



A Study of the Construction Approaches to a Multimodal Narrative Discourse System for Lingnan Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is a vital part of China's cultural treasures, possessing significant historical and cultural value. The Lingnan region in China is abundant in varieties of intangible cultural heritage at national, provincial, and municipal levels. From the perspective of multimodality, by exploring the construction of a multimodal narrative discourse system for Lingnan ICH through the lenses of historical and cultural narratives, folk customs narratives, and traditional craftsmanship narratives, this paper attempts to focus on the construction approaches to this multimodal narrative discourse system for Lingnan ICH. The study has found that visualized spatial narratives, scenarized integrated narratives, and digitized interactive narratives are efficient approaches to stimulate the cultural memory of the masses, construct the multimodal narrative discourse system for Lingnan ICH, which is conducive to contributing to the development of a three-dimensional Lingnan's cultural images and promote the protection, international dissemination and reception of Lingnan's ICH on the global culture stage.

Keywords

Intangible Cultural Heritage; discourse system; international dissemination; modality

1. Introduction

“The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” was adopted on 17 October 2003 by the UNESCO General Conference at its thirty-second session (Zanten, 2004). ICH refers to oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, and festive events that have been transmitted over generations and are thus recognized by communities as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Intangible Cultural Heritage is a vital component of China's cultural treasures. It encompasses a rich diversity of intangible heritage at the national, provincial, and municipal levels. The protection, inheritance, and promotion of Lingnan ICH contribute to strengthening cultural confidence and a sense of cultural identity among the Chinese people. In his report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Xi (2022) emphasized the need to “uphold China's cultural stance, distill and showcase the spiritual symbols and cultural essence of Chinese civilization, accelerate the construction of China's discourse and narrative systems, tell China's stories well, spread China's voice effectively, and present a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China.”

In recent years, scholars have begun focusing on the external communication and dissemination of Lingnan Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), conducting related research. Huang Yinxue and Zeng Yanwen (2019) proposed a

"translation + interpretation" strategy for the external communication of Cantonese opera based on the "5W" communication theory in communication studies. Xie Qingli (2020), analyzed ICH external communication translation strategies from the perspective of harmonious discourse analysis by taking Zhuhai City in Guangdong as an example. Li Congli (2021) proposed macro-level strategies for improving the English translation of Zhanjiang's ICH by focusing on the intangible cultural heritage of Zhanjiang. Zeng Changhui and Li Cuimin (2022) explored ICH external communication translation strategies through approaches like "literal and free translation," "foreignization and domestication," and "compilation and adaptation" from the perspective of Skopos Theory. Zhang Shaobing (2022) analyzed the current situation of translating Madam Xian's culture for external audiences, summarized the contradictions in the external communication translation activities, and explored strategies to enhance the translation and communication effectiveness of Madam Xian's ICH. Jiang Liping (2022) refined the English translation strategies for Guangdong ICH, including equivalent translation, cultural grounding, cultural filtering, and cultural grafting, and attempted translation of Guangdong ICH texts, from a cross-cultural perspective. Zhang Han and Li Yanhui (2024) focused on Wing Chun in Foshan and the Guangdong Lion Dance as examples to explore the local image of ICH. From the above literature, it is evident that these studies mainly focus on ICH translation strategies and dissemination, while few scholars concentrate on the construction of a multimodal narrative discourse system of Lingnan ICH. This paper aims to fill this gap by analyzing the construction of a multimodal narrative discourse system for Lingnan ICH and its construction approaches, with the purpose of enhancing Lingnan ICH's international dissemination.

2. Construction of a Multimodal Narrative Discourse System for Lingnan Intangible Cultural Heritage

The core meaning of discourse is to describe specific verbal behaviors within a particular context, supported by certain ideologies, value orientations, and cultural thinking. It represents the combination of language communication and context (Li, 2019). Discourse exchange has increasingly taken on multimodal, diversified, and multi-media characteristics. As a result, discourse has transcended its purely spoken, auditory form and entered an era when multiple modes coexist, intersect, and are used interchangeably. Discourse is now expressed in various forms, including spoken language, written text, images (both static and dynamic), visuals, as well as the combined or mixed usage of these different forms (Liang, Wu, & Zeng, 2018).

The multimodal narrative discourse system for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) must be rooted in China's local context, emphasizing both theoretical and practical innovation. Within the framework of Chinese-style modernization, it should actively integrate into the international narrative system (Shen, 2024). To tell the story of Lingnan ICH effectively, a diverse narrative discourse system needs to be constructed, which specifically includes historical and cultural narratives, folk customs narratives, and traditional craftsmanship narratives.

