

From "On-site" to "Online": Real Dilemmas and Relief Paths of Digital Empowerment for Rural Sports Event IP

-- A Qualitative Analysis Based on Jiangmen Practice

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Abstract: Under the dual drive of the "Digital China" and "Rural Revitalization" strategies, rural sports events are experiencing a painful transition period from traditional "on-site" carnivals to modern "online" IP construction. As a renowned "Qiaoxiang" (hometown of overseas Chinese), Jiangmen in Guangdong Province possesses a profound cultural heritage of rural sports. However, amidst the wave of the digital economy, it faces the paradox of "rich resources but weak branding." Based on digital empowerment theory and field theory, this paper employs qualitative research methods to deeply analyze the realistic dilemmas faced by rural sports events in Jiangmen during the IP development process. The study finds that there are currently multiple contradictions, such as the "hard gap" in digital infrastructure versus the "soft deficit" in digital literacy, the "involution" of rural narratives versus the "aphasia" in international communication, and the "closedness" of strong tie networks versus the "sense of rupture" in weak tie connections. Addressing these dilemmas, the paper proposes relief paths shifting from "unidirectional technology implantation" to "deep scene integration": activating Qiaoxiang cultural genes by reconstructing the digital narrative system, building a global community network based on "digital nostalgia," and establishing a "government-market-village collective" multi-party synergistic digital governance mechanism. The aim is to realize the transformation of rural sports events from "momentary heat" in physical space to "long-term popularity" in digital space, providing a Jiangmen sample for rural cultural revitalization in the process of Chinese-style modernization.

Keywords: Rural Sports Events, IP Development, Digital Empowerment, From "On-site" to "Online", Jiangmen Practice, Qualitative Analysis.

1. Problem Statement and Research Background

1.1. The Call of the Times: The Digital Turn of Rural Sports Events

With the in-depth implementation of the "Digital Village Development Strategy Outline" and the "14th Five-Year Plan for Sports Development," digital technology is reshaping the production and lifestyle of rural society with unprecedented depth and breadth. In this grand context, rural sports events, as important carriers of rural culture, have far exceeded the scope of national fitness. They have become key grasps for condensing rural emotions, reshaping rural governance structures, and promoting rural industrial revitalization.

In recent years, phenomenal events represented by Guizhou's "Village BA" (Village Basketball Association) and "Village Super League" have successfully broken the cultural barriers of the urban-rural dual structure with the help of digital media such as short videos and live streaming, realizing a leap from "rural entertainment" to "national IP." This model of "online traffic attraction + offline consumption" has provided a new paradigm for the development of rural sports across the country. However, this success is not a simple technological replication but an explosion of specific socio-cultural capital in the digital field. For most villages, how to bridge the "digital divide" and transform local sports resources into digital IPs with market competitiveness and cultural influence remains a difficult

problem to be solved.

1.2. The Paradox of Qiaoxiang: Resource Enrichment vs. Digital Aphasia

Jiangmen, known as the "First Hometown of Overseas Chinese in China," possesses extremely unique and abundant rural sports resources. Taishan's "Nine-man Volleyball," Xinhui's "Dragon Boat Racing," and Heshan's "Lion Dance Culture"—these projects not only have a long history and a profound mass base but also carry the special mission of maintaining emotional ties among millions of overseas Chinese. In the traditional physical space (i.e., "On-site"), these events are often crowded with people and full of enthusiasm. However, in the digital space (i.e., "Online"), Jiangmen's rural sports events appear relatively silent, facing the awkward situation of "having categories but no brands," "having history but no traffic," and "having activities but no industry."

This sharp contrast between "on-site" enthusiasm and "online" coldness forms a distinct paradox. On the one hand, the unique "dual social structure" of Qiaoxiang (local society and overseas diasporic community) provides a natural gene for the international dissemination of events; on the other hand, traditional organizational methods and communication means greatly limit the generation and diffusion of their digital IPs. Therefore, deeply exploring the specific realistic dilemmas faced by Jiangmen rural sports events in the transition from "on-site" to "online," understanding the underlying generation mechanisms, and constructing

effective relief paths are not only realistic needs for the high-quality development of Jiangmen's sports undertakings but also typical cases enriching the theory of digital transformation of rural sports in China.

