

International Communication of City Image under the Visa-Free Policy: Practices and Path Optimization

Yurong Zhang*, Sihui Zou, Chaoping Xiong, Jiaqi Yan, Rui Fan

School of Shandong Technology and Business University, Yantai 264005, Shandong, China

*Corresponding author: Yurong Zhang, 19558917322@163.com

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Abstract: This study takes Rednote as the core platform, focusing on the context of the visa-free policy, to conduct a comparative analysis of the international communication practices of urban images in four coastal cities of Shandong and four cities outside the province. The study finds that the cultural tourism accounts of cities outside the province generally hold an advantage in interactive effectiveness. In contrast, while the four cities of Qingdao, Yantai, Weihai, and Rizhao in Shandong demonstrate higher efficiency in content production, they still share common issues in areas such as supply-demand matching, precise targeting, cross-cultural narration, and multilingual services. Through content analysis, case comparison, and data mining, the research reveals the strengths and weaknesses of different types of cities in international communication. From the bidirectional communication perspective of “welcoming in” and “sending out”, this paper proposes optimization paths from the dimensions of demand positioning, immersive experience, interactive word-of-mouth, brand shaping, and international cooperation. It aims to provide practical references for coastal cities in Shandong to leverage the dividends of the visa-free policy, enhance the effectiveness of international communication through new media platforms, and shape distinctive urban images.

Keywords: Visa-free policy; Urban image; International communication; Rednote; Bidirectional mutual construction

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Against the backdrop of global economic integration and the globalization of the tourism market, international tourism has become a vital bridge for cultural exchange and economic interaction. China’s continuously deepening visa-free policies have significantly lowered the entry barriers for international tourists. Since 2022, the popularity of traveling to China has been steadily rising, creating favorable conditions for the international dissemination of city images and providing policy support for the bidirectional flow of people

and culture—both “welcoming in” and “sending out.”

Coastal cities in Shandong, such as Qingdao, Yantai, Weihai, and Rizhao, leverage their resource advantages and the dividends of the visa-free policy to become popular inbound tourism destinations, necessitating the use of new media for international image dissemination. As a mainstream social media platform, Rednote serves not only as a core platform for international tourists to obtain information and share experiences but also as an important channel for the international communication of city culture and tourism.

Currently, challenges persist in the international communication of cities, including insufficiently targeted content, weak cross-cultural narratives, and inadequate multilingual services. To this end, this paper focuses on the international communication practices of city cultural tourism accounts on the Rednote platform in the context of the visa-free policy, exploring strategies for optimization. It aims to provide practical references for enhancing cities’ international visibility and achieving effective external communication.

1.2. Literature review

Domestic academic research in China primarily adopts the theoretical framework of mass communication to conduct systematic studies on urban image construction, with a general consensus that urban image serves as a crucial carrier of a country’s soft power system, focusing on enhancing international influence through media dissemination and brand marketing ^[1]. At the level of theoretical development and communication policy innovation, historically and culturally renowned cities generally face communication challenges in transforming traditional intellectual properties for modern contexts. Dou Wenna employed CiteSpace to conduct a knowledge graph analysis of urban communication research in China, complemented by an empirical study on overseas communication in Hangzhou. The findings indicate that channel fragmentation and audience narrowing lead to weakened cultural recognition, prompting a proposal to establish a “Digital Silk Road” communication framework ^[2]. Regarding policy effect research, academia generally focuses on the catalytic role of visa-free policies in the tourism economy. Following the implementation of South Korea’s unilateral visa-free policy targeting China in 2023, Ctrip data revealed an 180% surge in orders from Korean tourists to Shanghai, giving rise to a new model of “cross-border weekend leisure travel” ^[3]. In the realm of cross-cultural communication theory, the Guangdong Construction Institute team proposed a framework encompassing “Four Forces”—cultural affinity, technological empowerment, industrial competitiveness, and value cohesion—emphasizing that visa-free policies facilitate deeper cultural experiences by extending the duration of foreign tourists’ stays, thereby promoting a shift from “symbolic cognitive differences” to the “construction of value consensus” ^[4].