2.1 Historical and Cultural Narratives

The Lingnan region, located in southern China, is a cultural crossroads that encompasses present-day Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan. With its unique geography, ethnic diversity, and historical background, Lingnan's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has developed into a rich tapestry of humanistic and historical narratives. These ICH projects not only serve as important carriers of Lingnan culture but also foster a unique cultural identity by telling local histories and passing down traditional values. The humanistic and historical narratives of Lingnan can be composed of stories of local historical figures and cultural heroes, the folklore and legends. For example, there are legends surrounding the deity worship at the Nanhai God Temple, Mazu Culture and tales about Lingnan's historical heroes, such as the legends of Wangyan Tower, Pan Maoming, Zhang Jiuling, He Xiang and the Hanging Green, Ge Hong, Bao Zheng, Su Dongpo, the migration of the people from Zhuji Lane, and the worship of agriculture and nature. Traditional agricultural techniques, such as water management and rice cultivation, and ICH items that have developed based on hydrological conditions—like the Fish Lantern Dance and the Fishermen's Festival—highlight the symbiotic relationship between people and the natural environment, as well as the culture of medicine and wellness. Additionally, traditional medicine in Lingnan, such as Lingnan Traditional Chinese Medicine and the herbal tea culture, reflects the influence of the region's humid and hot climate on local health practices. Through the concept of "food and medicine from the same source" and the use of herbal tea to relieve internal heat, people in Lingnan demonstrate how they maintain health in a specific ecological environment. Furthermore, clan narratives are significant. Lingnan places special emphasis on family and clan culture, with activities such as ancestral halls, genealogies, and ancestor worship rituals forming an important part of Lingnan ICH. The architectural skills used in building

ancestral halls, the rituals of ancestor worship, and related folk stories are often closely tied to the history of a particular family or clan.

Cultural heritage is regarded as cultural capital, which serves to protect the dying ways of life, economies and places and helps develop a national image and identity (Tan, Anwar, & Jiang, 2023). The humanistic and historical narratives of Lingnan's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) are multi-layered and multidimensional. These narratives encompass the fusion and interaction of diverse cultures, the relationship between the natural environment and local lifestyles, the expression of clan culture and identity, as well as the transmission of historical figures and heroic deeds. Lingnan ICH is not only a carrier of skills or cultural expressions but also a narrative vehicle for the region's unique history, culture, and social values, showcasing the area's rich humanistic history and sense of cultural identity.

2.2 Folk Customs Narratives

The Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of the Lingnan region showcases a rich narrative of local customs and traditions. These folk traditions not only reflect the lifestyle and spiritual beliefs of the Lingnan people but also shape their cultural identity and social structure. The local customs of Lingnan include festival and ritual narratives, clan worship and marriage customs narratives, as well as daily customs and local folklore narratives.

Festivals and rituals are an important part of Lingnan folk traditions, conveying not only local customs but also carrying the collective memory and historical identity of the Lingnan people. In terms of festival and ritual narrative, the typical representatives are Dragon Boat Culture and Guangfu Temple Fair. Dragon boat culture is a typical example of festival and ritual narratives. Dragon boat racing is one of the most representative folk activities in the Lingnan region, especially popular in cities like Guangzhou, Foshan, and Zhuhai. It not only commemorates the traditional festival of Qu Yuan but also incorporates the unique water culture and collective spirit of the Lingnan area. In dragon boat races, the competition and cooperation between villages, clans, and communities are not just forms of entertainment but symbols of local unity and collective pride. Festivals and rituals are an important part of Lingnan folk traditions, conveying not only local customs but also carrying the collective memory and historical identity of the Lingnan people.