2. Theoretical Perspective and Analytical Framework

2.1. Digital Empowerment Theory: From Instrumental Rationality to Value Rationality

Digital Empowerment refers to the process of using digital technology to grant individuals, organizations, or communities stronger abilities to achieve goals, solve problems, or create value. In the context of rural sports events, digital empowerment is not just an application of "instrumental rationality"—such as installing a few cameras or opening a few live streaming accounts—but a profound reconstruction of "value rationality."

It includes three levels:

Connection Empowerment: Breaking geographical restrictions to connect scattered audiences, resources, and information, especially connecting overseas Chinese with their hometowns.

Content Empowerment: Utilizing technologies like AIGC, VR/AR to improve the production efficiency and expressiveness of event content, making it conform to the laws of Internet communication.

Governance Empowerment: Optimizing event organization and management through big data analysis to achieve scientific and precise decision-making.

2.2. Spatial Reconstruction under Field Theory: From "On-site" to "Online"

Bourdieu's field theory posits that social space is a network composed of objective relationships between various positions. In the digital age, the field of rural sports events has undergone fundamental spatial reconstruction.

"On-site" Field: This is a physical space based on geography and kinship. Its characteristics are embodiment, immediacy, and closedness. Spectators must be present at the scene, and interaction is based on the norms of an acquaintance society.

"Online" Field: This is a virtual space based on bitstreams and algorithms. Its characteristics are disembeddedness, latency (or hyper-reality), and openness. Spectators can be strangers or wanderers from any corner of the globe, and interaction is based on shared interests and internet subcultures.

The core of IP development is to realize the effective conversion and appreciation of capital (cultural capital, social capital, economic capital) in this dual field of "on-site" and "online." This study will use this as an analytical framework to examine the ruptures and bridging in Jiangmen's practice.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Method

This study mainly adopts Qualitative Research methods. Compared with quantitative research, qualitative research is more suitable for exploring deep-seated, procedural social facts such as "dilemmas," "mechanisms," and "pathways," especially in the field of rural sports where large-scale

structured data is lacking.

3.2. Data Collection

Research data is derived from a three-month field investigation conducted by the research team in the Wuyi region of Jiangmen (Taishan, Kaiping, Xinhui, Heshan, etc.).

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants, including event organizers (village cadres, heads of sports associations), participants (athletes, villagers), communicators (self-media personnel, media reporters), and representatives of overseas Chinese.

Participant Observation: The research team observed activities such as the "Taishan Volleyball Village Super League" and "Xinhui Dragon Boat Race" on-site, focusing on the application of digital technology, the media usage behavior of the audience, and the event organization process.

Netnography: Textual analysis was conducted on short videos, live replays, and comment interactions related to Jiangmen sports events on platforms such as TikTok (Douyin), WeChat Channels, and Bilibili to understand online public opinion feedback and the communication ecology.

4. Realistic Dilemmas: Blocking Factors from "On-site" Carnival to "Online" Aphasia

Based on the coding analysis of fieldwork data, this study found that Jiangmen rural sports events face structural dilemmas in four dimensions—technology, content, relationship, and commerce—during the digital transformation process.

4.1. Dilemmas in the Technical Dimension: The "Hard Gap" in Infrastructure and the "Soft Deficit" in Digital Literacy

4.1.1. The Lag in New Rural Digital Infrastructure

Although network coverage in the Jiangmen region has significantly improved, rural digital infrastructure remains weak in supporting the high-concurrency, low-latency demands of large-scale event live streaming. The investigation found that some remote village courts have not laid dedicated optical fiber networks, and 5G signals are prone to congestion during crowded times, leading to lagging live streams and blurry image quality. This greatly affects the viewing experience of online audiences, especially overseas users accustomed to high-definition experiences. Furthermore, professional broadcasting equipment (such as multi-angle cameras, drones, audio equipment) is extremely scarce at the village level. Most live streams rely solely on a single mobile phone filming "one take to the end," lacking professional director switching and slow-motion replays, failing to reproduce the exciting moments of competitive sports.

