

A Study of the Carnival Features of Harbin Ice and Snow World from the Perspective of Bakhtin's Carnival Theory

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Abstract: Harbin Ice and Snow World is often described as a tourist attraction, a winter festival site, or a successful city brand. These descriptions record what the site looks like and how popular it has become, yet they do not explain why this place generates such intense collective emotion, why it shortens social distance, or why visitors so readily enter its mood of performance and release themselves. This paper uses Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory to examine Harbin Ice and Snow World as a cultural space rather than a simple scenic spot. It argues that the park creates a temporary "carnivalized" environment through four connected mechanisms: spatial estrangement, partial suspension of hierarchy, symbolic exaggeration, and collective emotional participation. At the same time, this paper does not romanticize the site. Harbin Ice and Snow World is not a pure carnival in the Bakhtinian sense. Its freedom is organized, its participation is guided, and its apparent equality remains tied to commercial tourism. Even so, carnival theory still explains its force better than ordinary branding language or tourism statistics. In this sense, Harbin Ice and Snow World should be read not merely as a winter park but as a managed carnival space where collective pleasure, cultural display, and economic design meet.

Keywords: Carnival theory; Harbin Ice and Snow World; Bakhtin; Ice and snow culture; Cultural tourism

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1. Introduction

Harbin in winter has an urban atmosphere that is hard to compare with that of an ordinary city. The usual rhythm of streets, work, and daily movement is changed by ice and snow. In Harbin, ice is no longer a cold and hard material; it is carved into buildings, performances, and spaces that invite people to enter. Harbin Ice and Snow World stands at the center of this transformation and has become one of the most recognizable symbols of winter tourism in China. As the project proposal for this study has already pointed out, the site does more than display ice sculptures. It creates a special sense of time and space in which visitors seem to step away from everyday social ranks and share a feeling of freedom and participation.

Earlier studies of Harbin Ice and Snow World have mainly discussed its popularity, striking visual scenes, and economic value. These observations are useful, but they only explain part of the case. They describe why the park looks attractive and why it has become successful as a tourist destination, yet they do not fully explain why visitors are so easily drawn into a shared emotional atmosphere, or how the space makes ordinary social differences feel less visible for a

short time. A crowded tourist site is not necessarily a cultural phenomenon, and a well-branded winter attraction does not automatically become a carnival.

Bakhtin's carnival theory offers a useful way to understand these issues. Carnival is not simply a festival. It is a short break from the normal social order. In carnival, hierarchy becomes weaker, authority can be laughed at, and bodies, laughter, and exaggeration take the place of official seriousness. People do not just stand outside and watch a carnival; they become part of it. As Andrews notes in her study of festive tourism, "carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it"^[1].

This paper argues that Harbin Ice and Snow World should be understood as a managed carnival space. Although the site creates many carnivalized effects, such as reshaping space, loosening social roles, strengthening symbolic display, and producing collective emotion, it does not truly overturn social hierarchy. Its carnivalization works mainly through feeling and perception, creating a limited but still meaningful sense of freedom, which makes it a useful case for studying contemporary urban leisure and cultural practice.

2. Literature review: What existing research shows, and what it misses

Research on Bakhtin's carnival concepts in China shows both clear interest and uneven application. Terms like dialogue, polyphony, and carnivalization are now frequently used, but this popularity has sometimes resulted in simplified readings that do not fully reflect the analytical range of the theory^[2]. This study treats carnival not as a general festive label, but as a framework for examining social and symbolic processes.

Previous research has often emphasized the democratic potential of carnival. It is usually understood as a cultural form that grows from below, questions dominant discourse, and opens space for reinterpretation^[3]. This point is important for the present study because it helps explain why Harbin Ice and Snow World should not be viewed only as entertainment or a visual spectacle. Its activities can also be read as organized attempts to change how people experience space, social contact, and collective pleasure.

