

Developing an Evaluation Framework to Assess the Cultural Value and Art-Therapeutic Effects of Huizhou Couplets

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Abstract: This study examines Huizhou couplets as a traditional cultural resource and investigates their reinterpretation and application in contemporary public cultural contexts. It proposes an integrated evaluation pathway combining assessments of cultural value and art-therapeutic effects. Drawing on a literature review, the study defines the construct of cultural value and operationalises art-therapeutic effects using three measurable indicators: immersion, subjective relaxation, and anxiety. An experiential pretest–posttest design is employed, with engagement in Huizhou couplet culture as the intervention. Immersion and subjective relaxation are measured post-experience, while anxiety is assessed pre- and post-intervention. Descriptive statistics, pre–post comparisons, and mediation (path) analysis are used to test the proposed mechanism linking immersion and relaxation to changes in anxiety and to identify key pathways underlying potential therapeutic outcomes.

Keywords: Huizhou Couplets; Cultural Value; Art Therapy; Immersion

1. Research Background and Significance: Evaluating the Cultural Value and Art-Therapeutic Effects of Huizhou Couplets

Traditional couplets are a vital component of China's written culture and ritual life. Combining literary expression, calligraphic artistry, and spatial display, their cultural significance extends beyond the aesthetic qualities of regulated parallelism and condensed imagery to the ways in which they are embedded in local ethical orders and everyday social practices. In Huizhou in particular, the couplet tradition is closely intertwined with ancestral halls, memorial archways, and domestic courtyard dwellings, together forming a “readable cultural space.”[1] Through highly condensed texts positioned along everyday

passageways, these inscriptions embed family precepts, aspirations for scholarly success, philosophies of conduct, and vernacular memory into the built environment, offering sustained normative cues and reinforcing identity formation.

In contemporary society, rapid urbanisation and digitalisation have accelerated the pace of life. Academic and workplace competition, information overload, and emotional exhaustion have become pervasive sources of psychological strain, heightening demand for cultural practices that can support emotion regulation, provide meaning, and foster a sense of psychological grounding.

Art-based therapy emphasises the use of aesthetic experience, symbolic expression, and immersive participation to facilitate emotional soothing and psychological recovery. Huizhou couplet culture is particularly well suited to this perspective because of its distinctive feature of conveying high-density meaning through short texts. Its rhythmic cadence, symmetry, and imagistic structure may help focus attention and reduce cognitive “noise.”[2] Its value-laden themes—such as self-cultivation, family responsibility, and timely self-reflection—can prompt introspection and support meaning-making. Moreover, the narratives embedded in couplets, closely tied to specific places, kinship relations, and local identity, may evoke a sense of safety and belonging. Accordingly, under conditions of contemporary psychological stress, conceptualising couplets as an experiential and activatable cultural resource and exploring their potential art-therapeutic functions carries clear practical relevance as well as scholarly significance.

This study asks whether engagement with couplet culture can generate observable therapeutic effects, and how “cultural value” and “therapeutic outcomes” might be incorporated into a single evaluative framework so that research conclusions become testable and comparable. It conceptualises the couplet

experience as a process jointly shaped by textual meaning, aesthetic perception, and emotional response, and argues that therapeutic effects do not arise spontaneously but may be triggered and accumulated through a pathway linking immersion, subjective relaxation, and changes in anxiety.[3]When individuals enter a highly immersive state while reading couplets, listening to interpretation, or participating in interactive activities, attentional resources may shift away from external stressors towards the cultural context, cognitive load may decrease, and a subjective sense of calmness and psychophysiological relaxation may emerge. If such relaxation is repeatedly elicited over time, it may be reflected in a reduction in anxiety levels.

Accordingly, this paper proposes to construct an integrated evaluation system for cultural value and therapeutic effects. On the cultural value dimension, it derives observable indicators across domains including humanistic significance; aesthetic and interpretive knowledge value; value orientations and self-cultivation meanings; social significance; identity formation and cohesion; and potential for public communication and dissemination. On the therapeutic dimension, immersion, subjective relaxation, and anxiety are selected as core indicators, and therapeutic outcomes will be quantitatively examined through an experiential pretest–posttest design.

