



Pathways to the Foregrounding of Maritime Cultural Narratives

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Abstract

The foregrounding of maritime culture is characterized by the recognition, typification, and iconicization of cultural symbols, transforming them into easily identifiable markers of regional identity. This study integrates theoretical insights from linguistic semiotics and cultural anthropology to analyze the visibility and accessibility of cultural narratives, particularly within the context of coastal cities. Using the coastal city of Zhanjiang, Guangdong, as a case study, five culturally representative maritime symbols were selected to examine the processes and impacts of cultural symbols foregrounding in the transmission of maritime heritage. Through these case studies, the research underscores the importance of making cultural narratives more visible and accessible, facilitating an interactive relationship between the symbols and the public. The study found that strategies such as developing spatial recognition systems, employing original-point encoding, and activating heritage sites contribute to the typification and recognizability of maritime culture, enhancing the overall visibility of these symbols. Furthermore, the integration of digital storytelling emerged as a critical method for engaging audiences with maritime culture in a dynamic, immersive way, bridging traditional narratives with modern technological platforms. These strategies collectively support the sustainable development of local cultural industries by promoting community engagement and strengthening regional identity. Ultimately, this study highlights the value of foregrounding cultural symbols not only in preserving maritime culture but also in enriching urban identity and fostering local cultural economies. The approach provides a structured framework for coastal cities seeking to leverage their unique cultural assets, demonstrating that the foregrounding of cultural symbols plays a vital role in both cultural transmission and community development.

Keywords

Maritime culture; cultural narratives; cultural communication; cultural industry

1. Introduction

Semiotics, which emerged in the 1960s in France, the United States, Italy, and the former Soviet Union, serves as a methodology and a new theoretical framework for cultural studies. It allows for a more nuanced understanding of the structures and organizations of the subjects being studied, clarifying causal and meaning relationships, and enhancing the comprehensibility of culture (Li, 1995). Semiotics views human social activities as broadly encompassing symbolic expressions, including the activities through which humans create and construct their cultural products, which themselves are symbols. This approach addresses the longstanding issue in cultural research of focusing exclusively on canonical texts, often neglecting cultural information found in physical artifacts and images (Ye, 2010), thereby obscuring cultural diversity. Integrating the theoretical achievements of linguistic semiotics and cultural anthropology

helps to reveal the importance and pathways of foregrounding cultural symbols in the dissemination of maritime culture.

2. Overview of Maritime Cultural Narratives Research

Maritime cultural narratives refer to the physical symbols representing maritime culture located in port areas. They are concrete cultural products formed and constructed by people in these regions and represent a classification of cultural narratives based on local characteristics. Due to their lasting influence in port areas, these narratives are often widely disseminated and collectively recognized as representations of maritime culture. Maritime cultural narratives possess characteristics such as "lasting influence, collective recognition, and widespread dissemination (Chen, 2014)," making them fundamental elements in building a regionally distinctive maritime cultural brand.

Maritime cultural narratives serve as tangible symbols representing maritime culture and are fundamental elements in creating regionally distinctive ocean cultural brands. The concept of "narrative" was first introduced by semiotician Meng Hua (2014) in his work "The Cultural Symbol System Dominated by Chinese Characters," where he distinguished it from terms like "words," "phrases," "discourses," and "images." Narratives encompass not only tangible symbols but also focus on the materiality of the signifier, distinguishing them from objects that perform a symbolic function in a verbal context. The "thing" itself possesses narrativity; it is not a passive object governed by language but actively engages in meaningful generation mechanisms.

Interpreting cultural information not recorded in textual forms from a narrative perspective is significant for revealing the diversity and richness of regional ocean culture. Cultural studies have long centered around the core of transmitted literature, often neglecting the cultural information embedded in physical objects and images, which masks cultural diversity. Anthropologist Ye Shuxian (2010) asserts that, from a new historical perspective, all written records are merely subjective "rhetoric," and their evidential power cannot compare with the facts constituted by objective entities. Classical studies on material culture date back to the early 20th century, with works like Marcel Mauss's "The Gift," Roland Barthes's symbolic analysis of the Eiffel Tower, and Baudrillard's systematic study of furniture symbols. Since the mid-20th century, the significance of material culture research has gained widespread recognition, featuring notable scholars and works. Recently, the "narrative of things," originating from anthropology, has become a new trend in semiotic research, focusing directly on the latent "narratives" contained within objects, thereby applying semiotics to cultural studies (Zhao, 2009).

