

Heritage Elements in Chagan Lake's Ice and Snow Folk Culture in Multimodal Discourse

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Abstract: This study qualitatively explores how heritage elements are represented in the multimodal discourse of China's Chagan Lake winter fishing culture, a case of intangible ice and snow folk heritage. Drawing on visual grammar theory as the analytical framework, the research focuses on how textual, visual and auditory modes jointly construct cultural meaning in the original Chinese materials ^[1]. The study employs both thematic analysis and semiotic analysis: the former identifies recurring cultural themes across source texts, while the latter investigates how visual, auditory and linguistic signs encode and transmit cultural meanings. Data include authentic Chinese videos and English videos. Through close reading and comparative examination, the study reveals how cultural meanings of Chagan Lake's winter fishing heritage elements are constructed across textual, visual, and auditory modes. The findings underscore the challenges of recognizing intangible heritage and highlight the greater cultural sensitivity. This research contributes to heritage communication studies by offering qualitative insights into the complex cultural meanings in multimodal texts.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse; Heritage elements; Visual grammar theory; Thematic and semiotic analysis; Ice and snow folk culture

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1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) refers to communities' identity-defining practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills ^[2]. Unlike tangible heritage of physical artifacts and monuments, ICH is dynamic and living, transmitted intergenerationally via oral traditions, rituals, performances and craftsmanship, and plays a vital role in nurturing cultural diversity and human creativity amid globalization.

Folk culture, a core ICH component, comprises everyday practices, beliefs and customs shaping a community's lifestyle, including collectively observed and passed-down festivals, rituals, music, dance and oral traditions ^[3]. It mirrors historical and social contexts while strengthening community identity and continuity.

Chagan Lake in Jilin Province, China, is famed for its traditional winter fishing, designated national-level ICH by the State Council in 2008. Its annual winter fishing festival features distinctive techniques like ice drilling and horse-drawn capstan net-hauling, reflecting the community's profound bond with nature. This practice

sustains local livelihoods and embodies cultural values of cooperation, nature respect and communal identity.

In an increasingly interconnected world, translating such rich cultural practices for global audiences poses major challenges. This study addresses one question: How are cultural meanings of Chagan Lake's winter fishing heritage elements constructed across textual, visual, and auditory modes?

2. Literature review

Multimodal discourse, evolving from language-dominated to integrated forms with images, sound, color and spatial design, has grown central to contemporary communication. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), as defined by Kress et al. (2006)^[4], highlights semiotic resources' interplay in meaning-making, offering robust frameworks for culturally embedded visual texts—critical for folk culture communication where images convey symbolic, affective and identity meanings. Effective translation demands balancing verbal-nonverbal modes to ensure accuracy, coherence and cultural intelligibility. Recent intangible cultural heritage (ICH) studies enrich this field: Zheng (2024) explores narrative landscape design's role in turning cultural memory into visual-spatial symbols^[5]; Li et al. (2025) prove 3D visualization boosts ICH clarity and authenticity via visual-textual modeling^[6]. Xie et al. (2025) and Liu et al. (2024) discuss fashion imagery and digital archives/immersive experiences in ICH communication^[7,8]. Digital advances like visual-text fusion^[9], mixed-reality broadcasting^[10] and VR-supported practices^[11] enhance cultural transmission. Lin (2025)^[12], Yin et al. (2025)^[13], Cao (2024)^[14], and Yuan et al. (2024)^[15] further emphasize multimodal semiotics' role in global cultural communication and ICH interpretability. Grounded in this literature, Chagan Lake's ice-snow folk culture can be analyzed via image-text cohesion, spatial sequencing, digital augmentation and symbolic encoding, with heritage elements (lake worship, rituals, tools, communal practices) acting as multimodal semiotic resources, laying a comprehensive theoretical foundation for examining its winter-fishing heritage's multimodal semiotics and cross-cultural communication.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, multimodal approach to investigate how heritage elements of Chagan Lake's winter fishing culture are represented across textual, visual, and auditory modes. The methodology combines thematic analysis to identify recurring cultural themes and semiotic analysis informed by visual grammar theory to examine how these themes are constructed and conveyed through multiple modes.

3.1. Data collection

The dataset consists of 4 Chinese videos of the Chagan Lake winter fishing. Three of them are from the CCTV (China Central Television), namely A Bite of China, Culture in Ten Minutes, Travelling with Books, and the rest one is a local one filmed with the help of Local Public Security Bureau for the celebration of the 19th Chagan Lake winter fishing festival, called Overture of Winter Fishing.

The videos were selected to include a representative range of festival activities, such as ceremonial offerings, collective fishing practices, and ritual performances, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the festival's heritage elements. Each video was viewed multiple times to ensure detailed observation of textual, visual, and auditory components.

