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Research on International Communication Strategies of Chinese Local Documentaries: A Case Study of the Hainan Free Trade Port

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of profound adjustments in the global communication landscape and a comprehensive upgrade of China's cultural "going global" strategy, local documentaries have emerged as an important vehicle for shaping regional and national images and conveying core values. As a pilot zone for China's deepened reform and opening-up in the new era and a gateway to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the Hainan Free Trade Port (FTP) offers a distinctive case for the international dissemination of local documentaries, owing to its unique policy orientation and diverse cultural ecosystem. Taking Hainan-themed documentaries as the research object, this study adopts textual analysis, cross-cultural communication theory, and policy interpretation to systematically examine their practical foundations, international communication challenges, and optimization pathways. The findings indicate that Hainan FTP-themed documentaries can be upgraded from regional visual documentation to national image construction through four approaches: integrating values into thematic design, adapting narrative strategies to cross-cultural contexts, expanding communication channels via a matrix model, and strengthening the industrial ecosystem in a systematic manner.

Introduction

Historical Context: The Dual Variation of Globalization and Cultural Transmission

The current process of globalization presents a complex dynamic of coexistence between differentiation and integration. On the one hand, anti-globalization sentiments and unilateralist policies have triggered adjustments to the international cooperation landscape, highlighting cognitive gaps and value divergences among different civilizations. On the other hand, the rapid development of digital technology has broken the spatiotemporal boundaries of traditional communication, providing more accessible carriers and broader platforms for cross-cultural exchange. In this context, cultural communication has become an important dimension of competition in national comprehensive strength. As visual historical records and cross-cultural communication bridges, documentaries serve as a vital medium for transcending ideological barriers and achieving value resonance, thanks to their authenticity, factuality, and humanistic characteristics.

Since the launch of its cultural "going global" strategy, China has consistently endeavored to tell its stories through diverse cultural media. The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly stresses the need to enhance the dissemination and influence of Chinese civilization, uphold the stance of Chinese culture, tell China's stories well, spread China's voice effectively, and present a credible, appealing, and respectable image of China. As an important part of the national cultural communication system, local documentaries carry the unique genes of regional cultures and reflect the zeitgeist of national development. Their international dissemination

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performance is closely associated with the global influence of Chinese culture and the quality of China's national image construction.

Strategic Background: The Special Positioning and Communication Mission of the Hainan Free Trade Port

The development of the Hainan Free Trade Port is a major strategic decision made by the CPC Central Committee based on an overall assessment of domestic and international situations, and a vivid practice of building a free trade port with Chinese characteristics. Distinct from other free trade zones in China, the Hainan FTP features island-wide customs closure and implements a series of pioneering policies, including zero tariffs, low tax rates, and a simplified tax system. It aims to become the world's largest free trade port, serving as a window for China to align with high-standard international economic and trade rules, a hub for advancing regional economic integration, and a platform for facilitating cultural exchanges between China and other countries.

This unique strategic positioning endows the Hainan FTP with three prominent attributes: first, a highland for institutional innovation in policy terms, embodying China's resolve and courage in reform and opening-up; second, a land-sea convergence hub geographically, linking China with Southeast Asia and global markets; third, a melting pot of diverse civilizations culturally, integrating Central Plains culture, maritime culture, overseas Chinese culture, and the cultures of ethnic minorities such as the Li and Miao peoples.

The construction of the Hainan FTP is not only a major economic initiative but also a critical opportunity for cultural communication. As a core visual medium for showcasing the achievements, cultural charm, and development philosophy of the Hainan FTP, documentaries play an important strategic role in international communication. Domestically, documentaries can build social consensus and demonstrate the outcomes of reform and development. Internationally, they can present the institutional advantages, development vitality, and cultural heritage of the Hainan FTP to the global community in a comprehensive, truthful, and multi-dimensional manner, helping to break one-sided international perceptions of China and shape an open, inclusive, and innovative national image. Therefore, a systematic study of the international dissemination pathways for Hainan FTP-themed documentaries is both an important response to the national cultural strategy and a practical need for promoting the high-quality development of the Hainan FTP.

Literature review

In recent years, documentaries have drawn growing scholarly attention as important cultural communication media. Nichols (2017) systematically elaborates on the narrative characteristics and cross-cultural communication potential of documentaries, emphasizing the key role of authenticity and factuality in shaping international audience perceptions. Aufderheide (2007) further notes that documentaries can facilitate the transnational dissemination of cultural values through visual storytelling, offering a theoretical framework for understanding the international communication strategies of local documentaries.

