

Image Construction and Discourse Strategies of Yungang Grottoes Tourist Site: A Discourse Analysis Approach

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Abstract: This study examines Yungang Grottoes as a case to systematically investigate the discourse mechanisms and strategies in its image construction through critical discourse analysis. By analyzing multiple types of materials including official promotional texts, media reports, tourism guides, and online reviews, the research reveals how Yungang Grottoes' image underwent discursive transformation from historical relic to cultural symbol and from local landscape to national icon. The study finds that Yungang's image construction presents three discourse positions: "Millennial Buddhist Caves," "Eastern Art Treasury," and "National Treasure," achieved respectively through temporal representation and authenticity rhetoric in historical narratives, professional interpretation and extreme evaluations of aesthetic value, and symbolic encoding of national identity with cultural subjectivity expression. The discourse construction process employs complex strategies including authoritative discourse legitimacy production, emotional mobilization, intertextual meaning proliferation, and multimodal synergy. Discourse production is deeply embedded in contestations among official power, commercial logic, and popular participation: official discourse dominates through institutional authority, commercial logic profoundly shapes discourse construction, and popular discourse gains expression space but remains constrained by existing discourse frameworks.

Keywords: Yungang Grottoes; Tourist Site Image Construction; Discourse Analysis; Discourse Strategies

1. Introduction

The image of a tourist destination is not an objective reflection of the landscape itself, but rather a result continuously constructed through discourse practice within specific social and cultural contexts. This construction process involves the selection of historical narratives, the encoding of cultural symbols, the attribution of aesthetic values, and the implantation of ideologies, ultimately forming a symbolic system with specific meanings. As a representative of royal Buddhist cave art from the Northern Wei Dynasty in China, the Yungang Grottoes have undergone a profound transformation from a frontier relic to a national cultural symbol since their "discovery" in the early twentieth century. Behind this transformation lies a process of continuous interpretation and reconstruction by different social groups through diverse discourses across different historical periods. Today, the Yungang Grottoes serve as both a World Cultural Heritage site and an important cultural tourism brand for Shanxi Province and China as a whole. The construction of its image involves multiple levels including official cultural policies, tourism marketing, academic research and interpretation, media representation, and mass tourism consumption. These discourse practices at different levels collectively shape public perception and imagination of the Yungang Grottoes.

Discourse analysis provides an effective theoretical perspective for understanding the construction of destination images, as it focuses on the relationship between language and power, revealing how discourse achieves the production and dissemination of meaning through specific rhetorical strategies, narrative structures, and symbolic manipulation. This study takes the Yungang Grottoes as a case study, collecting various types of materials including official promotional texts, media reports, travel guides, and online reviews, and employs critical discourse analysis methods to examine the discourse mechanisms of its image construction. It specifically analyzes how historical narratives are selectively presented, how artistic values are interpreted through specialized discourse, how national identity is symbolically encoded, and explores the specific operation of authoritative discourse strategies, emotional appeal strategies, and intertextual strategies in image construction. This research can not

only reveal the discourse patterns of image production for cultural heritage sites, but also provide insight into the power relations and cultural politics behind them, thereby offering an empirical reference for understanding meaning production and social construction in contemporary Chinese tourism communication.

2. “Millennium Buddhist Caves”: Discourse Construction of Historical Narratives

2.1 Temporal Discourse Representation

Temporal discourse in Yungang Grottoes’ image construction demonstrates distinctive “deep time” features through repeated use of precise temporal expressions like “over 1,500 years,” “460 AD,” and “early Heping reign of Northern Wei,” positioning the grottoes at specific points on a long historical timeline. Texts employ dynamic temporal metaphors such as “weathered by vicissitudes,” “traversing millennia,” and “witnessing rise and fall” that personify the grottoes as historical witnesses with agency, while phrases like “still standing today” and “enduring for millennia” create temporal tension through past-present contrasts. This intensive temporal discourse operates symbolically to distinguish Yungang from other sites and endow it with irreplaceable historical value and cultural weight. The deeper function lies in establishing cultural authority through historical depth, as historical longevity constitutes important symbolic capital in contemporary Chinese cultural contexts. Repeated emphasis on the “Northern Wei” period connects the grottoes with a pivotal era of ethnic integration and cultural exchange in Chinese history, while discourse structures like “carved during Northern Wei and renovated through successive dynasties” narrate the grottoes as condensed Chinese history. This embeds Yungang into the grand historical process of Chinese civilization development, achieving discursive transformation from local relic to national cultural symbol while evoking audience reverence for history.