3.2. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring cultural themes across the source texts. The analysis proceeded in six steps (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for patterns across codes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming the final themes, and documenting the themes with illustrative examples for analysis.

3.3. Semiotic analysis guided by visual grammar theory

To explore how cultural meanings are encoded and transmitted, semiotic analysis was conducted using visual grammar theory as the analytical framework. Visual grammar theory conceptualizes images as structured systems of meaning, highlighting how compositional, representational, and interactive choices communicate cultural information.

4. Results and discussion

This section presents the analysis of the Chagan Lake winter fishing videos through thematic analysis and semiotic analysis grounded in visual grammar theory. Three main themes are identified. For each theme, we first described the multimodal elements observed in the video, then analyzed their semiotic functions (textual, visual, auditory).

4.1. Results of thematic analysis

Open codes, derived from the detailed actions in the videos, were grouped into categories reflecting 5 dimensions. These categories were further abstracted into three central themes, as presented below.

4.1.1. Axial coding and category formation

Through axial coding, related open codes were grouped under conceptual categories based on their functional or symbolic relationships. **Table 1** presents the axial coding process.

Table 1. Axial coding and five dimensions

No.	Axial code	Video examples
1	Pre-fishing Rituals and Belief	Video 1, 2, 3, 4
2	Winter fishing practices, including technical tools and skills and major procedures	Video 1, 2, 3, 4
3	Key Roles in Winter Fishing	Video 1, 2, 3, 4
4	Winter fishing outcomes and Culinary fish culture	Video 2, 3, 4
5	Fishing-hunting cultural heritage transmission	Video 2, 3, 4

4.1.2. Emergent themes

Based on the axial codes, three overarching themes were identified:

(1) Theme 1: Historical Inheritance and Living Practice in Winter Fishing Rituals

This theme emerged from the Pre-fishing Rituals and Belief category, Winter Fishing Practices, Key Roles in Winter Fishing as well as Fishing-hunting Cultural Heritage Transmission category. The codes illustrate how Chagan Lake Winter Fishing functions as a ritualized cultural performance that

integrates historical continuity with contemporary practice. Chagan Lake Winter Fishing is not merely an act of catching fish, but a living cultural ritual that traces its continuity back to the Liao Dynasty's Spring Nada-bo tradition. Centered on the spiritual core of the "Lake Blessing and Net Awakening" and "Shamanic Participation," and carried out through the practical medium of "Fish Head Coordination and Full-Process Manual Operation," it preserves the belief traditions of ancient fishing-hunting practices while sustaining its vitality through modern adaptations such as horse-driven capstans. They originate in ancient time, demonstrating the performative and symbolic aspects of winter fishing that maintain communal traditions.

(2) Theme 2: Technical Tools and Ecological Wisdom for Sustainable Harvest

This theme synthesizes the categories of Winter Fishing Practices and Fishing-hunting Cultural Heritage Transmission. Codes such as horse-driven capstans, six-inch mesh nets, and the principle of "taking the large and leaving the small" illustrate how mechanical tools and ecological wisdom work together to meet the practical demands of under-ice fishing while preventing overexploitation. These practices embody a balance between productivity and sustainability, reflecting the integration of technical functionality with ecological responsibility.

(3) Theme 3: Cultural Value Transformation Through Culinary and Artistic Media

The final theme arises from the Winter fishing outcomes and Culinary Fish Culture, and Fishing-hunting Cultural Heritage Transmission categories. The data reveal how ritual and ecological practices are recontextualized into tangible cultural products such as fish-based cuisine, fish rubbings, and fish skin paintings. These outputs exemplify the translation of traditional winter fishing practices into culturally meaningful and socially valued expressions, reinforcing heritage continuity and community identity. The outcomes of winter fishing extend far beyond the fish catch itself. Through culinary practices such as the "whole fish banquet", the harvest is transformed into everyday gustatory experiences that embed fishing-hunting culture into daily dining and social practices. At the same time, artistic forms such as fish rubbings and fish-skin paintings convert the activity into visual cultural symbols that not only preserve the memory of the fishing process but also embody collective aesthetic values and cultural identity. In this way, the act of under-ice fishing acquires significance beyond its productive function, achieving a cross-domain extension from the material to the spiritual, and from subsistence to culture. Ultimately, the abstract notion of fishing-hunting culture is disseminated and regenerated across diverse domains such as cuisine and art, ensuring the broad transmission of its cultural value.

4.2. Results of semiotic analysis

The semiotic analysis examined multimodal resources in the Chagan Lake Winter Fishing videos through the lens of visual grammar theory, focusing on representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. To ensure coherence with the thematic findings, the discussion is organized around the first overarching theme identified in Section 4.1. Theme 1 is Historical Inheritance and Living Practice in Winter Fishing Rituals.