This research uses Zhanjiang, a coastal city in Guangdong, as a case study, selecting five narratives that represent maritime culture: the Guangzhou Bay Chamber of Commerce, the Naozhou Lighthouse, the Jinpu Well, the Tianhou Temple in Wenzhang Bay, and Wuchuan Piao Se. This study integrates linguistic semiotics and cultural anthropology theories to reveal the importance and pathways of cultural symbol foregrounding in the process of ocean cultural dissemination.

3. Pathways to Foregrounding

3.1 Spatial Identification and Foregrounding

Foregrounding refers to the recognizable manifestation of narratives, achieved through various spatial markers, maps, and symbolic media that make the narrative known and identifiable to the outside world (Meng, 2014). Backgrounding denotes narratives that remain unmarked, with cultural wealth obscured, whether through a lack of spatial identification, media exposure, or disorganization and unrecognized value. The essence of foregrounding is to make narratives in the background recognizable and visible through symbolic means, enabling the visualization and presence of coastal city culture. The degree of urban cultural foregrounding and the construction of urban spatial identification systems form a direct urban image and serve as an important indicator of urban cultural development.

In this study's sample narratives, the background state of the Naozhou Lighthouse warrants attention. This narrative's backgrounding is primarily reflected in its lack of external recognition through spatial markers. The Naozhou Lighthouse was historically used to navigate commercial ships and war vessels entering and leaving the port. Its main component, the crystal lens, improved upon previous technologies that suffered from weak light sources and insufficient range, reflecting the most advanced maritime technology of its time. The Naozhou Lighthouse was designated as a key national cultural relic in 1996 and listed as one of the "Eight Scenic Views of Zhanjiang." However, there is currently a significant lack of road signs and maps directing visitors from the urban area of Zhanjiang to the Naozhou Lighthouse.

The spatial identification system serves as a means for foregrounding maritime cultural narratives, transforming the Naozhou Lighthouse from a natural object into a narrative entity. The foregrounding of the Naozhou Lighthouse narrative means that even in the absence of physical discourse, the lighthouse can "speak" for itself through spatial identification systems. The ephemeral nature of discourse complicates understanding when narratives are not marked by words or labels. The lack of spatial markers along the road to the Naozhou Lighthouse renders it challenging to comprehend or identify, making it difficult for outside visitors to recognize, which affects public communication. Therefore, improving the urban spatial identification system is crucial for disseminating urban culture.

3.2 Encoding Methods and Foregrounding

This study found that the degree of foregrounding in the cultural narratives of coastal cities is closely related to their symbolic encoding methods. Encoding is the process by which the signifier and the signified are combined into a symbol in a certain way, and symbols are combined into a system that performs a specific function. Narrative encoding can be divided into two types: original encoding and canonical encoding (Meng, 1999). Original encoding refers to the object itself as a symbol, where its physical form has a semantic function, and language either does not participate or exists merely as a "metalanguage" of the object. Its main characteristic is that the signifying relationship or meaning is directly constructed in the physical entity. Canonical encoding, on the other hand, involves the linguistic construction of the symbolic nature of an object, where the object's signifier is not important and can be separated from the context of signification. In this case, the meaning of the symbol primarily comes from the linguistic reconstruction of the object's signifier and signified.

The symbolic mode of original-point encoding is metonymy, while the symbolic mode of original-text encoding is a metaphor. In semiotics, metonymy and metaphor refer to two fundamental modes of thought. Jakobson believes that metonymy and metaphor represent a typical binary opposition, with their universal competition manifesting in any symbolic process or system (Hawkes, 1987). According to his concepts of polarity and equivalence, metonymy and metaphor occupy the two poles of synonymous choice (equivalence) in expressive forms. Meng Hua (2014) points out that when the sender expresses symbols, they can choose different methods; "exhibiting" is one method, while narrating through words, sounds, and images is another. The characteristics of "exhibiting" include the presence of the referent and the use of the present tense; conversely, "narrating" features the absence of the referent and the use of the past tense. The method of "exhibiting" has a smaller gap from the facts, providing closely related information, and represents the symbolic mode of metonymy; while the method of "narrating" has a larger gap from the facts, providing associative information based on similarities, which represents the symbolic mode of metaphor.