Many Chinese studies apply carnival theory to literature and film. Zeng Yaonong, for example, shows how comedic films use carnivalization to disturb hierarchy and challenge conventional seriousness^[4]. Chen Yang also points out that carnivalized narratives often combine humor and seriousness, producing an audience experience that is unstable but still coherent^[5]. These studies are helpful, especially in showing how carnival works through tone, laughter, and inversion. However, their focus on textual and cinematic forms also creates a limitation. Harbin Ice and Snow World is not only something to be watched or interpreted. It involves bodies moving through cold air, crowds waiting together, and visitors entering an immersive spatial design. Film analogies can offer useful comparisons, but they cannot fully explain the participatory nature of the site.

Tourism studies add another layer to this discussion. Andrews examines the carnivalesque logic of Magaluf and shows how spectacle, inversion, and grotesque display shape visitor behavior^[1]. This example is relevant, but it cannot be transferred directly to Harbin. Magaluf is closely linked to alcohol, nightlife, and excess, while Harbin's carnival atmosphere is seasonal, family-oriented, and closely connected with city branding. The comparison makes one issue clear: applying carnival theory to Harbin requires attention to local context and to the specific ways people participate.

Empirical studies on Harbin Ice and Snow World also reveal the limits of existing approaches. Li Jiaxin discusses the role of brand image, social media, and cultural integration in shaping visitor experience^[6]. Liu and Tao study tourism carrying capacity and point to rapid growth as well as ecological and social pressure^[7]. Bi and Wang focus on problems such as supply mismatch, seasonal pressure, and service quality^[8]. These studies are useful for understanding management and operation, but they pay less attention to the symbolic and participatory dimensions of the site.

The existing literature leaves a gap between management-based research and theory-based interpretation. Harbin Ice and Snow World needs to be studied as a cultural mechanism that turns winter into a collective performance. By bringing Bakhtin's theory together with the lived effects of the park, this paper tries to explain not only how the site is managed, but also why it creates such a strong carnivalized experience for visitors.

3. Theoretical framework

In this study, Bakhtin's theory of carnival is not used as a decorative label for any lively festival scene. It is also not placed before the case simply as a detached theoretical summary. The key question is more specific: does Harbin Ice and Snow World produce the kind of social and symbolic effects that Bakhtin associates with carnival? In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin defines carnival as a "second world and a second life outside officialdom." This means a temporary sphere where ordinary rules do not disappear completely, but their authority becomes weaker for a limited time. This idea gives a clear starting point for reading Harbin Ice and Snow World. The site not only displays winter culture; it organizes another mode of experience, allowing visitors to step out of daily urban routine and enter a space shaped by spectacle, play, and collective participation^[9].

Bakhtin's discussion of hierarchy is especially important here. In carnival, "all were considered equal," and "free and familiar contact" replaced the normal distance created by "caste, property, profession, and age." This does not mean that carnival permanently abolishes social structure. Rather, it weakens the visible signs and emotional discipline of hierarchy for a short period. This distinction is central to the present paper. Harbin Ice and Snow World can be called carnivalized not because it truly overturns power, but because it creates a temporary situation in which visitors meet one another less as fixed social identities and more as people taking part in the same event. The aim is not to force the site into a perfect Bakhtinian model, but to ask how far it repeats carnival's logic of temporary release^[10].

Bakhtin also makes it clear that carnival cannot be reduced to an ordinary celebration. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he writes that "the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is, noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival," especially the forms of etiquette and distance produced by inequality. This idea helps shape the analysis that follows. The paper will examine Harbin Ice and Snow World through four related aspects: the making of an unfamiliar spatial order, the short-term weakening of visible hierarchy, the use of exaggeration and visual inversion, and the growth of collective emotion through shared participation^[11].

These aspects are not added to the case from the outside. They come from Bakhtin's own understanding of carnival and provide a basis for judging how the site works.