2.2 Rhetorical Strategies of Historical Authenticity

Historical authenticity discourse occupies a central position in shaping Yungang’s image through frequent keywords like “original flavor,” “authentic record,” and “authenticity preservation” that establish the grottoes’ authoritative status as historical evidence. Official discourse emphasizes precise data such as “45 major caves and over 51,000 statues,” creating scientific rigor through numerical objectivity while extensively citing archaeological reports, academic findings, and historical records with authoritative markers like “recorded in the Book of Wei” and “archaeologically confirmed.” This mixed use of academic and promotional discourse transforms professional knowledge into public cognition, converting academic authority into destination credibility. The deeper strategy lies in transforming abstract history into perceptible experience through “presence” construction: promotional texts use bodily metaphors like “witnessing with one’s own eyes” and “touching history,” narrating visits as direct historical dialogue while phrases like “every statue is an authentic portrayal of history” equate material remains with history itself, dissolving temporal distance and creating historical presence illusion. This rhetorical effectiveness responds to contemporary tourists’ cultural demand for “authenticity”—in postmodern tourism contexts where authenticity distinguishes quality cultural products, Yungang’s discourse establishes unique market positioning as a “genuine” historical-cultural destination distinct from replica-based and fictional theme park products.

2.3 Symbolic Production of Royal Identity

Royal identity has been systematically symbolized in Yungang’s discourse construction through frequent expressions like “royal grottoes,” “imperial project,” and “built with the strength of the entire nation,” establishing direct connections between the grottoes and supreme power. Textual narratives highlight specific imperial figures—Emperor Wencheng, Empress Dowager Feng, and Emperor Xiaowen—through subject-predicate structures like “Emperor Wencheng ordered the excavation,” presenting imperial will as fundamental to the grottoes’ existence, while naming practices like “Tan Yao’s Five Caves” and “Imperial Portrait Caves” inscribe royal identity into physical structure through symbolic spatial markers. Intensive use of descriptive expressions such as “royal magnificence” and “imperial scale” transforms royal identity from historical fact into perceptible aesthetic characteristic, converting abstract power hierarchies into concrete spatial experiences. This discourse production reproduces cultural hierarchies: in traditional Chinese contexts, royal identity signifies highest cultural taste, optimal resource allocation, and finest craftsmanship, so positioning Yungang as a “royal project”

establishes unsurpassable cultural status at the discourse level. This identity symbolization plays crucial distinguishing functions in contemporary tourism communication, contrasting “royally excavated Yungang” with “folk-built grottoes” to establish supreme cultural hierarchy position while evaluative discourses like “China’s largest royal grotto temple” combine “royal” with superlative expressions to reinforce cultural capital and support high-end cultural tourism market positioning through symbolic identity certification.

