

A Study of the Rooting and Inheritance of Lingnan Culture in Caribbean Society from the Lens of “Wu Yuan” Theory

Zeyu Lin ¹, Ping Su ^{1,2}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510000, China

² Think Tank for Blue Humanities and Sustainable Development, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510000, China

Abstract: Since the mid-19th century, large numbers of migrants from the Lingnan region entered the Caribbean as “indentured laborers” and became involved in the local development. Through this migration, Lingnan culture has gradually taken root and continuously passed down within Caribbean society. This study adopts a socio-anthropological perspective and uses the “Wu Yuan” theory as its analytical framework. Drawing on a two-month ethnographic study conducted in Antigua and Dominica, and combining semi-structured interviews with documentary analysis, this article examines the following five dimensions, kinship bond, geographic bond, spiritual bond, material bond and occupational bond, to systematically elucidate how Lingnan culture has achieved transoceanic continuity, creative transformation, and integrative adaptation within the multiethnic and multicultural context of the Caribbean. It is revealed that Lingnan culture has not only strengthened the internal identity within the Chinese community but has also facilitated the interaction and coexistence with the local culture through various paths such as surname inheritance, social organizations, belief integration, folk traditions, and economic cooperation. The study aims to provide valuable insights into the cultural inheritance and community-building of overseas Chinese communities, as well as to offer new ideas for Sino-Caribbean cultural exchanges and cooperations.

Keywords: Lingnan Culture; Chinese Caribbean; Wu Yuan Cultural Theory; Cultural Inheritance; Sino-Caribbean Cultural Exchanges.

1. Introduction

Large-scale migration from the Lingnan region to the Caribbean began with the wave of indentured laborers in the mid-nineteenth century. During this period, large numbers of “indentured Chinese laborers” [1] crossed the oceans and opened up Sino-Cuban relations [2]. Later, Jamaica, British Guiana, Trinidad, and Suriname also successively introduced Chinese laborers at low cost in order to alleviate the labor shortage faced by the plantation economy after the abolition of slavery. They were assigned to sugarcane plantations, cacao cultivation, railway construction, and other public work. According to historical records, the main body of migrants at that time were basically Lingnan peasants from Taishan and Xinhui in the Pearl River Delta, Hakka people from Meizhou in northeastern Guangdong, and Chaoshan people from eastern Guangdong; their migration routes displayed a chain-like pattern of “Lingnan–Southeast Asia–the Caribbean”.

According to Liu Lizi and Tao Naihan, Lingnan culture possesses four intrinsic qualities: first, Lingnan culture has a pioneering and innovative spirit derived from its maritime characteristics [3]. The Lingnan region is backed by mountains and faces the sea, and the challenging geographical environment, including its humid and hot natural environment and unstable climatic factors, gradually fostered among its inhabitants a spirit of enterprise and a keen ability to recognize and grasp opportunities. Second, Lingnan culture represents a fusion of a livelihood-oriented ethos and pragmatism [3]. Although Lingnan was far from the ancient centers of political powers, under the influence of exile culture and Central Plains culture, Lingnan culture absorbed from Baiyue culture the ideals of harmony between human

beings and nature and among human beings, while also embracing the Confucian principle of people-centered governance, thus forming a practical orientation that emphasizes people’s livelihood. Third, Lingnan culture has an accessible temperament of inclusiveness and mediation [3]. Repeated cultural encounters enabled Lingnan culture to develop open and inclusive qualities, and busy maritime trade further shaped the broad vision of the Lingnan people. This inclusive nature had already been verified in the local history of Lingnan. In *Father and Son: The Memoir of a Chinese in Cuba and the Trajectory of His Family Letters*, Professor Huang Zhuocai mentions that after experiencing the “Punti-Hakka Clan Wars”, Taishan achieved peaceful coexistence through “separate governance of Punti and Hakka”, and the people of Taishan gradually developed a character of peacefulness and modest yielding. This adaptive wisdom, shaped through a transition from conflict to inclusiveness, became an important cultural foundation for overseas Chinese in responding to multicultural environments [4]. Fourth, Lingnan culture upholds a life attitude of pleasure and adaptation [3]. It integrates Confucianism, Daoism, and Zen Buddhism, embodying both a value system of revering Heaven and the gods while caring for the people, and a life philosophy of enjoying the present. Against the broad background of the great achievements made in reform and opening up, “the transformation of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation and of interpersonal relationship networks” [5], gave rise to the emergence of the theory of the “Wu Yuan”. The “Wu Yuan”, proposed by Professor Lin Qitang, includes kinship bonds, geographical bonds, divine bonds, material bonds, and occupational bonds; these five kinds of bonds are regarded as the ties that maintain “interpersonal relationships” [5]. This term has been used to summarize relations among

overseas Chinese, aiming to bring together Chinese people at home and abroad.

