

Study on Symbolic Consumption in Guangzhou's Nighttime Economy

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Abstract. As e-commerce has revolutionized the habits and methods of mass consumption, the reliance of the real economy on the Internet for advertising and marketing has become more and more pronounced, and this phenomenon has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many municipal governments in China have introduced policies to encourage the development of nighttime economy as an important means to revive urban vitality, stimulate mass consumption and promote economic development. This essay takes four established nighttime economy gathering places in Guangzhou as examples, and studies the symbolic consumption process in them from the theoretical perspectives of cultural economy, leisure economy, symbolic economy and cultural capital, thus pointing out the problems of cultural change and cultural vulgarization in the nighttime economy neighborhoods and giving constructive solutions and suggestions for improvement.

1 Introduction

The nighttime economy has taken shape in some large cities in China. since 2016, the scale of China's nighttime economy has grown rapidly. By the end of 2020, the size of China's nighttime economy exceeded 30 trillion yuan, an increase of 5.0% over the same period in 2019. From "by the bridge, the night fair is abustle" to "thousands of lanterns make the night fair boisterous and bustling", the nighttime economy has become an important part of urban commerce, and is an effective carrier to show the characteristics and vitality of the city[1].

1.1 Research Background

The concept of nighttime economy was formally introduced by Montgomery (1990) in an article on urban planning in the UK. Due to the decentralization of retail development and the declining commercial status and loss of vitality of city centers, it has become a major challenge for the government to achieve the revitalization of downtown. According to Lovatt and O'Connor (1995), cultural activities aimed at urban regeneration and bringing people back to the city almost always incorporate the concept of urban nightlife, which is the reason for the importance of the nighttime economy and is one of the key measures of urban regeneration in the UK.

Since 2018, municipal governments across China have begun to gradually focus on the development of the nighttime economy. In August 2018, the General Office of Chengdu Municipal Government issued the Action Plan for Accelerating the Construction of Chengdu as an International Consumer City, which explicitly mentions

the need to tap new dynamics of nighttime consumption, strengthen the creation of the environment for the nighttime economy, accelerate the cultivation of the Jinjiang nighttime consumption business circle, introduce modern emerging consumer businesses, and create Chengdu nighttime consumption landmarks. In November 2018, the General Office of Tianjin Municipal Government issued the Implementation Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Nighttime economy, which clearly states that six municipal nighttime economy demonstration blocks should be created and formed by the end of 2019 to dig deep into the new momentum of nighttime consumption. On July 9, 2019, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Commerce issued the Beijing Measures to Further Prosper the Nighttime Economy and Promote Consumption Growth, specifying that by the end of 2021, a number of "nighttime capital" landmarks, shopping districts and living circles with reasonable layout, standardized management, distinctive features and perfect functions will be formed in the city to meet consumer demand.

Under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reliance of the real economy on Internet communication and marketing has become more and more obvious. Searching for recommended travel places, travel tips or consumption advice on online short videos or social media platforms, visiting "Internet influencer" attractions and stores, and consuming "Internet influencer" products have gradually become important ways for the public, especially young people, to travel and consume. As part of the real economy, the nighttime economy is undoubtedly an economic form that relies heavily on Internet "traffic".

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1.2 Research Significance

The nighttime economy is an opportunity for the country to generate revenue at a relatively low cost with the Internet in the face of weak economic growth. The nighttime economy covers a wide range of industries. It includes and is not limited to the cultural economy, tourism economy and even some peripheral industries. At the same time, the nighttime economy has a low industry threshold, and the general public from all kinds of industries can easily participate in the nighttime economy, which is an economic form closely related to daily life, with high public participation and industry vitality. Increasing the activity of the nighttime economy has an efficient effect on enhancing the country's economy. Therefore, it is necessary to study and observe the current situation of China's nighttime economy and suggest future directions for its development.

1.3 Research Methods

Field research: Using Guangzhou as a case study, we observe the night economic clusters that have formed on a larger scale, including but not limited to local clothing stores and snack streets, and determine the relationship between the success of these clusters and the Internet. A case study of some night-time economic zones with relatively low pedestrian flow is also conducted and compared with the former.

Interview: Interviews were conducted with representative visitors of all ages in the night economic zone to understand their motivations for visiting and spending money.