Clan culture deeply influences Lingnan's customs surrounding weddings, funerals, and rituals. In Lingnan, ancestor worship is a central tradition, especially in regions like Guangfu and Chaoshan, where ancestral halls and clan rituals are highly prevalent. During festivals or major ceremonies, the people of Lingnan express reverence and remembrance for their ancestors through rituals, while these collective activities also strengthen clan identity and cohesion. This ritual narrative not only reflects the structure of clans in Lingnan but also conveys ideas about family ethics and generational inheritance. In terms of Lingnan's traditional wedding customs are rich and diverse, especially in the Chaoshan region, where the wedding process is elaborate and ritualistic, typically involving multiple steps such as "betrothal gifts," "welcoming the bride," and "entering the family." These customs reflect the importance placed on marriage in Lingnan society and the social relationships between families. This narrative embodies the community's expectations for family continuity and their ritualized expression of marriage, while also highlighting the central role of the family within the social structure.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Lingnan is rich in local life, reflecting not only the daily lifestyles of the Lingnan people but also conveying the uniqueness of Lingnan culture. Lingnan's culinary culture is diverse and abundant, with distinctive food traditions from regions such as Guangfu, Chaoshan, and Hakka. Cantonese dim sum is an important symbol of Lingnan's culinary culture; it is not only about enjoying delicious food but also serves as a crucial occasion for socializing and maintaining relationships. The prevalence of tea house culture reflects Lingnan society's pursuit of a "leisurely lifestyle" and the close-knit social networks among its people. Besides, in Lingnan, herbal tea is regarded as an essential aspect of wellness customs. Due to the region's humid and hot climate, herbal tea, as part of the medicinal cuisine culture, has integrated into daily life, becoming a cultural response to the natural environment. This narrative showcases the Lingnan people's wisdom in adapting to their environment and preserving traditional medical knowledge through generations of herbal tea recipes.

2.3 Traditional Craftsmanship Narratives

The narrative of traditional craftsmanship in Lingnan encompasses the transmission of various artisan skills, such as weaving, embroidery, carving, ceramics, metalworking, and architectural techniques. It showcases the excellence of traditional crafts and the diversity of culture. Specifically, this includes the historical narratives of Lingnan's traditional crafts, family, and master-apprentice narratives of traditional craftsmanship, as well as the aesthetic and social value narratives within intangible cultural heritage crafts.

As a major economic and cultural hub in southern China, the Lingnan region has developed a unique tradition of handicrafts through the integration of the Maritime Silk Road and Central Plains culture. First, Guangcai porcelain is a type of colorful painted porcelain unique to Guangzhou, with origins tracing back to the Qing Dynasty. The production of Guangcai incorporates traditional porcelain-making techniques from the Central Plains while also absorbing elements of Western artistic styles, resulting in a unique decorative technique that blends Chinese and Western influences. The decorative patterns of Guangcai porcelain often feature landscapes, flowers, and auspicious motifs, narrating the history of trade and exchange between the Lingnan region and the outside world, particularly reflecting the prosperity of the Maritime Silk Road. Secondly, as one of the four famous embroideries in Lingnan, Guangxiu has a long history, originating in the Tang Dynasty, developing in the Song Dynasty, and reaching its peak during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Its techniques are intricate, with delicate stitching and diverse patterns, and it is widely used in court ceremonies and folk decorations. The narrative of Guangxiu (Cantonese embroidery) not only showcases the exquisite craftsmanship but also reflects the cultural exchange between Lingnan and the Central Plains, as well as the social norms related to rituals and attire in the region.

Chaozhou wood carving and the architectural craftsmanship of Guangfu are typical of family and master-apprentice narratives of traditional craftsmanship in Lingnan. With a long history, Chaozhou wood carving is renowned for its exquisite openwork designs and is widely used in the creation of temples, furniture, and folk decorations. The techniques of Chaozhou wood carving are usually passed down within families, from generation to generation. This transmission process not only conveys exceptional carving skills but also tells the stories of artisans who adhere to tradition and emphasize quality. Behind each piece lies the creative labor of the craftspeople and the narrative of family skill inheritance. Next is the architectural craftsmanship of Guangfu. Traditional buildings in the Lingnan region, such as the Xiguan Da House and Huoe Ear Houses, narrate the unique residential culture and social hierarchy of the Guangfu area. These building techniques are often transmitted through the master-apprentice system, where artisans teach the next generation their architectural skills. The detailed decorative elements such as wood carvings, stone carvings, and plaster sculptures in Guangfu architecture reflect the Lingnan people's pursuit of fine craftsmanship, as well as the artisans' commitment to family legacy and local identity.

The traditional crafts of Lingnan's intangible cultural heritage are not merely expressions of skill; they often carry specific aesthetic concepts and social values. The gold and silver jewelry-making techniques in Guangzhou have a long history, where artisans transform gold and silver into art pieces through exquisite inlaying and carving skills. Traditional jewelry from the Lingnan region, such as phoenix crowns and dragon-and-phoenix bangles, is often used in significant ceremonies like weddings, symbolizing auspiciousness and prosperity. This narrative of craftsmanship not only showcases the Lingnan people's pursuit of beauty but also reflects the social values embedded in marriage rituals, where jewelry serves as a symbol of family wealth and status, embodying traditional society's expectations for family continuity and prosperity. The craft of ivory carving is very exquisite. The history of ivory carving in Guangfu is long-standing, reaching its peak during the Qing Dynasty. This intricate and complex craft often features themes of landscapes, flowers, birds, and human figures. These carved works not only demonstrate the superb skills of Lingnan artisans but also reflect the society's appreciation for natural beauty and cultural customs, as well as their artistic expression during that time. Through the design and creation of crafts, artisans convey their understanding of beauty as well as their responses to social structures and cultural identities.

