

The Spread of Mazu Culture in Malaysia

Jing Wang, Yiqi Lin, Guihaorong Liang

School of Culture and Communication, Putian University, Putian, Fujian, China

Abstract: This study examines the dissemination of Mazu culture in Malaysia by tracing its historical origins and the role of migration as a cultural medium, while analyzing the localization adaptation process experienced by this cultural phenomenon within the local context. Research findings indicate that Mazu culture was not simply transplanted but underwent profound creative transformations at symbolic, practical, and organizational levels through interactions with local communities. Such transformations have not only enriched Malaysia's cultural diversity landscape but also played unique and complex socio-cultural roles in fostering community identity, facilitating interethnic interactions, and promoting harmonious social dialogue. The study concludes that the case of Mazu culture demonstrates that cultural transmission constitutes a dynamic process of meaning reconstruction, whose contemporary relevance transcends its original context and serves as a valuable perspective for understanding mechanisms of multicultural coexistence.

Keywords: Mazu Culture; Malaysia; Cultural Dissemination; Localization; Social Integration

1. Introduction

As a maritime cultural tradition originating from the southeastern coast of China, Mazu culture gradually spread to Malaysia with the historical migration of Chinese immigrants, becoming an important case of cross-cultural exchange in Southeast Asia. This cultural phenomenon not only reflects the cultural resilience of Chinese diaspora communities in China but also demonstrates the complex process of cultural adaptation and integration in a multicultural society. This paper aims to explore the dissemination mechanisms of Mazu culture in Malaysia from an academic perspective, focusing on its historical context, localization

transformation, and socio-cultural impacts, while conducting an in-depth analysis of the evolution and significance of cultural symbols in foreign environments. Through a review of literature and theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to reveal the interactive logic in cultural dissemination, provide insights for understanding cultural flows in the era of globalization, and emphasize its potential value in fostering community identity and multicultural integration [1].

2. Historical Origins and Dissemination Pathways of Mazu Culture

2.1 Origin and Early Development of Mazu Culture

The origins of Mazu culture can be traced back to the southeastern coastal regions of China during the Song Dynasty. Its initial form was not a strictly institutionalized religion but gradually took shape as a folk belief and a local knowledge system. The core of this cultural form revolves around the image of a historical figure revered as a protector of the sea. Over the long course of history, its legends were continuously narrated and enriched by local communities, gradually coalescing into cultural connotations related to peace, mutual aid, and community cohesion. A key feature of its early development was its close integration with local socio-economic life, particularly spreading and consolidating alongside the practical activities of coastal trade and fishing communities. During this phase, related rituals, narratives, and spatial practices—such as the establishment of temples and the conduct of festive events—collectively constructed a shared set of cultural symbols and behavioral norms. This cultural system not only provided coastal residents with spiritual comfort and a social support network to cope with the risks of maritime life but also, at a deeper level, became an important cultural resource for identifying group identity and maintaining community order. Its developmental trajectory exhibits distinct bottom-up characteristics and

regional features, laying a profound cultural foundation and flexible framework for subsequent cross-border dissemination [2].

2.2 Chinese Migration Waves and the Role of Communication Media

The dissemination of Mazu culture to Malaysia was fundamentally driven by the continuous waves of Chinese immigration throughout history. Most of these immigrants came from coastal regions of China where Mazu worship was prevalent, such as Fujian and Guangdong. During their migration, they were not merely economic individuals but served as intangible cultural carriers, bringing with them the memories, customs, and worldviews deeply rooted in their ancestral societies to their new living environments. In this transoceanic cultural transplantation process, specific socio-cultural media played a crucial role. Among them, voluntary associations established by immigrant communities based on geographical or kinship ties, such as guild halls and hometown associations, formed the primary institutional framework for cultural inheritance. These organizations often took the construction of temples as a significant marker of their establishment, and the shrines dedicated to Mazu naturally became the core physical spaces for fostering community bonds and conducting collective rituals. Additionally, orally transmitted family stories, periodic seasonal sacrificial practices, and material carriers such as statues and incense burners accompanying the immigrants collectively constituted a dynamic cultural transmission system. This system did not mechanically replicate the original model but, under new social contexts, became a key cultural tool for immigrant groups to process diaspora experiences and construct continuity of identity, with its mediating function profoundly influencing the pathways and forms of cultural transplantation [3].