In international research, within studies on the relationship between visa policies and tourism communication, Gu constructed a spatial difference-in-differences model based on China’s 72-hour transit visa-free policy. This study found that while the direct impact of visa-free measures on increasing inbound tourist numbers was limited, they significantly shortened the average length of stay and exhibited regional spillover effects ^[5]. Regarding theories of city branding and national image construction, Hankinson further advanced the concept of a “relational network city brand architecture”, emphasizing that brand construction should rely on diverse communication channels and the collaborative mechanisms of stakeholders ^[6]. Fan Hong proposed a “six-dimensional city branding model”, which provides a systematic framework for city branding and national image construction encompassing economic, historical, cultural, public opinion,

spatial, and demographic dimensions ^[7]. In terms of communication theory models, Kavaratzis and Hatch introduced a “place culture—identity—image” triadic interaction model, emphasizing that a brand is not merely the product of governmental planning but also emerges from the interactive co-construction of local culture, resident participation, and the communication environment ^[8].

Dudek-Mańkowska and Grochowski advanced the concept of the “creative field”, highlighting the dual economic and cultural driving forces of cultural and creative industries in shaping city brands. Concerning communication channels and technological approaches, international scholars increasingly focus on the integration of new media and big data ^[9]. For example, Sobolevsky et al., through cross-analysis of tweets and geotagged photographic data, discovered a superlinear relationship between a city’s popularity and its scale, underscoring the significant value of cross-platform content integration in shaping urban images ^[10].

Current research on the international image dissemination of cities under visa-free policies centers on three key areas: first, focusing on the synergistic effects between visa-free policies and cultural tourism economies; second, emphasizing narrative strategies within new media platforms; and third, constructing cross-cultural communication models. Future research is expected to trend toward technology-driven precision communication, deeper interdisciplinary integration, and refined audience management.

2. Research design

2.1. Research subjects and sample selection

This study takes Rednote as the primary digital communication platform, conducting a comparative analysis of the practices and effects of international communication of city images among four coastal cities in Shandong Province (Qingdao, Yantai, Weihai, and Rizhao) and four representative cities outside the province (Beijing, Chongqing, Hangzhou, and Zhangjiajie). The selection criteria are as follows: Beijing, as an international exchange center, boasts outstanding political and cultural resources as well as communication influence; Chongqing has achieved remarkable performance in new media communication relying on its unique landforms and attributes as an internet-famous city; Hangzhou is of typical significance in city brand building due to its digital economy and international development; Zhangjiajie, as a well-known tourist city, has strong appeal to international tourists. The four cities within Shandong are geographically adjacent and share similar types of tourism resources, facilitating horizontal comparative research.

2.2. Research methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Content analysis is employed to systematically sort out the language versions, cultural symbols, and other elements of the content released by cultural and tourism official accounts of each city, and summarize the content themes, formal characteristics, and quality improvement trends. The case comparison method is used to conclude the experiences and shortcomings of international communication in each city, and compare their differences in cross-cultural narration, multilingual services, interaction strategies, and other aspects. Data mining method is applied to collect key data such as the number of followers and interaction volume of the accounts, so as to conduct a quantitative evaluation of communication effectiveness. Through the combination of multiple methods, this study analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of different cities in international communication on digital platforms, providing references for coastal cities in Shandong to optimize their communication strategies.

2.3. Research framework

This study constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of “Policy–Platform–Audience.” The policy dimension focuses on the impact of visa-free policies on the flow of international tourists and the demand for city communication. The platform dimension centers on the algorithm logic, content ecology, user characteristics of Rednote, and the operation practice of multilingual content. The audience dimension analyzes the information needs, media preferences, and cultural cognition characteristics of international tourists. On this basis, from the two perspectives of “welcoming in” and “sending out”, this study systematically investigates the practical status quo, core problems, and optimization paths of the international communication of city images.

3. Research findings and analysis

3.1. Comparison of the international communication status of urban cultural tourism accounts

The survey reveals significant differences between the two groups of urban cultural tourism accounts in terms of follower base, engagement levels, content vibrancy, and operational strategies (**Table 1**). Among cities outside the province, Beijing and Chongqing lead in follower numbers and interaction metrics. Beijing maintains a stable advantage through its capital status and accumulated cultural resources, while Chongqing attracts substantial attention with distinctive landscapes and innovative communication approaches. Within the province, the four cities demonstrate stronger strengths in content update frequency and organizational structure, with Yantai standing out particularly for its efficient content production, clear structural framework, and mature operational system.