4.1.2. The Capacity Shortage of Grassroots Operational Subjects

Compared to the lack of hardware, the shortfall in software capabilities is more fatal. The organizers of rural sports events are mostly village committee cadres or local sports enthusiasts, who are generally older and whose understanding of digital technology remains at the primary stage of "posting to WeChat Moments." They lack the professional ability to plan internet topics, operate private traffic pools, and analyze backend data. In an interview, a village cadre frankly stated: "We know online publicity is important, but we really don't

know how to edit videos or how to buy traffic. The things we send out are only watched by people in our own village." This talent dislocation of "those who understand sports don't understand technology, and those who understand technology are not in the village" is the biggest constraint in the IP process [1].

4.2. Dilemmas in the Content Dimension: "Involution" of Rural Narratives and "Discount" in Cross-cultural Communication

4.2.1. Homogenization and Roughness of Communication Content

Browsing through various short video platforms, content about Jiangmen rural sports is voluminous but mostly stereotypical. Content focuses mostly on game highlights or even some vulgar funny bloopers, lacking deep excavation of the profound Qiaoxiang culture, clan stories, and character destinies behind the events. This fragmented and superficial content production makes it difficult to build a recognizable IP image. Audiences forget it after watching and cannot form sustained attention stickiness.

4.2.2. Decoding Failure in Cross-cultural Contexts

The potential audience for Jiangmen events is global overseas Chinese, but current digital content suffers from a serious "cultural discount" in international communication. Many live streams and short videos are not equipped with bilingual subtitles, and commentaries use authentic local dialects (such as Siyi dialect). While this enhances the intimacy for locals, it creates huge understanding barriers for the new generation of overseas Chinese (second and third generations) and domestic audiences from non-Cantonese speaking areas. In addition, for special rural rules and regulations in dragon boat sacrifices and volleyball rules, there is a lack of digital explanation means (such as animation demonstrations, background cards), causing external audiences to "watch the excitement without knowing the ropes," making it difficult to generate deep cultural identity [2].

4.3. Dilemmas in the Relational Dimension: "Closedness" of Strong Ties and "Sense of Rupture" in Weak Ties

4.3.1. Path Dependence of Acquaintance Society

"On-site" rural events rely on strong tie networks of clan kinship, which have high mobilization efficiency. However, these strong ties manifest as closedness in the "online" field. The spread of WeChat groups and Moments is limited to "insiders," forming an "echo chamber effect" of information. It is difficult for foreign tourists and ordinary netizens to obtain accurate schedule information and registration channels through public digital channels (such as OTA platforms, official mini-programs), causing events to become "self-entertainment in the village" and unable to absorb external traffic.

4.3.2. Lack of Operation in Online Communities

Although some events have established official accounts or video channels, there is a widespread lack of user operation thinking. The relationship between accounts and fans is a unidirectional "publish-read" relationship, lacking interaction. Comments are unanswered, fan groups are unmaintained, and "passerby fans" cannot be converted into "die-hard fans." Especially for overseas Chinese eager to establish contact

with their hometowns, the lack of an exclusive digital community space with a sense of belonging results in this precious "Qiaoxiang power" resource being unable to effectively precipitate on the digital end.

4.4. Dilemmas in the Commercial Dimension: The "Narrow Gate" of Traffic Monetization and "Ambiguity" in Interest Distribution

4.4.1. Single and Fragile Business Models

Currently, the funding sources for Jiangmen rural sports events mainly rely on government subsidies and donations from overseas Chinese (the traditional "being here" model). The traffic brought by digitalization has not effectively transformed into economic benefits. Live streaming e-commerce is still in the trial stage, mostly for primary agricultural products, lacking cultural and creative products deeply bound to the event IP. Sponsors are mostly local small and micro enterprises, lacking the intervention of national brands or digital platform capital.

