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Brand construction and living inheritance of Minnan glove puppetry in the context of media convergence

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Abstract. Under the context of media convergence, Minnan glove puppetry is facing challenges such as the loss of inheritors, limited communication channels, and the absence of a systematic branding framework. Based on performance spaces, social media exposure, and the development of the experience economy, potential integration paths are explored. Drawing on the experience of Pili puppetry, branding strategies are constructed from the perspectives of visual symbols, narrative content, and product design. A collaborative model involving government, academia, and industry is proposed to promote the integration of cultural and commercial value, enabling sustainable and dynamic inheritance.

Keywords: media convergence, Minnan glove puppetry (Zhangzhong Puppet Show), brand construction, productive reconstruction, collaborative inheritance

1. Introduction

Minnan glove puppetry is facing predicaments in inheritance and development in the new era, and how to shift towards "productive" inheritance has become a proposition to be explored at present. From the perspective of media convergence, this paper systematically puts forward a branding path by analyzing the current communication situation of Minnan glove puppetry and drawing on the experience of mature brand operation in relevant fields. Finally, it will discuss the macro pattern of "government-university-enterprise" collaborative inheritance, striving to explore a set of inheritance models with commercial self-consistency and social influence for intangible cultural heritage.

2. Current situation and predicaments of Minnan glove puppetry

Among the traditional puppetry in China, Minnan glove puppetry (also known as Budai Opera) stands out for its outstanding artistic expressiveness. Its puppet figures are exquisitely crafted in the form of cloth bags, about a foot tall. During performances, performers insert their hands into the puppet figures, integrating dramatic movements such as singing, recitation, acting and acrobatics into their fingertips, and combining craftsmanship with aesthetic appeal [1]. As a national intangible cultural heritage inscribed in the list in 2006, this art form is now widely spread in Beijing, Hunan, Fujian and Taiwan regions, forming the Minnan School with Quanzhou and Zhangzhou as the core [2].

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In the era of poor information and transportation, glove puppetry was the cornerstone of entertainment and a carrier of folk moral education for local people [3]. However, with the evolution of modern media, the Internet and its various derivative communication forms are showing unignorable value and unique significance, featuring convenience, richness and high-efficiency interaction, and occupying an important position in today's society. Especially for traditional arts with a profound history such as Chinese opera, online platforms are more like a double-edged sword [4]. Against this background, glove puppetry is faced with multiple challenges, mainly manifested in a severe loss of inheritors, the disconnection of script content from the times, contextual barriers caused by the characteristics of the Minnan dialect, and the lack of an established branding system. These problems have made puppetry develop with difficulty in the tide of the times [5]. Faced with such predicaments, its inheritance method needs to transform from "salvage protection" to "productive transformation" to adapt to the communication logic and cultural consumption demand in the multi-media convergence environment.

3. Communication scenarios and spatial reconstruction of puppetry from the perspective of media convergence

3.1. Modern performances from folk stages to cultural and creative spaces

Under the background of the development of media convergence, new and old media are not in a simple substitutional relationship, but present a more complex interactive evolutionary trend [6]. In recent years, the performances of Minnan glove puppetry are no longer confined to theatres and stages, and inheritors have actively expanded communication channels, trying to break the single spatial restriction of the traditional "temple fair stage".

Offline, inheritors have frequently appeared in various intangible cultural heritage exhibitions and commercial performances, initially realizing the modern migration of performance scenarios. Yang Jinwei, an inheritor of Zhangzhou puppetry, served as a performing guest at the 2025 Wuzhen Theatre Festival, and Mr. Zhou Fuchuan, another intangible cultural heritage inheritor, gave charity performances at Zhengyin Academy (Figure 1). They have moved the performance stage from traditional folk spaces to modern cultural and creative venues, greatly expanding the base of audiences for the intangible cultural heritage art and accumulating considerable initial resources for branding operation.

Figure 1. Charity performance by Mr. Zhou Fuchuan at Zhengyin Academy (photo by the author)

3.2. Exposure narrative and traffic pool construction in social media communication

In the new media environment, inheritors have also built a spontaneous communication network on short-video platforms. Through account operation, close-ups of the "finger tip stunts" such as puppet acrobatics, fan opening and sword play, as well as amusing skit interpretations, are presented on the screen, realizing the rapid accumulation of traffic. The single video of glove puppetry performance on the Xiaohongshu account "Zhangzhou Puppetry Yang Jinwei" has received a maximum of 52,000 likes, with a total of more than 320,000 likes; a popular science post about glove puppetry on the Douyin account "Xiamen Chunsheng Puppetry" has gained 38,000 likes, and the comments on relevant posts show a strong interest in puppetry. On mainstream media, Mr. Yang Jinwei participated in the recording of the 2025 Lantern Festival Gala (Figure 2), completing the cross-screen communication from "folk craft" to "mass visual art" by virtue of high-exposure platforms such as local Spring Festival galas and large-scale cultural TV programs.

