

Research on the External Communication Strategies of Zhaoqing Culture

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Supported by Zhaoqing Municipal Philosophy and Social Sciences '14th Five-Year' Plan Project under the grant number "25GJ-76".

Received 2 August 2025; accepted 22 October 2025

Published online 26 December 2025

Abstract

As a significant cradle of Lingnan culture, Zhaoqing's cultural symbols such as the Seven Star Crags, Dinghu Mountain, and Duan inkstones have been studied to some extent. Scholars have predominantly explored the cultural value of these symbols from historical and tourism perspectives. The cross-cultural communication strategies for Zhaoqing culture remains unexplored. As such, this study will focus on analysing the cross-cultural communication of Zhaoqing's local cultural symbols, promoting the city's image, effectively conveying its narrative, and advancing the international dissemination of its regional culture. The research is aimed to reshape Zhaoqing's global image, amplify its cultural narrative, and ultimately contribute to the broader mission of regional cultural promotion. It is designed to offer a practical framework for other cultures developing overseas communication plans.

Key words: Zhaoqing; Cultural communication; Communication strategy; Global image

Xiao, H. (2025). Research on the External Communication Strategies of Zhaoqing Culture. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 21(4), 1-8. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/13944>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13944>

1. INTRODUCTION

The strategic design of a city's brand image has become instrumental in enhancing its competitive edge

and attractiveness at the present time. As a historic prefectural capital, Zhaoqing is endowed with significant cultural assets which supply a wealth of distinctive visual and material references for shaping its urban identity. Urban branding not only reflects a city's competitiveness but also serves as a dynamic platform for preserving and revitalizing cultural heritage. Embedding local historical and cultural motifs into brand design helps accentuate a city's uniqueness, bolsters a sense of identity among residents, and raises its profile and reputation both nationally and internationally (Muinonen & Kumar 2017).

Brand hierarchy theory suggests that a brand's visual and cultural symbols not only enhance brand recognizability but also impart deeper cultural value (Martin & Lu 2002; Mohamad Adetunji & Alariffetal et al. 2022). Examining international examples of how cultural symbols have been incorporated into city branding offers valuable comparative insights for Zhaoqing's own initiatives. Tainan City in Taiwan, for instance, adopted the phoenix flower as a cohesive visual emblem, yet inconsistencies in its application reveal the importance of establishing standardized visual identity guidelines. Meanwhile, studies conducted in Hefei and Chengdu have investigated the combination of virtual reality (VR) technology with traditional culture to develop distinctive neighborhood landscapes. These projects illustrate how blending cultural heritage with digital innovation can produce urban environments that reflect local symbolism while accommodating contemporary needs. The research further underscores VR's significant potential in facilitating urban digital transformation, contributing valuable theoretical and practical knowledge to modern city planning. Collectively, these experiences provide actionable guidance for Zhaoqing, highlighting how the integration of historical and cultural elements can strengthen global competitiveness without compromising local character. With the introduction of semiotics,

scholars turn to the cultural symbols when talking about the traditional culture (Zhang, Cheng, et al, 2024).

2. THE VALUE OF ZHAOQING'S CULTURAL SYMBOLS

The creation of cultural symbols has long posed a significant challenge, particularly in developing representations that effectively embody national culture and foster a stronger identification with Chinese civilization (Zhang et al. 2024). Clarifying and defining China's cultural symbols and the image of the Chinese nation serves as a crucial component in deepening the theoretical foundations, narrative structure, and discursive framework of the sense of national community. It is essential to advance the preservation and innovative integration of diverse ethnic cultures, thereby establishing and reinforcing the shared cultural symbols and national image that unite all ethnic groups. This effort is vital for strengthening collective identification with Chinese culture.

Establishing and promoting these shared symbols and the image of the Chinese nation carries profound importance for realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, fostering a steadfast sense of national community, and enhancing China's global image. Chinese cultural symbols are those that reflect both the unifying features of Chinese culture and the distinctive characteristics of various ethnic groups and regions, embodying the profound historical depth and spiritual richness of China's heritage. These symbols can be broadly classified into two types: natural symbols, including landscapes, rivers, stars, and constellations; and human-made symbols, such as architecture and clothing. Theories regarding their origins are diverse, encompassing the totemic view, which holds that early symbols derived from images representing worshipped natural objects; the functionalist perspective, which attributes their emergence to practical needs; and the decorative explanation, which emphasizes their role in aesthetic enhancement.