2.4 Contemporary Reconstruction of Northern Wei Narratives

The Northern Wei Dynasty has been endowed with symbolic value far exceeding its original historical significance in contemporary discourse construction. Promotional texts no longer narrate Northern Wei merely as a historical dynasty but reconstruct it as a contemporary-relevant model through frameworks like “great era of ethnic integration,” “golden period of cultural exchange between China and foreign countries,” and “model of multicultural coexistence.” Texts repeatedly emphasize characteristics such as “Xianbei regime devoutly believing in Buddhism,” “crystallization of Hu and Han cultural integration,” and “witness to Silk Road cultural exchange,” transforming Yungang from simple Buddhist relic into historical symbol carrying multicultural values by selectively highlighting Northern Wei’s cultural openness, inclusiveness, and integration while intentionally weakening regime changes and military conquests. This contemporary reconstruction essentially transforms historical resources into contemporary cultural and political discourse, gaining new interpretive space within mainstream frameworks like the Belt and Road Initiative, cultural confidence building, and ethnic unity policies. Texts narrate Yungang as “historical witness to Silk Road cultural exchange,” establishing continuity between ancient Silk Road and contemporary Belt and Road Initiative to provide historical legitimacy for current national strategies, while expressions like “cultural heritage shared by 56 ethnic groups” and “historical witness to pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation” embed Yungang into contemporary ethnic unity discourse. This meaning reconstruction enables Yungang to transcend physical existence as historical relic and become symbolic space connecting history with the present, carrying national will and cultural policies, making its image construction engage deeply in contemporary China’s cultural identity construction and ideological production beyond mere tourism branding.

3. “Eastern Art Treasury”: Discourse Production of Aesthetic Value

3.1 Aesthetic Discourse Construction of Sculptural Art

The sculptural art of Yungang Grottoes has been systematically incorporated into professional aesthetic categories in promotional discourse. Texts extensively employ professional terminology from sculptural art criticism such as “exquisite modeling,” “smooth lines,” “balanced proportions,” and “vivid expressions,” transforming religious statues originally intended for worship into artworks for aesthetic appreciation. Promotional texts repeatedly elaborate on art historical propositions such as “the perfect fusion of Western Region styles and Central Plains traditions,” “statue characteristics influenced by Gandhara art,” and “evolution from foreign styles to indigenous forms,” positioning Yungang statues within the academic narrative framework of cross-cultural artistic exchange and stylistic evolution, thereby endowing them with art historical value transcending religious functions. The specialized use of art discourse fundamentally changes the social attributes and cultural positioning of Yungang Grottoes, as the viewing methods, value judgments, and meaning interpretations all undergo fundamental transformations once the statues are incorporated into the art discourse system. Descriptive discourse on specific caves’ artistic characteristics, such as “the delicate and expressive facial carving of the Great Buddha in Cave 20” and “the intricate and magnificent carving in Cave 6 represents the pinnacle,” provides ordinary audiences with an aesthetic framework and interpretive path for viewing the grottoes by making abstract aesthetic experiences concrete and identifiable. This aesthetic discourse construction transforms Yungang Grottoes from a religious site to an art hall, from a worship space for believers to an aesthetic space for audiences, and this transformation precisely aligns with the overall trend of aestheticizing and spectacularizing cultural heritage in contemporary tourism consumption, making art discourse a mediating discourse connecting historical heritage with modern tourism and religious culture with secular consumption.

3.2 The Use of Evaluative Discourse such as “World-Class” and “Incomparable”

Superlative evaluative discourse constitutes a core rhetorical strategy in Yungang’s image construction. Expressions like “World Cultural Heritage,” “world-class artistic treasure,” “internationally renowned,” and “world-famous” frequently appear, elevating Yungang from local landscape to global cultural symbol through spatial markers like “world” and “international.” Absolute expressions such as “incomparable,” “unique,” “unparalleled,” and “unprecedented” construct Yungang as an irreplaceable cultural entity through exclusive rhetoric, while intensive use of superlative forms like “largest,” “earliest,” “finest,” and “most complete” establishes exclusive superior position among cultural heritage sites through quantitative comparison. Authorization of evaluative discourse is crucial: promotional texts extensively cite international organization certifications, expert evaluations, and authoritative assessments, using discourse markers like “UNESCO evaluation” and “world-renowned art historians believe” to provide legitimacy through international and academic authority. This superlative discourse use fundamentally reflects competitive logic and symbolic value-adding mechanisms in cultural heritage tourism communication. In a tourism market dominated by attention economy and symbolic consumption, destination image construction essentially competes for cultural capital and symbolic power. Through intensive use of discourse like “world-class” and “incomparable,” Yungang establishes unquestionable value superiority at the discourse level, serving both tourism market brand competition and emotional appeals of local cultural pride and national cultural identity. Comparative discourses such as “one of China’s four great grottoes” and “no less than any grotto art in the world” confirm top-tier status while reinforcing Chinese cultural heritage’s position in the world cultural landscape. This discourse practice thus transcends destination promotion to become a tool for constructing national cultural image and confidence, achieving a functional leap from tourism communication to cultural politics.