In the field of Chinese local documentary studies, scholars have increasingly focused on the integration of local culture and national narrative. Lu and Yeh (2018) analyze the construction of cultural identity in Chinese documentaries in transnational contexts, highlighting the unique value of local themes in presenting national image and cultural soft power. Zhang (2018) examines the development trajectory and global dissemination practices of Chinese local documentaries, stressing that strategic choices in cross-cultural communication can significantly enhance national cultural influence. In addition, Keane (2016) explores international content distribution mechanisms from the perspective of China's television industry and media policies, providing policy and institutional references for the cross-border dissemination of local documentaries.

Regarding the Hainan FTP and local cultural communication, official policy documents issued by the Hainan Provincial Government (2021) lay a foundation for academic research, demonstrating the strategic significance of the FTP in institutional innovation and opening-up. Scholars such as De Valck (2007), through film festival studies, reveal the importance of cross-cultural reception mechanisms in the international communication of cultural products, offering insights into the international dissemination pathways of Hainan local documentaries. Existing research suggests that while Chinese local documentaries hold great potential for international dissemination, systematic strategic research targeting the Hainan FTP remains limited, leaving a research gap that this study aims to address.

Methods

Literature Review

This study systematically reviews literature, policy documents, and research reports related to documentary international communication, cross-cultural storytelling, national image construction, and the development

of the Hainan FTP, so as to establish a theoretical foundation and research context.

Textual Analysis
Representative Hainan-themed documentaries, including A Cascade of Companies, Watching Hainan, and Aerial China: Hainan, are selected as analytical objects. The study examines their thematic design, narrative structure, and visual expression to identify strengths and weaknesses in international communication.

Policy Interpretation
In-depth analysis is conducted on policy documents such as the Overall Plan for the Construction of Hainan Free Trade Port and Opinions on Accelerating the Deep Integration of Media Development, clarifying policy support and development orientations for the international dissemination of Hainan-themed documentaries.

Case Comparison
Lessons are drawn from successful Chinese documentaries with international dissemination experience, such as Beloved Land and Wudak, to extract strategies applicable to Hainan FTP-themed documentaries through comparative analysis.

The realistic basis for the international dissemination of documentaries on the hainan free trade port

~~A.~~ Policy empowerment: Communication opportunities provided by the construction of the free trade port

Shaping the national image, building international discourse power, and disseminating a truthful, multi-dimensional, and comprehensive picture of China are contemporary tasks facing Chinese documentaries [1]. The development of the Hainan FTP has received comprehensive national policy support, creating a favorable policy environment for the international dissemination of documentaries. The Overall Plan for the Construction of Hainan Free Trade Port explicitly proposes to strengthen international cultural exchange and cooperation and build an international tourism and consumption center, integrating cultural communication into the overall layout of FTP development. Relevant departments of Hainan Province have also introduced a series of supportive policies to encourage the growth of the film and television culture industry, establishing special funds to support the creation of Hainan-themed films and television works, and providing financial guarantees and resource support for documentary filming and production.

On December 18, 2025, Hainan officially launched its island-wide customs closure operation. This major historical milestone provides rich real-world materials for documentary creation. The documentary A Cascade of Companies centers on the milestone of the Hainan FTP's island-wide customs closure, chronicling the efforts and achievements of various industries through four chapters: "Departure", "Breaking the Mold", "Accelerating", and "Leading the Way". Since its release, it has been reposted by more than 50 new media platforms inside and outside the province, with a total online reach of over ten million views, demonstrating the communication potential of FTP-themed documentaries. Such creations rooted in major policy practices truthfully reflect the latest achievements of China's reform and opening-up and meet the international community's information demands about the Hainan FTP, laying a solid foundation for international communication.

Cultural Empowerment: The Core of Communication Fostered by Multiculturalism

Hainan possesses a unique and diverse cultural ecosystem, providing a rich cultural core for the international dissemination of documentaries. Culturally, Hainan culture integrates the profound heritage of Central Plains culture, the openness and inclusiveness of maritime culture, the international genes of overseas Chinese culture, and the distinctive charm of ethnic minority cultures. The brocade weaving techniques of the Li people, the festival customs of the Miao people, the marine production and livelihoods of fishermen, and the transnational migration stories of overseas Chinese all represent cultural materials with high international dissemination value.

This multicultural characteristic is highly consistent with the open positioning of the Hainan FTP, forming a dual communication advantage of cultural diversity plus institutional openness. Through visual presentation of these cultural elements, documentaries can showcase the richness and inclusiveness of Chinese culture and convey the development concept that civilizations are enriched through exchanges, thus resonating with international audiences. For example, Watching Hainan provides a panoramic depiction of Hainan's history, culture, and natural landscapes, exploring universal themes such as homeland, inheritance, and exploration, and offering cultural support for international dissemination.