The movement, continuation, and reproduction of Lingnan cultural heritages in Caribbean society provide an important point of entry for examining the process and significance of “Wu Yuan” in bringing Chinese Caribbean communities together. Based on this, the present study adopts a social anthropological perspective, uses the “Wu Yuan” as its analytical framework, draws on two months of ethnographic research conducted on the islands of Antigua and Dominica, and combines semi-structured interviews with documentary analysis to discuss such dimensions as surname inheritance, social organizations, religious integration, folk culture, and economic cooperation among Chinese Caribbean people. In the Caribbean context of multiethnic intermingling and multicultural coexistence, the study explores how Lingnan culture takes root and is transmitted in the daily lives of Chinese Caribbean people, with the aim of providing effective reference for the cultural transmission and community building of overseas Chinese communities, and injecting new ideas into cultural exchanges and cooperations between China and the Caribbean.

2. The Transoceanic Continuation of “Wu Yuan”: The Transmission of Lingnan Culture in the Caribbean

2.1. Kinship Bond: Intergenerational Bloodline Transmission Rooted in Surnames and Lineages

Lin Qitan points out in *An Introduction to Wu Yuan Culture* that “kinship bond refers to clan and kin relations formed through the tie of relatives” [5]. In Lingnan culture, kinship bond is precisely centered on family blood ties and is rooted, through intergenerational transmission, in the identity recognition of overseas Chinese. This theory is vividly confirmed in Chinese Caribbean communities: early Chinese migration to the Caribbean was marked by a gender imbalance. There were two reasons for this. First, there were inherent restrictions of the “indentured Chinese laborer” system. The Chinese laborers who went to the Caribbean in the mid-nineteenth century were, in essence, coolies who had signed labor contracts for fixed terms. The purpose of colonial plantation owners was to obtain strong male laborers in order to fill the labor shortage after the abolition of slavery. Second, there was the traditional Lingnan idea that “men manage affairs outside, while women manage affairs inside”. For migrant families, sending male members overseas was regarded as a kind of investment behavior, with the aim of expecting them to earn money abroad and send it back to the Chinese hometowns to support their families and bring honor to their ancestors. For example, in the correspondences between Huang Zhuocai and his father from 1965 to 1967, his father repeatedly asked whether “the family house in the hometown still existed” and whether “the family members were in good health” [4]. Even amid the difficulties in Cuba, where “material goods and food were scarce and shops were confiscated”, he still insisted on remitting money—130 yuan in 1966 and 140 yuan in 1967—to support his family [4]. Women, by contrast, were expected to remain in the hometown to manage household affairs, support the elderly, and raise the next generation, so as to stabilize the family’s rear base. This model greatly restrained women’s overseas

migration in the early stage of the migration wave, and men therefore constituted the main body of Chinese migrants. As a result, interethnic marriage became prevalent, and the Chinese in the Caribbean married and had children with people of African or Hispanic descent. Although many mixed-race descendants did not take their fathers’ surnames, the surname system emphasized in the traditional Lingnan family system continued to be passed down. Taking the He Qiulan family written about by Deng Qiyao as an example, although the mother was a local Cuban woman, she received a Chinese surname, “He,” which was then passed down within the family [6]. At the same time, in some mixed-race Chinese families in Trinidad, the Chinese also strengthened family identity by retaining traditional surnames such as Lee and Wong [7]; even when interracial marriages took place locally, surnames continued to be transmitted as markers of identity [7]. For example, the father of the Chinese Cuban painter Lin Feilong, Lin Yan (Lam Yam), was from Guangdong—Lam being “Lin” in Cantonese. When he was over eighty years old, he married a local woman in her twenties, Ana Serafina, a mixed-race descendant of Spaniards, indigenous Cubans, and enslaved Africans [4]. Thus, the surname “Lin” (Lam) was passed down through interracial marriage. Just as Mr. Lin Qitang states, the surname, as a totem, is a distinct carrier of kinship bond culture [5]; as a symbol of kinship bond, it becomes a cultural identity card that crosses racial boundaries. This transmission of surnames, even when ethnic blood ties have been diluted by intermarriage, can still awaken the cultural roots of Chinese descendants.

In Chinese Caribbean communities, cultural transmission unfolds through two kinship bond levels: “lineage” and “family”. At the lineage level, ancestral temples and clan halls, as the centers of lineage organization—one being the “externalization of kinship bond culture”, the other the “product of kinship bond culture”—likewise strengthen the consciousness of common ancestry among clansmen of the same surname and promote unity within the lineage [5]. Members with the same surname or from the same ancestral place often maintain a cultural transmission network beyond the nuclear family by compiling genealogies, establishing native-place associations, and building ancestral temples and clan halls. However, the most direct kinship bond carrier of the transmission of Lingnan culture is manifested in the details and daily life within the family, because the home has a natural adhesive force for people, and every person, from childhood to adulthood, revolves around the “home” [5]. At the same time, the traditional division of labor makes women the key executors of cultural transmission at the family level. In mixed-race Chinese families or Chinese migrant families, fathers often do not take the lead in shaping children’s cultural values, but are responsible for providing economic support and covering household expenses; mothers, by contrast, teach children in the spiritual and cultural sphere, bearing responsibility both for housework and for caring for and educating the children. This internal division of labor within the family accords with the idea of “men managing affairs outside, women managing affairs inside” in the traditional family structure of Lingnan culture [8]. For example, in Jamaica, the wife in a Chinese family is responsible for teaching children Hakka and Lingnan customs and for organizing festivals, which makes the family the smallest unit through which Lingnan culture is transmitted in the Caribbean. In fact, relatively large numbers of Hakka people have lived in Cayenne in French Guiana and in Suriname. It is no

exaggeration to say that Hakka has become one of the three major languages of Jamaica, and it plays an important role in bringing together the local Chinese community.