Table 1. Comparison of communication data for Rednote cultural tourism accounts

City Grouping	City	Account Name	Creation Time	Number Of Followers	Like Count	Number Of Posts	Promotion Module
Four coastal cities in Shandong Province	Qingdao	Qingdao Municipal Culture and Tourism Bureau	May 2020	2.1 ten-thousand	12.7 ten-thousand	1189	Love in Qingdao, Food in Qingdao, Flower Festivals in the Island City
	Yantai	Yantai Culture and Tourism	August 2021	7.3 ten-thousand	1.265 million	3217	Yantai 's Treasure: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Travel Guide, Trendy Spots, and Authentic Local Charm Explore museums, discover interesting exhibitions, check out the latest performances, and find great weekend destinations. Perfect destinations for every month and holiday
	Weihai	Cultural Tourism in Weihai	September 2023	6213	6.8 ten-thousand	342	Not yet divided into modules
	Rizhao	Cultural Tourism Sunshine	June 2023	7109	18.9 ten-thousand	1245	Not yet divided into modules
Other typical tourist hotspots in China	Beijing	Culture and Tourism Beijing	February 2021	13.2 ten-thousand	2.568 million	1723	I love Beijing, traveling with the performances
	Chongqing	Chongqing Culture and Tourism	January 2025	6.7 ten-thousand	78.2 ten-thousand	278	Not yet divided into modules
	Hangzhou	Hangzhou Culture and Tourism	July 2024	5.1 ten-thousand	16.3 ten-thousand	214	Not yet divided into modules
	Zhangjiajie	Zhangjiajie Cultural Tourism	July 2023	9842	35.6 ten-thousand	201	Not yet divided into modules

(Note: As of March 2026)

The overall gap primarily manifests in fan base size and engagement levels. Apart from Yantai, other cities within the province demonstrate relatively weak international communication capabilities: While Qingdao enjoys robust economic resources and substantial investments, its outreach effectiveness still trails behind Beijing and Chongqing. Weihai and Rizhao, constrained by their smaller economic scale and limited funding, exhibit restricted international recognition and influence. Additionally, cities outside the province have established Rednote accounts earlier with more systematic operations, accumulating richer fan bases and operational expertise.

3.2. Content production and cross-cultural narrative characteristics

In terms of content production, themes expand rapidly, but innovation in formats is insufficient.

The visa-free policy has driven urban cultural tourism accounts to expand their themes from scenic spot introductions to cultural experiences and lifestyle exploration. Qingdao focuses on beer culture and maritime festivals, Yantai highlights wine culture and fairyland coastlines, Weihai emphasizes marine ecology and folk traditions, while Rizhao showcases sun-drenched coastlines and leisure resorts. However, account content remains predominantly text-based with inconsistent video quality and creative shortcomings, with underutilization of advantageous formats like short videos and live streaming.

Cross-cultural narrative: Exploration is emerging, but the overall approach remains traditional

Cities such as Beijing and Chongqing have attempted to adopt international narrative and expression strategies, whereas most accounts within Shandong Province still adhere to traditional propaganda tones, failing to align with the cognitive patterns of international audiences and thus struggling to evoke emotional resonance. For instance, Yantai Fushan Damian primarily focuses on ingredient preparation methods without delving into agricultural culture, folk customs, or humanistic connotations, resulting in insufficient dissemination of cultural value.

Multilingual services: Weak foundation and insufficient service depth

The multilingual services provided by the eight cultural tourism accounts involved are still in their early stages, with relatively low development standards. While some cities have attempted to develop multilingual content, challenges persist regarding translation accuracy and cross-cultural adaptability. Other cities demonstrate limited language coverage, predominantly featuring foreign-language content supplemented by Chinese materials. Overall, customized language services targeting core overseas markets such as Japan and South Korea remain insufficient, failing to effectively support international communication efforts or meet the service demands of inbound tourists.

