

Telling red stories well in red tourism: intrinsic logic, practical challenges, and narrative innovation

Tianda Wei^{1*}, Linlin Che¹, Ya Zhang¹, Li Ran²

¹Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

²Rizhao Culture and Tourism Industry Service Center, Rizhao, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: weitianda@bisu.edu.cn

Abstract. Red tourism, as a key carrier for passing on the red gene, undertakes the mission of telling red stories well. The internal logic between the two is reflected in two aspects: first, the interdependence between content and carrier—red stories are the soul of red tourism, while red tourism serves as the medium for disseminating these stories; second, the existence of a supply-demand relationship, which requires a shift from one-way communication to interactive empathy. Currently, red tourism faces such challenges as insufficient content development, single form, limited experience scenarios, and backward dissemination mechanisms. This article proposes four major innovative approaches to promote the high-quality development of red tourism and inherit red culture.

Keywords: red stories, red tourism, narrative innovation

1. Introduction

2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. In terms of how to carry forward the spirit of the Great Resistance War and through what channels, the development of red tourism provides a pathway. As a distinctive tourism phenomenon with Chinese characteristics, the growth of red tourism highly depends on the extent to which red resources are utilized. Telling red stories well is inherently consistent with telling China's story well. Using red tourism as a means to narrate China's stories not only fulfills its educational function and role in guiding values, but also enhances the appeal of red tourism through in-depth exploration of red resources. Developing red tourism, telling red stories effectively, and disseminating China's voice demonstrate the mission and narrative responsibility of a major country in the new era.

2. The intrinsic logic linking red tourism and the telling of red stories well

Telling red stories well and developing red tourism are interdependent in terms of content and carrier. Culture is the value core of tourism, while tourism is a key arena for the expression and practice of culture [1]. On the one hand, red stories are the core content and the soul of red tourism. The figures, events, places, and historical contexts embedded in red stories provide “scripts” that can be seen, experienced, and reflected upon. Carrying rich connotations of red culture, these stories infuse tourism activities with spiritual impetus and constitute key factors that drive quality improvement and upgrading. Telling red stories well is not only a process of deep mining, systematic sorting, and innovative activation of red cultural resources; it is also essential to shaping the distinctive emotional resonance and core competitiveness of red tourism. On the other hand, red tourism serves as a key medium and experiential space for disseminating red stories. It has become an important channel for the communication of revolutionary and advanced culture [2]. Through diverse symbolic systems including material entities such as sites and relics [3], behavioral activities such as commemorative ceremonies and themed education; and linguistic texts such as slogans and works—abstract revolutionary spirit is transformed into perceptible, concrete images, achieving a “second narrative turn” from text to practice. This transformation shifts audiences from passively “listening to stories” to actively “entering into stories,” greatly enhancing the emotional impact and communicative efficacy of red stories.

Telling red stories well and developing red tourism are also linked by a supply-side/demand-side relationship. The educational function of red tourism is often understood as being subjected to preaching, interpretation, and education. Didactic narrative modes correspond to relatively singular educational demands, whereas “telling red stories well” entails a shift toward

micro-level, plural narratives that meet visitors' pursuit of new red-tourism experiences—immersion, interactivity, empathy, and personalization. This requires a turn in red-tourism narration from one-way transmission to multi-actor interaction and from grand narrative to micro-level empathy, leveraging technology, art, and gamified design to “tell good stories” that meet—and create—new market demand. This represents a form of strategic communication where value alignment is crucial. Specifically, red narration may take the form of language-and-text narratives centered on heroic stories, landscape narratives centered on sites and relics, and ritual-behavior narratives centered on commemorative ceremonies [4]. Red tourism, drawing upon these rich narrative forms, enables red stories—through emotional resonance, value identification, and memory construction—to deepen and satisfy the tourism experience, thereby unifying educational functions with market performance.

“Storytelling” is a hallmark of culture–tourism integration. Red stories endow red tourism with profound spiritual connotations and differentiated competitiveness, while red tourism enables broader dissemination of red stories. Anchored in “narrative” as the core link, cultural resources are converted into tourism capital, and cultural communication and value transformation are realized through tourism experiences. This expands the boundary of culture–tourism integration [5], providing a solid theoretical foundation for the development of the integrated culture–tourism industry.

3. Practical challenges in telling red stories well within red tourism

At present, red tourism has become an important vehicle for patriotic education and education in revolutionary traditions, bearing the mission of telling red stories well and transmitting the red gene. Yet it faces several practical bottlenecks in the excavation, narration, and dissemination of red stories.

3.1. Insufficient development of narrative content

Red cultural resources—products of deep integration between regional culture and the revolutionary process—carry unique local memories and rich cultural connotations. Many destinations, however, have not broken through the confines of macro-narrative; they emphasize linear sorting of basic historical facts (time, place, figures) while lacking deeper excavation and interpretation of historical details, individual destinies, and spiritual cores. As a result, visitors can learn “what happened” but struggle to understand “why it happened” and the underlying values. Meanwhile, there is a “blind spot under the lamp” regarding the excavation of local red cultural resources: genuine, moving, life-proximate local revolutionary stories remain under-utilized. Consequently, the red stories told in many destinations tend toward homogeneity and templating [6], which neither highlights the unique charm of local red culture nor readily triggers visitors' deeper understanding and emotional resonance.

3.2. Monotonous narrative forms

First, the storytelling of red narratives is often rigid. Most sites still rely on the traditional model of “docent commentary + graphic displays” [7]. Visitors remain passive recipients; even where audio guides are introduced, the essence is still “information infusion,” leaving little room for deep thought and emotional connection. Second, narrative design often fails to account for the cognitive traits and reception habits of distinct audiences, lacking differentiated, layered storytelling for groups such as adolescents, older adults, and Party members—leading to a mismatch between content and audience needs.