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Technology empowers: Digital communication expands the communication space

The advancement of digital technology has provided technical support and channel guarantees for the international dissemination of Hainan FTP-themed documentaries. On the one hand, the upgrading of shooting and production technology has enhanced the artistic quality of documentaries. The application of 4K ultra-high-definition shooting, drone aerial photography, and other technologies enables a more vivid presentation of Hainan's marine scenery, urban landscapes, and cultural scenes, meeting international audiences' demands for high-quality visuals. On the other hand, innovations in communication technology have broken the spatiotemporal constraints of traditional communication. Overseas social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter, international media outlets such as CGTN (China Global Television Network), and various streaming media platforms have offered diversified communication channels for documentaries, achieving wide coverage from point-to-point to point-to-multipoint transmission.

Beloved Land is a documentary directed by Qiu Min and produced by CGTN. Aired on CGTN's English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Russian, and documentary channels, as well as CGTN's official website and CCTV Video platform from September 9 to 14, 2024, the film records life in Liuxing Street Community, Yining City, Xinjiang. Through detailed scenes and personal stories, it shows residents' love and attachment to their land and presents a harmonious picture of multicultural coexistence and ethnic integration to the world [2]. The communication practice of Beloved Land indicates that multilingual versions and interactive communication on overseas social media can enhance a film's influence. Released in the six official languages of the United Nations and disseminated through CGTN's global channels and overseas social media, the film generated over 80 million overseas post impressions and nearly 20 million video views. This experience can also be applied to the production of Hainan FTP-themed documentaries. Multi-channel and multilingual dissemination enabled by digital technology can effectively enhance their international influence and coverage.

Core challenges in the international communication of hainan free trade port-themed documentaries

Although Hainan FTP-themed documentaries have a solid practical foundation for international communication, their international communication effectiveness remains to be fully realized due to constraints in thematic construction, narrative strategies, communication channels, and the industrial ecosystem, as shown in Table 1. Among these challenges, cultural discount has become a major obstacle to cross-cultural communication [3].

Dimension	Specific Challenges	Representative Documentaries
Thematic Construction	• Limited exploration of FTP's strategic significance • Weak universality of themes	Flavors of Hainan Beautiful Hainan Li-Miao Customs
Narrative Strategies	• Singular narrative perspective • Traditional linear narrative structure • Insufficient emotional resonance	Light of the Free Trade Port Hainan Free Trade Port Development Chronicle
Communication Channels	• Limited channel diversity • Low targeting precision • Weak interactive and secondary dissemination	Hainan on the Move Hainan Window
Industry Ecosystem	• Low production professionalism • Insufficient international collaboration • Lack of market-oriented dissemination and operation	New Journey of the Free Trade Port

TABLE I. Classification and examples of challenges in hainan-themed documentaries

Thematic Construction: Insufficient Balance between Strategic Significance and Cultural Value

Since the reform and opening-up, many high-quality Chinese documentaries have successfully gone global. However, due to differences in cultural and social contexts, as well as variations in audience cognition, aesthetic expectations, and production styles, Chinese documentaries often encounter cultural discount in international dissemination. Hainan-themed documentaries currently face two prominent thematic issues: First, the exploration of the strategic significance of the Hainan FTP remains insufficient. Some documentaries, such as Flavors of Hainan, mainly focus on Hainan's food culture and folk traditions, highlighting local cuisine and festivals while neglecting core development elements such as cross-border trade, institutional innovation, and industrial upgrading. Similarly,

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Beautiful Hainan tends to overemphasize natural scenery, with only brief mentions of FTP construction at the end, failing to fully demonstrate its policy implications and development vitality.

Second, the universality of themes is inadequate. Some works overemphasize local expression while ignoring universal values, leading to limited understanding among international audiences and intensifying cultural discount. For instance, Li-Miao Customs mainly displays Li and Miao cultures through superficial symbols such as textiles, bamboo pole dances, and traditional costumes, without delving into deeper cultural values such as collective cooperation and cultural inheritance. Likewise, documentaries interpreting FTP policies are often filled with technical jargon and official expressions, lacking accessible narratives from the perspectives of enterprises or local communities, making it difficult to attract international audiences.

