

Transoceanic Inheritance and Dissemination of Regional Culture: Lingnan Culture in the Caribbean

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Abstract

Lingnan people were pioneers of China's maritime trade and served as an important bridge in China's external exchanges. As generations of adventurous Lingnan migrants crossed the oceans, Lingnan culture took root in the Caribbean, where it intertwined with local cultures through intergenerational and community-based transmission, directly or indirectly contributing to cultural formation in host societies. However, there remains many gaps in research on its overseas transmission pathways and mechanisms. Based on a systematic review of existing research on the overseas transmission of Lingnan culture, this article focuses on the Caribbean region and examines, from historical, literary, economic, cultural-geographical, and social perspectives, the pathways and characteristics of Lingnan cultural inheritance and dissemination in the Caribbean, thus constructing a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary five-sphere analytical framework. It argues that Lingnan culture has played a significant role in shaping the ethnic consciousness of Caribbean Chinese, constructing their cultural identities, and fostering cohesion within immigrant communities. This study seeks to provide a systematic direction for subsequent empirical research through theoretical integration and framework construction, aiming to offer a path with theoretical depth and practical significance for regional culture to "go global", and promote overseas Chinese studies and mutual learning between Chinese and Caribbean civilizations.

Keywords

Lingnan culture; the Caribbean; Chinese diaspora; regional culture; international communication.

1. Introduction

Lingnan culture is an integral part of Chinese culture. Backed by the Five Ridges, adjacent to Southeast Asia, and facing the Pacific Ocean, the region's unique geography has nurtured a culture that is inherently indigenous, diverse, and open. Shielded by towering mountains to the north, the Lingnan region remained relatively isolated from the Central Plains dynasties, which spared it from the ravages of most historical wars. Consequently, Lingnan culture has evolved and flourished in a relatively peaceful and free environment, developing highly distinct regional characteristics. Meanwhile, its extensive coastline and numerous ports have long facilitated foreign exchange. More recently, policy support since the advent of the Reform and Opening-up has further forged the pioneering, pragmatic, and inclusive nature of Lingnan culture. Historically, the people of Lingnan were highly active in maritime trade, playing a pivotal role in cross-cultural communication. As successive waves of Lingnan emigrants ventured overseas to put down roots in foreign lands, their culture has been passed down through generations and communities. By interacting dynamically with local traditions, the Lingnan diaspora has exerted both direct and indirect influences on the cultural development of their host countries.

Although Chinese immigrants and their culture have historically occupied a relatively marginal position in the history, society, and academic discourse of the Caribbean, it is the steadfast, multi-generational adherence to Lingnan culture that has enabled the Caribbean Chinese diaspora to preserve and sustain their ethnic identity amidst the pressures of assimilation. Furthermore, this cultural persistence has even exerted a profound influence on the broader cultural landscape of the Caribbean. Research on Lingnan culture and its global dissemination is inextricably linked to various overseas Chinese communities. However, existing diaspora studies have predominantly focused on traditional destinations such as Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia, leaving the Caribbean region severely understudied. By systematically reviewing the existing literature, this paper aims to construct a broadly applicable, interdisciplinary analytical framework for the dissemination of regional cultures, while charting potential avenues for future in-depth research. Moving beyond the surface-level phenomena of Lingnan culture's international transmission, this study seeks to uncover the underlying logic driving this process. Ultimately, it strives to theoretically broaden the scope for interdisciplinary dialogues between overseas Chinese studies and other fields, including history, literature, economics, human geography, and sociology.