Methodologically, the study can employ immediate post-experience measures of immersion and relaxation, assess changes in anxiety before and after the intervention using the GAD-7, and combine pre–post difference testing with mediation (path) analysis to examine whether the proposed mechanism holds.[4]This approach enables the study to address not only whether the experience is effective, but also why it is effective and which dimensions of cultural value are most consequential. By integrating the interpretation of traditional cultural value with the measurement of psychological outcomes within a single framework, the study can provide a more compelling basis for the contemporary revitalisation and translation of couplet culture.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework on the Cultural Value and Art-Therapeutic Effects of Huizhou Couplets

Huizhou couplets constitute an important

vehicle of Huizhou local culture. Characterised by a hybrid nature that integrates textual content, calligraphic writing, and spatial display, they are commonly affixed to sites such as ancestral halls, memorial archways, reception halls, and academies, forming local cultural landscapes that can be “read.” Their role in humanistic transmission is first evident in the accumulation of historical memory and value orientations, through highly condensed language, couplets record family histories, accounts of local worthies, and community ethics, embedding ideals such as self-cultivation and family governance, reverence for learning, and frugality and ritual propriety into the order of everyday life, and sustaining them across generations. Their aesthetic function lies in the integrated articulation of parallel structure, tonal rhythm, imagery, and calligraphy. By organising experience through balanced symmetry and symbolically charged images, Huizhou couplets demonstrate the rhetorical refinement of classical Chinese while producing a distinctive visual aesthetics and rhythmic sensibility. [5] At the same time, Huizhou couplets also carry a pronounced educational function: on the one hand, their content frequently conveys admonitory messages about learning, aspiration, conduct, and household management, thereby serving as a vehicle for moral instruction and behavioural regulation.

On the other hand, in communicative and educational practice, couplets have often been used for early literacy instruction, rhetorical training, and local cultural education, serving as an entry point that links traditional knowledge systems with contemporary cultural learning. Accordingly, Huizhou couplets are not merely literary texts; they function as a symbolic system of values within local society and as a resource for cultural education. This provides a clear cultural foundation and a well-defined experiential setting for research on both cultural value and experience-based effects.

Research on art-based therapeutic effects commonly highlights the positive influence of artistic experiences on emotion and psychological states, and its theoretical logic can be understood along three interrelated lines. [6] The first is the aesthetic experience perspective, which posits that aesthetic activities can direct attention through formal structures—such as rhythm, symmetry, and imagery—thereby enhancing pleasure and

resonance and ultimately fostering psychological relaxation and a sense of stability. The regulated parallelism and tonal cadence of couplets convey a pronounced sense of order; together with their calligraphic rendering and spatial display, they constitute a perceptible formal structure that can readily evoke immersion and enhance subjective comfort.

The second is the emotion regulation perspective, which emphasises how individuals process and transform affect through aesthetic engagement and symbolic language. Through symbolic interpretation and inner dialogue, diffuse tension or anxiety that is difficult to articulate can be translated into experiences that are cognitively graspable, enabling reappraisal and buffering against stress.[7] Couplet texts often convey life circumstances and practical philosophies through restrained and indirect expression, offering linguistic resources through which individuals may “reframe” their situations, thereby facilitating emotional reorientation.

Humanistic value foregrounds the knowledge- and aesthetics-related significance of cultural heritage, encompassing historical continuity, interpretive capacity, aesthetic experience, and educational inspiration. Social value emphasises the role of culture in public life, including identity formation and social cohesion, accessibility of public cultural services, participatory engagement, and communicative reach and influence. Economic value, by contrast, concerns the capacity of cultural resources for responsible and sustainable transformation—for example, their contribution to cultural tourism, cultural and creative product development, brand/IP potential, and linkages with related industries.

In evaluating the cultural value and art-therapeutic effects of Huizhou couplets, the therapeutic indicators—immersion, subjective relaxation, and changes in anxiety—can be further embedded within the overall framework, yielding an integrated process model that connects cultural value dimensions, experiential process indicators, and therapeutic outcome indicators.

3. Research Design and Methodology for Evaluating the Cultural Value and Art-Therapeutic Effects of Huizhou Couplets

The selection of Huizhou couplet texts should follow the principles of thematic coverage,

contextual diversity, and strong representativeness. At the thematic level, three categories are recommended. First, couplets that express Huizhou ethos and local moral norms—such as family precepts, self-cultivation and conduct, frugality, and scholarly diligence—can be used to examine how cultural texts contribute to meaning-making and emotional grounding. Second, couplets that foreground aesthetic imagery and everyday life situations—such as landscapes, the four seasons, domestic life, and pastoral scenes—can help enhance aesthetic pleasure and immersive engagement. [8] Third, couplets with explicit historical narratives and cultural-memory orientations—such as those associated with ancestral halls, memorial archways, inscriptions by notable figures, and academy couplets—can be used to elicit cultural understanding and strengthen identity-related responses.