3.3 Aesthetic Guidance in Visual Discourse

Visual discourse in the promotion of Yungang Grottoes guides and shapes audience aesthetic experience through systematic control of image selection, shooting angles, and composition. Official promotional images frequently feature iconic sculptures such as the open-air Buddha in Cave 20, the pagoda pillar in Cave 6, and the giant Buddha in Cave 5, establishing these as symbolic markers through repeated visual representation. The choice of specific shooting angles carries clear aesthetic purposes: upward angles emphasize grandeur and sublimity, close-ups highlight exquisite carving details, and panoramic views showcase spatial magnificence. Light and shadow effects are deliberately created—morning sunlight casting solemn dignity on the Buddha, nighttime illumination adding mysterious depth—transforming the grottoes from everyday landscape into aesthetic spectacle. The systematic exclusion of visitors and religious activities “decontextualizes” the site, abstracting it from social reality into a pure aesthetic object. This aesthetic guidance is further reinforced in multimedia communication through slow camera movements, musical atmosphere, and emotional narration that construct viewing as a ritualized aesthetic experience. Color treatments favor warm yellows, golden luster, and azure backgrounds to create dignified elegance. Online production of “best angles,” “optimal photo spots,” and “must-see sculptures” standardizes viewing paths and photographic practices, disciplining tourist behavior into collective visual consumption patterns. This visual discourse essentially shapes and regulates audience aesthetic taste through symbolic manipulation, dictating not only “what to see” but “how to see” and “what is seen.”

3.4 Artistic Discourse and Cultural Capital Conversion

The discursive production of Yungang Grottoes’ artistic value fundamentally represents a process of cultural capital accumulation and conversion. By positioning the site as “the pinnacle of Eastern sculptural art” and “an outstanding representative of ancient Chinese art,” artistic discourse assigns it quantifiable and exchangeable cultural capital at the symbolic level. Emphasis on “art historical significance,” “academic research value,” and “art education importance” embeds Yungang within institutionalized systems of art historical scholarship and professional education, providing institutional certification. Official designations such as “National Key Cultural Heritage Site,” “World Cultural Heritage,” and “5A Tourist Attraction” convert bureaucratic rankings into symbolic capital, while references to “art academy sketching base” and “international academic conference site” leverage scholarly community recognition for capital accumulation. This cultural capital directly converts into economic value through market premium and brand advantage in tourism. Promotional texts construct visiting Yungang as “high-quality cultural tourism,” “pilgrimage for art lovers,” and “essential for

cultural cultivation,” attracting middle-class tourists with higher cultural capital whose consumption capacity supports premium market positioning. Repeated use of concepts like “artistic appreciation,” “cultural refinement,” and “aesthetic ability” elevates visits from ordinary sightseeing to cultural capital acquisition and display, enabling tourists to construct their cultural taste and social identity symbolically^[1]. This discursive strategy differentiates Yungang from mass tourism sites to cultural landmark status, securing a unique symbolic position in competitive tourism markets and serving as the key mechanism for converting cultural heritage’s symbolic value into tourism products’ market value.