2.2. Geographic Bond: Native-Place Ties in Social Organizations

Lin Qitang defines geographic bond as “neighborly and native-place relations formed through the ties of commandery prestige, place of origin, and native soil” [5]. Through social organizations centered on ancestral place, geographic bond transformed the Lingnan tradition of gathering the clan through geographic ties into the capacity for community mobilization among the Chinese Caribbean people. The social organizational carriers of Lingnan culture are mostly represented by native-place associations and assembly halls. These social organizations are important carriers for maintaining ethnic connections and transmitting cultural traditions.

For example, in Trinidad, there is the Fui Toong On Association, which “provides temporary accommodation and office space for new immigrants” ([9], pp. 287-288, 291-294). The name of this association derives from three counties in the Lingnan region—Huizhou (Fui Young), Dongguan (Toong Kon), and Bao'an (Pow On). Taking ancestral place as its bond, it continued the Lingnan tradition of mutual assistance through geographical ties and became a buffer station through which new immigrants could integrate into local society. It enabled dispersed individual migrants to gain a sense of belonging, and its function was similar to that of the assembly halls in the Lingnan region. Additionally, the Caribbean hosted similar social organizations such as The China Society, the Chinese Civic Association, and the Chung Shan Association. In Cuba, the Casino Chung Wah (“Chung Wah” being the Cantonese pronunciation of “Zhonghua”), functioning as the premier social organization serving Lingnan expatriates, was not only dedicated to cultural and educational endeavors but also undertook critical functions including the coordination of diaspora affairs and the processing of repatriation applications [4]. In Panama, the five major native-place associations—Fa Yin, Gou Kong Chow, Chung San, Sam Yap, and Hok San—are all named after the ancestral places in Lingnan. These organizations maintain shared native-place ties through regular gatherings, festival activities, and other means. Concurrently, the local Chinese established the Asociación China de Panamá; by hosting beauty pageants and participating in carnivals, it preserved the collective traditions of Lingnan communities while fostering cultural integration. Functioning as “umbrella organizations” [9], for Chinese societies, these institutions coordinated various cultural activities and community affairs, thereby reinforcing group cohesion and facilitating congregation and mutual assistance. Simultaneously, they served as the representative voice of the Chinese community in dialogues with the broader Caribbean society [9]. Furthermore, the Chinese community established a Chinatown in Port of Spain, Trinidad, which emerged as a core spatial hub for uniting the diaspora [10]. During the fieldwork, our research team interviewed Ms. Zheng Laiyili, who has resided in Antigua and Barbuda for over 20 years. She emphasized that the establishment of these Chinese community organizations was not coincidental, but rather a gradual evolution driven by specific social environments and practical realities:

Zheng: Here in Antigua, a weekly wage system is standard. Civil servants are paid on Fridays, and ordinary workers on Saturdays. Sometime in the 2000s, for about two years, certain individuals specifically targeted Fridays and Saturdays to commit armed robberies. Initially, they targeted us Chinese, robbing door-to-door. Later, even local shops were victimized. The atmosphere was extremely tense during that period, and Chinese expatriates in Antigua and Barbuda were among the primary victims.

At that time, I was living across from the First Choice Supermarket. The security there was poor; there were no enclosing walls, and the main gate was left open. One night, I drove my parents and my pregnant sister-in-law home. Out of habit, I parked the car under a tree. The robbers had already scouted the location. Because the driver's seat was on the right, my parents and sister-in-law exited from the left and went inside. Suddenly, four men rushed out. Each of them had a gun and pointed it directly at my head, demanding money. They took the money bag from my car and even drove the car away.

Nie: Did you report it to the police at the time?

Zheng: I did, but it was of little use. It was impossible to catch them immediately, though the police did put the information on file. As for the car, I had absolutely no idea where they drove it. Two days later, the car was finally found abandoned in a remote area; the culprits had long fled.

Actually, many shops encountered similar incidents back then. I was relatively lucky—perhaps because I am a woman, I wasn't physically assaulted. But other Chinese compatriots weren't so fortunate. Some were beaten bloody, or even knocked unconscious and tied up, just to force them to hand over their cash. Later, there was a consensus among us: you can give them the money, but you must beg them to leave the passports behind, because losing a passport creates massive trouble.