At the contextual level, it is advisable to establish a balanced mix of media and spatial settings—such as ancestral halls, clan temples, residential reception halls, academies, historic architecture, and street-side memorial archways—so that participants can engage with a more complete range of “cultural-space imaginaries.” In terms of representativeness, priority may be given to texts that appear frequently in local records, compiled couplet anthologies, or relevant digital resources, and that are widely circulated and clearly legible. At the same time, text length and difficulty should be controlled to ensure that participants can grasp the basic meaning within a limited time frame. For example, each couplet can be accompanied by a brief gloss or explanation, so as to avoid excessive interpretive difficulty and the resulting cognitive burden, which could otherwise confound the measurement of therapeutic effects.

Within the humanistic value dimension, indicators may include cultural comprehension, referring to the extent to which participants acquire an understanding of the couplets meanings, allusive references, and local cultural information; aesthetic experience intensity, capturing perceived qualities of parallel structure, linguistic rhythm, imagery construction, and overall aesthetic appeal; and meaningful inspiration, assessing whether the couplets prompt self-reflection, value resonance, or insights at the level of life outlook. In addition, a heritage-identification orientation

may be included to examine whether the experience enhances participants' endorsement of, and willingness to support, the preservation and continuation of couplet culture.

Within the social value dimension, local identity can be measured to determine whether the experience strengthens participants' sense of belonging to, and identification with, Huizhou culture and its regional ethos.[9] Evaluation of art-therapeutic effects should follow a "few but critical" principle, focusing on both experiential processes and outcomes to produce a clear, testable pathway.

At the process level, immersion and subjective relaxation can be used to capture participants' immediate psychological responses during the Huizhou couplet experience. At the outcome level, anxiety can be assessed using the GAD-7 to evaluate more stable changes in anxiety symptoms. Immersion may be defined as a subjective state characterised by focused attention, heightened sense of presence, and a diminished awareness of time, reflecting whether individuals genuinely enter the cultural context and sustain engagement. Subjective relaxation refers to the immediate post-experience feelings of calmness, tension reduction, and psychophysiological ease, representing the most direct and readily observable experiential outcome of art-therapeutic engagement.

4. Findings of the Study on Evaluating the Cultural Value and Art-Therapeutic Effects of Huizhou Couplets

This study used engagement with Huizhou couplet culture as the intervention context and evaluated outcomes across three indicators: immersion, subjective relaxation, and anxiety. Pre-post results showed that, following the experience, participants generally reported high levels of immersion and subjective relaxation, suggesting that couplet texts—when encountered as short, semantically dense readings—can effectively capture attention and elicit a pronounced immediate sense of relief.

In interpreting the cultural value dimension, the study indicates that the value types most likely to activate therapeutic effects are concentrated in two domains—humanistic meaning and aesthetic resonance—with local identity under certain conditions providing an additional amplifying layer. First, the activation of humanistic meaning was reflected in

participants' heightened sense of "meaning being illuminated" when they engaged with the couplets' practical philosophies of conduct, ideals of self-cultivation, and everyday wisdom. Compared with remaining at a surface level of viewing,[10] participants reported stronger subjective relaxation and a clearer downward tendency in anxiety when the text was understood and connected to their current life situations. This suggests that the therapeutic effect is not merely a product of attentional diversion, but is grounded in meaning support that can be cognitively grasped and internalised. Second, aesthetic resonance emerged as a similarly important trigger. The sense of order produced by couplets' regulated parallel structure, linguistic rhythm, and imagery provides a stable and predictable formal framework for the experience. Such a framework may reduce cognitive "noise" and emotional fluctuation, making it easier for individuals to enter a focused state and to derive pleasure and relief through formal beauty and imagistic association, thereby enhancing subjective relaxation.

Third, local identity appeared to play an enhancing role for some participants. When couplets were linked to Huizhou places, family traditions, or vernacular memories, the experience became not only an aesthetic activity but also a process of evoking belonging and cultural pride. The sense of safety and being supported associated with identification may further strengthen relaxation and render improvements in anxiety more stable. Taken together, the findings suggest that therapeutic activation does not depend on a single value dimension. Rather, it is grounded in an experiential base jointly shaped by the cognitive comprehensibility of humanistic meaning and the immersive quality of aesthetic form, with identification and belonging contributing to a stronger sense of psychological grounding. Based on the observed results and pathway relationships, the study's therapeutic mechanism can be interpreted in terms of three complementary psychological processes. The first is a meaning-making mechanism. Through highly condensed language, couplets compress value orientations, life experience, and practical wisdom into textual units that invite repeated reflection. When participants achieve understanding—often with interpretive guidance—they are more likely to engage in a

process of “reframing” their current circumstances. Such meaning-making can reduce anxiety arising from helplessness and uncertainty, providing a renewed sense of direction and perceived control at the psychological level, which in turn is reflected in greater relaxation and lower anxiety levels.