4. “National Treasure”: Symbolic Encoding of National Identity

4.1 Dual Functions of World Heritage Discourse

Yungang Grottoes’ inscription on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 2001 has been repeatedly emphasized in promotional discourse, becoming a core resource for site image construction. “World Cultural Heritage” appears as a fixed prefix in promotional texts with remarkable frequency, while the specific date “December 14, 2001” carries ritualistic significance as the moment Yungang transformed from local heritage to global cultural symbol. This discourse serves dual functions: externally, it invokes international authority to establish Yungang’s position in world culture, with texts emphasizing “high international recognition,” “shared cultural treasure of humanity,” and “representing China in global cultural dialogue,” elevating it from Chinese to world heritage through globalized frameworks. Internally, this status converts into a vehicle for national pride, with expressions like “showing the world Chinese culture’s greatness” and “winning honor for the nation” narrating international recognition as China’s cultural victory on the global stage, thereby stimulating national identity and cultural confidence. This operation effectively converts international discourse into nationalist discourse, making World Heritage status serve both global cultural circulation and domestic construction of national identity.

4.2 Constructing National Cultural Symbolism

Yungang’s discursive transformation into a national cultural symbol follows a path from concrete to abstract, from local to national. Promotional discourse progressively constructs Yungang from a Buddhist site in Datong, Shanxi, into “the Chinese nation’s cultural treasure” and “outstanding representative of ancient Chinese civilization.” This symbolization occurs through specific strategies: frequent use of grand narrative concepts like “Chinese nation,” “Chinese culture,” and “Chinese civilization” embeds Yungang within the imagined community of nation and state, while expressions like “common heritage of 56 ethnic groups” and “embodying the wisdom and creativity of the Chinese nation” strengthen its legitimacy as national symbol by expanding cultural ownership. Repeated emphasis on Yungang’s “Chineseness” forms the core mechanism: texts elaborate how sculptural styles transformed from Western styles to Chinese characteristics, embodied traditional Chinese aesthetics, and incorporated Confucian elements, constructing Yungang as purely Chinese cultural product distinct from Indian and Central Asian Buddhist traditions. This symbolization also relies on placing Yungang within China’s continuous historical-cultural narrative through expressions like “pivotal historical position,” “cultural link connecting ancient and modern,” and “millennial national spirit,” establishing inherent connections with Chinese civilization’s historical process and completing the transformation from historical relic to national symbol.

4.3 Ideological Embedding in “National Card” Narrative

“National card,” a frequently appearing metaphor, carries complex ideological functions in Yungang’s image construction, redefining the site from tourist destination to showcase of national image and symbolic resource for cultural diplomacy. Texts narrate Yungang as “important window displaying China to the world,” “cultural ambassador representing national image,” and “key platform for telling China’s story,” granting it national representativeness that transcends heritage attributes to become an instrument of state will. This discourse operates by incorporating protection, promotion, and consumption of Yungang into the framework of national interest: “protecting Yungang protects national cultural security,” “promoting Yungang enhances national cultural soft power,” establishing direct links between individual behavior and national goals, transforming site image construction into ideological practice. This strategy manifests in selective and reinforced historical narratives: Yungang’s history is deliberately interpreted as evidence of ethnic integration, cultural tolerance, and openness, aligning

with contemporary political discourse on ethnic unity, cultural confidence, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Through this intertextual construction between history and reality, Yungang becomes a symbolic bridge connecting ancient and contemporary China, historical and political narratives, deeply engaging in the production and dissemination of state ideology.

4.4 Cultural Subjectivity in Globalization

Cultural subjectivity expression in Yungang's image construction manifests as sustained assertion of Chinese culture's uniqueness and superiority within globalized discourse, presenting a complex posture of both acceptance and resistance, dialogue and differentiation. Promotional discourse actively employs globalized terms like "world-class," "international standards," and "global perspective" to establish Yungang's international status, comparing it with Greek sculpture and Roman architecture to demonstrate artistic value within universal world art historical frameworks. Simultaneously, it constructs cultural difference and incommensurability through essentialized expressions like "Eastern characteristics," "Chinese wisdom," and "unique cultural genes." The repeated positioning as "pinnacle of Eastern sculptural art" carries deep discursive implications: "Eastern" as a geo-cultural concept locates Yungang on the global cultural map while constructing subjectivity through binary opposition with "the West," while "pinnacle" attempts to establish Eastern culture's superior position. This cultural subjectivity gains new political significance in contemporary China's cultural revival context: Yungang is narrated as "important Chinese contribution to world civilization," "crystallization of Eastern wisdom," and "comparable to any Western artistic achievement." Through such construction, site image-building transcends tourism promotion to become a symbolic tool for constructing Chinese cultural discourse power and establishing cultural confidence in global cultural competition, simultaneously proving Chinese culture meets universal world standards while insisting on irreplaceable unique value, a discursive tension reflecting contemporary China's complex position seeking cultural subjectivity in globalization.