Furthermore, Chinese national cultural symbols encompass rich connotations derived from Confucianism, political and ethical traditions, and diverse ethnic cultures. Symbolic systems such as Confucian culture and chess culture form an integral part of China's national heritage and represent abundant resources for cultural representation.

2.1 The localised value of Zhaoqing's cultural symbols

Usually, cultural symbols are mainly composed of "shape," "meaning," "color," and "movement" in their visual expression and application to grasp the four aspects. They do not exist as isolated symbols but are integrated to function together. The graphics will "speak," the mood

will "feel," the colors will "tell," and the dynamics will "tell." Zhaoqing, as a nationally designated historical and cultural city, possesses an exceptionally rich and profound array of cultural symbols. These symbols not only bear witness to its historical stature but also embody unique local values, shaping the very soul of the city.

The Seven Star Crag, hailed as 'Lingnan's foremost wonder' and 'an earthly paradise,' exemplify the perfect fusion of natural landscapes and cultural heritage. Characterised by its karst peaks, limestone caves, lakes, and stone inscriptions, it represents the pinnacle of Lingnan's pursuit of natural beauty- 'exquisite yet extraordinary, serene yet spiritually resonant.' More than mere scenery, it stands as the city's spiritual garden. The cliff inscriptions (dating from the Tang Dynasty to the present) are history books carved into stone, embodying the dialogue between literati and nature across the ages. They imbue the landscape with cultural vitality, serving as tangible witnesses to Lingnan's literary heritage. Dinghu Mountain, hailed as the 'Emerald on the Tropic of Cancer' and the foremost of Lingnan's Four Great Mountains, is a national nature reserve and a UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve. It symbolises Zhaoqing's exceptional natural ecology, embodying the principle that 'lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets'. This has fostered a profound sense of ecological stewardship and pride among its people. Simultaneously, as a Buddhist sanctuary (Qingyun Temple), it offers spiritual solace, cultivating a regional ethos of 'mountain-water Zen harmony and symbiotic coexistence'.

Duan inkstones, hailed as 'the foremost among China's Four Famous Inkstones' and 'the jewel among the Four Treasures of the Study,' stand as Zhaoqing's most irreplaceable cultural emblem. More than mere artefacts, they embody the quintessence of Chinese literati spirit and traditional culture. This designation as the 'Inkstone Capital' grants Zhaoqing a unique and exalted position within the cultural landscape of China. Over a millennium of stone quarrying and carving has nurtured Zhaoqing's tradition of 'meticulous refinement and ingenious craftsmanship,' an integral component of its local spiritual heritage. The Song Dynasty city walls represent 'Guangdong's sole and nationally rare' fully preserved brick fortifications from that era. They stand as tangible evidence of Zhaoqing's millennia-long governance as a prefectural seat, serving as the city's 'backbone' and symbolising steadfastness, continuity, and resilience. Encircling the ancient city, these walls form the backdrop to daily life for Zhaoqing's residents, bearing the collective memories of generations and serving as a central landmark that unites local sentiment. Zhaoqing Prefecture City (Baogong Culture) stands as the origin of the culture of incorruptible officials. The tales of Bao Gong's 'unblemished integrity' and 'returning without

even a writing inkstone' have imprinted profound cultural genes of incorruptibility, fairness, and devotion to the people upon Zhaoqing. These represent the city's vital spiritual wealth and moral benchmark. Matteo Ricci established China's first inland Catholic church, Xianhua Temple, in Zhaoqing and created the first Chinese world map, the Complete Map of Mountains and Seas. This historical event signifies Zhaoqing's role as the initial window for Sino-Western cultural exchange. It endowed the city with an inherent cultural ethos of openness, inclusivity, and receptiveness to novelty, adding an international historical dimension to its pragmatic spirit rooted in Lingnan culture.

The steamed rice dumpling, wrapped in winter leaves and as large as a pillow, is not merely an ordinary dumpling but embodies the very essence of Zhaoqing. Particularly during the Spring Festival, it carries profound symbolism: 'bountiful harvest,' 'abundance,' 'reunion,' and 'blessings.' It serves as a flavourful conduit for familial affection and regional identity, a 'taste of home' cherished by Zhaoqing natives wherever they may roam. The Dragon Mother Ancestral Temple (Deqing) stands as the cradle of Dragon Mother culture and the spiritual centre for the 'water deity' revered throughout the West River basin. It embodies the people's reverence for nature, their worship of 'maternal benevolence' and 'taming the waters for peace'. This temple unites communities across the West River basin, serving as a living embodiment of Lingnan's Cantonese folk beliefs.