3. Construction Approaches to a Multimodal Narrative Discourse System for Lingnan Intangible Cultural Heritage

To construct a credible, lovable, and respectable image of Lingnan culture, the multimodal narrative discourse of Lingnan intangible cultural heritage can adopt the following approaches such as visual-spatial narratives, scenario-integrated narratives, and digital interactive narratives, which are conducive to promoting the construction and dissemination of Lingnan's cultural image.

3.1 Visual Spatial Narrative

The visualization of Lingnan intangible cultural heritage is a hallmark of its tangible representation. The museum is the proper place to present visual spatial narratives. Museum discourse narrative refers to the use of compelling, engaging, and lively verbal and non-verbal symbols to present the knowledge and cultural systems related to various exhibits while ensuring a strong sense of participation for visitors (Yin & Wang, 2022). In the Guangdong Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, visual-spatial narratives are a prominent feature. From the first to the fourth floor, visitors

can see a fusion of textual symbols, visual images, auditory symbols, and video symbols, which creates a refreshing and memorable experience. Through videos, images, and digital technologies, the techniques, rituals, lifestyles, and other aspects of intangible heritage are demonstrated in dynamic and intuitive ways. For example, on the second floor, the “Drinking and Eating Virtue” exhibition hall features a map displaying the origin, distribution, and development of Cantonese cuisine. This map combines dynamic and static elements, with dynamic icons marking the development of various culinary traditions. The display area for Guangdong herbal tea includes specific textual descriptions, images, and physical exhibits. Visual imagery, as a presentation of phenomena, reflects a fundamental shift in the way humans perceive the world. The third floor features a display area for Chinese kung fu, particularly Wing Chun, where visitors can engage with the martial arts through video demonstrations, enhancing their experiential understanding of intangible heritage. On the fourth floor, in the “Greater Bay Area Unity” exhibition hall, representative intangible cultural heritage projects shared by Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao, such as Cantonese opera, martial arts, lion dancing, and Yingge dance, are selectively showcased. In the Yingge dance display area, there are not only texts and images but also video presentations that convey the visual impact of the dance. The Guangdong Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum serves as a visual narrative space centered on Guangdong's cultural heritage, creating a unique platform for collective memory among the people of Guangdong and interaction with other cultures, allowing cultural interaction and exchange to become a bond connecting the audience with their cultural memories and identities.

3.2 Scenario-integrated Narratives

To effectively tell Chinese stories and build a discourse system with Chinese characteristics, external communication media need to strengthen narrative perspectives in topic selection and content production, making them flexible and dynamic, changing from flatness to three-dimension, and from static state to dynamic state (Wang & Qiu, 2023).

In the Guangdong Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, various exhibition areas showcase scenario-integrated multimodal narratives. For instance, in the second-floor exhibition hall “Between Mountains and Seas,” the display follows a timeline, tracing elements from Guangzhou's Xinghua Street, Foshan's Xing Tongji, Hakka's Shangdeng, to Chaoshan's Yingge dance, and including Zhanjiang's Nuo dance and the Yao people's Shuogetang. Visitors can easily find traces of nostalgia belonging to the people of Lingnan.

Xiguan Yongqingfang Tourist Area in Guangzhou, with its profound historical and intangible cultural heritage, has a well-protected arcade building complex and a combination of Chinese and Western-style buildings during the period of the Republic of China. It brings together Xiguan customs, arcade architecture, and Lingnan folk arts, making it one of the places with more Lingnan cultural flavor. There is the famous Cantonese Opera Art Museum in the Yongqingfang tourist area. There are Cantonese opera costumes, musical instruments, and a real performance stage with Xiguan Style. Visitors can really experience the rich visual symbols of Cantonese Opera and hear the narrative integration of Cantonese opera music and songs with Lingnan regional characteristics. Besides, visitors can appreciate the traditional arcade building complex and Western-style buildings on both sides of the river by taking the boat.