5. Operating Mechanisms of Discourse Strategies

5.1 Legitimacy Production through Authoritative Discourse

Yungang's image construction systematically invokes academic, official, and international discourse to establish narrative legitimacy and authority. Promotional texts extensively cite archaeological reports, scholarly works, and expert evaluations through markers like "renowned architect Liang Sicheng praised," "archaeologically recognized," and "art historical research shows," converting professional judgments into objective foundations for site image. This strategy transfers academic authority into public communication, granting scholarly knowledge legitimacy in broader dissemination. Official certification constitutes another dimension: "State Council's first batch of National Key Cultural Heritage Sites," "National Cultural Heritage Administration's approved protection plan," and "Ministry of Culture and Tourism's 5A rating" provide institutional endorsement through state administrative hierarchy^[2]. International discourse further reinforces this authority through frequent mentions of "UNESCO evaluation," "ICOMOS recognition," and "World Heritage Committee's high praise," offering both universal validation transcending national boundaries and reinforcing domestic cultural standing. This multilayered authoritative discourse creates an unshakeable meaning system where any challenge to Yungang's value must confront triple barriers of academic authority, state power, and international organizational discourse.

5.2 Emotional Mobilization Techniques

Phrases like "ancestral wisdom," "ancient craftsmen's dedication," and "treasures left by forebears" establish blood and cultural connections between contemporary people and ancient creators, converting feelings toward Yungang into national historical identity and cultural belonging. National pride activation forms another dimension: "Eastern art that amazes the world," "pride of the Chinese nation," and "cultural achievements rivaling the globe" construct Yungang's superiority in international comparison to trigger national emotions^[4]. This appeal proves especially effective against contemporary China's cultural revival psychology, satisfying national self-esteem while providing emotional foundation for cultural confidence discourse. The deeper mechanism bypasses rational critical thinking by directly triggering emotional responses to establish audience identification with specific narratives; when tourists are emotionally "overwhelmed" or "moved," they temporarily

suspend questioning of discourse content, more readily accepting constructed site images and value judgments^[3].

5.3 Intertextual Strategies and Meaning Proliferation

Intertextual strategies in Yungang's discourse construction manifest through systematic citation and appropriation of canonical texts, historical documents, and cultural symbols, establishing dialogues between texts to achieve meaning accumulation and proliferation. References to ancient texts like Wei Shu and Shui Jing Zhu provide historical documentation while invoking these canonical texts' cultural authority to add historical depth and credibility to contemporary narratives. Selective quotations from literati poems and contemporary scholars' commentaries create intertextual meaning networks through multiple voices. Contemporary practice reveals more complex forms: Yungang's promotional discourse forms competitive yet complementary intertextual relationships with other famous grottoes like Dunhuang Mogao and Longmen, with "one of China's Four Great Grottoes" both borrowing cultural prestige from other sites while highlighting uniqueness through comparison. Intertextual production across media reports, travel guides, academic papers, documentaries, and social media repeatedly represents and reinforces Yungang's image across discourse fields, each reproduction drawing meaning from other texts while providing resources for subsequent texts, forming a continuous meaning production cycle. Notably, intertextuality also appears between Yungang discourse and contemporary political discourse: texts link Yungang with mainstream political discourse like the Belt and Road Initiative, cultural confidence, and national rejuvenation. Through this intertextual grafting, Yungang gains political correctness while sharing mainstream ideological discourse's communication resources and social influence.