On the other hand, the ambassador at the embassy was very visionary. He considered the fact that we were all private individuals, whereas the embassy is an official entity, and a direct “official-to-private” interface didn't seem entirely appropriate. Therefore, the ambassador suggested we establish a Chinese Association. He pointed out that Chinese communities in other countries all had similar organizations—like Chinese associations or chambers of commerce—and Antigua was the only exception. With such an organization, we could communicate with the embassy on an “institution-to-institution” basis whenever issues arose. This would be much more efficient and formal. After all, the ambassador couldn't possibly respond to every single

household individually, right? So, forming an organized group with our own leadership made things convenient for everyone. It was truly an excellent suggestion.

Before the establishment of formal and regular Chinese community organizations, dispersed individual Chinese were often vulnerable to discrimination and bullying. This problem existed not only in Antigua and Barbuda, but also on other islands, where similar news was frequently reported. From this perspective, the founding of the Chinese Association was not simply motivated by cultural sentiment, but arose more from the urgent need of overseas Chinese to cope with real pressures of survival. It could not only promote unity among local Chinese, strengthen the internal identity of the community, and bring compatriots together as one, but also better safeguard the survival and security of overseas Chinese like the interviewee.

In addition, Chinese Caribbean associations continue to strengthen community cohesion and cultural transmission through a rich variety of cultural activities. For example, in Antigua and Barbuda, since its establishment, the Chinese Association of Antigua and Barbuda (CAAB) has held an annual Spring Festival reception, and has also organized Chinese residents to participate in some local cultural activities, including Carnival, the most prestigious festival in the Caribbean. At an event in 2019, Ms. Zheng displayed calligraphy and painting works on site and held a charity auction; the proceeds were donated to the association, and the works were also presented to the local Governor-General, effectively promoting friendly relations between China as well as Antigua and Barbuda. In 2022, the association again co-organized a Mid-Autumn Festival cultural exchange event with the Confucius Institute, and accepted Ms. Zheng's donation of her personal publications, including *The Twenty-Four Solar Terms* and *Chinese Traditional Festivals in Antigua and Barbuda*, as well as calligraphy and painting works, for use in cultural education and dissemination (see Figure 1). During the 2023 Spring Festival (Year of the Rabbit) celebrations, Ms. Zheng personally inscribed and gifted various traditional calligraphic works to her compatriots at the CAAB. These included 35 pairs of Spring Festival couplets, 10 “Fu” (fortune/blessing) characters, 10 “Rijin Doujin” (daily wealth accumulation) scrolls, and 10 “Zhaocai Jinbao” (ushering in wealth and prosperity) scrolls. In 2024, the Antigua Chinese Association further collaborated with the Antigua and Barbuda–China Friendship Association and the Confucius Institute to successfully hold the “First China–Antigua and Barbuda Art Exhibition”, displaying 93 art works by Ms. Zheng and launching her new book. When speaking about the process of organizing this exhibition and its role in improving local society's understanding of the Chinese community, Ms. Zheng herself said:

The inaugural exhibition primarily consisted of three sections: calligraphy, traditional Chinese painting, and oil painting. The calligraphy section featured a variety of styles, including cursive, clerical, seal, and regular scripts. The attendees were predominantly school teachers and students; while the general public was relatively smaller in number, the overall reception was quite positive. For example, for my painting of the

airport, titled *New Look*, I did not use Western oil painting techniques. Instead, I employed the traditional Chinese splash-ink method. During the exhibition, people commented that the painting was as realistic as a photograph. There was also a traditional Chinese painting of the *Yellow Crane Tower* in Wuhan, which I created during the pandemic. Through it, I wanted to showcase the beauty of traditional Chinese architecture to the audience.

On the second and third days of the exhibition, local artists gradually brought their own works to participate. Isn't this exactly a form of two-way cultural exchange? The workers at my supermarket and our surrounding neighbors now all know that I can paint and practice calligraphy, which has significantly shifted their perception of us Chinese. Previously, there was an almost 100 percent stereotypical view that we lacked culture and taste, and only knew how to make money. But the reality is that we are also actively learning about their history and culture; we are friendly counterparts. Teachers, parents, and local artists all mentioned that the exhibition period was too short and hoped more people could have the chance to visit. This indicates that the exhibition was highly recognized and suggests there is ample room for future events. My initial goal of testing the waters has certainly been achieved.



Figure 1. On-site book signing and presentation by Ms. Zheng Laiyili and Mr. Li Yucheng, President of the Chinese Association (Photo courtesy of Ms. Zheng Laiyili).

Such activities not only publicized China's excellent cultural traditions, but also strengthened ethnic identity through interaction and exchange with local culture. From the initial stage of the exhibition, which mainly focused on displaying Chinese art, to the second and third days, when local artists took the initiative to bring their own works to participate, the activity shifted from “one-way output” to a cultural dialogue of “two-way output”. This was a vivid practice of cultural integration characterized by “harmony in

diversity”. At the same time, it is worth noting that the Chinese Association, as a geographic-bond organization, played the role of a “cultural ambassador” in this process. By holding art exhibitions for cultural exchange, it not only helped the Chinese community win greater respect from local society, but also enabled it to become an important actor in exerting contemporary ethnic cohesion and serving as a cultural bridge.