These cultural symbols and their inherent local values collectively form the profound heritage of Zhaoqing, the 'First Prefecture South of Lingnan'. This makes it not merely a picturesque tourist city, but a living museum rich in history, culture, spirit, and warmth.

2.2 The global value of Zhaoqing's cultural symbols

Zhaoqing's cultural symbols bear witness to a uniquely Chinese narrative. The Duan inkstone, as the foremost among the Four Famous Inkstones, has long transcended its role as a mere scholar's implement, becoming a tangible emblem of the spirit of Chinese literati and the culture of the scholar-officials. The traditions it embodies 'farming and scholarship passed down through generations' and 'veneration for learning and education' alongside the rigorous, introspective and creative spirit inherent in the act of 'grinding ink and preparing brushes', provide an exceptional entry point for narrating China's story to the world and elucidating the character and values of the Chinese nation. Moreover, Zhaoqing stands as the historical starting point for Matteo Ricci's cultural exchange between East and West. This very symbol carries profound connotations of openness, inclusivity, and mutual learning between civilisations. Uncovering and disseminating Ricci's deeds in Zhaoqing powerfully narrates the story of a China that has, since ancient times,

been committed to dialogue with the world and absorbing foreign civilisations not a nation closed off in isolation.

Promoting the global dissemination of Zhaoqing's cultural symbols represents a strategic pathway to revitalise traditional culture and engage in global cultural dialogue. We must not allow our rich cultural resources to remain confined to historical texts and local annals; instead, we should employ innovative dissemination methods and modern interpretations to integrate them into the global pop-culture landscape. For instance, incorporating the scenic essence of the Seven Star Crags into digital cultural tourism products, or transforming historical anecdotes of Bao Zheng's incorruptible governance in Duanzhou into film, television, or animation IPs, are all effective attempts to elevate regional cultural symbols into globally influential cultural products. This approach not only elevates Zhaoqing's international city brand image but also concretely demonstrates the diversity and inclusivity of Chinese culture to the world through specific cultural symbols. Consequently, it makes a substantive contribution to enhancing the nation's overall cultural image.

3. PRINCIPLES FOR REFINING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF ZHAOQING'S CULTURAL SYMBOLS

Zhaoqing has undergone a long history and has accumulated a wealth of symbolic material resources, and although it has made a lot of achievements in communicating these cultures, some of them always have problems such as blindness and imitativeness in using local culture, favoring the form, and failing to accurately convey the main idea.

Symbols in the traditional landscapes and arts capture scenes of daily life from ancient societies, revealing the cultural context of past civilizations and holding significant research value (Wang, 2024).

3.1 Establishing cultural symbols of Zhaoqing with traditional spirit

In an era of accelerated globalization, the preservation and promotion of cultural IP have become a critical frontier for maintaining cultural diversity. For a city like Zhaoqing, with its profound history as a cradle of Cantonese culture and a pivotal site in the story of Lingnan, the challenge is not merely one of preservation but of active, strategic communication. The concept of "exemplarity" is central to this endeavor. It moves beyond simply listing cultural assets to the deliberate process of identifying, refining, and presenting the most representative and potent symbols of a culture's traditional spirit. For Zhaoqing to resonate on the world stage, it must move from being a repository of traditions to a curator of compelling cultural narratives. This requires a meticulous process of distilling its vast

ICH into a coherent and captivating symbolic language that can traverse cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Before symbols can be refined, one must first appreciate the raw material. Zhaoqing's cultural symbol is a rich tapestry woven from threads of history, art, belief, and daily life. For example, the Duan Inkstone is not "a stone for grinding ink," but "The Stone of Eternity: Where Ideas are Honed." This reframes it as an object of meditation, patience, and the timeless pursuit of wisdom. The story is about the artisan who communes with the stone to reveal its hidden beauty, mirroring the scholar's process of refining raw thought into elegant expression. Complex traditions need to be rendered into clean, recognizable icons without losing their soul. This is not about dumbing down, but about creating accessible points of entry. The Duan Inkstone can be symbolized by a single, elegant brushstroke emerging from a beautifully textured stone. The focus is on the result of the inkstone—the act of creation.