4. International audience demands and constraints on communication

From the perspective of international audiences, the international communication of urban cultural tourism accounts currently faces several main issues as follows.

4.1. Mismatch between content supply and audience demand

What international audiences truly seek are in-depth cultural experiences, as well as the emotions and history behind culinary stories. However, some urban content creation fails to adequately prepare by considering cultural differences. For instance, when presenting tin-inlay craftsmanship of Weihai, some accounts merely display finished product images with brief descriptions, lacking video presentations of the production

process, thus failing to convey the craftsmanship's value. Simultaneously, international users have a high demand for practical travel guides, including itinerary planning, transportation, and accommodation, yet some accounts provide incomplete or inaccurate information.

4.2. Insufficiently precise information transmission

Some account operations rely on outsourced teams lacking professionals skilled in cross-cultural communication, leading to content planning that becomes disconnected from local culture, resulting in a loss of focus or distortion. People from different cultural backgrounds interpret information differently, yet the account content is not precisely adapted. For example, the external promotion of Rizhao as the "Oriental Sun City" merely emphasizes the concept without integrating scenes such as sunrise or fishermen's rituals into cross-cultural translation, leaving international audiences with a vague understanding.

4.3. Ineffective interaction mechanisms

International audiences are willing to engage with locals, but some cultural tourism accounts fail to respond promptly to international comments and private messages, making audiences feel neglected and reducing their engagement. Additionally, the limited variety of interactive activities dampens the enthusiasm of overseas users. For instance, some overseas interactive initiatives of Hangzhou remain confined to formats like "scenery + captions", failing to launch multi-format activities such as a "West Lake Walk Photography Challenge", thus relegating users to the role of mere "viewers" rather than "participants." In the case of the Yantai cultural tourism account, the comment section has seen overseas visitors inquiring about "English maps of Yangma Island and homestay bookings", with prolonged periods of no response, prompting these overseas tourists to turn to other cities for travel planning.

4.4. Structural constraints

Poor communication among departments such as cultural tourism, foreign affairs, and publicity leads to content duplication and fragmented distribution channels. Economically strong cities like Qingdao have ample funding and talent, whereas cities like Rizhao face resource constraints, struggling to consistently produce high-quality international content, widening the gap with stronger cities and limiting communication effectiveness. Furthermore, existing evaluations often focus on quantitative metrics such as follower counts and likes, lacking dynamic assessments of communication quality and audience behavior.

5. Strategies for optimizing the city image in international communication

5.1. The "welcoming in" strategy system

To precisely reach international audiences, in-depth market research targeting different visa-waiver countries is necessary: focusing on natural scenery, culinary experiences, and high cost-effectiveness for Southeast Asian tourists; and emphasizing history, culture, art exhibitions, and high-end vacation needs for European and American tourists. Based on this research, audience segments are defined, personalized content is developed, and a dynamic mechanism for monitoring audience needs is established using social media data analysis, online surveys, and feedback from travel forums.

Efforts should be made to delve into the city's cultural essence to create immersive experiences: Qingdao could launch an in-depth beer culture tour encompassing museum visits, brewing experiences, and

food tastings; Yantai could organize a wine culture festival featuring vineyard tours, tastings, and winemaking workshops. Concurrently, tourism infrastructure should be enhanced, the foreign language skills and service awareness of industry personnel improved, and multilingual signage and service systems optimized.

Social interaction and word-of-mouth promotion should be strengthened by setting up official accounts on major platforms and regularly sharing travel information. International tourists should be encouraged to share their experiences and participate in topics. Incentive programs for word-of-mouth marketing can be introduced to leverage tourists' organic sharing, thereby expanding the city's international influence and effectively promoting its cultural tourism image abroad.

5.2. The “sending out” strategy system

Officials must strengthen the branding of the urban image. Core urban values and characteristic resources should be explored in depth, and exclusive brand identifiers, along with promotional slogans, are to be refined in order to build a differentiated urban image. For instance, Qingdao has been positioned as “A City of Beer, A Charming Coastal Destination”, while the brand of Yantai is established as “A Wine Capital, An Immortal Coastal Resort.” Meanwhile, urban historical allusions, cultural legends, and humanistic stories should be extracted and packaged into vivid and accessible brand narratives, with communication channels expanded to enhance international recognition.