2. Literature Review

In the contemporary Caribbean, the Chinese constitute the third-largest ethnic group, following those of African and Indian descent. Within this demographic, immigrants originating from the Lingnan region form the overwhelming majority. Despite this significant presence, substantial gaps remain in both domestic and international research regarding the Chinese Caribbean diaspora and its dominant regional culture. International scholarship currently lacks a comprehensive understanding of Lingnan culture and its global dissemination. Researchers often subsume it under the broad umbrella of Chinese culture, failing to accord Lingnan culture specific scholarly attention. Existing international studies can generally be classified into three categories. First, research on food culture. The uniqueness of Chinese culinary culture has garnered extensive attention from international scholars. While Thomas O. Höllmann frequently mentions Cantonese cuisine in his monograph on the history and culture of Chinese food, he does not subject it to dedicated thematic analysis ([1]). Using Cantonese cuisine as a starting point, Timothy Lloyd outlines the overarching history of Chinese food in the United States ([2]). Doreen G. Fernandez traces the dissemination and localization of Chinese food culture in the Philippines, but his analysis remains broad despite acknowledging the predominance of culinary practices from Guangdong and Hong Kong and the role of Chinese merchants and chefs in spreading Chinese cuisine ([3]). Sarah Lawson Welsh, in her book *Food, Text and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean* (2019), specifically examines the food and identity representation of the Chinese Caribbean diaspora ([4]). Although these studies are closely related to Lingnan culinary culture, they remain largely introductory, lacking deeper inquiry into the cultural expressions underpinning these culinary phenomena. Second, research on opera culture. Traditional opera is a hallmark of Chinese culture. Nancy Yunhwa Rao compares the Mei Lanfang Peking Opera troupe in the 1930s New York with Chinatown Cantonese opera troupes, exploring their reception among non-Chinese American audiences and the shifting perceptions of China they reflected ([5]). Michael Williams investigates the dissemination of Chinese opera in Australia, acknowledging the bridging role of Cantonese immigrants in its overseas transmission ([6]). However, these studies are primarily descriptive, focusing on the overseas circulation and audience reception of Chinese opera culture, without delving deeply into the intrinsic qualities of Lingnan opera culture itself. Third, research on folk culture. For instance, Rui Oliveira Lopes offers an alternative pathway for the world to understand China through the lens of folk art. Yet, the study lacks an in-depth discussion of

Lingnan folk culture, consequently overlooking the region's unique customs and their global impact ([7]).

Overall, international scholarship exhibits a tendency to emphasize phenomena while neglecting mechanisms. Research on the underlying mechanisms driving the dissemination of Lingnan culture in the Caribbean remains virtually nonexistent. Even when occasional literature, such as Welsh, touches upon the Chinese food and identity in the Caribbean ([4]), the analysis remains strictly descriptive.

Domestically, the academic community has paid significant attention to the preservation and innovation of Lingnan culture within China during the new era ([8]; [9]; [10]). However, the interpretive scope regarding its overseas dissemination remains relatively narrow. For instance, by comparing overseas emigrants from Guangzhou and Jiangsu, Yao treats Lingnan culture as a crucial factor influencing their migratory activities ([11]). Shen uses the overseas dissemination of Cantonese opera in the 1930s and 1940s as a lens to examine the preservation, transformation, and localization of Lingnan culture abroad ([12]). From an architectural perspective, Feng and other scholars explore the dual characteristics of Lingnan architectural history, which is simultaneously "locally rooted" and "outward-looking" ([13]). Furthermore, domestic research concerning the overseas dissemination of Lingnan culture predominantly focuses on European and North American countries. An example is Wu's discussion on the dissemination practices of Lingnan culture in France within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative ([14]). Notably, the North American perspective is particularly prominent in related studies, covering the multifaceted impacts of the Lingnan diaspora on the society, economy, literature, and culture of the United States and Canada ([14]; [15]; [16]; [17]). To date, no domestic research has been published regarding the dissemination of Lingnan culture in the Caribbean region.

In summary, current domestic and international research on the dissemination of Lingnan culture in the Caribbean is scarce and still in its infancy, lacking a systematic and theoretical analytical framework. Specifically, international scholarship on the various sub-branches of Lingnan culture remains uneven, with notable gaps in the study of Chaoshan and Guangfu cultures, alongside a severe lack of attention paid to the Caribbean region. Meanwhile, domestic research has yet to extend its purview of Lingnan culture's overseas dissemination to the Caribbean, leaving a substantial research void. To address these gaps, this paper proposes a comprehensive, "five-in-one" interdisciplinary analytical framework encompassing history, literature, economics, human geography, and sociology. This approach aims to systematically explore the transmission pathways and evolutionary logic of Lingnan culture within the Caribbean region.

3. The "Five-in-One" Transmission and Dissemination Pathways for Lingnan Culture in the Caribbean

First, research on Lingnan culture can be conducted from a historical perspective within the broader context of the Chinese Caribbean diaspora. The history of the Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean is inextricably linked to colonial-era sugar plantations and the "coolie trade" ([19]: p. 208). Initially, Lingnan culture was not introduced to the Caribbean through high-culture mediums such as literature and art; rather, it was deeply embedded in the distinct lifestyles of Cantonese laborers. As Patrick Bryan noted in 2004, "After a hundred and fifty years, the Chinese community remains a racially distinct minority, and despite a significant adaption to western culture in Jamaica has not gone the path of full assimilation" ([20]: p. 24). Positioned on the margins of the Caribbean society, these largely uneducated Chinese laborers, who resisted complete naturalization and steadfastly adhered to Chinese tradition, showcased the myriad characteristics of Chinese culture, particularly Lingnan culture, through their daily

