

A study on media evolution in the cross-border communication of overseas-Chinese hometown culture: A case study of Heshun

Xiaoling YANG, Yujin WANG, Xiaoyan MO*

School of Foreign Languages, Yuxi Normal University, Yuxi 653100, China

Corresponding Author

Email address: mxy@yxnu.edu.cn

Abstract: As a spiritual bond connecting Chinese people at home and abroad, overseas-Chinese hometown culture has witnessed a long evolution of cross-border communication from embodied media to digital media. Taking Heshun, a typical overseas-Chinese hometown in Tengchong, Yunnan, as a case, this paper explores the evolutionary process of media in its cross-border cultural communication. The research reveals that the cross-border communication of Heshun's overseas-Chinese hometown culture has gone through four successive stages: embodied media, print media, spatial media, and digital media, each placing distinct emphasis across different historical periods, yet they interweave and penetrate one another throughout the evolution, jointly facilitating the cross-regional transmission of overseas-Chinese hometown culture.

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

1 Introduction

Overseas-Chinese hometown (Qiaoxiang) culture is a type of local culture gradually shaped amid long-term transnational human migration. On the one hand, it preserves native conventions, clan values and traditional architectural aesthetics; on the other hand, it absorbs foreign artifacts, languages and living customs, constituting a hybrid cultural form. Far from static, overseas-Chinese hometown culture is continuously constructed and adjusted through persistent interactions among overseas Chinese, national policies and local society at multiple levels [1]. Heshun Township in Tengchong, Yunnan, serves as a typical overseas-Chinese hometown. This border town situated on the Southern Silk Road has maintained the tradition of migrating to Southeast Asia for livelihood since the Ming Dynasty. Generations of Heshun residents followed caravans along ancient routes to Myanmar, India and other parts of Southeast Asia for trade and work. They brought Central Plains culture overseas and introduced exotic goods and new ideas learned from foreign lands back to their hometown. Over time, Heshun developed a cultural temperament valuing both tradition and inclusiveness. The local motto "Heshun embodies harmony (a pun on the town's name Heshun, literally meaning harmony)" itself reflects such cultural traits.

Cultural communication invariably relies on certain media. From the past to the present, the media employed for the cross-border dissemination of Heshun's overseas-Chinese hometown culture have undergone constant shifts. Initially, human beings themselves functioned as media—the caravan travelers who traveled cross-border to Myanmar, India and Southeast Asia. Later, written Qiaopi (remittance letters) and overseas hometown newsletters emerged. Subsequently,

tangible architectures, ancestral halls and libraries came into being; these tangible spatial carriers bear inherent cultural connotations. In the contemporary era, short videos and social media have become new communication channels. The experiences, observations and emotions of overseas Chinese shaped under diverse social contexts are largely preserved in Qiaopi archives, providing abundant and authentic materials for reconstructing collective memory linking overseas-Chinese hometowns with diaspora communities [2]. Each form of media reshapes the mode, reach and depth of cultural communication, and continuously sustains emotional bonds between overseas Chinese and their ancestral homeland. Taking Heshun overseas-Chinese hometown as the research object, this paper sorts out the evolutionary process of media for its cross-border cultural communication as well as the communication characteristics of each medium. It analyzes the interactive logic of complementation, superposition and re-embedding among different media, and summarizes the implications of media development for the contemporary communication of overseas-Chinese hometown culture based on local practices.

2 The evolutionary process of media in cross-border communication of Heshun overseas-Chinese hometown culture

Based on six centuries of historical records concerning transnational communication in Heshun, the cross-border dissemination of its overseas-Chinese hometown culture can be divided into four progressive yet coexistent and superimposed stages: embodied media, print media, spatial media and digital media. Each medium undertakes distinct communicative functions while bearing inherent limitations that cannot be fully eliminated.

2.1 Embodied media: migration to Southeast Asia and ancient caravan routes

The earliest communication of Heshun overseas-Chinese hometown culture relied on human bodies. After the Ming Dynasty, Heshun suffered from limited arable land amid a growing population. Many impoverished local men embarked on the traditional journey of "Qiong Zou Yifang"—migrating to Southeast Asia to make a living amid land scarcity, traveling along ancient caravan trails across mountain passes to Myanmar, India and adjacent regions for jade mining and trade. They carried not only goods, but also their native dialects, ballads, ancestral legends, dietary customs and diverse beliefs. In Bhamo, Mandalay and other parts of northern Myanmar, Heshun migrants constructed guild halls. Inside these halls, they performed ancestor worship and seasonal rituals in accordance with hometown customs, thereby preserving Central Plains culture abroad.