3.3. Constrained experiential scenarios

As key material carriers of red stories, many destinations, revolutionary sites, and memorial halls still adopt traditional static displays, underutilizing modern presentation techniques for scene restoration and dynamic exhibition. Visitors struggle to link the objects before their eyes with the red stories they hear through audio devices; the separation of “objects” and “events” and the disjunction between scenery and emotion are widespread. Visitors often “see objects but not history; view exhibitions without sensing the spirit,” making immersion difficult. Moreover, barrier-style exhibitions (e.g., glass enclosures; restricted access to core historical scenes) prevent close contact with exhibits, weakening embodied experience and participation, and hindering the formation of deep understanding and lasting memory of red stories.

3.4. Underdeveloped dissemination mechanisms

On the one hand, most destinations are in the early stages of developing cultural derivatives. Types are limited, and products that deeply integrate the connotations of red stories are scarce. Conventional items—badges, keychains, commemorative coins—struggle to carry emotional value and spiritual core, dampening purchase and sharing intentions and constraining secondary dissemination via tangible carriers that are “portable and spreadable.” On the other hand, online communication capacity is

weak. Many destinations have not fully leveraged short-video, livestreaming, and other new media; official websites and social media accounts often update slowly and lack interactivity, further limiting the breadth and impact of red-story dissemination.

4. Pathways for narrative innovation in telling red stories well

4.1. Content innovation: deepening the connotations of red narratives

Narrative content should be strengthened through systematic excavation and connotation building of red resources.

(1) Establish specialized teams of historians, local-culture experts, and archival researchers to comprehensively sort and interpret local red resources—drawing on archival research, interviews with witnesses and descendants, verification of historical sites and build a red-resource database to underpin content creation [8].

(2) Break the confines of linear timelines with thematic and modular narrative designs. Rigorously adhere to historical facts while, around major events, key figures, and critical symbolic spirits, probing the historical contexts of events and the intellectual logic behind individual choices, and interpreting their contemporary value to meet current development needs.

(3) Prioritize moving stories of “ordinary people” in great history—e.g., mass support narratives and grassroots revolutionaries’ deeds—drawing on local materials. For instance, the “Half a Quilt” story from Shazhou Village, Rucheng, Hunan can be developed as a red narrative IP. A popular perspective closer to everyday life can enhance emotional resonance and strengthen the recognizability and identification of local red culture.

4.2. Formal innovation: enriching the forms of red narratives

Narrative form should move beyond one-way explanations to deep visitor participation through interaction and co-creation.

(1) While retaining traditional displays, actively introduce interactive devices—touch-screen query systems, interactive knowledge quiz systems to broaden channels for autonomous information acquisition.

(2) Rely on audio-visual technologies, full-scale scene reconstruction, and role-script design to develop immersive projects such as red theatres and red-themed immersive role-playing experiences (similar to LARP). Convert physical display spaces into historically faithful dramatic scenes. This involves adapting real revolutionary events and figures into coherent plotlines. Such immersive experiences enable visitors to perceive historical details directly and internalize revolutionary spirit deeply.

(3) Tailor differentiated content and delivery for adolescents, older adults, Party members, and other groups, employing layered design and heightened interactivity to ensure red stories more effectively move audiences across ages and identities.

4.3. Scene innovation: optimizing spatial carriers for red narratives

Narrative scenes should leverage new technologies to activate static resources and enhance scene-based storytelling.

(1) Harness VR/AR and holography to break time-space constraints and restore historical settings, transforming visitors from bystanders into participants and elevating immersion and affective impact [9].

(2) On the basis of rigorous historicity, implement contextual restoration of revolutionary sites—restoring period slogans, household and production implements, and other elements—to build atmospherically authentic narrative scenes that narrow the psychological distance between visitors and history.

(3) Create accessible, tactile, and experiential spaces that visitors can enter, touch, and perceive. Allow visitors to handle select replica objects, such as vintage telephones, wartime communications devices, and traditional farming tools. This multi-sensory approach stimulates sight, hearing, and touch, turning red relics into on-site “storytellers” and upgrading the experience from artifact display to contextual re-enactment [10].

4.4. Dissemination innovation: expanding the reach of red narratives

Narrative dissemination should transcend geography and raise communicative efficacy through whole-area promotion.

(1) Endow red stories with lightweight, everyday communicability; shift cultural and creative products from shallow symbols to story-rich red intellectual property [11]. Develop practical, shareable, collectible products, so that red stories enter daily life through usable carriers.

(2) Build an online dissemination matrix by integrating a destination’s multimedia platforms and coordinating messaging across channels. Continuously release high-quality content—expert deep-dives, oral histories by witnesses, short red-drama videos, live-streamed guided tours, so that red stories gain traction online and spread widely.

(3) Strengthen deep linkages with surrounding communities, schools, and enterprises/institutions by organizing red-themed festivals, special exhibitions, and study-tour programs [12]. This approach embeds storytelling and dissemination into local public-culture services. As a result, red stories can achieve dual objectives: reaching national audiences from afar while taking

root locally through proximity and community engagement. This creates a multi-dimensional, normalized, whole-area dissemination system.

5. Conclusion

Telling red stories well is of great significance for promoting the high-quality development of red tourism. Through narrative innovation that transforms red history into tangible, comprehensible, and interactive tourism experiences, we can not only enhance the emotional resonance and influence of red culture but also improve the market competitiveness of red tourism. Therefore, we must maintain our fundamental principles while embracing innovation, deeply excavate the intrinsic value of red resources, and continuously innovate in narrative methods and experiential forms—so that red stories gain new vitality and vigor, making a greater contribution to transmitting the red gene and promoting revolutionary culture.

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