4.4.2. Difficulties in Defining Digital Asset Property Rights

When an event becomes an IP, who owns the generated video copyrights, data assets, and brand authorization? In practice, the boundaries of rights between village collectives, operating companies, and live streaming platforms are blurred. Village collectives believe the event belongs to the village and proceeds should go to the collective; operating companies believe traffic is brought by technology and they should benefit. This absence of an interest distribution mechanism makes multi-party cooperation difficult to sustain, often leading to a halt after "one popular season" due to interest disputes [3].

5. Attribution Analysis: From Binary Opposition to Digital Divide

The emergence of the above dilemmas is not accidental but a reflection of deep-seated structural contradictions.

Digital Projection of the Urban-Rural Dual Structure: For a long time, high-quality digital resources (technology, talent, capital) have gathered in cities, leaving rural areas on the edge of the digital ecology. This offline imbalance is further amplified in cyberspace, forming a "digital divide."

Conflict between Traditional Rural Logic and Modern Platform Logic: Rural society follows the logic of a ritual-custom society, emphasizing human feelings (Renqing), face (Mianzi), and order; while internet platforms follow the logic of traffic, emphasizing efficiency, algorithms, and eyeballs. When the two meet in the process of event IP development, intense friction is inevitable.

Tension between Cultural Protection and Commercial Development: In the process of digitalization, to cater to internet aesthetics, rural culture is often subjected to "decontextualized" tailoring. While this brings traffic, it may also lead to cultural alienation and hollowing out, triggering resistance from local villagers.

6. Relief Paths: Constructing a Symbiotic Ecology of "Technology-Culture-Community"

Addressing the above dilemmas and combining the resource endowments of Jiangmen Qiaoxiang, this study

proposes the following relief paths aimed at achieving a smooth transition and value appreciation from "on-site" to "online."

6.1. Infrastructure Upgrade: Consolidating the "Digital Base" of IP Development

6.1.1. Promoting the Intelligent Transformation of Rural Venues

The government should incorporate the digital transformation of rural sports facilities into the overall planning of the "High-Quality Development Project for Hundreds of Counties, Thousands of Towns, and Myriads of Villages" and digital village construction. In key Qiaoxiang areas and core event zones, the deep coverage of 5G networks and gigabit optical fibers should be coordinated. Encourage villages and towns with conditions to build "Smart Courts," deploying AI automated capture cameras, smart scoreboards, and VR panoramic live streaming systems. This will not only improve the online viewing experience but also provide data analysis services for athletes to improve their competitive level [4].

6.1.2. Implementing the "Rural Digital Sports Partner" Plan

Solving the talent problem relies not only on introduction but also on cultivation. It is suggested that the Municipal Federation of Social Sciences or the Sports Bureau take the lead, in conjunction with universities (such as Wuyi University, Guangdong University of Finance) and MCN institutions, to conduct targeted training. Excavate "digital natives" among returning college students, retired athletes, and rural youth to cultivate a group of "rural digital sports partners" who understand sports, filming, live streaming, and operations. At the same time, establish a "Science and Technology Commissioner" system to let university teacher-student teams sink to villages and towns to provide technical guidance and accompanying services.

6.2. Reshaping Content Ecology: Creating a Digital Atlas of "Qiaoxiang Narrative"

6.2.1. Excavating Cultural Cores and Telling "Qiaoxiang Sports Stories" Well

Content is the soul of IP. Homogenized game highlights should be abandoned in favor of deep cultural narratives. Use AIGC technology to assist scriptwriting, focusing on the "century-old history" of Jiangmen volleyball, the "clan inheritance" of dragon boats, and the "martial spirit" of lion dances. Produce series of micro-documentaries, character interviews, and cultural vlogs to restore cold events into flesh-and-blood human stories. For example, themes like "Looking for the Veteran Youth on the Volleyball Court" or "A Letter (Qiaopi) of Competition News Crossing the Ocean" can be planned to trigger emotional resonance [5].

6.2.2. Building a Multilingual, Omni-media International Communication Matrix

For overseas audiences, establish a "Global + Local" communication strategy. Open official account matrices on international platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. Introduce intelligent translation technology to provide multilingual subtitles for live streams and short videos. Invite overseas Chinese media and ethnic Chinese influencers to participate in the broadcasting and secondary creation of events. Utilizing VR/AR technology, develop immersive experience products like "Cloud Tour of

Qiaoxiang Courts" to let overseas wanderers feel the changes in their hometown as if they were there, eliminating "cultural discount."