When it comes to the Dragon Boat Festival, the narrative shifts from "a boat race" to "Rhythms of the River: A Community's Pulse." This emphasizes unity, synchronized effort, and the human struggle against the currents of life. The story becomes one of collective strength, cultural continuity, and the sacred relationship between a community and its waterway. The Dragon Boat can be abstracted into the powerful, synchronized motion of oars breaking the water's surface, or the determined expression of a rower. The symbol is human endeavor and harmony.

3.2 Excavating Zhaoqing's cultural symbols that bridge the past and present

Continuity is a defining characteristic that has enabled the enduring legacy of Chinese civilization. It compels us to identify points of connection between the essence of ancient Zhaoqing culture and contemporary life, thereby facilitating empathetic communication that bridges past and present.

Zhaoqing Duan inkstones and the Dragon Mother culture, as cultural symbols, have exerted profound influence since the Tang and Song dynasties and retain significant practical value in contemporary cultural development and economic growth. Designated as tribute items since the Tang period, Duan inkstones have served as bearers of China's literary heritage. Their influence spread far and wide via the West River waterway and the Maritime Silk Road, establishing them as vital cultural commodities linking East Asian Sinicised cultural spheres. Throughout Zhaoqing's millennia-long development, three enduring symbols spanning antiquity and modernity have emerged:

First, they represent exceptional cultural craftsmanship. From the Tang Dynasty's founding masters of Duan inkstone craft to the Song Dynasty's artisans who standardised its forms, and continuing into the modern

era with figures like Li Kang and Zhang Qingming—both honoured as 'Chinese Masters of Arts and Crafts'—these artisans wielded chisels as brushes, transforming stone into treasured heirlooms. The 'craftsmanship spirit' they embody, the pursuit of technical perfection and unwavering commitment to quality, resonates profoundly with modern society's advocacy of "professionalism" and "dedication to one's craft," establishing timeless benchmarks of value.

Secondly, it is the Zhaoqing's renowned cultural brands and produce that are celebrated both domestically and internationally. Duan inkstones need no introduction, with masterpieces like the 'Monkey King Inkstone Worth a Thousand Pieces of Gold' and the 'Seven Star Cave Heaven Inkstone' remaining prized treasures for artistic collection and cultural exchange. Moreover, Zhaoqing's 'Wen'an Carp' and 'Maixi Carp', cultivated through unique farming methods, have been imperial tributes throughout history. Their green, ecological farming philosophy aligns perfectly with contemporary demands for wholesome food. As a millennia-old local delicacy, Zhaoqing's steamed rice dumplings embody the cultural significance of family sharing through their traditional craftsmanship, wrapped in holly leaves and simmered through winter nights. This makes them a living symbol preserving local sentiment while showcasing Cantonese culinary culture to the wider world. These brands and products continue to provide premium goods and cultural experiences for China and beyond, demonstrating the enduring vitality of Zhaoqing's heritage.

Thirdly, this comes from Zhaoqing's deep cultural spirit. There is a strong tradition of valuing both farming and education. For generations, people have respected learning and literature. This tradition is clearly shown in the Duan inkstones. They are made in Duanzhou and used for writing and study. Zhaoqing also has a long history of academies and a wisdom of respecting nature. This wisdom follows the idea of "harmony between humans and nature." For example, the craft of making Duan inkstones follows the principle: "Adapt to the stone and treat it like gold." Also, the Dragon Mother culture shows thanks and respect for the Xi River. These traditional ideas strongly match modern sustainable development concepts. Moreover, Zhaoqing has a business spirit of openness and inclusion. In history, it was a transportation center in the West River area and an important stop on the Maritime Silk Road. It became a meeting point between Chinese and Western cultures. It was here that Matteo Ricci drew the first world map in Chinese. This history of openness gives Zhaoqing a solid foundation today. It helps the city join the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

Zhaoqing's cultural symbols, which possess continuity in their external dissemination, can propel the contemporary transmission of Zhaoqing's culture and

its international dialogue. By tracing and revitalising these enduring cultural genes, we can present a genuine, multidimensional and comprehensive image of Zhaoqing to the world. Moreover, the universal values embedded within its cultural symbols, such as craftsmanship, education, ecology and openness, enable us to forge emotional connections with global audiences, thereby crafting the 'Zhaoqing chapter' in the new era of telling China's story.