5.4 Multimodal Discourse Synergy

Yungang's image construction relies not solely on linguistic texts but on coordinated operation of language, images, video, sound, and space to achieve multidimensional meaning production. Promotional photographs' selection of specific sculptures, camera angles, and lighting effects complement textual descriptions: images provide visual impact and intuitive perception while text guides viewing methods and meaning interpretation, enabling audiences to both see physical forms and understand cultural significance^[5]. Video communication integrates camera language, music, and narration to create immersive discourse effects: slow camera movements establish solemnity, classical music reinforces historical atmosphere, and emotive narration directly conveys value judgments^[6]. These modal symbols act synergistically on audience vision, hearing, and emotion, forming stronger persuasion than single modalities. Digital platforms present more complex multimodal forms: virtual reality provides immersive spatial experiences, 3D modeling recreates details, and interactive interfaces allow personalized exploration. These technological multimodal means not only change information presentation but reconstruct relationships between audiences and the site, converting experiences requiring physical visits into remotely consumable digital products. Different modalities do not simply repeat information but create division and complementarity in meaning production: images excel at formal beauty and visual impact, text at conveying historical information and value interpretation, sound at creating emotional atmosphere, and space at immersive experience. Multimodal synergy mobilizes advantages across modalities to comprehensively engage audience perceptual systems, constructing richer and more compelling site images than single modalities alone.

6. Power, Commerce, and Discourse Production

6.1 Official Discourse Dominance and Operating Logic

Official discourse occupies absolute dominance in Yungang's image construction, derived from institutional power over heritage management, communication channels, and discourse resource allocation. The Yungang Grottoes Research Institute controls not only physical space and cultural relics but also authoritative knowledge production and information dissemination through official websites, promotional materials, guide systems, and academic journals^[7]. This network disciplines other discourse subjects' narrative methods by setting agendas, filtering information, and defining standards. Official discourse operates through monopolizing historical interpretation rights and establishing value judgment standards: all authoritative historical narratives must follow officially recognized archaeological findings and research, while value assessments must align with heritage protection

concepts and patriotic education orientations. Digital-age control strengthens through official Weibo, WeChat accounts, and apps, enabling more direct audience reach while filtering folk discourse through algorithmic recommendations and content moderation. Maintaining dominance relies on close alliances with state power, academic authority, and mainstream media. When official narratives require reinforcement, concentrated media coverage, academic symposiums, and government policy support create discourse resonance. When contradictory folk discourse emerges, this alliance quickly neutralizes influence through suppression, topic diversion, or absorptive transformation, ensuring official discourse system stability and exclusivity.

6.2 Tourism Commercialization's Shaping of Discourse

Tourism market commercial logic profoundly shapes Yungang's discourse production and image construction, with commercialization-driven practices exhibiting consumerist characteristics and market orientation. Promotional discourse favors vocabulary stimulating consumption desire—"shocking," "spectacular," "must-visit"—while over-emphasizing visual spectacle and experiential appeal and simplifying historical-cultural content, reflecting commercial communication's pursuit of immediate effects, lowered acceptance thresholds, and consumption impulse creation. Commercial discourse transforms Yungang from cultural heritage into consumable tourism product through specific strategies: appropriating social media discourse like "photo opportunity shrine," "internet-famous site," and "Moments must-share" constructs visiting as social capital acquisition, while promotional language like "limited-time offers" and "package deals" directly places cultural experience within commodity exchange market logic^[8]. Tension exists between commercial and cultural value discourse: the former emphasizes entertainment, accessibility, and instant gratification; the latter stresses seriousness, professionalism, and deep experience. This tension manifests in commercially packaging serious cultural narratives—historical depth becomes "time-travel sensation," artistic value becomes "visual feast," religious connotations become "mysterious experience." Through such conversion, commercial logic transforms and co-opts cultural value discourse without completely abandoning it.