Shawan Ancient Town in Guangzhou, with over 800 years of history, is rich in unique Cantonese folk culture and has abundant tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources. The town preserves a large number of ancient buildings from the Ming and Qing dynasties, including more than 100 ancestral halls, with the most famous being the Liugeng Hall and Sanren Hall. Exquisite local folk crafts such as brick carvings, wood carvings, stone carvings, and clay sculptures are also featured here. Known as the “Hometown of Guangdong Music,” the “Hometown of Piaose Parade,” the “Hometown of Lion Dance,” and the “Hometown of Orchids,” Shawan Ancient Town allows visitors to experience the beauty of intangible cultural heritage firsthand while enjoying sightseeing. The intangible cultural heritage-themed market is held in the ancient town, showcasing Lingnan handicrafts, and traditional foods, and offering cultural performances and hands-on craft experiences, bringing intangible cultural heritage into urban life.

Such scenario-integrated narrative constructions create a unique atmosphere for Lingnan intangible culture, aiding in the diversification of Lingnan culture narratives. This not only attracts elder people but also garners interest from younger generations.

3.3 Digital Interactive Narratives

In the process of constructing a multimodal narrative discourse system of Lingnan Intangible Cultural Heritage, digital interactive narratives are a crucial component, particularly in utilizing digital technologies and internet platforms to disseminate traditional culture to a broader international audience. Digital interactive narratives are conducted through online platforms and digital technologies, combining various media (such as text, images, videos, and

interactivity) to tell cultural stories.

Online platform narratives can leverage domestic social media platforms, such as WeChat and Weibo, as well as international platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, to publish multilingual text and images, as well as themed documentaries or short video series on intangible cultural heritage for overseas audiences. Additionally, digital content platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou, as well as Bilibili and YouTube, can be used to produce exquisite short videos showcasing Lingnan intangible cultural heritage. For example, performance videos of the Yingge dance and lion dance can be published on digital platforms with multilingual subtitles to expand the influence of traditional dances among international art enthusiasts. The short video narrative strategy generally follows a linear storytelling format: beginning (developing interest in a specific intangible cultural heritage)—development (deciding to learn more and visit heritage inheritors)—climax (encountering and overcoming challenges)—conclusion (returning home, carrying forward the intangible cultural heritage) (Zhou & Wang, 2024). What's more, there are varieties of delicious food in the Lingnan region. By posting videos that document the process of making traditional Lingnan cuisine along with stories about the cultural background, attention can be drawn from food enthusiasts worldwide.

In multimodal digital interactive narratives, coordination and interaction between various symbols are necessary to form a complete narrative system. Different symbols must be coordinated to ensure their roles and meanings within the narrative are consistent. The process of text narration is the process of symbolizing and meaning cultural information (Yu & Cai, 2016). At Guangdong Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, visitors can experience the collaborative interaction of multimodal symbols brought by digital technologies, including panoramic virtual displays, guided tours, and 3D technology. For instance, on the second floor, there is a youth activity room named "Tea Time in the Mountains," where children can see flowing images and poetic text while enjoying beautiful music. They can dance and run along with the flowing images, text, and music, immersing themselves in the intangible cultural heritage offered by the virtual space.

Using artificial intelligence and virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies enhances the engagement, vividness, and realism of heritage dissemination (Gao, 2024). Moreover, VR and AR technologies allow audiences to immerse themselves in the scenes of Lingnan intangible heritage, which provide tourists with immersive experiences, enabling them to "personally" participate in the operations of traditional crafts in virtual space, thereby deepening their understanding of the culture. For instance, they can participate in a virtual dragon boat race or experience the charm of Cantonese opera on a virtual stage. This interactivity and immersion not only enrich the narrative modes of intangible cultural heritage but also stimulate the interest of younger generations in traditional culture, promoting intergenerational transmission and preservation of culture.

4. Conclusion

To Construct a comprehensive multimodal narrative discourse system for Lingnan's intangible cultural heritage combined with historical and cultural narratives, folk customs narratives, and traditional craftsmanship narratives, the three approaches consisting of visual spatial narratives, scene-based integrated narratives, and digital interactive narratives can be adopted. By combining multimodal resources such as visual, auditory, and textual elements, as well as linking online and offline narratives, Guangdong's intangible cultural heritage can invigorate the digital age while creating a unique cultural brand in cross-cultural exchanges. A well-constructed multimodal narrative discourse system for Lingnan's intangible cultural heritage can effectively communicate its values and significance. By integrating various narrative forms and leveraging modern technologies, this multimodal narrative discourse system can enhance cultural understanding, foster community identity, and promote the safeguarding of heritage for future generations. The findings emphasize the potential of innovative storytelling approaches in the preservation and promotion of Lingnan cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world.

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