behaviors and ways of life. From basic necessities like food, clothing, housing, and transportation to the subsequent development of literature, entertainment, and education, Lingnan culture subtly permeated every facet of Caribbean society, ultimately becoming an integral component of its vibrant cultural mosaic. Throughout this process, Lingnan culture dynamically interacted and hybridized with African, Indian, and European cultures. In doing so, it not only shaped the sociocultural landscape of the Caribbean but also continuously reshaped itself. Exploring the evolutionary history of Lingnan culture in the Caribbean from a historical dimension requires the extensive collection and rigorous analysis of historical documents. Employing a chronological framework, it is essential to bridge the transnational experiences of the Chinese Caribbean with the global dissemination trajectory of Lingnan culture. By systematically delineating the historical contexts and developmental phases of this cultural transmission, as well as its interactions with the Chinese Caribbean community across different eras, researchers can achieve a holistic understanding of the overarching narrative of Lingnan culture's global spread.

Second, research can be conducted on the representation of Lingnan culture in Chinese Caribbean literature from a literary perspective. In early Caribbean literary works authored by writers of other ethnicities, Chinese immigrants were frequently depicted as cunning, shrewd, and mercenary shopkeepers. They were predominantly relegated to secondary roles characterized by profound racial prejudices ([21]: p. 109). For instance, in the novel *Her Chinaman's Way* (1929), Alfred Mendes stereotyped Chinese shopkeepers as "financial vampires who exclusively exploited other Caribbeans", or as "opium addicts, gamblers, smugglers, and sexual exploiters" ([4]: p. 174). Similarly, the character Chin-a-foo in Edward Jenkins's novel *Lutchmee and Dilloo: A Study of West Indian Life* (1877) further exemplifies these tropes. Such portrayals reflect, to a certain extent, the precarious and marginalized plight of the local Chinese community. Introduced into the 19th-century Caribbean colonial society as indentured laborers, the Chinese were strategically positioned as a middle stratum to buffer the tensions between the white upper class and the Black lower class. However, they rapidly shed this indentured status and transitioned into the retail trade sector ([21]: p. 109). Consequently, in the narratives of white colonizers, they were cast as disruptors of the colonial economic order, while in the works of Afro- and Indo-Caribbean writers, who represented the local demographic majority, they were depicted as outsiders and exploiters aligned with colonial power. Particularly during the era of independence movements, the Chinese were frequently stereotyped as apathetic bystanders, or even enemies, of national liberation efforts. Coming of age against this historical backdrop, Caribbean writers of Chinese descent have directed profound attention toward the construction of a Chinese cultural identity. Notable among these authors are Willi Chen, Easton Lee, Jan Lowe Shinebourne, Kerry Yong, Meiling Jin, and Hannah Lowe. In their works, these authors increasingly emphasize their Chinese heritage and emotional ties to China, striving to dismantle and rewrite distorted stereotypes ([21]: pp. 111-112). They seek to reconstruct their cultural identities by drawing spiritual sustenance from traditional Chinese culture. Through the personal lenses forged by these diasporic writers, readers gain insight into their profound, internalized attachments to their ancestral nation and regional culture. This not only illuminates the pivotal role that Lingnan cultural roots play in reshaping the ethnic identity of the Chinese in the Caribbean but also vividly maps the cultural conflicts and reconciliations that Lingnan culture has navigated in foreign lands. Whether examining fictional genres, such as novels, poetry, and drama, or non-fictional forms like periodicals, essays, and memoirs, analyzing the literary representations of Lingnan culture provides a crucial gateway. A literary perspective allows readers to penetrate the inner worlds of the Chinese Caribbean diaspora, thereby exploring the profound spiritual significance that Lingnan culture holds for this community.