This study found that original and canonical encoding mainly exists in the expression stage of coastal city cultural product generation mechanisms. For example, the Jinpu Well and the Tianhou Temple at Wenzhang Bay are "displayed" in their original forms, and their symbolic method is metonymy, which is a type of original encoding. In contrast, many of the working and living items from the Guangzhou Bay Chamber of Commerce Hall and the Naozhou Lighthouse are no longer present on site, and people can only imagine those referents through the "narration" of words, sounds, and images. Their symbolic method is metaphor, which represents canonical encoding. Comparatively, original encoding is more conducive to the typification and iconicization of maritime cultural narratives. This is because, in original encoding, the narrative does not rely on supplementary symbols such as words, sounds, or images to "explain" itself; instead, the narrative's "display in its original form" is already sufficient to mark its "self."

On the other hand, the degree of typification and iconicization of maritime cultural narratives is also closely linked to their degree of foregrounding. In this study, the foregrounding levels of the sample narratives vary significantly. The higher the degree of foregrounding, such as in the case of the Wu Chuan Floating Color Festival, the higher the degree of typification and iconicization.

3.3 Preservation and Foregrounding

In the mid-to-late 1990s, a wave of urban renewal swept across China, and many historical cultural districts and ancient buildings were razed, while European architectural styles flourished. Fortunately, as we entered the 21st century, the preservation and development of historical and cultural cities and ancient towns became a priority in urban planning, and there was growing social consensus to preserve the historical continuity of cities.

However, this closed-off method of protection isolates cultural narratives from people's modern lives. In every famous city, preservation is funded and organized by the government, with low participation from the general public.

The protection of historical buildings and districts in cities is also a government-led effort. Many cities' cultural heritage preservation efforts have failed to mobilize active participation from citizens.

Internationally, "revitalization" has become a new approach to contemporary heritage preservation. "Revitalization" refers to the moderate use of heritage-listed buildings and other structures under the premise of good preservation. Under the government's coordinated planning and effective guidance, cultural heritage can be "revitalized" in public spaces through diverse cultural heritage protection mechanisms and market-driven activation. This allows cultural heritage to fully play its unique role in social development, economic construction, and cultural communication. At the same time, the public can benefit from the process of revitalizing public buildings and share equally in the outcomes, particularly the social benefits. Therefore, critically borrowing from international experience and combining it with local realities can lead to new approaches to the preservation and use of local cultural narratives.

3.4 Digital Narrative and Foregrounding

Currently, the rapid iteration of digital and intelligent technologies, alongside the deep integration of new and old media, continuously breaks through the dimensions of narrative communication, providing new opportunities for the foregrounding of maritime culture. Digital narrative is a new practice or method that uses digital tools and multimedia forms to create, express, interpret, and share stories, literary works, personal experiences, and more (Dai & Yang, 2022). Compared to traditional narratives, digital narratives, empowered by digital and AI technologies and the continuous integration of modern media, possess various new characteristics such as interactivity, intelligence, multimedia integration, immersion, dynamism, and engagement (Sun & Shi, 2024).

Digital narratives empower the foregrounding of maritime culture not merely by stacking digital and AI technologies into the narrative, but by starting from the structural framework of the narrative text to create interactive modes. For example, the Guangzhou Bay Chamber of Commerce as a cultural narrative foregrounds itself by facilitating interactive immersive experiences for visitors through their interactions with the narrative text, with each other, and with AI technology props. Interaction between the audience and the narrative text enhances emotional resonance, interaction among the audience promotes communication and interaction with props recreates scenes and deepens the sense of presence, allowing the audience to feel as if they are part of the experience.