2.3. Spiritual Bond: Spiritual Resonance in the Retention and Integration of Faith

Spiritual bond is defined as “interpersonal relationships forged through the bond of religious faith” [5], fundamentally representing the implicit transmission of cultural heritages at the spiritual level. Religious belief not only shapes human behavior through moral paradigms of good and evil but also cultivates spiritual bond relationships through faith-based identification, thereby consolidating social groups [5]. Through shared religious symbols and rituals, these beliefs function as the spiritual adhesive for the Chinese Caribbean community. Following the arrival of indentured Chinese laborers in the Caribbean in the mid-19th century, the majority of them gradually gravitated toward Christianity in their religious identity to expedite social integration and secure survival resources [11]. This choice was intertwined with the dominant societal position of the church during the colonial period; simultaneously, it embodied the Lingnan cultural wisdom of joyfulness and adaptability—the pragmatic flexibility to adjust to novel environments without breaching the baseline of survival. However, this conversion never completely dissolved the belief foundation embedded in their cultural genes; instead, it gave rise to a distinctive form of integrative practice. In other words, the core of Lingnan folk belief continued to exist in a fused form, forming a unique spiritual bond. For example, the Lantern Parade organized by the Chinese in British Guiana during the Spring Festival [12] revolved around the traditional Lingnan ritual of welcoming deities and praying for blessings. The percussive rhythms of gongs and drums, alongside the designs of the colorful lanterns, were directly inherited from the folk customs of the Pearl River Delta. Through collective acts of communal worship and praying for blessings, this collective ritual fortified a sense of ethnic belonging and awakened a shared cultural identity, thereby binding the Chinese Caribbean diaspora more tightly together on a spiritual level.

What was more innovative was the creative fusion that Chinese people in the Caribbean carried out within the local belief system, such as the Chinese Cuban belief in Sanfancón. “San” derives from the abbreviation of the Spanish word “Santo” (saint), corresponding to the title “shen” in Cantonese; “fan” derives from the dialect of Taishan, Guangdong, the main place of origin of early Chinese migrants in Cuba, in which the pronunciation of the character “Guan” is close to “Fan”; and “cón” derives from the Spanish transliteration of the Cantonese word “gong”, an honorific for elders or deities. The belief in Sanfancón combined the Lingnan folk belief in Guan Gong’s “loyalty, righteousness, benevolence, and courage” with Catholic saint worship [13]. It not only met the local society’s expectations regarding acceptable religious forms, but also united the Chinese community around the core values of loyalty and righteousness. In traditional Chinese religions, it is difficult to find the monotheism distinctive to Christianity. However, Sanfancón, invented and integrated by

Chinese Cubans, with its flexibility in functioning as a saint, could reflect and satisfy the typical Christian emphasis on monotheism [13]. It therefore enabled Chinese religious belief to be recognized and transmitted in Cuba, and indirectly brought Chinese Caribbean communities together. In fields such as commercial cooperation, the Chinese community’s shared belief in Sanfancón became an internal foundation of mutual trust, allowing dispersed Chinese to obtain a collective identity at the spiritual level and to form a cohesive Chinese force in commerce and other fields. The ceramic statue of Guan Gong preserved inside the Chinese Association in Dasha is precisely the most vivid spiritual symbol of overseas Chinese “offering worship and sacrifice, and uniting in shared commitment” [4]. Overall, however, the influence of Christianity remained dominant. Although Chinese Caribbean people still preserved some religious beliefs from Lingnan culture, the “Three Teachings” of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, which had originally occupied a dominant position in Chinese beliefs, were gradually replaced by Christianity in the Caribbean.

Admittedly, among Chinese Caribbean people, traditional Chinese rituals such as ancestral worship during the Spring Festival and tomb-sweeping during the Qingming Festival have still been transmitted in a hidden manner. For example, Trinidadian Chinese historian Walton Look Lai mentions that, every Lunar New Year, the Chinese in British Guiana likewise dressed in their finest clothes, held aloft various ingeniously decorated colored paper lanterns, and paraded through the streets to the sound of gongs and drums, welcoming the gods and praying for blessings [12]. In Cuba, during the Qingming Festival, the religious sentiments of the Chinese community were closely connected with their ancestor worship. The monograph *Where Are Cubans From?* points out that local Chinese in Cuba would often go in pairs to sweep graves and worship their ancestors during Qingming [8]. In the interview, Ms. Zheng also spoke about the Chinese traditional customs that have continued in her family life to this day:

