

Digital Dissemination and Consumption of Cultural Symbols in Lingnan's Traditional Villages

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Abstract: Ancient villages in Lingnan serve as crucial carriers of Lingnan culture. Their abundant cultural symbols now face the dual task of inheritance and innovation in the digital era. Drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, this study explores how representative cultural symbols of Lingnan's ancient villages are digitally translated and disseminated. By analyzing specific cases, it elucidates the logic of audience interaction and consumption during the decoding of these digital cultural symbols. This study aims to offer valuable insights for revitalizing ancient village culture and informing its sustainable industrial development.

Keywords: Ancient villages of Lingnan; Cultural symbols; Digital dissemination; Encoding and decoding; Symbolic consumption

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1. Introduction

Lingnan ancient villages are important carriers of Lingnan cultural accumulation, and the tangible and intangible cultural heritage they preserve constitutes a distinctive cultural symbol system. According to the Guangdong Province Ancient Village Recognition Criteria, ancient villages must possess characteristics such as being formed before the Qing Dynasty, having abundant historical and cultural remains, and being able to reflect traditional features and folk culture^[1]. With the promulgation of the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, which advocates the strategy of "co-building a culturally vibrant Bay Area", the preservation and dissemination of Lingnan's ancient village culture have been enlisted as a central concern in regional cultural development initiatives^[2].

The advent of the digital wave has established symbolic consumption as a new mode of economic activity. Consequently, cultural symbol consumption has become a key choice for consumers in the new media era. Meanwhile, as consumer demand for cultural experiences grows increasingly diverse, digital media such as short videos and live streaming are progressively supplanting traditional media, reconfiguring the primary channels

through which audiences receive information. Grounded in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, this study interrogates the process of digital translation of cultural symbols from Lingnan's ancient villages. It further synthesizes the underlying logic of audience interaction and consumption behaviors during the decoding process, thereby furnishing novel approaches for the inheritance and innovation of Chinese traditional culture within the modern context.

2. Cultural symbols of Lingnan ancient villages

As an important part of Cantonese cultural symbols, Lingnan ancient village cultural symbols mainly exist in their tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The tangible cultural symbols are often presented by extracting their design elements and refined through artistic design transformation, while the intangible cultural heritage symbols are more implicit. The audience's recognition of these symbols relies heavily on the creative forms used by the communicators.

In the digital age, the transmission of symbols is no longer confined to the monological communication of traditional media. Instead, it operates through a process where internet communicators digitally encode these symbols, utilizing new media platforms as the interface to reach audiences or consumers, forming a complete "encoding-decoding" circuit. Consequently, dissemination strategies for both tangible and intangible cultural symbols must align with the information reception habits of contemporary audiences by deconstructing and re-encoding these symbols through digital means.

2.1. Tangible cultural symbols

Tangible cultural symbols constitute heritage with a physical presence, ranging from immovable relics (e.g., historic sites, architectural complexes, carvings, murals) to movable items (e.g., representative art and documents). As a fundamental component of ancient village architectural complexes, Lingnan traditional dwellings possess culturally symbolic significance, exemplified by the "Pot-Ear Roof House". Named for its distinctive roof that resembles a pair of upright pot ears, this structure, built from blue bricks and stone slabs since the mid-late Qing Dynasty, epitomizes Lingnan vernacular architecture. The Da Qi Tou Ancient Village in Foshan's Sanshui District boasts the largest preserved cluster of Pot-Ear Roof Houses in the Lingnan region, thereby establishing it as a highly recognizable cultural and visual symbol for the village.

The unique spatial layout "All Alleys Unite, Every Alley Faces the Pond" is an important symbolic feature of ancient village site selection. The ancients believed: "A Hundred Alleys Converging as One, Each Facing the Pond," represents a vital characteristic in ancient village site selection. This practice is rooted in the traditional belief that "Qi disperses with the wind but gathers where water meets" ^[3]. Settlements established with mountains at their back and facing water were believed to harness abundant natural resources while embodying a humanistic philosophy of living in harmony with nature. A quintessential example is the Songtang Ancient Village in Nanhai, Foshan, which utilizes its central pond for ecological regulation, showcasing a hallmark of the Lingnan style.

Furthermore, the academy (Shu Yuan), serving as the physical embodiment of traditional Confucian educational culture, held a position of institutional core within Lingnan's ancient villages. A significant number of these village academies retain the architectural style of the Ming and Qing dynasties, perpetuating the legacy of "emphasizing civility and prioritizing education" ^[4]. This enduring architectural legacy provides the primary source for tangible cultural symbols, and they jointly create the diverse genealogy of Lingnan ancient village cultural symbols.