2 Related Theoretical Basis and Research Status

2.1. Nighttime Economy and Leisure Culture

The nighttime economy is an economic term originally introduced in the UK to alleviate the urban nesting phenomenon at night and to achieve urban revitalization, and refers to the economic activities of a city mainly in the service sector from 6 pm to 6 am. Mao Zhonggen, Long Yanni, and Ye Xu have the opinion that the development of the domestic nighttime economy is still new, but this project has great potential based on a large number of successful cases abroad[2]. Because the nighttime economy mainly comes from the consumption that occurs during leisure time, it is also closely related to leisure culture and economy. As a branch of economics, leisure economy mainly studies the inputs and outputs in human leisure behavior, the output value created by leisure, the operation law of leisure economy, and the variable relationship between leisure behavior and economy[3]. Ma Huidi argues that the relationship between economy and leisure is a two-way street[4]. On the one hand, economic participation "buys" leisure, which in turn is part of the reward; on the other hand, leisure can facilitate recreational consumption, which

supports effective economic participation. It is this "recreation" of consumption that rationalizes leisure. One of the important tools is the Internet economy and the digitization of culture.

2.2 Symbolic Economy and Cultural Capital

Baudrillard believed that human society has changed from a society of production to a society of consumption. The concept of symbolic economy was proposed by Peter Drucker on this basis, referring to the fact that people not only care about the object itself in the process of consumption, but also care about the symbolic value given to it by the culture or society behind it[4].

Cultural capital was first introduced by Bourdieu. There are three types of capital: economic, cultural and social capital, which can be interconverted. Among them, cultural capital refers to the different being institutionalized by educational qualifications, which transcend the materiality of use values, and the production, exchange, and distribution of symbolic consumption, which further the purpose of economic growth[5].

Baumol's 1966 monograph, *Performance--An Economic Dilemma*, is considered the source of contemporary cultural economics. Cultural economics is an economic act of assigning cultural value to objects and re-selling them. The value added is achieved by giving the goods sold something other than themselves, such as a festival or custom. Subsequent scholars have proposed six elements of such economic sustainability, namely material and immaterial well-being, intergenerational equity, intra-generational equity, the maintenance of diversity, and the recognition of the preservation and interdependence of cultural systems and the precautionary principle[6].

2.3 Conclusion

For case studies based on the nighttime economy and the Internet, there is a general consensus that China is still at the initial stages. This paper holds the opinion that the above discussion of the nighttime and digital economy in China is not entirely correct. In some Chinese cities such as Changsha, Chengdu, and Guangzhou, the nighttime economy has taken on a certain scale and has formed a popular trend and consumption habit especially among the young population. In these cities, it is evident that a large number of online influencer spots and specialty restaurants are contributing to the nighttime consumption boom[7].

3 The Symbolic Consumption Process of Cultural Economy

3.1. Overview

The field survey sites included four night-time economic gathering places in Guangzhou: Datang Village, Swire

Pacific Warehouses and Wharfs, Wingqing Square and Maling Village.

Datang Village covers an area of about 4 square kilometers and is an urban village located in the middle of Haizhu District. The village has a large number of migrant workers living here, which is a different scenery in the urban area of Guangzhou.

Swire Pacific Warehouses and Wharfs, or Taigucang, located in Guangzhou's Haizhu District, was once a port and transshipment yard belonging to the Swire Shipping Company, built along one of the riversides of the Pearl River, and is now a special urban creative district in Guangzhou.

Wingqing Square, famous for its characteristic Guangzhou arcade architecture and traditional Guanxi culture, is located in the old city of Shangxiajiu, which was redeveloped by Vanke in 2016 and is now a new urban business card with leisure and tourism landmarks in Guangzhou.

Maling Village in Panyu District was originally a fishing village, and most of the people in the village were self-sufficient by fishing for a living. In recent years, because of the rise of the "Internet influencer" economy, a "car trunk market" here has brought considerable income to the local area, and young people from the neighborhood will drive here, opening the trunk to set up a stall.

3.2 The Symbolic Consumption Process

After observing these four night-time economic concentrations in the field, some processes of consumer symbolization were found. For example, most of the restaurants in Taigucang are mainly western food, while the few other types are mostly poorly run. The large number of Western restaurants is related to local history as a warehouse for foreign shipping companies, as well as the relatively high prices of Western food as a way to drive consumption. On the other hand, most of the store exterior decorations are based on exaggerated appearance and casual content, using distinctive colors and architectural styles to attract customers and increase the time they stay in the store while retaining the characteristic architecture of the pier. The slogans are mostly in Cantonese, which propagandizes the local culture of Guangzhou and increases the purchase rate of tourists at the same time.