Figure 2. Behind-the-scenes of Mr. Yang Jinwei's participation in the 2025 Lantern Festival gala (source: Xiaohongshu account "Zhangzhou Puppetry Yang Jinwei")

3.3. The online-offline conversion closed loop under the "experience economy"

Traditional Minnan glove puppetry mainly relies on specific folk scenarios such as temple fairs and sacrificial rituals, and its communication radius has obvious geographical limitations [7]. To break the geographical limitations, puppetry has begun to explore offline scenarios centered on "experience" and develop DIY experiential tourism. "7FUN Rooftop Puppetry" combines recreation, tea and beverage with puppet performances; "Mouou No.9 Hall" introduces puppet research and study, and experience content such as painting puppet heads and hand-making puppet figures (Figure 3). This "DIY customization model" transforms the audience from mere "spectators" into "participants", who gain a unique cultural experience through personal participation, thus effectively breaking the original limitations. At the same time, it conducts online communication through social media to improve exposure, realizing a linkage mechanism of online traffic diversion and offline conversion, further enhancing the communication scope and commercial transformation capacity of puppetry, and promoting the synergistic growth of cultural value and commercial value.

Figure 3. DIY experience content at "Mouou No.9 Hall" (photo by the author)

4. The necessity of visual construction and strategic reference for the brand of Minnan glove puppetry

4.1. Current situation analysis of the lack of brand visual assets

A brand is the revelation and expression of human emotional demands. When such revelation and expression meet the needs of social reality, the brand will have a strong vitality; otherwise, it will fail [4]. Field research finds that there is a significant "lack of brand visual assets" in the current Minnan glove puppetry. Up to now, there are very few cultural and creative products related to glove puppetry in Quanzhou and Zhangzhou. Taking the Xu Zhuchu Puppet Exhibition Hall as an example, the exquisite puppet figures sold in the hall are priced at thousands of yuan, and the rest are mass-produced products that are not glove puppets (Figure 4). The cultural and creative products are outdated and uncharacteristic, and the commemorative puppet figures sold are priced at 100-200 yuan with shoddy quality and a cheap visual effect.

Figure 4. Cultural and creative products at the Xu Zhuchu Glove Puppet Exhibition Hall (Photo by the author)

The research results show that the cultural and creative products on the market present a polarization phenomenon: on the one hand, there are high-priced collection artworks (Figure 5), and on the other hand, there are mass-produced replicas lacking in design sense and with a cheap visual effect (Figure 6). However, products with an identifiable branding system in the middle range are seriously lacking. Behind the prosperous online publicity and offline performances, this consumption gap exposes the core pain point in the current inheritance of Minnan glove puppetry: although inheritors have personal popularity and personal IP due to their individual influence, it cannot be transformed into a unified cultural brand entity; after marveling at the craftsmanship, the audience is faced with a psychological consumption gap of "no stories to follow, no IP to recognize, no cultural and creative products to buy". This leads to the fact that although media communication has initially solved the problem of "visibility" of glove puppetry, it is difficult to convert short-term attention into long-term brand loyalty, which hinders the process of living inheritance.

Figure 5. Puppet artworks sold at the Xu Zhuchu Glove Puppet Exhibition Hall (photo by the author)

Figure 6. Doll cultural and creative products related to glove puppetry (photo by the author)

4.2. The reshaping of visual symbols and IP-oriented transformation

The construction of intangible cultural heritage brands is not a mechanical imitation of tradition, but a re-interpretation and reconstruction of its visual symbols in line with contemporary aesthetics by means of media convergence on the basis of retaining the cultural core [8]. Taking Taiwan Pili Glove Puppetry as an example, the key to its success lies not only in the continuous output of dramatic content and the exquisite presentation of puppet figures, but also in the effective "visual reshaping" of traditional complex symbols during branding, thus attracting a large number of fans to buy brand products. Based on this, the branding of glove puppetry can start from two aspects: extracting regional cultural elements and reconstructing character images. First, carry out modern visual translation of puppet head carving, facial makeup colors, helmet and hat patterns, stage structure and other elements to build a unified brand visual system; second, conduct contemporary expression and IP-oriented shaping of traditional opera characters to make them more adaptable to the narrative operation needs of new media platforms, such as knowledge popularization, event explanation, Q&A and interaction, thus establishing a brand system with identifiability and commercial potential.

4.3. The reconstruction of narrative content and the elimination of communication barriers

The outdated scripts and language barriers lead to the audience's lack of resonance with the core of traditional stories, which is a pain point in the communication and development of glove puppetry. In addition to keeping the tradition intact, actively seeking innovation has always been a theme of continuous exploration for Fujian puppetry [9]. Taking Taiwan Pili Glove Puppetry as an example, it endows characters with lasting vitality and audience stickiness by constructing a surreal martial arts narrative system and a continuous episode structure. Inspired by this, glove puppetry can recode traditional operas under the premise of adapting to the contemporary context, and reorganize content in combination with cross-platform communication strategies: for example, present the main plot in theatres and on long-video platforms, extend character settings and derivative content to social media, and build a complete brand story system through fragmented narrative; at the same time, adopt the dual-track communication mode of "Minnan dialect expression + Mandarin dubbing" supplemented by multilingual subtitles to lower the threshold of understanding and expand the audience scope; it can also combine puppetry with Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) to transform the performances and shapes of traditional puppets into digital assets that can be spread in the virtual world [10]. For example, Quanzhou Art Museum regularly holds experience activities and visits for intangible cultural heritage projects, and also realizes online VR exhibition tours and online courses for learning intangible cultural heritage culture [11]. This not only expands the communication dimension, but also establishes the intellectual property boundaries of Minnan glove puppetry, laying a foundation for the subsequent licensing business model, and can effectively eliminate communication barriers, allowing Minnan glove puppetry to reshape its brand identity in the contemporary entertainment context.