6.3. Activating Community Connection: Weaving a Network Based on "Digital Nostalgia"

6.3.1. Building "Cloud Ancestral Halls" to Connect Global Fellow Villagers

Use WeChat mini-programs or dedicated APPs to develop "Cloud Communities" integrating event live streaming, genealogy queries, and nostalgia exchange. Use events as touchpoints to activate communities, maintaining activity during non-competition periods by publishing hometown construction updates and holiday greetings. Translate traditional clan strong ties to the online world, forming a private traffic pool with high stickiness and trust.

6.3.2. Expanding Ubiquitous Connections to Absorb Public Domain Traffic

Break closedness and actively embrace public domain traffic. Cooperate with mainstream OTA platforms (Ctrip, Meituan) and sports vertical communities (Hupu, Dongqiudi) to publish event travel guides and viewing guides. Plan online challenges (such as the "Nine-man Volleyball Juggling Challenge") and use algorithmic recommendation mechanisms to attract general populations interested in sports, rural areas, and tourism, achieving a breakthrough in user circles.

6.4. Innovating Governance Mechanisms: Establishing a Multi-party Synergistic Co-creation Model

6.4.1. Establishing a Synergistic Mechanism of "Government Guidance + Market Operation + Villager Subjectivity"

The government is responsible for top-level design, brand endorsement, and infrastructure construction (meta-governance); market institutions are responsible for technical support, commercial operation, and traffic promotion; village collectives and villagers are responsible for event organization, cultural display, and venue maintenance. All three are indispensable.

6.4.2. Exploring Diversified Commercial Realization Paths of "IP+"

Change the single blood transfusion model and build hematopoietic functions.

IP + Cultural Tourism: Launch boutique tourism routes like "Game Viewing + Diaolou Study Tour + Hot Spring Experience," achieving drainage through online booking.

IP + Specialties: Use event live streaming rooms to promote geographical indication products like Xinhui dried tangerine peel and Taishan rice, creating "event co-branded" souvenirs.

IP + Digital Assets: Explore issuing event NFT souvenirs based on Qiaoxiang culture (such as digital autographed photos of champion teams, 3D digital models of dragon boat heads) for overseas Chinese to collect, satisfying their emotional sustenance while achieving digital confirmation and monetization of IP [6].

6.4.3. Clarifying Interest Linkage Mechanisms

Formulate standardized cooperation contracts, clarifying the distribution proportions of ticket revenue, broadcasting rights revenue, and peripheral product revenue among all

parties. Establish a transparent financial disclosure system to ensure that collective income is used to feed back into rural construction and villager welfare, thereby obtaining sustained support from villagers.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

From "on-site" to "online," it is not only a change in the communication medium of Jiangmen rural sports events but also a comprehensive reshaping of their cultural forms, organizational methods, and social relationships.

Through qualitative analysis, this study finds that although Jiangmen currently faces multiple dilemmas in technology, talent, content, and mechanisms, its unique Qiaoxiang cultural genes and profound mass base are the greatest confidence for its digital transformation. By connecting hard infrastructure, soft narratives, community hearts, and interest mechanisms, Jiangmen is fully capable of exploring a path of rural sports event IP development with Chinese characteristics and Qiaoxiang features.

This transformation will make rural sports events no longer just a "grassroots troupe" for villagers' self-entertainment, but a cultural bridge connecting home and abroad, a digital window displaying the style of Chinese-style modernization in rural areas, and a green engine promoting high-quality development of the county economy. Future research can further focus on the impact of digital technology on rural sports ethics and the comparative differences in IP paths for different types (competitive vs. folk) of events.

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(2) 2024 Guangdong Provincial Social Science Planning Joint-Discipline Project: "Pathways and Countermeasures for Upgrading Sports Consumption Empowered by the Digital Economy" (Project No. GD24XTY02)

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