3.3 Refining Zhaoqing's cultural elements that can bridge Chinese and international audiences

The dissemination of regional culture is not a mere display or exportation, but rather a profound dialogue grounded in "commensurability". Derived from mathematics, commensurability in the cultural sphere denotes the universal values and emotional foundations that enable mutual understanding and appreciation across distinct cultural systems. For Zhaoqing in Guangdong, the core task in distilling its cultural symbols lies precisely in uncovering those "cultural codes" that both embody the local spiritual essence and connect with the universal experiences of all humanity. This enables a transition from being merely "seen" to being understood and recognised.

Zhaoqing, historically known as Duanzhou, possesses a long and profound historical and cultural heritage. However, to transform these rich cultural resources into universally resonant "universal symbols", we must first distil the elements most capable of evoking cross-cultural resonance from the multitude of cultural phenomena. Specifically, the following cultural symbols demonstrate potent universal appeal: Duan inkstones, regarded as the foremost of China's Four Treasures of the Study, transcend their role as exquisite writing implements. Their profound value lies in the universal ethos embodied throughout their creation and use, an ethos revered worldwide. From the quarrying and selection of stone to the design of 'composing with the stone,' and through every meticulous carving, the creation of a Duan inkstone is a condensed epic of craftsmanship. This spirit of craftsmanship resonates deeply with the Swiss watchmaker's obsession with precision and the Italian artisan's devotion to leather. At its core, it represents humanity's shared tribute to excellence and professionalism. In our fast-paced, high-stimulus modern world, focus and inner tranquillity have become globally scarce commodities. The ritual of grinding ink demands patience and a settled mind. At its heart, the Duan inkstone transforms into a potent cultural symbol. This pursuit of stillness resonates deeply with urban dwellers worldwide, swept along by the torrent of information. Zhaoqing Duan inkstones, revered as the foremost among China's "Four Treasures of the Study", trace their origins to the flourishing Tang Dynasty. Renowned for their lustrous stone, oil-like ink dispersion, and exquisite

carving, they stand unrivalled. Their craftsmanship adheres to the philosophy of "adapting techniques to the material", seeking harmony between nature's artistry and human ingenuity, while embodying the Eastern wisdom of "virtue bearing all things". Traditional masterpieces such as the priceless Monkey King Inkstone and the Songkeng Grand Historian Inkstone, among dozens of others, stand as treasured heirlooms. From the ingenuity in quarrying the stone, through each stage of carving and polishing, to its dual existence as both ritual vessel and work of art, the craftsmanship embodied in Duan inkstones, their reverence for education, and their dialogue with nature possess the potential to become universally resonant cultural symbols. They may thus strike a profound chord with audiences worldwide who seek beauty, focus, and sustainable lifestyles.

The scenic beauty of Zhaoqing stands as its most tangible cultural emblem. The synergy between the Seven Star Crag's concept of 'a lake within the city, a city within the mountains' and Dinghu Mountain's status as 'an oasis on the Tropic of Cancer' lies in their shared resonance with humanity's innate longing for Mother Nature and yearning for poetic habitation. Pristine air, crystalline lakes, and luxuriant forests constitute universal currency transcending borders. In an era where ecological conservation has become a global imperative, Zhaoqing's exceptional environment itself stands as a potent universal symbol. It embodies not merely scenic beauty, but a tangible, high-quality way of life and the ideal vision of 'harmony between humanity and nature'.

As Roland Robertson (2000) observes, contemporary globalisation constitutes a form of institutionalisation encompassing the dual processes of "the universalisation of particularism" and "the particularisation of universalism". The universal symbols within Zhaoqing's local culture possess precisely this "universal significance", enabling effective connection and interaction between local meaning and global significance.

4. INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK FOR ZHAOQING'S CULTURAL SYMBOLS

Through the above analysis of the value and development power of the cultural IP, the specific strategies for the construction of the cultural IP of Zhaoqing cultural heritage are proposed.