Seen in this way, carnival theory does not remain outside the argument as background information. It becomes part of the analysis itself. The question is not simply whether Harbin Ice and Snow World looks like a cheerful festival. The more important question is whether, under commercial and organized conditions, it creates a temporary second life in which ordinary distance becomes less strict, symbols become stronger, and collective experience feels more powerful than individual observation. The following sections examine the site from this perspective^[12-14].

4. Harbin Ice and Snow World as carnivalized space

Harbin Ice and Snow World can be understood as a carnivalized space because it changes the way visitors experience space, interaction, visual form, and collective feeling. It does not abolish ordinary social order completely, but it does interrupt it for a short time. The site does not present winter only as a natural season or a tourist resource. It turns winter into a constructed environment where daily rhythms are disrupted, visible social differences become softer, symbolic forms are enlarged, and visitors are pulled into a shared emotional atmosphere. The analysis below discusses the park through four connected dimensions: spatial estrangement, temporary weakening of hierarchy, exaggeration and symbolic transformation, and collective emotion created through crowd participation.

4.1. Spatial estrangement: Winter made unreal

The first carnival mechanism can be seen in the space itself. Harbin Ice and Snow World turns winter into something like an alternative city. Ice buildings, giant slides, illuminated sculptures, themed zones, and night lighting do not present snow as untouched nature. They present it as a designed world. This produces a strong sense of estrangement. Visitors are not

simply entering a park; they are crossing into a place where ordinary urban logic feels temporarily suspended.

Li Jiixin's discussion of brand image supports this point, even though her focus is different. She notes that the park uses artistic display, visual symbols, and a unified image system to strengthen the cultural meaning of ice and snow^[6]. Yet the effect goes beyond image-building. The whole site works like a frozen stage. Outside the park, the city follows familiar routines such as transport, study, work, and deadlines. Inside the park, cold becomes theatre, and ice architecture becomes an invitation to move, watch, and participate. The place does not ask visitors to look at it quietly from a distance. It asks them to enter it physically.

This is where carnival theory explains more than marketing language can. Branding may explain how the park is packaged, but carnival theory helps explain why that package affects bodies and feelings so strongly. It directs attention away from the image alone and toward the atmosphere created when people move together through an unfamiliar winter space.

4.2. Temporary equality: Real feeling, limited truth

One of the strongest social effects of Harbin Ice and Snow World is the temporary leveling of hierarchy among visitors. People of different ages, jobs, and regional backgrounds wait for the same slides, watch the same performances, and experience the same cold weather. Heavy winter clothing also reduces visible signs of status. Professors, students, office workers, parents, and children may look different in daily life, but in the park, they are first seen as visitors taking part in the same event. This short-lived sense of equality becomes one of the park's major attractions^[15].

This leveling can be felt, but it should not be overstated. Unlike Bakhtinian carnival, which suspends hierarchy more directly, the park softens social differences without removing them. Visitors still need to buy tickets, follow planned routes, and participate in a commercial setting. The feeling of equality is therefore conditional. Beneath the shared experience, the structure of the tourist site continues to guide movement and behavior^[16].

These limits do not simply weaken the argument. They actually show what kind of carnivalization Harbin produces. The park stages a partial freedom. It allows visitors to step outside everyday roles for a while, but it does so without changing the social order that exists outside the site. In this sense, Harbin Ice and Snow World works more like a controlled outlet for social inversion than a real transformation of social relations^[17].

5. Extended carnivalization: Symbol, emotion, and its limits

The carnivalization of Harbin Ice and Snow World does not stop at spatial estrangement or temporary equality. It also appears in symbolic exaggeration, collective emotional participation, and the limits created by management and commercial organization. These elements do not work separately. They strengthen one another and produce an experience that is controlled but still immersive.