Narrative Strategies: Inadequate Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Expressive Innovation

The applicability of narrative strategies can directly affect international communication effects. The presentation of Chinese stories involves both self-representation and other-representation [4]. At present, Hainan-themed documentaries have three narrative limitations:

First, the narrative perspective is relatively singular. Most works adopt a self-representation approach, telling Hainan's stories solely from a local standpoint, which may trigger resistance among international audiences who perceive such content as propagandistic. For example, Light of the Free Trade Port mainly interviews local officials and enterprise leaders, neglecting the perspectives of foreign investors, overseas Chinese, and international tourists, thus limiting audience empathy.

Second, the narrative structure remains traditionally linear. Many documentaries still adopt a past-present-future chronological framework, lacking innovative narrative design and dramatic tension, and thus failing to meet international aesthetic expectations. Hainan Free Trade Port Development Chronicle is a case in point, as it recounts policy milestones in sequence since the establishment of the special economic zone, resulting in flat storytelling.

Third, emotional resonance is insufficient. Some works focus excessively on grand narratives and achievement displays, with inadequate exploration of individual stories and daily experiences, hindering cross-cultural emotional resonance. In contrast, Wudak uses a narrative technique that intertwines personal fate with historical events to explore universal themes such as war, exile, and identity, thereby eliciting cross-cultural resonance.

Communication Channels: Insufficient Matrixed Construction and Targeted Dissemination

Hainan-themed documentaries face problems of fragmented and homogenized communication channels:

First, distribution channels are limited. Producers tend to rely excessively on traditional official media and neglect emerging platforms such as social media and streaming services, hindering the matrix integration of traditional plus new media and official plus grassroots channels. For example, Hainan on the Move was mainly broadcast on Hainan TV and CCTV International Channel, with limited presence on YouTube or Twitter.

Second, targeting precision is low. Audiences are treated homogenously, without differentiated strategies tailored to regional or cultural contexts.

Third, interactive and secondary dissemination is weak. Overseas dissemination often consists of simple video posting, lacking audience engagement or design for shareable content. Hainan Window only provides Chinese and English versions, without regional adaptation, localized editing for attention spans, or cultural adjustments, resulting in low engagement and limited communication effects.

Industry Ecosystem: Incomplete Professional Production and Operational Systems

Professional production standards are critical to international acceptance. Limited budgets, repetitive themes, superficial content, and uneven production quality can all negatively affect compliance with international quality standards. Some domestic productions suffer from variable visual quality, inconsistent editing, and limited professional design.

International collaboration and resource integration are insufficient. Few partnerships with global production teams or directors reduce cross-cultural adaptability. There is a lack of co-production with major international institutions (e.g., BBC, Discovery), limiting the integration of global perspectives and narrative innovation.

Market-oriented communication and operation are underdeveloped. The absence of a professional international communication team, inadequate market research, and limited promotion efforts may hinder sustainable commercial and cultural influence. Unlike Wudak's multi-dimensional film + academic + exhibition strategy, documentaries such as New Journey of the Free Trade Port rely solely on television broadcasts,

lacking screenings, academic exchanges, exhibitions, or derivative products, leading to narrow reach and unsustainable dissemination.

Optimization strategies for international dissemination of hainan free trade port-themed documentaries

To address the core challenges outlined above, a comprehensive approach can be adopted to optimize the system, enhance international communication effectiveness, and mitigate cultural discount, with a focus on thematic construction, narrative strategies, communication channels, and the industrial ecosystem.

Thematic Construction: Integrating Locality with Global Relevance

Themes can highlight the strategic position of the Hainan FTP, combining regional specificity with universal human values.

Visualization of strategic significance: Focus on Hainan as a center of institutional innovation, vividly presenting stories of institutional reform driven by entrepreneurship, talent development, and trade activities. Major policy milestones such as island-wide customs closure and zero tariffs can be highlighted to demonstrate China's commitment to aligning with global economic norms [5].

Universalization of cultural values: Universal themes can be extracted from Hainan's diverse cultures, such as community cooperation in Li ethnic customs, the resilience of fishermen's livelihoods, and cross-cultural dialogue among overseas Chinese, enabling international audiences to understand local culture and development.

Establishment of a window narrative framework: A multi-dimensional theme system of Policy Window–Cultural Window–Development Window can be constructed to present institutional innovation, cultural diversity, and sustainable development through layered narratives.

Narrative Strategies: Enhancing Cross- Cultural Adaptation and Emotional Resonance

Balancing self-representation and other-representation: Dual-perspective narratives can be adopted that integrate local achievements with internationally familiar storytelling logic. International directors can be engaged, or a global perspective plus local story structure can be employed [6].