There are two modes of symbolic communication in cultural narratives: dialogue and monologue. The dialogue mode relies more on the recipient's responses, inviting them to participate in the construction of symbols; the monologue mode relies less on the recipient's responses and constructs symbols without interruptions (Chen, 2014). Creating interactive modes through digital narratives exemplifies the dialogue mode of symbolism. For instance, maritime cultural narratives such as the Guangzhou Bay Chamber of Commerce, Naozhou Lighthouse, Jinpu Well, Wenzhang Bay Tianhou Temple, and Wuchuan Piao Color can invite people to participate in the construction of symbols through digital narrative as a dialogue mode, achieving their foregrounding.

4. Conclusion

The effective promotion and communication of a region's cultural identity often rest on the visibility and accessibility of its cultural symbols and narratives. For coastal cities, where rich historical and maritime traditions interweave to create unique regional identities, the "backgrounding" of cultural narratives—where such narratives remain obscure or poorly represented—impedes both cultural transmission and the growth of related local industries. Therefore, the foregrounding of maritime cultural narratives, or enhancing their prominence and accessibility, should be central to the development strategies for regional maritime culture industries. Foregrounding these narratives will enhance community engagement, attract tourism, and contribute to a sustainable cultural economy, allowing maritime heritage to evolve dynamically alongside social and technological advancements.

Key approaches to this foregrounding process include the establishment of urban spatial recognition systems, the use of original-point encoding, the "activation" of heritage sites, and the empowerment of digital storytelling techniques. Together, these strategies provide a multifaceted framework for making maritime cultural narratives more accessible, immersive, and engaging.

First, building a spatial recognition system in urban environments creates a physical landscape where cultural symbols are prominently visible and incorporated into the cityscape. Signage, landmarks, maps, and interactive installations allow residents and visitors alike to connect with these symbols, understanding them not only as relics of the past but as active elements of the community's contemporary identity. Such systems encourage experiential

learning, whereby individuals interact with these cultural narratives through designated routes, sites, and marked symbols, making maritime culture a living and ubiquitous part of the city's landscape.

In addition, original-point encoding offers a method of representation that emphasizes authenticity and direct engagement with cultural artifacts. This type of encoding utilizes the materiality of symbols—the objects and landmarks themselves—as the primary means of communication, minimizing reliance on supplementary interpretations through text or image. By enabling a more unmediated interaction with cultural artifacts, original-point encoding allows the narrative to be understood through the physicality of the object itself. Coastal artifacts, like lighthouses, wells, and temples, carry embedded histories within their structures, and when these objects are foregrounded, they communicate regional heritage directly, encouraging appreciation of the culture as it has been preserved through time.

Moreover, “activation” practices within heritage preservation represent a vital component of foregrounding. Moving beyond traditional preservation methods, “activation” involves making historical sites not only accessible but functional and relevant to modern-day users. By repurposing historic buildings and spaces within a controlled and respectful framework, these sites can serve community functions or host cultural events that bring them into the public sphere. This approach not only safeguards the physical structure but also breathes life into its symbolic relevance, ensuring the cultural narrative continues to be actively shared and experienced by new generations.

Lastly, the integration of digital storytelling introduces innovative means of narrative dissemination and interactivity, which is increasingly essential in a digital era. Digital storytelling, empowered by AI and multimedia, provides a dynamic platform where cultural narratives can reach audiences globally while incorporating interactivity, immersion, and personalized engagement. Techniques such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and digital recreations enable audiences to experience maritime history in ways that transcend physical limitations, deepening their understanding through tailored, interactive experiences. By transforming static information into engaging stories that adapt to the user's actions and interests, digital storytelling redefines how maritime culture can be shared, allowing for a more immersive and impactful interaction.

In conclusion, foregrounding coastal city cultural narratives is not merely about preserving history but about enabling active, accessible engagement with a city's cultural heritage. By embedding these narratives within urban landscapes, employing authentic modes of representation, activating heritage sites, and utilizing digital narratives, coastal cities can transform maritime culture into an integral part of their community and economic development strategies. These efforts contribute to the regional identity and support a sustainable model of cultural industry growth, ensuring that maritime heritage remains vibrant, relevant, and beneficial to the community in modern contexts.

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