4.1 Diversified presentation formats

Against the backdrop of media convergence, leveraging diverse visual content such as video, imagery, audio and animation to disseminate Chinese culture enhances user comprehension, rendering it more accessible to foreign audiences and thereby amplifying the influence of Zhaoqing culture. This will enable more international

audiences to understand, accept and grasp our messages, thereby continuously enhancing the effectiveness of our external communication. For instance, presenting Zhaoqing's history, traditions, cultural arts, and way of life through dynamic videos and animations, while incorporating explanations of specific Chinese cultural symbols and drawing comparisons with analogous foreign cultural symbols, offers a more direct and accessible approach. This not only captures the attention of foreign audiences but also enables them to gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of Zhaoqing's culture. In news content production, integrating advanced technologies such as big data, AR, and VR can provide audiences with more intuitive and comprehensive visual experiences. This deepens their recognition and understanding of Zhaoqing's culture while reducing the risk of cross-cultural misinterpretation. Such multimedia communication strategies not only align with the trend of media convergence but also provide a stronger impetus for cultural dissemination.

Strengthening international cultural exchange requires aligning with contemporary trends by de-emphasising official dominance. While government bodies and official spokespersons remain primary communicators, greater attention should be given to non-official opinion leaders—such as students studying in Russia, cultural practitioners, and social media personalities—to foster a decentralised, less official-centric dissemination model. Engaging international students and expatriates: Actively invite international students enrolled at Zhaoqing universities and foreign experts working in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area to co-design immersive cultural experiences such as 'Duan inkstone carving workshops,' 'steamed rice dumpling culinary explorations,' and 'outdoor yoga at Seven Star Crag.' Encourage them to share first-person video diaries in their native languages on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, recounting experiences such as the warmth of handling Duan inkstone stone, the delight of learning to wrap zongzi, and the tranquillity found amidst the mountains and waters. Such authentic, user-generated content possesses far greater credibility and appeal than official promotional videos. Collaborating with artistic creators to achieve 'local adaptation': Independent musicians, illustrators, and documentary filmmakers from home and abroad are invited to reside in Zhaoqing, granted maximum creative freedom. Their mission is not to recount history, but to find points of resonance between tradition and modernity—for instance, an electronic musician sampling the sound of grinding ink as a rhythmic beat, or an illustrator reimagining the Dragon Mother legend as a contemporary picture book. These works themselves become highly effective, decentralised nodes of dissemination, precisely reaching diverse circles of overseas arts enthusiasts.

4.2 Precision communication via data algorithms

The media syntax of big data and algorithmic recommendations will pioneer innovative models for the digital globalisation and localisation of Zhaoqing's cultural symbols. Overseas users inadvertently reveal their points of interest in Huizhou narratives through casual browsing, searches, and likes. 'Leveraging big data, distributed computing, and particularly advancements in social media and mobile intelligent terminals, machines can now gather micro-behavioural data through richer methods' (Cheng & Zhao, 2020). Through associative algorithms, these systems link users' keywords of interest and behavioural trajectories into semantic networks, forming targeted narrative themes. Comprehensive monitoring of potential users' data further enables 'precise insight-driven creativity'. Collaborating with influential cultural institutions and renowned scholars within Confucian cultural circles on social platforms will significantly advance the resonance and revival of core cultural symbols, such as Duan inkstones, Dragon Mother culture, and Zhaoqing's landscape ecology across East and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, targeted dissemination efforts should be intensified across the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and Belt and Road nations, particularly port cities historically intertwined with the Maritime Silk Road.

The convergence of history and contemporary reality establishes a unique foundation of recognition for the precise dissemination of Zhaoqing's cultural symbols. During the 1990s, archaeological discoveries in Southeast Asia and Japan, alongside ancient trading post sites, frequently unearthed ancient Duan inkstones or referenced them in historical records. According to research by Chinese and foreign scholars, most of these inkstones were traded via the Xi River-Pearl River waterway and the Maritime Silk Road, bearing witness to Zhaoqing's illustrious history as a millennia-old commercial hub. Today, modern industries represented by Zhaoqing's new energy vehicles and environmental technologies are actively integrating into the Belt and Road Initiative, perpetuating the city's tradition of openness, inclusivity, and pioneering spirit in commerce. This profound historical connection and close contemporary ties enable tailored narratives for target regions to swiftly foster cultural affinity.