The second is an emotion regulation mechanism. Aesthetic engagement offers a gentle pathway for affective processing: through imagery and symbolic expression, participants may engage in reappraisal, transforming feelings of tension into psychological experiences that are more readily articulated and understood. At the same time, the symmetry and rhythmic cadence of couplet form can function as an affective stabiliser, helping to contain emotional drift and reduce unstructured emotional spillover.

The third is an attentional shift and restoration mechanism. Under high levels of stress, attention is often captured by threat-related cues and negative rumination. Engagement with couplets—through focused reading, rhythmically structured language, and imagistic association—may redirect attention away from stressors towards the cultural context, thereby reducing cognitive load and restoring psychological resources. The higher the level of immersion, the more concentrated attention becomes, and the more readily relaxation is elicited; the more fully relaxation is experienced, the more likely it is to accumulate into observable improvements in anxiety indicators.

Taken together, these three mechanisms converge on a single, testable pathway: engagement with couplet culture may alleviate anxiety by enhancing immersion and relaxation, thereby supporting attentional restoration and meaning-based resources. This interpretation also has practical implications. In public cultural programming and educational communication, priority should be given to ensuring textual comprehensibility, an orderly and perceivable formal presentation, and narratives that are readily resonant, so as to maximise the potential art-therapeutic benefits.

5. Conclusion

Huizhou couplets not only embody enduring humanistic and aesthetic value, but also exhibit observable therapeutic potential when encountered in experiential settings. An evaluation pathway that treats immersion and

subjective relaxation as process indicators and uses the GAD-7 as an outcome indicator suggests that couplet-based cultural engagement can facilitate heightened attentional focus and psychological calmness, with subjective relaxation serving as a key link between immersion and improvements in anxiety. In other words, the therapeutic effect is unlikely to result from mere “distraction.” Rather, it more plausibly arises from the psychological stability afforded by aesthetic order, the self-interpretive and value-based support enabled by textual meaning, and the subsequent processes of emotional reappraisal and stress buffering.

A further comparison of how different cultural-value dimensions are activated suggests that humanistic meaning and aesthetic resonance are the primary triggers of therapeutic effects, while local identity and a sense of belonging can provide an amplifying influence in certain contexts. This indicates that the therapeutic potential of traditional culture does not lie in instrumentalising or “entertaining” cultural resources. Rather, it emerges when their depth of meaning is preserved and, through appropriate experience design, cultural value is translated into resources that provide psychological support.

Based on these conclusions, this paper offers the following practical recommendations. First, in public cultural and educational settings, an “aesthetics–understanding–expression” three-stage pathway can be adopted to strengthen emotion-regulatory effects. At the aesthetic stage, emphasis should be placed on formal order and imagistic experience; attention can be guided through regulated parallel structure, rhythmic recitation, and calligraphic display, thereby reducing cognitive “noise” and facilitating focus. At the understanding stage, emphasis should be placed on meaning interpretation and contextual supplementation. Brief explanations, gloss cards, or narrative-based storytelling can lower interpretive barriers and enable participants to acquire value resources that can be internalised. At the expression stage, participants should be encouraged to re-express and engage in light co-creation—for example, extending a line based on personal experience, noting key words of resonance, keeping a short affect diary, or sharing reflections—so as to facilitate emotional externalisation and reappraisal, thereby producing more stable emotion-

regulation outcomes.

Second, for digital dissemination and the cultural-tourism/creative-industry translation of couplet culture, experience pathways should be designed with relaxation and meaning as primary orientations, rather than focusing narrowly on traffic generation or consumption-driven stimulation. Experience design may follow a rhythm of “low-load entry–high-resonance dwelling–gentle take-away exit.” At the entry stage, informational stacking should be minimised, foregrounding one or two core images and key contextual cues. The core segment should prioritise immersion and resonance, using sound, the process of calligraphic writing, spatial association, or slow-paced interaction to cultivate a quiet, attentive experience. The exit stage should offer portable meaning prompts and guided self-reflection, allowing momentary relaxation to extend into more sustained self-support in everyday life.

Third, a sustainable evaluation mechanism should be established, using immersion, subjective relaxation, and changes in anxiety as core indicators to compare effectiveness across different thematic texts, experience modalities, and participant groups. This would provide evidence to support the assessment of public cultural programmes, curriculum design, and the optimisation of therapeutic activities. Overall, Huizhou couplet culture holds a dual potential in contemporary contexts—value transmission and psychological nourishment—and the key lies in combining rigorous evaluation with human-centred experience design to enable an organic transformation from cultural resources to resources for mental and physical well-being.

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