2.3 Initial Social Acceptance Process in Malaysia

The initial reception of Mazu culture in Malaysia was a complex process involving bidirectional interactions between immigrant communities and local social structures. Initially concentrated within early Chinese immigrant settlements, it manifested as an inward-looking cultural practice that served community integration and psychological adjustment. However, this cultural

presence was not entirely isolated from external influences. Its broader recognition within local society often began through non-core belief-level functional social interactions. For instance, Mazu-related festivals featuring public processions, theatrical performances, and market fairs gradually attracted participation from other ethnic groups, creating preliminary opportunities for cultural display and superficial exchanges in public spaces. From a local societal perspective, the initial acceptance of foreign cultural elements was frequently driven by pragmatic considerations. The port economy and multi-ethnic social structure of early Malay Peninsula required tolerance of diverse cultural practices to maintain basic social cooperation and commercial exchanges. Thus, cultural assimilation did not imply profound understanding or internalization of cultural connotations, but rather reflected social acquiescence or limited spatial concessions. This phase laid the initial social foundations for Mazu culture to evolve from an immigrant community heritage into an integral component of local cultural landscapes [4].

3. Localization Adaptation of Mazu Culture in Malaysia

3.1 Integration of Cultural Elements with Local Traditions

During the localization process of Mazu culture in Malaysia, its external cultural symbols and expressive forms have undergone significant creative transformations. This transformation is not merely a simple substitution or juxtaposition, but rather involves deep mutual infiltration and reweaving with local cultural elements. A prominent manifestation occurs in visual arts and architectural aesthetics. While preserving fundamental structural regulations, some Mazu temples unconsciously incorporate decorative details, color schemes, or building materials from Southeast Asian regions or other ethnic groups, creating a unique hybrid aesthetic. Deeper integration occurs at the level of meaning systems. Core concepts originally embedded in Mazu narratives—such as ocean protection and divine protection—have been reinterpreted with broader significance in new contexts. For instance, their protective function may metaphorically extend from maritime safety to universal blessings for immigrants' livelihoods, family harmony, and community stability in new

lands. This semantic expansion resonates with the shared aspirations of local Chinese communities and other ethnic groups for well-being and success, enabling the cultural symbol to transcend original ethnic or regional boundaries and gain wider acceptance. The fusion of cultural elements thus becomes a two-way adaptation: it not only transforms the external manifestations of foreign cultures but also subtly influences the formation of local cultural landscapes [5].

3.2 Adaptive Evolution of Ritual Practices and Customs

The Mazu-related rituals and practices relocated to Malaysia inevitably faced profound transformations in spatiotemporal contexts and social structures. Their adaptive evolution primarily manifested through adjustments in ritual logic and performance formats. Traditional periodic ceremonies closely tied to specific maritime rhythms and regional communities often underwent localized modifications in scheduling, scale, and procedural details within new terrestrial environments and multi-ethnic communities. Complex rituals dependent on natural conditions were simplified, while those enhancing community cohesion and public display functions were strengthened. Significant transformations also occurred in customs. Collective feasts, theatrical performances, and market trade activities accompanying traditional worship practices gradually evolved into inclusive community festivals. Participants expanded beyond religious adherents or specific dialect groups, with functions extending from pure ceremonial rituals to social networking, cultural exhibitions, and even economic revitalization initiatives. This evolutionary process wasn't driven by singular forces but resulted from intergenerational transitions within communities, external social interactions, and resource constraints. Consequently, these practices and customs ceased to be mechanical replicas of ancestral models, evolving into dynamic local traditions capable of addressing contemporary social needs and cultural expression aspirations [6].

3.3 Functions of Community Organizations in Cultural Heritage Preservation

In the localization and sustained inheritance of Mazu culture, various Chinese community organizations have played indispensable

intermediary and leading roles. These organizations, including local guild halls, clan associations, and later established temple management committees, form the social framework that institutionalizes cultural practices. Their functions extend far beyond simple event organization, delving into resource integration, authority establishment, and meaning interpretation. Firstly, these organizations are responsible for raising and managing material resources to maintain temple spaces and prepare annual festivals, thereby providing a stable material foundation and ritual venues for cultural expression. Secondly, they establish legitimate authority in cultural affairs management through rule-making and leadership selection, ensuring orderly practices and coordinating internal disagreements. More crucially, these organizations often consciously undertake cultural interpretation and education. By publishing journals, hosting lectures, or supporting academic activities, they selectively emphasize ethical values in Mazu culture such as charity, filial piety, and community mutual aid, connecting it with broader social moral discourse. This provides a rational, secular discourse transcending specific beliefs for its existence in modern pluralistic society. Community organizations thus serve not only as carriers of inheritance but also as key agents in cultural self-reconstruction to adapt to new environments [7].