4.3 Innovative cross-textual narratives in game-based communication

In the era of digital intelligence, gaming has emerged as a globally recognised medium for cultural dissemination through immersive scenarios, high-intensity interactive engagement, and exquisite visual aesthetics, that is, cross-cultural communication have continually evolved alongside the development of internet technology and the shifting media landscape (Yang & Zhang, 2024). Zhaoqing's rich heritage, embodied in its Duan

inkstones, the Legend of the Dragon Mother, the Seven Star Caves, Dinghu Mountain, and its pivotal role as a key node along the Maritime Silk Road, provides exceptional resources for constructing a grand gaming universe. By drawing inspiration from successful precedents, we can innovate the narrative discourse of Zhaoqing's culture through gaming pathways, ensuring its profound global resonance.

Specifically, Zhaoqing's cultural symbols can undergo profound 'symbolic reinterpretation' and narrative innovation within games through the following approaches: Firstly, natural and cultural landscapes can be transformed into open-world exploration stages. An open-world game modelled on 'Song Dynasty Duanzhou' or the 'West River Basin' could be developed. Players assume the role of a 'stone seeker' or 'cultural traveller,' exploring digitally recreated landscapes such as the karst formations of Seven Star Caves and the pristine forests of Dinghu Mountain. A core gameplay mechanic involves tracing water patterns and stone veins to locate rare jadeite stones for crafting Duan inkstones. Concurrently, the Dragon Mother Ancestral Temple in Yuecheng serves as a pivotal narrative hub. By completing the 'Dragon Mother's Trials,' players unlock ancient legends concerning rivers, storms, and the welfare of the land, interweaving natural landscapes with mythical beliefs. Secondly, craftsmanship and spiritual heritage can be transformed into interactive 'core gameplay.' The crafting of Duan inkstones, a nationally recognised intangible cultural heritage, should transcend mere background scenery to form a comprehensive 'artisan creation' gameplay system. Players engage in every stage: surveying quarries ('opening pits and pit rocks'), designing compositions based on stone characteristics, and employing techniques like shallow carving, deep carving, and openwork carving. This system could incorporate 'flow state' mechanics, requiring players to maintain focus and steady hands during carving. Successfully crafting a premium Duan inkstone would unlock special abilities or advance key plotlines, enabling overseas players to deeply grasp the essence and value of 'artisan spirit' through interaction. Thirdly, historical figures and events can be transformed into narrative-driven scripts. The game could feature a central questline: reviving the commercial and cultural prosperity of the 'West River-Maritime Silk Road'. Players would assume the role of a courageous and resourceful Lingnan merchant tasked not only with trading inkstone, tea, and spices at 'Duanzhou Port', but also disseminating culture and knowledge during their travels. Matteo Ricci, who resided in Zhaoqing and created the 'Complete Map of the World,' could be designed as a pivotal guide-type NPC. Through interactions with him, players unlock new geographical zones and technological advancements. This ingeniously transforms Zhaoqing's historical role

as a frontier of Sino-Western cultural exchange into a narrative rich with dramatic tension.

Through these approaches, the game innovates cross-textual narratives of Zhaoqing's cultural symbols. The Seven Star Caves transform from static scenic landmarks into challenging, secret-laden exploration spaces; Duan inkstones evolve from displayed artefacts into 'living' crafts requiring dedication and ingenuity to master; the Dragon Mother legend shifts from written lore into core world-building that shapes game mechanics and player destinies.

Ultimately, overseas players will actively internalise key aspects of Zhaoqing's cultural ethos within an immersive environment. Through first-person exploration, interaction, and hands-on practice, they will absorb the ecological philosophy of 'harmony between heaven and humanity,' the artisan spirit of 'pursuing perfection,' and the open-minded character of 'converging rivers and seas.' This process will significantly enhance the appeal, influence, and recognition of Zhaoqing's cultural identity abroad.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explores the value of local cultural symbols in Zhaoqing to overcome challenges in disseminating regional culture, thereby enhancing cultural communication effectiveness. It promotes cultural exchange and integration across different regions and even nations, fostering cultural diversity. Concurrently, the cross-cultural dissemination of local cultural symbols contributes to enhancing citizens' cultural confidence and sense of cultural pride. By examining iconic architecture, significant historical heritage, and natural-cultural landscapes as cultural symbols of the Zhaoqing region, this research challenges traditional stereotypes about the area. It fosters the sustainable dissemination of Zhaoqing's local culture, offers practical recommendations for its preservation, facilitates the region's cultural outreach, and enhances its cultural soft power. Moreover, this research contributes to the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, aligns with the Belt and Road Initiative, and offers valuable insights for both national and local cultural advancement.

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