Deepened international cultural exchanges and cooperation are also called for. Overseas tours and exhibitions by local art troupes are to be promoted in visa-exempt countries, and overseas performances are to be organized by the Qingdao Peking Opera Troupe and Yantai Lü Opera Troupe. Cultural exhibitions such as photography and calligraphy shows are to be held to display the charm of regional culture. University resources are expected to be leveraged to carry out international exchange programs and academic seminars, while overseas young people's understanding is to be enhanced, and friendly communication groups are to be cultivated for the cities.

Overseas media promotion should also be expanded. Cooperation is to be made with mainstream overseas media to accurately launch urban image advertisements and special reports, so as to improve communication reach. International cultural and sports events, as well as characteristic festivals, are to be planned to create hot news events, and overseas media are to be invited for on-site interviews and coverage. Urban influence is thus amplified through foreign media, and the regional international visibility and reputation are to be comprehensively enhanced.

5.3. Innovation of communication paths

This initiative focuses on innovation in digital communication paths by developing VR tourism experience projects designed to shape urban images. Virtual reality devices are used to allow international tourists to immerse themselves in urban natural scenery, historical sites, and cultural attractions. VR videos featuring scenic spots—such as coastal views of Qingdao and Penglai Pavilion of Yantai—have been produced and are displayed at overseas tourism exhibitions and cultural exchange events. In addition, AR technology is adopted to set up interactive markers at major urban scenic areas and commercial streets. By scanning these markers with mobile phones, international tourists can access historical and cultural information, travel guides, and food recommendations related to the attractions.

A strategic approach has been introduced to enhance integrated cross-boundary communication paths, through which urban cultural and tourism resources are deeply merged. Tourism products and routes with

rich cultural connotations, such as “Historical and Cultural City Tours” and “Folk Culture Experience Tours”, have been launched to allow international tourists to experience the city’s cultural charm during their travels. Various culture-and-tourism integrated events—including cultural tourism festivals, music festivals, and food festivals—are held to attract international visitors. Furthermore, coordinated development between the urban tourism industry and other sectors is being strengthened. Joint marketing campaigns are carried out in collaboration with the aviation, hospitality, catering, and retail industries, thereby expanding the international reach and influence of urban image communication through industrial synergy.

Through international cooperative communication paths, new opportunities have been created. International communication alliances have been established with tourist cities, cultural institutions, and media outlets in visa-exempt countries, through which international urban image communication activities are jointly carried out. By means of these alliances, resource sharing and complementary advantages are realized. Regular meetings of the international communication alliance are convened, where experiences and practices in urban image communication are exchanged, and communication strategies and development directions are jointly discussed. Active participation is also maintained in various events organized by international tourism organizations, where urban tourism resources and images are showcased. Professional exchanges and cooperation with figures in the international tourism industry are conducted, contributing to the expansion of the international tourism market.

6. Conclusion

The implementation of the visa exemption policy provides a structural opportunity for the international communication of urban images to shift from “one-way display” to “two-way interaction and co-construction.” Through a comparative analysis of official cultural and tourism accounts of four coastal cities in Shandong and four external cities on the Rednote platform, the study finds that external cities generally have advantages in interactive efficiency. Although the four Shandong cities possess strong content production capabilities, they face common problems such as mismatched demands between communicators and audiences, and poor matching between cultural symbols and target groups. Such gaps reveal the underlying dilemmas of current urban international communication in terms of supply-demand adaptation and accurate reach. From the two-way communication perspective of “Welcoming in” and “Sending out”, this paper proposes optimization paths from five dimensions: demand-oriented content positioning, immersive scene experience, interactive word-of-mouth building, differentiated brand shaping, and international communication cooperation mechanism. The research concludes that the traffic dividends released by the visa exemption policy need to be captured through targeted communication strategies, so as to achieve a substantive transformation of urban images from “display” to “co-construction”, providing practical references for coastal cities in Shandong to improve their international communication efficiency.

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