For example, during the Spring Festival, we write and paste Spring Festival couplets, write *Fu* (fortune) characters, and gift them to our compatriots here in Antigua and Barbuda. During the Lantern Festival, we make and boil “yuanxiao” (sweet glutinous rice balls) and eat them together. For the Dragon Boat Festival, we make and eat “zongzi” (sticky rice dumplings), and also give some to relatives and friends. Before the Mid-Autumn Festival, every year we order mooncakes from Miami. According to our Fujian customs, on the morning of the Mid-Autumn Festival, we use mooncakes, fruit, and lit incense to worship my deceased parents-in-law; this incense was brought by me from China. The remaining mooncakes are then distributed to relatives and friends. Every New Year’s Eve, that is, on the evening of the thirtieth day of the last lunar month, we prepare a table full of abundant food, fruit, tea leaves, baijiu, and candies, light incense, burn paper money, and sprinkle wine to worship the ancestors. In my home there is also a position for the God of Wealth, and a bagua hangs directly above the door. No matter where we go, we must

maintain a kind of spiritual communication with our ancestors.

From the sharing, it can be seen that Chinese Caribbean people construct spiritual anchors for cultural transmission by adhering to traditional rituals, allowing themselves, at fixed points in time, to continually experience the sense of ritual and belonging associated with Chinese culture. At the same time, ancestral worship on New Year's Eve and the worship of deceased parents-in-law during the Mid-Autumn Festival represent an emotional connection with the ancestors. Through such acts as burning incense, sprinkling wine, and burning paper money, Chinese families engage in a spiritual dialogue with departed loved ones. This tradition of ancestral worship not only maintains the historical memory of the family, but also enables family members to gain emotional consolation and spiritual support in the relationship between the departed and the living. In addition, the presence of belief elements such as a God of Wealth altar at home and a hanging bagua talisman is deeply integrated with festival customs, together forming the spiritual homeland of Chinese Caribbean people. In an unfamiliar cultural environment, this cultural identity based on traditional beliefs becomes an important force for Chinese people to maintain their sense of self-identity. In sum, the spiritual bond is, in essence, a form of spiritual transmission among Chinese Caribbean people that takes ritual as its vehicle, emotion as its core, and belief as its support. This transmission not only allows traditional Chinese culture to continue in a foreign land, but also becomes an important pillar for the Chinese to maintain their identity and construct their spiritual world in the Caribbean, demonstrating the strong vitality and cohesion of Chinese culture.

2.4. Material Bond: Cultural Cohesion in Material Symbols

Material bond refers to “interpersonal relationships gathered together with objects as the medium and as the bond; such relationships are established on the basis of a shared love for, and emotion toward, particular objects” [5]. As discussed above, Lingnan culture holds an affinity toward objects, which are “always closely connected with emotion” [5], thereby giving rise to feelings toward objects. Thus, material-bond relationships, through perceptible cultural symbols such as food and drama, awaken Chinese people's feelings toward objects, bring Chinese communities together, and become an intuitive marker by which Chinese Caribbean people identify their fellow members. In terms of food, the dissemination of Lingnan-featured ingredients and cooking techniques has constructed a distinct material-bond tie. As the Chinese migrant communities continued to grow, Chinese cuisine became increasingly popular in the Caribbean. Chinese people brought traditional Lingnan dietary customs into the Caribbean, and the most direct manifestation of this was the opening of Chinese restaurants or Chinese fast-food shops locally, selling classic Lingnan dishes such as chow mein and fried rice. These foods, originating from Lingnan, not only satisfied the taste preferences of Chinese people, but also became the standard feature of Chinese family gatherings and community activities. Furthermore, Lingnan dishes are not merely replicated in the Caribbean; rather, they are infused with Caribbean flavors unattainable elsewhere [10], resulting in unique culinary innovations. While preserving the core techniques and flavor foundation of Lingnan cooking,

Chinese restaurant owners actively integrated local Caribbean elements, adding such native components as Caribbean curry powder and green seasoning [14], thereby giving traditional Lingnan dishes renewed flavor vitality. This fusion did not weaken Lingnan food culture; on the contrary, because the core techniques and flavors continued to be preserved by Chinese migrants, Lingnan food culture took root in a way more suited to the local environment. Moreover, the introduction of Lingnan-featured ingredients injected a distinct Lingnan genetic marker into Caribbean cuisine and further strengthened the material bond. Chinese migrants brought Lingnan-featured ingredients such as “soy sauce, sesame oil, ginger and garlic, rice noodles, and five-spice powder” [14] into Caribbean kitchens. When cooking them together with local Caribbean staples, they also incorporated local seasonings such as “thyme, allspice berries, and Scotch bonnet peppers” [14]. Ingredients from two different cultural backgrounds collided in the same pot, not only creating a unique taste experience, but also enabling Lingnan food culture, through the concrete carrier of ingredients, to form a deep connection with local Caribbean culture, allowing Lingnan dietary customs to exert a sustained cultural influence in the Caribbean.