2.2. Intangible cultural symbols

Intangible cultural symbols are typically manifested as cultural practices, encompassing categories such as traditional crafts, performing arts, and folk festivals. Within Lingnan's ancient villages, these symbols are centered on traditional craftsmanship, showcasing their living cultural heritage. The Lion Awakening (Xing Shi), a quintessential Lingnan performance, derives its symbolism, which is expelling misfortune and attracting prosperity from its core ritual of "Cai Qing", which literally means "picking the green." In recent years, new forms such as female lion dance teams have emerged, giving this traditional symbol characteristics of the times.

Additionally, traditional crafts and culinary culture also constitute significant intangible cultural symbols. Cantonese Embroidery, represented by the Yue Xiu style, is extensively applied in the attire and architectural decorations of Lingnan's ancient villages. Local delicacies such as Boat Congee and Ginger Milk Curd, emblematic of Lingnan, convey regional distinctiveness through the sensory medium of taste. These intangible symbols, relying on oral tradition and practical inheritance, have become the main spiritual core of ancient village culture.

3. Digital encoding: IP collaborations endow ancient village cultural symbols with new meanings

People in modern society live not only in a physical world but also in a symbolic world. As theorized by Stuart Hall, the production of meaning in communication operates through encoding, which is a process wherein an encoder translates information into a message, with the symbol constituting its fundamental vehicle ^[5].

In the current digital context, the dissemination of ancient village cultural codes involves not only formal innovation but, more importantly, leverages new media channels in order to spark audience interest, thereby transforming modes of interaction and consumption. Within the symbolic society, the operational logic of the consumption system no longer relies solely on the fulfillment of material needs but is fundamentally built upon the differentiation and encoding of symbolic meanings ^[6]. In other words, consumers in their purchases often pursue cultural identification, status symbolism, and value resonance. Precisely because of this, IP collaborations have emerged as a pivotal form of digital symbolic encoding for brands.

Through such crossover collaborations with trending IPs to digitally transcode cultural assets, brands can achieve resource complementarity, creating a mutually beneficial outcome where cultural and commercial value are co-created. For example, Foshan's Da Qi Tou Ancient Village forged a lifestyle IP through a collaboration with the coffee brand "Hecaff", distilling the iconic Pot-Ear Roof gable into a "Ripple Logo." This symbol anchors a line of cultural creative products, from coffee sets to mugs, sold via digital markets, integrating symbols with traditional material cultural connotations into the lifestyles of young people.

Similarly, Foshan's Songtang Ancient Village transposed the symbolic layout of "A Hundred Alleys Converging as One" into a cover design for notebooks. Enhanced with illustrative elements depicting the Confucius Birthday Ceremony, the village launched a limited-edition cultural creative gift set. This combination of cultural symbols with modern design exemplifies the vitality of innovating upon and perpetuating its Han Lin (imperial academic) culture. These partnerships create a dual effect, where they channel brand reach to amplify the village's cultural presence, while the unique symbolic narratives significantly enhance the products' value.

Furthermore, a common strategy in the current digital encoding of traditional cultural symbols involves distilling ancient village cultural symbols to create a personified IP, thereby enhancing their distinctiveness. The abstract of the ancient village culture is translated into a tangible IP image, which effectively lowers the cognitive

barrier for audiences regarding specific cultural connotations and facilitates the digital dissemination of the village's cultural symbols. A prime example is the "Dadun Village Tao Dun Dun" IP launched by Lecong Dadun Village in Foshan's Shunde District. The design centers on a pottery jar, clothed in historical attire with peach blossoms adorning its robe and shoes. The peach blossom elements make the image more adorable and tightly connect it with the theme of "Tao Yuan Jie Yi" (Pottery Garden Agreement). This IP is utilized in cultural and creative products to collectively narrate Dadun Village's long history of pottery artistry, carrying profound cultural sedimentation.

4. Communication media: New media as the gateway for cultural symbols

The communication process constitutes an integrated whole, within which the message constitutes merely a part of this entirety ^[7]. After cultural symbols are encoded, they must be conveyed through specific media channels. In the contemporary communication context, new media platforms have become the primary conduits for the dissemination of cultural symbols. Compared to traditional media, they not only serve the function of information transmission but, more significantly, intervene deeply in the propagation of cultural symbols through algorithmic recommendations and interactive mechanisms.

As an emerging medium, short-form video platforms facilitate the rapid permeation of cultural symbols through their fragmented nature and highly visual format. A "Pot-Ear Roof House Construction" series on the "Guangfu Ancient Village" Douyin account exemplifies this, combining time-lapse photography of the building process with Cantonese narration, resonating widely and surpassing 8 million views per video. Another case, Foshan's "Lion Awakening Eye-Dotting" video, used close-ups to detail the embroidery and ritual, while physical check-in spots spurred user-generated content and challenges, propelling the video to over 100 million views.

