

The Logic of Media Evolution and Contemporary Enlightenments of Overseas Chinese Hometown Cross-border Communication: A Case Study of Heshun

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Abstract: The cross-border communication of overseas Chinese hometown culture is a dynamic process that continuously evolves alongside media technological changes. Taking Heshun, an overseas Chinese hometown in Tengchong, Yunnan Province, as a case, this paper reviews the evolutionary trajectory of media employed in its cross-border communication and extracts three core logics: first, new media and traditional media are complementary and superimposed instead of substitutes; second, communication gradually breaks through temporal and spatial constraints, but locality remains the anchor of cultural identity; third, communicative subjects shift from elites to the general public. Accordingly, contemporary enlightenments are proposed: we should integrate new and old media, confront the fragmentation inherent in digital communication, and consistently place human emotional bonds at the center of communication. The study argues that media are merely bridges, and that the hometown affections and local memories deeply rooted in overseas Chinese constitute the fundamental endogenous driving force for the sustained dissemination of overseas Chinese hometown culture. In the digital age, a balance between technological empowerment and cultural heritage is essential to ensure the lasting vitality of cultural lineage of overseas Chinese hometowns.

Keywords: overseas Chinese hometown culture; cross-border communication; media evolution; Heshun

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of intertwined globalization and digitalization, overseas Chinese hometown culture — as an extension of Chinese culture abroad and a cultural fusion integrating indigenous and foreign civilizations — has its effective cross-border dissemination directly tied to the cultural identity and emotional bonds with the homeland maintained by overseas Chinese communities. Heshun, a renowned overseas Chinese hometown in Southwest China, boasts a profound cultural heritage spanning over six centuries and distinctive cross-border characteristics. Its cultural communication practices have undergone a long-term transition from embodied media to digital media, offering a typical research sample for understanding how culture is inherited and transformed amid mobility.

Through a comprehensive review of media evolution in Heshun's overseas Chinese hometown cross-border communication, three core evolutionary logics are summarized. These evolutionary logics reflect not merely technological changes, but also profound transformations in cultural communication patterns and the structure of social participation. An in-depth analysis of these evolutionary logics and the distillation of implications for contemporary communication practices bear significant theoretical value and practical relevance—both for revitalizing the cultural vitality of overseas Chinese hometown culture in the digital age and for fostering people-to-people exchanges between China and Southeast Asian overseas Chinese communities.

2. Logical Analysis of Media Evolution

Reviewing the evolutionary trajectory of media in the cross-border communication of Heshun's overseas Chinese hometown culture, three distinct threads can be discerned. First, new and old media do not replace but complement each other. The emergence of new media is invariably driven by the need to compensate functional defects in existing media; in essence, new media serve as remedies and compensations for older ones. However, compensatory media cannot eliminate communicative "noise" (media interference, a term from compensatory media theory) while addressing old defects—they often generate new communicative dilemmas while addressing old ones (Cheng Ming, Cheng Yang, 2020)[1]. Embodied media deliver authentic sensory experience, yet human carriers are constrained by time and space. Print media enable texts to travel instead of people, breaking geographical barriers, but lose the sense of physical presence and exclude illiterate ordinary people. Spatial media anchor culture in tangible architectures that can be touched and returned to, yet they cannot

actively spread outward. Overseas Chinese architectural heritage, precisely as tangible and visible carriers of nostalgia shaped through the interaction between diaspora communities and their hometowns, also constitutes a realistic space where the ethics of nostalgia and cultural identity are generated and sustained (Yang Tian, Zhang Minwei, 2023)[2]. Digital media, in turn, attempt to integrate the strengths of the previous three: they offer both imagery and sound, support real-time interaction, and transcend geographical limits. Each emergent medium compensates for the shortcomings of its predecessors, while simultaneously introducing new challenges — fragmented information tends to undermine depth in communication. Such is the nature of media evolution: Every emergent medium is superimposed onto existing ones to jointly form a multi-dimensional systema of cross-border communication.

Second, cultural communication shifts from "mandatory physical presence" to "people's optional absence." In the era of embodied media, cultural circulation was limited to regions where migrants traveled. Print media began to separate culture from human carriers; as independent carriers, Qiaopi (overseas Chinese remittance letters) could convey messages even without the writers' physical presence. Spatial media further embedded culture within specific sites, allowing people to perceive it without being present. Digital media pushes this separation to an extreme: once a video is released, culture continues to circulate across temporal and spatial gaps between creators and audiences. Overseas Chinese hometown culture has thus gradually broken free from the shackles of time and space. Yet even as communication becomes increasingly "disembedded," locality remains the foundation of cultural identity.

Third, communicative subjects expand from a narrow elite group to the general public. In the era of embodied media, communication relied on caravan porters; the print era was dominated by literati and overseas Chinese leaders; the construction of spatial media depended on wealthy returned overseas Chinese. The digital era breaks this pattern—anyone with a mobile phone can shoot videos and tell stories. Young workers in Myanmar, descendants returning to their hometowns, and local homestay operators have all become cultural communicators. The narrative of overseas Chinese hometown culture has evolved from a single voice into a polyphonic narrative. Digital media enables participants of diverse scales — ranging from ordinary overseas Chinese abroad to the younger generation at home — to take part in the construction of overseas Chinese hometown culture.