Another carrier of folk culture is festival customs. Federico Chang Pon, in his research, discusses how local Chinese in Cuba have preserved traditional Lingnan festival customs. In addition to celebrating the Lunar New Year, eating the New Year's Eve reunion dinner, and going up the mountains during the Qingming Festival to sweep graves and worship ancestors, some local Chinese organizations have also held celebratory activities such as enjoying Cantonese opera and Cantonese songs [8]. While preserving the original festival customs of Lingnan culture, the Chinese have also actively participated in local traditional festivals. For example, on August 5, 2025, during the “Last Lap” of Carnival in Antigua and Barbuda, the Chinese rode on a Nezha-themed float, which was then popular around the world, in an island-wide parade (see Figure 2). They celebrated the festival together with lion dances, a symbol of traditional Chinese culture, showing the beauty of Chinese culture to the islanders of the Caribbean.



Figure 2. The Chinese Association's Nezha-themed lion dance float at the Antigua Carnival in August 2025 (Photo by Xinran Nie)

Finally, the transmission of Lingnan culture is profoundly embodied in folk art and language. At the end of the nineteenth century, with the influx of Lingnan Chinese laborers into Cuba, Cantonese opera, as a representative form of Lingnan folk art, began to take root in Chinese settlements such as Havana. Not only did professional troupes such as

Guoguang and Guosheng emerge, but local Cubans and people of mixed Chinese-Cuban descent were also attracted to participate in Cantonese opera performances. Local customs were incorporated into the performances; although the vocal style was not completely reproduced, Spanish spoken lines were integrated, while the formal core of Cantonese melodic tunes was retained [6]. During the migration process in the late nineteenth century, the Chinese diaspora brought their native languages, initially dominated by Cantonese and Hakka. It was only after the twentieth century that Mandarin and Hokkien were brought in with migrants from other regions, but Cantonese remained the main language of the Chinese community. In associations established by the Chinese then, such as the Chung Shan Association and Guo Ming Tang, Cantonese and Hakka were the main languages of social interaction. Grace Church even provided trilingual worship services in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. At the same time, many Cantonese expressions were also preserved in mixed Caribbean-Lingnan cuisine, such as char siu (barbecued pork), chow fan (fried rice), chow mein (fried noodles), dim sum, lychee, and see yow (soy sauce), becoming part of Trinidadian English and Creole [15].

Cantonese opera, as a form of Lingnan folk art, underwent integrated development in the Caribbean. Through shared performance symbols, it enabled local Chinese communities to find a sense of cultural belonging in a foreign Caribbean land. Cantonese opera performances held on various public occasions were no longer merely a form of entertainment, but also a symbol through which Chinese people confirmed their ethnic identity with one another in collective activities, making Cantonese opera an emotional adhesive in a foreign land that transcended language barriers. In addition, the transmission and development of Cantonese opera strengthened the material bond. The handwritten Cantonese opera scripts preserved by the Chinese Cuban He Qiulan's family used Spanish to provide phonetic annotations for Chinese [6], which not only realized the creative development of Cantonese opera as an artistic form in the Caribbean, but also, through the transmission of skills within the family, turned Cantonese opera into a family-transmitted craft, intertwining artistic transmission with the continuation of kinship. This model of gathering the community through art elevated Cantonese opera from a mere artistic form into a spiritual symbol that brought the community together. Even though the younger generation now finds it difficult to understand the meaning of the lyrics, they can still connect with one another within the Chinese community through shared artistic memory.

Visual arts such as calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting likewise became important symbols of material bond. In Antigua, Chinese artist Ms. Zheng actively participated in community activities. During festivals such as the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, she created calligraphy on site—such as the symbolically meaningful characters “Fu” (fortune) and “Jia” (family)—as well as traditional Chinese paintings, such as *Golden Pig Bringing Wealth*. She presented these works as gifts to local political figures or to the embassy, personally wrote Spring Festival couplets and gave them to Chinese compatriots in the Chinese Association, and some works were even used for charity auctions. This strengthened the emotional connections both within the community and between the community and the outside world. This kind of material-bond culture is a form of cultural power: through objects, it connects emotions and

gathers people together [5]. The above-mentioned material-bond symbols are linked with one another within the Chinese community through shared artistic memory, demonstrating the powerful role of material bond in cultural cohesion.

2.5. Occupational Bond: Community Networks in Economic Cooperation

Occupational bond is defined as “peer and alumni relationships bonded by professional and academic pursuits” [5]. Among them, occupational-bond relations based on profession take economic activities as their carrier, transforming the spirit of pragmatism and mutual assistance in Lingnan culture into a community cooperation network among Chinese Caribbean people. The spread of Lingnan food culture gave rise to the emergence of the Chinese catering industry. In the early twentieth century, the occupational transformation of Chinese people in the Caribbean and the construction of commercial networks became the core starting point through which occupational bond brought the ethnic group together. As Chinese laborers gradually left agricultural estates after their labor contracts expired, some returned to China, while the majority stayed and shifted into fields such as retail and catering, becoming owners of shops and restaurants [16]. From scattered laborers, they transformed into a concentrated group of merchants. This shift in occupational identity laid the initial occupational-bond foundation for ethnic connection. For a period thereafter, as a minority middleman group, Chinese merchants became an important component of the Caribbean economic structure. In Panama, Chinese shops reached 499 in number, ranking the first among Caribbean countries [17]. This large-scale commercial presence enabled Chinese people to form local concentrations and created the conditions for cooperation and mutual assistance among them.