Meanwhile, the rise of "micro-dramas" derived from short videos has garnered significant attention from digital communicators in recent years. Official social media accounts of several ancient villages have begun releasing micro-dramas, activating the historical context behind cultural symbols through narrative storytelling. For instance, Bijiang Ancient Village in Shunde produced a micro-drama based on the legend of its "Gold Tower," transforming gilded wood carvings into "treasure clues" and integrating analyses of architectural craftsmanship within a suspenseful plot. Released on the Tencent Video platform, it achieved over ten million views. Similarly, Da Qi Tou Ancient Village in Foshan's Sanshui District collaborated with a self-media team to produce the series *Mystery in the Ancient Village*, converting the defensive functions of watchtowers into elements of suspense. This allows audiences to understand the symbolic connotations through entertainment, while the lightweight narrative style aligns with modern fast-paced lifestyles, endowing the symbols with storytelling appeal and emotional resonance.

By accurately capturing the core elements of intangible cultural symbols and completing their mediatized encoding, creators utilize platform mechanisms to provide users with new decoding pathways. Consequently, cultural symbols achieve fission-like diffusion through short video platforms. This process illustrates how communication channels not only enhance the visibility of symbols but also shape the patterns of audience engagement.

Furthermore, the instant feedback mechanism inherent in live-streaming technology significantly facilitates two-way interaction, substantially enhancing user participation and encouraging a stronger sense of identity, thereby maximizing the impact of symbolic dissemination. For instance, during a live stream of the "Confucius

Birthday Ceremony” from Guangzhou’s Songtang Ancient Village, the host guided the online audience through ancestral halls while explaining the cultural significance behind inscribed plaques. When viewers posed questions via bullet-screen comments, their inquiries triggered AR effects that visually demonstrated the virtual reconstruction of “Ritual Vessel Arrangements.” This interactive live-streaming format effectively assisted Songtang Ancient Village in integrating traditional cultural symbols into online cultural experiences, thereby transformed into cultural tourism products with clear market value. This demonstrates that live-streaming channels not only affect information accessibility but also complete the transformation of the audience from passive interpreters to co-creators and consumers.

5. Digital decoding: The logic of interaction and consumption in the communication of ancient village cultural symbols

Following the completion of the communication phases involving the IP-based encoding of cultural symbols and their multi-channel distribution, the audience’s “decoding” process becomes crucial in determining the actual effectiveness of communication .

Decoding is a complex and active process of meaning reproduction, wherein the audience is not a passive recipient of information but rather interprets and even reconstructs the message based on their own socio-cultural background and experiences ^[8]. Within the context of digital interaction, this decoding behavior manifests as active engagement, sharing, and consumption, thereby forming the progressive communication chain of “cognition-emotion-action.” It is precisely within this dynamic decoding process that the meaning of ancient village cultural symbols is revitalized and ultimately translated into commodity value.

5.1. Cognition: Popular culture activates symbolic vitality

Traditional cultural symbols of ancient villages often present cognitive barriers for younger audiences due to their spatial and temporal distance. Integrating these symbols into contemporary forms of popular culture provides audiences with a familiar and relatable decoding framework, effectively lowering the barrier to understanding. Online variety shows, as a significant domain of youth culture, activate the vitality of traditional cultural symbols through their entertainment format.

In the past two years, the popular online variety show “Let’s Farm”, leveraging the influence of its “Ten Hardworking Guys” IP, significantly boosted national discourse around agricultural support. During the 2024 Agricultural Support Day period, the show filmed in Foshan, where the “Ten Hardworking Guys” members personally experienced Lion Awakening training and performance. In the program, the majestic lion heads, the resounding gongs and drums, and the members’ clumsy yet earnest learning poses created a dramatic contrast.

This “demystifying” presentation translated complex intangible cultural heritage skills into relatable public entertainment experiences. Subsequently, the program, combined with live-streaming platforms, initiated “Live Streaming for Agricultural Support,” linking the auspicious meanings symbolized by the Lion Awakening, such as “warding off evil, inviting blessings, and bringing prosperity”, with local agricultural products.

Throughout this process, audiences, via the popular cultural form of the online variety show, completed a transformation in their decoding path towards the Lion Awakening symbols: from viewing them as “spectacle” to feeling “resonance,” and ultimately arriving at “value identification.” The entertainment shell packaged and delivered the cultural core of the traditional symbols, effectively enhancing their recognition and affinity.