Symbolic exaggeration is central to this process. Harbin Ice and Snow World expresses carnival logic by enlarging and reshaping visual forms. Ice sculptures turn castles, mythic creatures, and famous buildings into objects far beyond everyday scale, while night lighting makes them appear even less ordinary. These forms are not only decorations. They change how visitors judge size, distance, and atmosphere, drawing them into a space where normal proportion no longer seems to apply. In Bakhtin's terms, carnival depends on a world being turned upside down, where familiar forms lose their fixed meaning. In Harbin, this reversal happens mainly through space rather than narrative. Winter itself becomes a spectacle. Andrews's discussion of carnivalesque tourism supports this reading, since it shows how inversion and excess can push experience beyond ordinary limits^[1]. At the same time, Harbin's excess is clearly controlled. It depends on scale, brightness, and visual density rather than open transgression. This makes it closer to a sanitized form of exaggeration.

This symbolic amplification leads directly into collective emotional experience. The carnival force of the site does not come only from what one visitor sees. It grows when people participate together. Visitors gather for performances, wait for attractions, respond to music and lighting, and react to movement around them. Through these shared actions, they

form a temporary public. Bakhtin's point that carnival is lived rather than observed is useful here, because participation turns individual enjoyment into shared feeling. In the park, emotion moves through the crowd. Excitement spreads, reactions become aligned, and personal experience starts to follow a collective rhythm. Sherfudeen's argument that carnival connects representation with social meaning also supports this point, even though Harbin is not mainly a space of political contestation. What it creates instead is brief social closeness, a moment when urban isolation is replaced by shared presence.

These effects, however, should not be treated as a full realization of Bakhtinian carnival. Harbin Ice and Snow World is institutionally organized, commercially promoted, and carefully regulated. It borrows the emotional and spatial logic of carnival, but it also controls how visitors move and participate. Bakhtin's carnival challenges official order from below. Harbin Ice and Snow World does not overturn authority; it folds carnivalization into a managed tourist system. This is not simply a failure of carnival. It is a transformation of it. The site allows release, but only within conditions that do not threaten structural change. Emotional intensity does not mean social reversal. Visitors may feel free, yet the form of that freedom is already designed.

The success of this model also brings new pressures. As tourism grows, ecological strain, unstable service capacity, and seasonal limits become more visible ^[7,8]. These problems are closely connected with carnivalization itself. When the crowd effect becomes stronger, culture may be reduced to visitor flow and visual spectacle. A collective experience that once felt spontaneous can be standardized and repeated on a large scale. Regional culture may also be simplified into familiar symbols, so that the complexity of local life is compressed into a polished surface that is easy to recognize and consume.

This is why carnival theory remains useful for the analysis. It helps distinguish emotional intensity from cultural depth and participation from control. Harbin Ice and Snow World does not simply display winter culture. It produces a managed form of collective experience in which exaggeration, emotion, and regulation exist together. The tension between release and structure is therefore not a side issue. It is what gives the site its contemporary significance.

6. Conclusion

Harbin Ice and Snow World can be understood as a managed carnival space. In this space, winter becomes unfamiliar, social distance is temporarily reduced, symbolic forms are enlarged into spectacle, and collective emotional participation is carefully organized. Bakhtin's carnival theory helps explain how these elements work together. The site creates a partial suspension of hierarchy, encourages shared emotional engagement, and produces a controlled inversion of ordinary social roles.

The analysis shows that the freedom of this space is structured rather than absolute. Its equality can be felt, but it remains limited. Its inversion is created mainly through atmosphere and symbolism, not through a real disruption of power relations. This helps explain why ordinary tourism statistics or descriptive language are not enough to capture the strength of visitors' collective experience. The park is not important only because many people visit it. It matters because it changes, for a short time, how people feel their own bodies, their relation to others, and their place within a winter city.

The relationship between regulated design and participant release does not make the site culturally shallow. Instead, it shows how contemporary urban festivals mediate individual and collective experience. Harbin Ice and Snow World suggests that carnivalization can take place inside managed systems. Winter becomes a stage for shared participation, symbols become more visible, and emotional currents move through the crowd. Even in a highly organized and commercially mediated environment, Bakhtin's ideas remain useful for understanding how pleasure, control, and collective feeling come together.

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