4. The Impact of Mazu Culture on Malaysian Social Culture

4.1 The Constructive Role of Social Identity and Ethnic Relations

The sedimentation and evolution of Mazu culture in Malaysia have profoundly shaped the social identity of local Chinese communities, while exerting subtle influences on broader ethnic relations networks. Within Chinese communities, this cultural system has transcended its role as mere historical memory carriers, gradually evolving into iconic identity symbols. Through periodic collective practices and spatial arrangements, it continuously strengthens emotional bonds and cultural belongingness among community members, providing vital cultural resources for maintaining group identity continuity in diverse contexts. This consolidation of internal identity does not lead to isolation but may instead create new

conditions for cross-ethnic interactions. When cultural expressions like festivals enter public spheres in more open and entertaining formats, they transform into cultural interfaces accessible to "outsiders" for observation, engagement, and limited participation. Through these interfaces, other ethnic groups often perceive and understand not the core beliefs but externalized ethical values, artistic forms, or community organizational models. Under ideal circumstances, such interactions can foster mutual understanding between cultural groups, converting abstract "other" cultures into tangible experiences. This provides informal, flexible channels for culturally respectful social interactions, playing a constructive role in alleviating ethnic boundary tensions [8].

4.2 Significant Contribution to Cultural Diversity Landscape Enrichment

The localization of Mazu culture in Malaysia has substantially enriched the connotations and manifestations of the country's cultural diversity ecosystem. Its contributions are first and foremost reflected in the material cultural landscape, where temples blending diverse architectural styles and their interior decorations have become distinctive historical landmarks and visual symbols in urban areas, adding irreplaceable layers to Malaysia's urban landscapes and cultural heritage map. On the intangible cultural level, its contributions are even more vivid and multifaceted. Legends, festival rituals, performing arts, and culinary customs associated with this culture, after long-term local adaptation, have evolved into a unique cultural practice complex with distinct Malaysian characteristics. This practice not only supplements the national intangible cultural heritage inventory but, more importantly, demonstrates through living examples the dynamic process of cultural transplantation and creative transformation. Its very existence serves as a silent rebuttal to the singular narrative of "Malaysian culture," proving that the nation's cultural fabric is a complex web formed by the interweaving and mutual penetration of multiple sources. Therefore, Mazu culture is not merely a preserved object but also one of the active subjects continuously shaping the vitality and appearance of local cultural diversity.

4.3 Mechanisms for Promoting Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Social Harmony

The role of Mazu culture in contemporary Malaysian society has increasingly demonstrated its public cultural function of fostering cross-cultural dialogue and potentially enhancing social harmony. This function is realized not through doctrinal dissemination or direct political engagement, but rather through the inherent shareability and openness inherent in its cultural practices. Annual major festivals often serve as pivotal opportunities. During these events, ritual performances, artistic displays, and community markets typically attract residents from beyond Chinese communities as well as tourists. While participation mostly remains at the level of observation, experience, and social interaction, it creates rare informal spaces for social engagement. People from diverse backgrounds collectively experience cultural atmospheres and engage in superficial yet direct interactions within these spaces, which inherently constitutes a foundational form of dialogue. More importantly, through prolonged localization processes, community organizations within this cultural system consciously emphasize and promote values aligned with universal ethics—such as aiding the vulnerable, respecting the elderly and caring for the young, and mutual community support. The public articulation of these values enables cultural integration with broader societal moral discourses, facilitating understanding and acceptance among people from different cultural backgrounds. By providing shared cultural experience venues and comparable value systems, Mazu cultural practices establish bridges of understanding and respect among ethnic groups at the micro-social level, contributing a cultural dimension of lubrication and cohesion to harmonious coexistence in multicultural societies.

5. Conclusion

The dissemination of Mazu culture in Malaysia exemplifies the dynamic equilibrium between cultural transplantation and indigenous innovation. Its multidimensional evolution from historical origins to contemporary practices reveals profound underlying principles of symbolic reconstruction and social integration in cross-cultural communication. Through analyzing this process, this study highlights that cultural adaptation not only strengthens the internal cohesion of Chinese communities but also injects vitality into Malaysia's multicultural

ecosystem, fostering mutual understanding and interaction among diverse ethnic groups. Future research could further examine the ongoing transformation of Mazu culture under globalization and modernization trends, as well as its emerging manifestations in public spaces and digital media, thereby deepening theoretical explorations of cultural inheritance mechanisms. This academic endeavor transcends geographical and religious boundaries, provides broader perspectives for cultural diversity studies, and offers insights into preserving cultural traditions amidst rapidly changing societies.

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