Communication via embodied media presents two core characteristics. First, it delivers holistic embodied cultural sensations. The clatter of horse hooves, humid heat in rainforests, fears of crossing border checkpoints, and the desolate tune of migrant ballads that depict "leaving one's parents to seek a living in foreign Southeast Asian lands" jointly constitute a unique "embodied cultural sensation" that cannot be fully restored by written texts. When elderly returnees narrated foreign adventures to descendants beside fire pits, their tattoos and scars themselves functioned as living cultural carriers. Second, such communication was sustained by trust. Travel along ancient routes was fraught with dangers; hiring labor and borrowing money depended entirely on geographical and kinship ties. The unwritten norm that "Heshun residents support one another" fostered both openness and internal cohesion within the migrant community. Nevertheless, embodied media had obvious limitations: cultural transmission was limited to the scope of human travel, and oral folk memories faded away with the passing of generations. Such vulnerability drove people to seek new media capable of transcending time and space.

2.2 Print media: Qiaopi and overseas hometown journals as cultural bonds

From the mid-to-late 19th century, booming Yunnan-Myanmar trade generated strong demand for overseas Chinese to remit money home, giving rise to Qiaopi. Combining remittance slips and family letters, each Qiaopi served as a miniature

cultural parcel. It delivered funds to support household expenses, road construction and school building, while embedding moral teachings. For instance, in a Qiaopi sent from Mandalay back to Heshun in 1908, an overseas Chinese instructed his wife: "Respect parents-in-law without neglect; supervise children's studies rigorously." In just a few sentences, traditions of filial piety and emphasis on education were conveyed across vast distances. Qiaopi often enclosed architectural blueprints and seeds, bringing technologies and culture back to hometowns.

The value of Qiaopi archives lies not merely in recording overseas-Chinese entrepreneurs' journeys and household financial exchanges, but in authentically preserving emotional dialogues between diaspora communities and their hometowns in that era. Behind every Qiaopi lies longing and responses spanning oceans. These letters conveyed across mountain passes united scattered Heshun residents in Myanmar, Thailand and other regions into a transnational community. These private folk letters furnish the most fundamental and authentic materials for understanding the collective memory of overseas-Chinese migrants. They record ordinary people's joys and sorrows, rather than abstract figures in grand narratives. For overseas Chinese hometowns such as Heshun, Qiaopi were far more than financial instruments; they formed an emotional bridge linking native land and foreign settlements.

During the Republic of China period, local Heshun residents launched overseas-Chinese hometown journals, including the township publications *Heshun Xiang* and *Journal of the Heshun Chongxin Society* (Chongxin: advocating loyalty and self-improvement), which were regularly distributed to overseas Chinese in Myanmar and Thailand. These publications delivered hometown news, letters from migrants and commentary articles. When Heshun merchants thousands of miles away read about pagoda trees blooming in the village or new books added to the library, they psychologically felt never separated from home. Such printed materials freed cultural communication from temporal and spatial restraints: texts could be preserved, reproduced and transmitted over long distances. Yet obvious constraints remained: Reading these printed publications required basic literacy skills. Most Qiaopi were written by village literati on behalf of illiterate migrants, and journals were compiled by intellectuals. Numerous illiterate overseas family members and grassroots caravan porters could hardly access these materials. The power to narrate and record culture rested with a small group of intellectual elites, and the life stories of grassroots people were often left unrecorded.

2.3 Spatial media: architecture, ancestral halls, and libraries

The most enduring media of Heshun overseas-Chinese hometown culture are the buildings rooted in the land. Walking through Heshun, one immediately notices mixed Chinese-Western ancient residences. The overall layout follows the traditional western Yunnan architectural form of "three dwellings surrounding a screen wall", yet closer observation reveals Burmese teak-carved windows, British-style iron balconies, ceramic tiles printed with English letters, and Indian-style scroll patterns on gateheads. These physical structures sustain lasting appeal for Heshun-origin overseas Chinese because they constitute the most intuitive and tangible physical evidence of the homeland. They continuously evoke and reinforce clan memories and cultural sense of belonging toward their hometown among overseas Chinese [3]. Having earned wealth abroad, overseas Chinese built residences upon returning home and deliberately embedded exotic symbols. These structures silently informed villagers and descendants of their achievements overseas, and enabled concrete imaginations of distant lands. Such architecture itself is a cultural product formed by overseas Chinese shuttling between hometowns and foreign lands—a tangible carrier of homesickness. Adopting imported new materials such as cement and steel bars, overseas Chinese broke the structural norms of traditional dwellings and created innovative hybrid Chinese-Western styles. The Wanlouzi (the Curved Mansion), in Heshun stands as a typical representative of this trend.

Ancestral halls constitute another vital type of spatial medium. The grand ancestral halls of the eight major clans of Heshun, including the Cun, Liu and Li clans, all feature horizontal inscribed plaques, ancestral spirit tablets and stone

steles embedded in walls that record overseas achievements of clan members. When returning overseas Chinese knelt to worship inside the halls and contemplated ancestral names, a sense of clan belonging alleviated the loneliness of wandering abroad. Even second- and third-generation overseas descendants who never returned home developed a consciousness of roots passed down across generations through oral descriptions and photographs of these halls.