4.2.1. Textual mode analysis

The narration and on-screen quote describe the history of winter fishing, and an introduction to Chagan Lake, and also being listed on the intangible cultural heritage.

From a representational perspective, the narration describes the continuity of winter fishing from its origins in the Liao Dynasty to its contemporary practice, and notes its recognition as an intangible cultural heritage.

These textual resources encode the participants, actions, and cultural processes, framing winter fishing not merely as an economic activity but as a ritualized practice imbued with historical meaning. From an interactive perspective, the evaluative language and authoritative tone of the narration position the viewer as a respectful observer, inviting recognition and appreciation of the practice's cultural value. The on-screen quote further reinforces credibility and directs audience interpretation. From a compositional perspective, the placement, size, and timing of the on-screen text emphasize key information such as "intangible cultural heritage," while its alignment with relevant images creates a temporal and symbolic link between past and present. Collectively, these textual semiotic choices construct meaning that integrates historical continuity, cultural significance, and audience engagement, providing essential cues for translation that preserve both factual and symbolic content.

4.2.2. Visual mode analysis

This theme emphasizes the cultural and historical significance of Chagan Lake winter fishing.

From a representational perspective, the visuals depict both natural and human elements. These elements include the vast snow-covered landscape, the frozen lake surface, situating winter fishing within its harsh, yet sacred, natural environment, fish emerging from the nets and Ice Lake Fishing Harvest. Besides, winter fishing in the Liao Dynasty explicitly conveys historical continuity and ritual origins, and the festive winter fishing event emphasizes communal participation and celebratory cultural expression.

From an interactive perspective, the camera angles, framing, and sequencing engage viewers as observers of both natural beauty and ritualized labor. Wide shots of the frozen landscape establish a sense of awe and reverence, while close-ups of fish being hauled from the ice immerse viewers in the physicality of the practice. The hand-drawn historical illustrations and festival images encourage recognition of continuity and cultural pride, aligning the viewer's gaze with the narrative authority of the accompanying narration.

From a compositional perspective, the sequence of images creates a temporal and symbolic flow that mirrors the narration, from natural environment to fishing action, historical origin, and festival celebration. Salient elements, such as the expansive white landscapes and emerging fish, are visually emphasized through central positioning and scale, while the juxtaposition of contemporary and historical visuals reinforces both heritage continuity and ritual significance. Collectively, these visual choices co-construct meaning in alignment with the narration, situating winter fishing as a living cultural ritual embedded in historical, ecological, and communal contexts, providing essential cues for translation that preserve both cultural content and experiential effect.

4.2.3. Auditory mode analysis

In the auditory mode, the video employs both the narrator's voice and background music to convey the cultural and ritual significance of Chagan Lake winter fishing.

From a representational perspective, the narration provides factual and historical information, introducing the lake's richness, long-standing fishing tradition, and intangible cultural heritage status. The auditory cues complement the visual representation of rituals and landscapes, reinforcing the sense of a culturally embedded practice. From an interactive perspective, the narrator's tone is solemn, formal, and composed, establishing authority and commanding respect, which invites the audience to perceive the winter fishing ritual as both significant and venerable. Simultaneously, the light and cheerful background music creates a subtle contrast that softens the solemnity, generating a welcoming and engaging atmosphere for the viewer. From a compositional perspective, the synchronization of the narration with the visual sequence, combined with the layered background music, structures the temporal and affective flow of the video. The auditory design thus actively shapes viewers'

emotional and cognitive engagement, enhancing the communication of historical continuity, ritual authority, and cultural pride, and providing critical cues for translation strategies that aim to preserve both semantic content and affective tone.

5. Conclusion

This study qualitatively explores how heritage elements of Chagan Lake's winter fishing culture are represented across textual, visual, and auditory modes, highlighting the multimodal complexity of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Guided by visual grammar theory, thematic and semiotic analyses identify three core themes: historical inheritance and living practice of fishing rituals, technical tools and ecological wisdom for sustainable harvests, and cultural value transformation via culinary and artistic media. These themes reveal that the practice is not merely economic but a living, multimodal cultural activity infused with ritual, ecological, and aesthetic significance. Overall, this research advances the understanding of multimodal discourse in heritage contexts, underscoring the necessity of integrated textual-visual-auditory analyses to capture holistic cultural meaning. It offers practical guidance for translators, communicators, and educators mediating cultural identity across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Future research may explore English translation, audience reception, cross-cultural comprehension, multimodal translation evaluation, and digital media's role in heritage translation.

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