency of views among different groups, organizations, and individuals, enabling the sustained and stable development of traditional media inheritance and cultural communication.

5. Conclusion and Prospects

This study adopts the media anthropology paradigm and combines documentary and interactive product media practice, using ethnographic research methods to investigate the current state of traditional media. It analyzes the problems faced by traditional media in the inheritance and communication of ancient village traditional culture. It proposes feasible paths for rural cultural communication from the perspective of media. Due to various limitations such as time and space, the written ethnography fails to depict a complete media portrait, and exploring other media forms outside Huiju requires more depth.

What's more, this article's perspective on rural communication mainly focuses on domestic communication from the periphery to the center. Still, it hasn't yet expanded to international communication from the inside out. The current demand for reconstructing international communication order and discourse calls for Chinese solutions combining universality and particularity, urgently requiring researchers to explore the excellent local culture fully. Therefore, based on this article, further exploration of other media forms is planned to construct a comprehensive media portrait from points to areas. In terms of research, exploring the integration strategies of international and rural communication is expected to achieve mutually beneficial effects in multiple fields.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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