3. Implications of Media Evolution for the Communication of Overseas Chinese Hometown Culture

The historical experience of media evolution in Heshun offers profound implications for the contemporary cross-border communication of overseas Chinese hometown culture. First, we should not prefer new media at the expense of traditional ones. The authentic sensory experience embodied in physical interaction, the emotional warmth conveyed in Qiaopi, and the sense of belonging evoked by architectural spaces are all invaluable resources that screens cannot replace. Overseas Chinese entrust their unique family memories to tangible architectural spaces imbued with elements of overseas Chinese hometown culture, which vividly embody the core values of China's fine traditional culture (Yang Tian, Zhang Minwei, 2023)[2]. In contemporary communication practice, multiple media should be deployed in coordination to build a multidimensional communication network: while leveraging the immediacy and broad reach of digital media, we should also preserve the sense of presence and depth offered by traditional media. Caravan cultural experiences, physical exhibitions of Qiaopi, revitalization of ancestral hall spaces, short-video communication, and online community interaction should complement and reinforce one another.

Second, we must recognize the dual nature of digital media. New media often bring new challenges while addressing old problems; every step of "compensation" in media evolution comes with its own costs (Cheng Ming, Cheng Yang, 2020)[1]. In pursuing communication efficiency and breadth, we should consciously counteract the dilution of profound cultural connotations caused by fragmented information. It is essential to develop in-depth and high-quality cultural content, systematically curating serial content such as oral histories of overseas Chinese hometowns and diaspora family stories. Through organized documentation and narration, we can preserve systematic, reliable, and compelling "memory archives" for overseas Chinese hometown culture, thereby consolidating the core of cultural communication.

Finally, the core of communication is always people; media serve merely as bridges. No matter how media evolve and iterate, the fundamental purpose of cross-border cultural communication lies in preserving and nurturing people's emotional attachment to their hometown, so that every generation is willing to tell and listen to the stories of Heshun. Nostalgia expresses the longing and affection of those dwelling in foreign lands for their hometown; it carries their memories, yearning, and aspirations for home, and constitutes a deep-seated emotional need and spiritual anchor inherent in the individual. This sentiment is rooted in the "native soil" and continuously extends and proliferates alongside people's transnational mobility (Yang Tian, Zhang Minwei, 2023)[2]. Therefore, the efforts should be made to build intergenerational platforms for cultural

communication, actively guiding young people to participate in narrating and disseminating overseas Chinese hometown culture, so that hometown memories and native cultural lineage are passed down from generation to generation.

4. Conclusion

Taking Heshun, an overseas Chinese hometown in Yunnan, as a case study, this paper systematically sorts out the development process and inherent laws of cross-border communication of overseas Chinese hometown culture from the perspective of media evolution. Throughout the whole process of media evolution, its core evolutionary logic lies in complementation and superposition. New media do not simply replace earlier media; instead, they targetedly remedy the deficiencies of existing communication modes, enabling overseas Chinese hometown culture to continuously expand its reach of cross-border communication and cultural connotation within the dynamic cycle of "disembedding (separation from fixed sites) and re-embedding (rebuilding local identity)". Along with media upgrading, profound transformations have taken place in participants and discourse modes of overseas Chinese hometown cultural communication. Communicators have gradually shifted from traditional elites to the general public, and the single, fixed voice has evolved into diverse and rich narratives, rendering the construction of overseas Chinese hometown cultural identity more three-dimensional. In the final analysis, media are merely tools and bridges for the cross-border communication of overseas Chinese hometown culture. The innate hometown sentiments and native memories cherished by overseas Chinese at home and abroad constitute the core endogenous driving force that enables overseas Chinese hometown culture to spread continuously across regions.

Based on the present and oriented toward the future, the cross-border inheritance and communication of Heshun overseas Chinese hometown culture should draw fully on valuable experience accumulated through media communication across generations and explore innovative development paths adapted to the communication characteristics of the digital age. First of all, it is necessary to promote the in-depth integration of diverse media. Traditional communication carriers such as caravan cultural experiences, physical exhibitions of Qiaopi, and revitalized ancestral hall culture should be organically combined with digital communication methods including short video dissemination and online community interaction to build an all-round, three-dimensional cultural communication network. Meanwhile, emerging technologies such as virtual reality can be adopted to create an immersive "sense of presence" for overseas Chinese compatriots and strengthen their sense of native belonging. Secondly, efforts should be made to produce high-quality, in-depth content. Systematic production of series content such as overseas Chinese hometown oral histories and diaspora family stories can effectively counter fragmentation and superficiality in cultural communication in the digital era, consolidating the core of overseas Chinese hometown cultural communication. Thirdly, platforms for cross-generational cultural exchange and communication should be established. Young people should be actively guided to narrate and spread overseas Chinese hometown culture. Practical forms such as study tours in overseas Chinese hometowns allow teenagers to experience and understand the profound heritage of local culture firsthand, facilitating the intergenerational inheritance of hometown memories and native cultural lineage.

Digital technology has injected brand-new vitality into the communication of overseas Chinese hometown culture. Nevertheless, virtual communication can never replace authentic cultural experience and multifaceted native-place bonds. The core value of digital communication lies in arousing people's willingness to visit overseas Chinese hometowns, perceive cultural heritage and carry forward culture, rather than substituting offline cultural practices. As long as the local stories of Heshun overseas Chinese hometown keep being told and the spirit of overseas Chinese hometown culture continues to be inherited, the age-old cultural lineage of this overseas Chinese hometown will endure in the new era of media evolution, be passed down from generation to generation, and continuously radiate fresh vitality and influence.

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