6.3 Popular Discourse Space and Boundaries

Digital platforms provide unprecedented discourse space for ordinary tourists participating in Yungang's image construction. Tourism website comments, social media shares, and short-video creations constitute a mass-produced discourse field characterized by decentralization, personalization, and fragmentation. Tourist comments narrate from personal experience, focusing on practical dimensions like service quality, touring convenience, and value—sharply contrasting official grand narratives with everyday life-oriented site expressions. However, popular discourse space is not completely free but constrained and disciplined by multiple boundaries. Platform content moderation deletes comments deemed negative, inappropriate, or politically sensitive, while algorithmic recommendation systems amplify high-engagement content, making popular discourse serve specific value orientations beneath seemingly free appearances. More subtle disciplining comes from internalized discourse habits: ordinary tourists immersed in official and commercial discourse unconsciously replicate mainstream narrative frameworks and rhetorical strategies. Tourist reviews' repeated use of formulaic phrases like "shocking," "spectacular," "worth seeing," and appropriation of official discourse like "historical depth" and "cultural treasure" show popular discourse has internalized mainstream value judgments and expressions^[9]. Truly critical or heterogeneous popular discourse occupies marginal positions. Negative discourse questioning management issues, criticizing over-commercialization, or doubting promotional authenticity, though objectively existing, encounters multiple resistances in dissemination and struggles to enter mainstream site image narratives. Popular discourse thus formally gains expression space but remains substantially confined within existing discourse frameworks and power structures.

6.4 Tensions and Contestations among Discourse Subjects

Yungang's image construction discourse field is a complex space where multiple subjects coexist and compete. Official institutions, tourism enterprises, academic communities, media organizations, and ordinary tourists engage in ongoing meaning contestation based on respective interests and discourse positions. Official discourse emphasizes heritage protection, patriotic education, and national image; commercial discourse pursues market benefits and consumption mobilization; academic discourse maintains professional standards and knowledge production autonomy; popular discourse

expresses individualized experiential perceptions and value judgments. These differently oriented discourses involve both cooperation and conflict. Official-commercial tension manifests in prioritizing cultural versus economic value: when excessive commercialization threatens relic protection, official discourse constrains commercial behavior through policy regulation; when sites need market operations for enhanced influence, officials selectively adopt commercial logic. Academic-promotional discourse negotiation appears in continuous balancing of professionalism versus accessibility, objectivity versus advocacy. Promotional discourse requires academic research for knowledge support and authoritative endorsement but cannot fully follow academic rigor and complexity, which would weaken mass communication effectiveness^[10]. Academic discourse thus suffers simplification, distortion, or misuse when cited, while academic community resistance rarely changes promotional discourse operations. Though weak in discourse power, popular discourse exerts reverse influence through numerical advantage and digital amplification effects. When tourists collectively complain about management or service issues, officials must respond discursively and sometimes adjust policies. This bottom-up discourse pressure, though limited, makes Yungang's image construction not unidirectional power manipulation but a dynamic process generated through tensions and contestations among different subjects.

7. Conclusion

This study employs critical discourse analysis to examine Yungang Grottoes' image construction mechanisms. The research reveals that Yungang's image is not an objective reflection but a symbolic product systematically constructed through historical narratives, aesthetic discourse, and national identity discourse. Historically, discourse transforms Yungang from frontier relic to national memory symbol through temporal representation, authenticity rhetoric, royal symbolization, and Northern Wei narrative reconstruction. Aesthetically, professional terminology, extreme evaluations, visual guidance, and cultural capital conversion accomplish the transformation from religious sculpture to artistic treasure. Politically, World Heritage discourse, national symbol construction, and "national card" narratives make Yungang a symbolic resource serving state ideology. Discourse construction relies on mechanisms including authoritative legitimacy production, emotional mobilization, intertextual strategies, and multimodal synergy. Discourse production is embedded in contestations among official power, commercial logic, and popular participation: official discourse dominates through institutional authority, commercial logic profoundly shapes construction, and popular discourse gains expression space but remains constrained by existing frameworks. This study reveals discourse patterns in cultural heritage site image construction, demonstrating complex interactions among meaning production, power operations, and cultural politics in tourism communication. However, empirical investigation of international tourist discourse, local community discourse, and discourse reception remains insufficient for future expansion.

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