Third, examining economically driven cultural dissemination constitutes another vital perspective for understanding the transmission of Lingnan culture in the Caribbean. Many scholars posit that Chinese “transnational ethnic entrepreneurship” has managed to endure on the margins of state power and political systems for centuries precisely because it relies on mature, highly mobile, and universally replicable cultural institutions and practices rooted in ancestral traditions and extended kinship networks ([22]; [23]). This characteristic is distinctly evident in the Caribbean region. Taking Chinese-owned shops and restaurants as integrated socio-economic hubs, the symbiotic relationship between cultural preservation and economic advancement not only enabled early Chinese immigrants in the Caribbean to survive in harsh overseas environments but also allows them to continuously expand and thrive amidst fierce contemporary market competition. Fieldwork conducted by our research team reveals that in the contemporary Caribbean, the majority of Chinese immigrants remain engaged in the restaurant and retail sectors. Consequently, the spatial pattern of their cultural dissemination radiates outward, with these eateries and shops serving as the central epicenters. The naming conventions and interior decor of these establishments consistently feature distinct Chinese elements. Embedded in the daily routines of local residents, these commercial spaces function as crucial arenas for cross-cultural exchanges. Take “Stanley’s Home Restaurant” (阿康饭馆) in Antigua as a case study. During an interview, the proprietor, Mr. Yang, noted that the restaurant proactively adapts its flavor profiles to suit local dietary preferences, for instance, by reducing spiciness, enhancing sweet and sour notes, and substituting chicken thighs with chicken breasts. Furthermore, the restaurant highlights “Cantonese Beef”, “Cantonese Chicken”, and “Cantonese Shrimp” as house specialties, explicitly showcasing and promoting the culinary culture of the Guangdong region. Additionally, the packaging of the disposable chopsticks provided by the restaurant features illustrated instructions detailing their usage and historical origins, thereby guiding customers to engage with and understand Chinese culture through hands-on practice. Similarly, the “Little Canton Supermarket”, a Cantonese-owned grocery store in Antigua, dedicates specific aisles to imported Chinese merchandise alongside local goods. Offering a comprehensive inventory at competitive prices, the supermarket attracts a large clientele and has successfully expanded to a second branch in downtown Antigua. The owner, Mr. Li, who also serves as the President of the Chinese Association of Antigua and Barbuda, plays a pivotal role in community organization. He not only routinely coordinates with the local Chinese community to host celebrations for traditional Chinese festivals, such as National Day, the Spring Festival, and the Mid-Autumn Festival, but also leads the diaspora in actively participating in distinctively Caribbean festivities, such as Carnival, to promote Chinese culture. In August 2025, at the invitation of Mr. Li, our research team participated in the Carnival parade organized by the Association. Alongside local Chinese residents, we immersed ourselves in the Caribbean cultural ambiance while co-performing the traditional Chinese mythological tale, “Nezha Conquers the Dragon King” (哪吒闹海). The interactive exchanges and photo-taking sessions between the Chinese participants on the float, the local spectators, and performers from other themed floats significantly fostered cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding between the different communities.

Furthermore, an exploration from the intertwined perspectives of human geography and sociology can illuminate the underlying drivers behind the successful transmission and preservation of Lingnan culture in the Caribbean. Cultural evolution is inherently anchored in specific geographical environments. Geographic factors played a foundational role in the cultural amalgamation between the Lingnan and Caribbean regions, not only providing the structural possibility for integration but also shaping its distinct trajectory. The Lingnan region is flanked by the Five Ridges while facing the sea, characterized by a dense network of waterways and numerous islands. Similarly, the unique archipelagic geography of the Caribbean creates an environment where individual islands remain relatively autonomous yet

intricately interconnected. The shared hot and humid climate allowed Lingnan immigrants to rapidly transplant their agricultural production models, such as rice and sugarcane cultivation, alongside traditional living customs, including the consumption of herbal tea and the construction of ventilated architecture. This climatic synergy mitigated early cultural friction and facilitated initial cultural rooting. The mountainous and insular topography prompted Lingnan immigrants to establish relatively isolated enclaves in the Caribbean, exemplified by the Cantonese-speaking communities in the Cuban mountains. Concurrently, agricultural mutual aid in these mountainous terrains, seen in the fusion of traditional Chinese labor exchange and local practices like *comida*, propelled cultural interaction and fostered a coexistence model characterized by flexible boundaries. Moreover, the structural similarities of their geographic environments nurtured an ethos within both cultures that is fiercely independent yet remarkably open and inclusive. This shared disposition ultimately allowed Lingnan culture to take root, proliferate, and seamlessly integrate into the local Caribbean fabric. Caribbean elements such as coconut groves, harbors, and tropical humidity formed a symbolic correspondence with Lingnan motifs like banyan trees, river wharves, and typhoon seasons. This semiotic alignment encouraged migrants to reimagine the physical space of the Caribbean as a home away from home. Highly developed aquatic networks, mirroring the Pearl River in the Caribbean Sea, served as crucial conduits for both trade and migration. This maritime connectivity not only facilitated the convergence of Lingnan commercial culture, seen in the operation of traditional Chinese shops, with Caribbean marketplace traditions, but also catalyzed religious syncretism, evidenced by the joint worship of deities such as Mazu and Lagona.