Memory and space are never isolated. A specific place sustains memory precisely because space itself carries and transmits humanistic memories [4]. For cultural memory to be inherited across generations, it must rely on perceptible material forms. Texts, rituals and architecture all embody such "cultural symbols". Heshun Library exemplifies such a space. More than a book collection, it is a spiritual landmark jointly built by transnational efforts. To this day, every Qingming Festival, overseas Chinese bring their children and grandchildren here to recount family stories while pointing out ancestors' names on donor lists. Spatial media feature stability and tangibility, offering an anchor for diasporic culture to return to. The ultimate significance of cultural memory lies in helping people confirm "who I am" and "where I come from", consistently underpinning the formation of cultural identity. Via materialized cultural symbols, spatial media continuously evoke such identity among overseas wanderers. However, their weakness lies in immobility — they can only stand in place, awaiting the return of overseas Chinese. Once younger generations lose their sentimental attachment to their hometown, these sites risk being reduced to mere tourist attractions.

2.4 Digital media: the contemporary transformation via short videos and social media

Since the turn of 21st century, the popularization of digital technology has brought revolutionary changes to cross-border communication of overseas-Chinese hometown culture. Digital media including short videos, social media and mobile internet are reshaping the form and pattern of such communication with immediacy, interactivity and wide communication reach. Overseas-Chinese hometown cultural heritage bears not only regional cultural memory, but also the striving history and spiritual strength of the Chinese nation engaging with the world and pursuing self-improvement in modern times [5]. In the digital era, how to leverage new media technologies to widely perceive and disseminate this heritage has become a new research topic for overseas-Chinese hometown cultural communication.

Heshun is actively embracing this media transformation. Though located in a township, Heshun Library keeps pace with the times by establishing an electronic reading room and independent database, launching digital service platforms including a WeChat Official Account and mobile library App, benefiting more than 30,000 visitors annually. The library sorts out documents, newspapers and manuscripts of notable figures to showcase Heshun's profound history and culture, and assists in reviving the township journal *Heshun Xiang*, founded in the 1930s. Traditional overseas-Chinese hometown journals are gaining new vitality through digitalization. The value of overseas-Chinese cultural heritage extends beyond academic research and heritage conservation. It can also be transformed into high-quality educational and tourism resources, functioning practically in inheriting traditional culture, consolidating national identity and fostering cultural confidence. As a venue integrating heritage preservation and public cultural services, Heshun Library is exploring directions along this line.

With the prevalence of short videos, the series *Overseas Chinese' Glimpse of a Prosperous New Yunnan*, jointly produced by China News Service, Yunnan Overseas Friendship Association and Yunnan Branch of China News Service, was launched in 2025. The series selected Heshun of Tengchong and four other overseas-Chinese hometowns in Yunnan as shooting locations. Filmed from overseas compatriots' perspective, it captures hometown landscapes, features native dialects, conveys hometown affections and eases the pangs of homesickness. Through immersive visual narratives, the series conveys Heshun's overseas-Chinese stories to audiences at home and abroad, delivering an intimate cultural sensory experience to overseas compatriots thousands of miles away. Such in-depth creations can effectively counteract

fragmentation and superficiality in online cultural communication.

3 Conclusion

Overseas-Chinese hometown culture serves as a core spiritual carrier sustaining emotional bonds between Chinese people at home and abroad. Its cross-border inheritance across regions and generations relies on diverse media forms. Media merely function as communication bridges linking hometowns with overseas settlements; the nostalgia and native memories deeply rooted in overseas Chinese constitute the endogenous driving force behind the sustained cross-border dissemination of hometown culture. Only by balancing the humanistic depth embedded in traditional media and the broad reach of digital media, and promoting the integrated development of tangible offline spatial carriers and virtual online platforms, can Heshun's six-century caravan legacy and overseas-Chinese spirit be perpetually disseminated across borders, and the global cultural appeal of Chinese culture in border regions be steadily enhanced.

Acknowledgments

This paper belongs to the phased achievements of the College Students' Innovative Entrepreneurship Training Program (No. 2025A032) "Multilingual Decoding and Cross-border Linkage: Construction of a Symbiosis Model Between International Communication and Economic Development of Heshun Overseas Chinese Hometown Culture in Tengchong".

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Chen R, Liu Y, Yang X M. Research on the dynamic construction of overseas Chinese hometown culture from a multi-scale perspective: a case study of Shantang culture in Dawu Village, Chaozhou[J]. *World Regional Studies*, 2023, 32(6):131-141.
- [2] Yan H. Narrative research of Qiaopi archives from the perspective of collective memory construction: taking the documentary "You Came from the Sea" as an example[J]. *Beijing Archives*, 2023(4): 30-32.
- [3] Yang T, Zhang M W. Expression of cultural identity from the perspective of nostalgia narrative: a case study of overseas Chinese architectural heritage in Jiangmen[J]. *Qinghai Social Sciences*, 2023(2): 197-202.
- [4] Sun B G, Yu J Q. History, media and identity: local possibilities of constructing cultural memory of the southern silk road[J]. *Culture and Communication*, 2023, 12(2): 16-22.
- [5] Li Z W. Research on communication strategies of overseas Chinese-related cultural heritage in Xiamen under the context of new media[J]. *Southeast Communication*, 2024(8): 79-82.