5.2. Emotion: Collective memory awakens social identity

The profound efficacy of digital decoding lies in its ability to reach the audience's emotional dimension. By awakening latent "Collective Memory" and fostering a sense of ritual, it strengthens the community's identity. Collective memory serves as the emotional bond connecting the individual to the community, while ritualized communication acts as the core mechanism for reinforcing this bond^[9].

The Han Fu fashion show event held at Foshan's Da Qi Tou Ancient Village exemplifies this decoding strategy. The event invited visitors to don Han Fu and walk through the ancient alleys beneath the Pot-Ear gable walls. This act itself constituted a ritual performance transcending time and space. The ancient village's architectural complex, as a tangible cultural symbol, provided an authentic historical setting for the ritual; Han Fu, as a dynamic cultural symbol, became an emotional vehicle for individuals to connect with tradition. When participants shared photos and videos of the event on social media, their decoding behavior surpassed simple "documentation" or personal consumption, this constituted an act of reinforcing their identity as "inheritors of Lingnan culture." through this sense of ritual.

This collective experience transforms symbolic consumption into a cultural statement of "Who we are." When individuals purchase, use, and share products bearing the symbols of Lingnan's ancient villages, they are essentially using consumption to signal their cultural tastes and social identity. For instance, consumers purchasing and showcasing Da Qi Tou Ancient Village's co-branded coffee products on social media not only gain practical value but, more importantly, demonstrate a recognition for both traditional culture and a contemporary youth lifestyle within the digital social sphere, thereby constructing their identity within specific social circles.

Consumption also provides stability through the rationalization of the non-rational, the standardization of difference, and through the precariousness of the human condition^[10]. In other words, the significance of symbolic consumption extends beyond merely "buying a product"; it lies in the reproduction and sharing of symbols, allowing individuals to integrate into a specific cultural community. This logic is precisely the crucial prerequisite enabling emotional identification to further transform into consumer action.

5.3. Action: Scenario-based narratives facilitate consumption decisions

The ultimate objective of digital decoding lies in guiding user action, thereby bridging cultural dissemination and commercial conversion. "Context-Aware Computing" emphasizes that in the mobile internet era, the relevance of information acquisition depends on the perception and construction of "context" (time, location, identity, needs, etc.)^[11].

Live-streaming e-commerce, with its powerful capacity for contextual construction, has become a tool for facilitating immediate consumption decisions. The online live stream "New Year Greetings from the Pi Xiu" launched on the first day of the Lunar New Year in 2025 by Song Jia Ling Village in Zeng Cheng adeptly captured and constructed the specific spatio-temporal context of the "Spring Festival". During the broadcast, the lively and joyous performance of the intangible cultural heritage Pi Xiu dance decoded the collective emotional need for "Ushering in luck and prosperity in the New Year".

Local specialty handicrafts and other New Year goods were displayed and sold within this context, rich with festive atmosphere and cultural meaning. Cultural symbols (Pi Xiu New Year greetings) and consumer symbols (New Year goods) were connected and synchronously decoded within the live stream. The user's live-stream viewing experience was an immersive and continuously stimulated consumption scenario, which channeled their emotional connection to the auspicious culture and festive spirit directly into a desire to purchase the associated

cultural products.

Ultimately, the 336,000 viewership and a 300% increase in sales of local specialties robustly demonstrate the impact of scenario-based decoding on audience consumption decisions, which effectively shortened the consumer decision-making path from cultural understanding to recognition of commercial value.

6. Conclusion

As crucial carriers of Lingnan culture, Lingnan ancient villages are the very root of Lingnan traditional culture. In today's polymorphic media environment, the "re-encoding" and "re-dissemination" of complex cultural codes has become the central challenge for revitalizing ancient villages across the region. The key to addressing this challenge lies in constructing a comprehensive digital communication system that progresses from "symbolic recognition" to "value co-creation." This system requires a systematic curation of cultural symbols and infusing them with contemporary relevance.

The approach is threefold:

- (1) Mastering the digital ecosystem by transforming archaic signifiers into contemporary discourse through IP-centric transcoding;
- (2) Utilizing new media platforms to craft immersive storytelling and contextual experiences;
- (3) Engaging the audience in the decoding process by stimulating cognitive recognition, forging emotional connections, and motivating behavioral responses, thereby closing the loop between cultural appreciation and tangible consumption.

Notably, the revitalization of ancient village culture in the digital age is by no means a simple digital replication, but rather a process of creative translation. Prevention of over-commercialization, superficial homogenization, or even misinterpretation of cultural symbols within the context of consumer society, while ensuring the continuity of their authenticity and cultural significance, will be a core ethical issue determining the sustainable development of traditional culture. Continued exploration of these questions will propel the cultural dissemination of Lingnan's ancient villages from effective revitalization toward sustainable inheritance.

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