Finally, the Chinese Caribbean community's social identification with the "Wu Yuan" (五缘 five affinities) of Lingnan culture (kinship, geographic ties, religious beliefs, material culture, and occupational networks) constitutes another major research perspective on its transoceanic dissemination. The "Wu Yuan" framework is not merely a cultural concept but rather a comprehensive social network of organization and practice. Kinship Affinity is rooted in surnames and clan lineages. In an environment where interethnic marriage is prevalent, Chinese surnames are deliberately preserved as markers of cultural identity, serving as symbols that awaken ethnic consciousness. Furthermore, the traditional domestic division of labor, where men work outside and women manage the household, has positioned women as the primary agents for the intergenerational transmission of language and customs. Geographic Affinity is institutionalized through community organizations. This includes hometown associations, guild halls (such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Cuba and the Fui Toong on Association in Trinidad), and various Chinese federations (like Chinese Association of Antigua and Barbuda). These organizations provide new immigrants with footholds and mutual aid networks. They also proactively build bridges for dialogues with mainstream society by hosting traditional celebrations like the Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival, participating in local carnivals, and organizing art exhibitions. Consequently, they strengthen community identity on the dual fronts of survival security and cultural expression. Religious Affinity manifests through syncretic belief practices. To adapt to their environment, the Chinese formally converted to Christianity while creatively merging the worship of Guan Yu with Catholic saint veneration, giving rise to the syncretic deity "Sanfancón". Concurrently, they persist in traditional rituals such as ancestral worship and tomb-sweeping during festivals like the Lunar New Year and Qingming. Material Affinity constructs boundaries of identity in daily life. Through tangible cultural symbols like food, traditional opera, festivals, and calligraphy, the community maintains its heritage. Cantonese cuisine undergoes adaptive modifications to suit local palates, and Cantonese opera incorporates Spanish spoken lines. Practices like writing spring couplets and exchanging calligraphy during the Lunar New Year fulfill an emotional need for belonging while acting as a window to showcase their cultural identity to the outside world.

Occupational Affinity is anchored in commercial networks. Following their transition from indentured laborers to the retail and catering sectors, the Chinese have coordinated interests and navigated competition through organizations like Chinese chambers of commerce. Their shops and supermarkets serve as crucial hubs for information exchange and emotional connection. Shared commercial interests and professional environments have fostered tight-knit collaborative relationships, thereby consolidating the community's economic foundation and social capital. This profound identification based on the "Wu Yuan" enables the Chinese Caribbean to share both hardships and triumphs while practicing solidarity and mutual aid in the face of external pressures. Thus, they maintain their community's relative independence and cultural resilience despite generational transitions and the forces of cultural assimilation. For example, the previously mentioned activities organized by Chinese Association of Antigua and Barbuda, such as hosting festivals and participating in float parades, represent the concrete manifestation of the "Wu Yuan" network in the public sphere. This not only internally solidifies community identity but also externally projects the image of a highly cohesive cultural group.

4. Conclusion

Lingnan culture has undergone continuous transformations alongside the transnational journeys of Chinese immigrants. Building upon existing research, this paper explicitly asserts that the study of the transmission and dissemination of Lingnan culture in the Caribbean remains in its nascent stage, and consequently attempts to construct an overarching, interdisciplinary analytical framework. Our investigations span multiple dimensions. We examined Lingnan culture within the Chinese Caribbean history and literature, analyzed the catalytic role of economic spaces like restaurants and shops in its transmission, and explored the underlying drivers of its dissemination through the intertwined lenses of human geography and sociology. These explorations reveal a dual reality. External to the Chinese community, the spread of Lingnan culture in the Caribbean is inherently accompanied by processes of cultural adaptation and mutation. Conversely, within the community itself, Lingnan culture continues to grapple with the challenge of cultural attrition during intergenerational transmission. Furthermore, internal tensions within the Chinese diaspora, coupled with frictions between the Chinese community and mainstream society, further accentuate the contradictions and complexities inherent in the preservation and dissemination of this culture. Despite these multidimensional resistances, it remains undeniable that the transmission of Lingnan culture plays a pivotal role in shaping ethnic consciousness, constructing cultural identity, and consolidating the Chinese immigrant community in the Caribbean. Looking ahead, research on Lingnan culture should transcend ethnic boundaries and situate itself within a global context to excavate the cosmopolitan ethos and contemporary relevance of Chinese regional cultures. Ultimately, this approach aims to provide reference pathways, with both theoretical depth and practical significance, for the "going global" of regional cultures, the advancement of overseas Chinese studies, and the mutual learning between Chinese and Caribbean civilizations.

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