Innovating narrative structures: Move beyond linear storytelling by adopting multi-thread and cross-temporal narratives that weave together multiple personal stories of entrepreneurs, local communities, and overseas Chinese. Direct cinema techniques can be used to reduce external intervention and convey authentic daily life and emotions.

Emphasizing relatable emotional details: Focus on individual experiences, daily life, and social interactions to evoke universal emotional responses, reflecting Hainan's business environment, social inclusiveness, and ecological awareness.

Communication Channels: Building a Matrixed and Precise Dissemination System

Integrating traditional and new media: International broadcasters such as CGTN and overseas TV channels can be used for wide coverage, while YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and streaming platforms (Netflix, Amazon Prime) can be leveraged for precise targeting. Content can be tailored to platform characteristics—short clips for social media and full-length films for streaming services.

Multi-language and regional adaptation: Multi-language versions can be provided, including the UN official languages, and content can be adapted for target regions (Southeast Asia, Middle East, Europe, Americas) based on cultural contexts and audience preferences [7].

Interactive and secondary dissemination: Audience engagement can be encouraged through social media hashtags, KOL promotion, online and offline screenings, academic forums, and exhibition activities to extend the communication chain.

Industry Ecosystem: Professionalizing Production and Market-Oriented Operation

Enhancing production professionalism: Funding support can be increased, creative talents with both local and global perspectives can be cultivated, and cooperation with top domestic and international production teams can be strengthened to improve content and artistic quality.

Promoting international collaboration: Participation in international festivals can be enhanced, co-production opportunities can be explored, and tourism, cultural, and film resources can be integrated to develop a film + tourism + culture model, enhancing both cultural and economic value.

Developing market-oriented communication systems: Professional international communication teams can be established, detailed market research can be conducted, differentiated strategies can be implemented, and diverse revenue streams (copyright sales,

advertising, derivative products) can be explored to ensure sustainable international dissemination.

Conclusion

As a strategic pivot for China's deepened reform and opening-up in the new era, the international dissemination of Hainan FTP-themed documentaries is not only important for shaping the region's global image but also closely linked to conveying China's concept of openness and constructing the national image globally. This study systematically examines the practical foundations, core challenges, and optimization pathways for the international dissemination of Hainan FTP-themed documentaries, drawing several key conclusions:

First, these documentaries have a solid foundation for international communication: national and local policy support provides communication opportunities; Hainan's diverse cultural ecosystem offers a unique communication core; and digital technological development expands communication channels. Together, these factors establish the feasibility of their international dissemination.

Second, despite the solid foundation, several challenges persist. In thematic construction, the strategic significance of the FTP is not fully explored, and it is difficult to translate local cultural values into universal humanistic meanings. In narrative strategies, cross-cultural adaptation and innovative expression are insufficient. In communication channels, matrix construction and precise communication are lacking. In the industrial ecosystem, professional production and systematic communication capacity are relatively weak. These challenges collectively restrict the effectiveness of international communication.

Third, the optimization of international communication requires coordinated efforts across four dimensions. Thematic construction can be based on the strategic positioning of the FTP, integrating local characteristics with a global perspective. Narrative strategies can explore innovative expression models to strengthen cross-cultural adaptation and emotional resonance. Communication channels can be built into a matrix system that balances wide coverage and precise targeting. The industrial ecosystem can be strengthened to support professional production and market-oriented operation in a coordinated manner.

This practice also provides important universal insights for the international dissemination of Chinese local documentaries. First, international dissemination should be grounded in regional strategic positioning, aligning local development with national strategies to upgrade from regional narratives to national narratives. Second, cross-cultural adaptation is critical, emphasizing both local expression and an international perspective, and integrating local culture with universal humanistic values to reduce cultural discount. Third, a sound industrial ecosystem can be a necessary condition for sustainable dissemination, requiring the establishment of a comprehensive system covering production, collaboration, and operation to enhance professionalism and marketability.

Looking ahead, the international dissemination of Hainan FTP-themed documentaries can be further expanded in three directions. First, research on communication pathways under the framework of the Digital Silk Road can be strengthened, exploring cooperation mechanisms with Southeast Asian countries and countries along the Belt and Road Initiative. Second, the application of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality in production and dissemination can be explored to enhance interactivity and immersion. Third, empirical research on communication effectiveness can be conducted through audience surveys and data analysis, providing a scientific basis for optimizing communication strategies.

As the development of the Hainan FTP continues to advance, the international dissemination potential of its themed documentaries will be further unlocked. Through continuous theoretical and practical innovation, these documentaries are expected to become exemplars of Chinese local documentaries in global communication, contributing to telling China's stories well and spreading China's voice effectively on the world stage.

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