3.3 Cultural Transition

Taigucang itself is a granary and a wharf, and its original use as a transshipment yard represents the wharf and industrial culture. The renovation of Taigucang retains the integrity of the exterior while adding modern recreational programs such as restaurants, viewing platforms and bars to the interior. Since many tourists will watch the sunset near Taigucang, culture such as bars and live houses that have nothing to do with the history of Taigucang itself has become mainstream instead. The public consumes symbols rather than culture.

Wingqing Square is a nighttime economic gathering place with significant local cultural characteristics. The area retains traditional Guanxi arcade buildings, as well as traditional music and handicrafts such as Cantonese opera and cellophane, and the Guanxi culture is prevalent. Vanke and the Guangzhou Municipal Government worked together to transform this cultural gathering place by saving the exterior of the buildings and removing the interior of them. Similar to Taigucang, Wingqing Square has preserved and renovated the original buildings, and also added projects with regional cultural characteristics such as the Cantonese Opera Museum and traditional handicraft stalls with Guangzhou characteristics. Meanwhile, a large number of homogeneous "internet influencer" stores have been introduced to the neighborhood in order to leverage the influence of Internet media. In general, Wingqing Square is a historical and cultural district with a "slow life" leisurely atmosphere, but not very different from other online attractions.

These nighttime economic gathering places present a serious problem of cultural transition. Many of Guangdong's local culture and traditions are in vain, while the inner core has been replaced with a more responsive modern "internet influencer" culture. The buildings with local characteristics are not really closely related to the consumer content provided inside the buildings, resulting in a sense of fragmentation and hypocrisy in the whole neighborhood, which affects the consumer experience of tourists and also deviates from the original purpose of preserving traditional culture. This is the problem with the development idea of "save the exterior and change the interior"[8].

In addition, cultural vulgarization is also a potential problem. During the field research in these four nighttime economies gathering places, most of the interviewees' first impression of the neighborhood was "this is an Internet influencer's spot, often found on the Internet", rather than being attracted by the local traditional culture or regional characteristics. A shopkeeper at Taigucang even directly referred to the area as a "bar street".

4 The Future Development Path of Guangzhou Nighttime Economy

The four nighttime economic aggregations investigated in this study can be essentially summarized into four different types of nighttime economies. Datang Village belongs to the traditional type, which is still at the initial stage and possesses heterogeneity, but the economy has not yet matured into consumption; Taigucang belongs to the creative park type, which has a higher consumption capacity of the target group compared to the traditional type; while Wingqing Square is a historical and cultural district, which is the one that retains the most native culture among these four types; and Maling Village belongs to the suburban rural cultural tourism project, which is based on the rural scenery. But these four gathering places share one common problem, that is, the single nature made it difficult to generate secondary

consumption or expand new customer base. An important component of the cultural economy is high value added, which refers to achieving higher economic returns by adding more meaning and value to an object. The infinite desire of people to consume will eventually cause the scarcity of specific products, and this is the opportunity to create new industries. Creating new industries and adding value to products can attract more new people while retaining the original customer base.

The second point is the change of product model. In addition to traditional items such as scenery, small goods and food, the nighttime economy can focus more on the launch of experiential items. For example, there is a traditional hand-tied lantern craft in Wingqing Square, in which fabric, paper and cellophane are covered with a skeleton made of wire to make lanterns in various styles. Among them, especially the hand-tied lanterns made of cellophane are exquisite and rich in local characteristics. Neighborhoods can set up some craft experience stores to provide visitors with craft-related cultural history interpretation and production experience services. This kind of experiential economy improves the vitality and interest of the consumption content, and attracts more visitors while passing on, spreading and promoting this traditional culture and crafts.

The third point is decentralization. Neighborhoods should not be shaped by a single "setting" or "label" when marketing on the Internet, but can have multiple focuses to stimulate secondary consumption [9]. The four nighttime economy gathering places in this survey all have obvious and single labels. The street interviews revealed that this problem is also commonly reflected in the experience and perception of consumers. Therefore, the neighborhoods can try to enrich their self-positioning, enrich their service content, and take the initiative to dig out their deep-seated characteristics and make them the focus of future publicity and promotion.

According to Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction, the innovation that can effectively create a new industry is not based on any mature industry and continue to evolve on that basis, but to create a new industry that has nothing to do with it and even has the potential to destroy the original one. In this process, developers should pay attention to balancing the share of modern industry of attractions with the original traditional culture to offer consumers with high-quality cultural products; focus on the innovation of cultural production, fairness of cultural product distribution, value of cultural interaction, and development of cultural consumption, and avoid the tendency of bulking, marginalization, vulgarization, and over-entertainment[10].

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