4.4. The construction of a product matrix and a sustainable commercial closed loop

If the construction of brand culture is compared to a tree, then brand products are the fruits on the tree, and each product is essentially a "narrative anchor". Taking Pili Glove Puppetry blind boxes as an example (Figure 7), the traditional glove puppet figures feature intricate carving and exquisite costumes, which reflect a high level of craftsmanship but also raise the aesthetic threshold for modern audiences and increase the cost of peripheral product development. Pili Glove Puppetry has carried out Q-version transformation of puppet figures, simplifying their forms while retaining their characteristics, making its products seamlessly integrate into the "trendy play" scene of modern popular culture (Figure 8), which has been well received by consumers

since its launch. This shows that brand products are not only material carriers, but also a communication medium linking users and content.

Figure 7. Illustrated handbook of Pili Glove Puppetry blind box doll products (source: official Xiaohongshu account of Pili Glove Puppetry)

Figure 8. Comparison of Pili Glove Puppet figures and blind box doll products (source: internet)

Based on this logic, glove puppetry can further strengthen the "media attribute" of products in brand construction, and embed digital access in the product matrix, such as linking to digital episodes of characters, the production of glove puppets, the inheritors' finger technique demonstrations and so on through two-dimensional codes. This media convergence path from "physical consumption" to "content consumption" can effectively solve communication barriers and realize in-depth inheritance of "cultural inheritance through physical objects".

Brand construction is inseparable from the self-consistency of commercial value; otherwise, it is just empty talk and castles in the air. The branding path of glove puppetry should be based on the construction of a sustainable commercial logic closed loop. Only when the brand generates considerable commercial returns to guarantee R&D and communication funds can it attract young design talents and operational personnel to enter this field, alleviate the loss of practitioners [12], ensure that intangible cultural heritage has a voice in the context of modern market economy, and build a positive cycle of "commercial returns feeding back into content creation, and high-quality content driving brand appreciation".

5. The integrated collaborative inheritance pattern of "government-university-enterprise"

From the macro perspective of media convergence, the inheritance pattern of Minnan glove puppetry is no longer an isolated protection of folk craft, but a systematic social project with in-depth cooperation between government top-level design, university aesthetic education incubation and enterprise market operation. Its

core is to build a cross-media operation ecosystem with a "self-hematopoietic function" (Figure 9). Based on this, Fujian has formulated the "Training Program for Successors of Fujian Puppetry" since 2006. This program was inscribed in the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices for the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2012 [13]. It transforms intangible cultural heritage craftsmanship into systematic aesthetic education courses through university-enterprise cooperation, cultivates potential audiences among adolescents at an early stage, and eradicates the intergenerational crisis of an aging audience for traditional art from the root.

The government provides cultural legitimacy and policy endorsement for the branding transformation, and the education system transforms intangible cultural heritage craftsmanship into systematic aesthetic education courses through university-enterprise cooperation. This collaborative mechanism of tripartite linkage between government, universities and enterprises ultimately points to a living inheritance model of the integration of industry, university, research and application, transforming Minnan glove puppetry from public welfare-oriented salvage protection to market-oriented productive reconstruction, and reshaping the cultural and commercial value of glove puppetry in the digital age in the positive cycle of commercial returns feeding back into content creation.

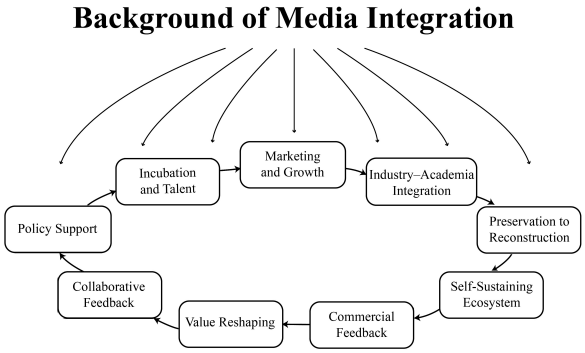

Figure 9. The integrated collaborative inheritance closed-loop model (drawn by the author)

6. Conclusion

Media convergence has not only changed the communication mode of intangible cultural heritage, but also reshaped the internal logic of its branding inheritance [14]. The future of glove puppetry lies in how to make good use of the trend of media convergence, transform the stock of traditional craftsmanship into the increment of brand assets, and establish a multi-dimensional and complementary inheritance system. However, the times are developing and evolving, with new propaganda methods emerging one after another and the application of science and technology presenting a dizzying variety. Only by actively integrating into the modern industrial chain on the basis of retaining the cultural core can glove puppetry reshape its spiritual context in the tide of the times and realize sustainable living inheritance.

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