With the steady proliferation of Chinese-owned shops across various Caribbean islands, Chinese immigrants have secured an increasingly prominent position within local retail, small-scale commerce, and everyday consumer networks. In Antigua, Ms. Zheng and her husband operate “Hao Hao Supermarket” (好好超市). When being asked how Chinese-owned establishments sustain their competitive edge within the local market, she shared the following insights during the interview:

Here in Antigua, the majority of Chinese people are engaged in running Chinese restaurants, supermarkets, and grocery stores. The variety of businesses is quite limited, and there are no particularly complex business models. Our main advantages are low prices, extended operating hours, and our reliability—we always pay our rent and utility bills on time. The most prominent characteristic is our cost-effectiveness, which also serves as our primary competitive edge in the market. For example, with small commodities imported from Yiwu—such as pots, pans, washbasins, and brushes—as well as electrical appliances like fans, hair dryers, mobile phone chargers, and adapters, we hold a distinct price advantage.

The operation of Chinese shops not only reflected the livelihood strategies of individual migrants, but also

constituted an important foundation for the formation of occupational bond relations in Chinese Caribbean communities. Mr. Lin Qitang points out that “the core of the spiritual tie in occupational bond relations is the need for interests and emotional belonging” [5]. It was precisely because Chinese shops were flourishing that local Caribbean merchants began to worry about their own interests and excluded Chinese shops through commercial competition. At this moment, the need for interests and emotional belonging contained in the occupational bond prompted the Chinese to unite as one, seek common interests, and further strengthen the ethnic cohesion of the Chinese community. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce [9] in Trinidad and Tobago is a typical manifestation of this trend. With the coordination of commercial competition as its core function, it not only helped Chinese merchants cope with policy pressures such as Chinese restriction orders, but also resolved conflicts of interest within the ethnic group. Through an institutionalized organizational form, it brought dispersed merchants together into a community of shared interests.

In addition, the sharing of commercial spaces and activities further allowed the occupational bond to permeate daily life, becoming a vivid carrier of ethnic identity. Wing Sing Supermarket [9] and Havana Chinatown [9] in Cuba became hubs for exchange in Chinese commercial activities, and the Sunday market [9] at Wing Sing Supermarket further promoted business dealings and cooperation among Chinese merchants, extending commercial interactions among merchants into emotional connections. This form, combining occupational bond and geographic bond, maintained the cohesion among Chinese merchant networks [5]. Here, order negotiations were interwoven with native-place greetings, and commercial cooperation coexisted with ethnic mutual assistance. The occupational-bond cohesion of Chinese Caribbean people was both a practical choice under the pressure of survival and an active construction of ethnic wisdom. From the group foundation formed through occupational transformation, to the cooperative system built by trade organizations, and then to the emotional connections nurtured by commercial spaces, the occupational bond advanced layer by layer, ultimately bringing dispersed individuals together into an ethnic community with strong centripetal force.

3. Conclusion

From the arduous departure of indentured Chinese laborers crossing the oceans in the mid-nineteenth century, to the present-day Chinese Caribbean people who have built a distinctive ethnic community in the soil of multiculturalism, Lingnan culture, taking “Wu Yuan” as its thread, has completed a process of cultural rooting and reshaping across thousands of miles. Kinship bond, anchored in the transmission of surnames, extends through the mutual-aid networks of geographic bond organizations; it gains spiritual resonance through the creative integration of spiritual bond beliefs, strengthens identity through the everyday practice of material bond symbols, and ultimately coalesces into a sustainable community force through the economic cooperation of occupational bond. These five ties intertwine with one another, preserving the heritages of pioneering innovation, pragmatism, and inclusiveness in Lingnan culture, while also evolving a flexible wisdom of survival and adaptation within the Caribbean’s colonial historical context and multiethnic environment. Today, as globalization

continues to deepen, this cohesive mechanism based on “Wu Yuan” not only provides historical reference for the cultural transmission and community building of overseas Chinese communities, but also suggests that exchanges among different civilizations should uphold an open and inclusive attitude: one must both safeguard one’s own cultural heritages and respect the objective reality of pluralistic coexistence.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to Xinran Nie for conducting the interviews and generously providing fieldwork materials. This support was invaluable to the present study.

This work was supported by the Guangdong Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences under the Lingnan Culture Project, “Research on the Transmission and Dissemination of Lingnan Culture in the Caribbean Region” (No. GD24LN11).

References

- [1] Li, X. M., & Huang, K. Z. (2016). History of overseas Chinese in Indonesia. Guangdong Higher Education Press.
- [2] Wang, P. P. (2013, May 27). Ancient labor contract papers record the bitter fate of Qiongie overseas workers. China News Service. <https://www.chinanews.com/zgqj/2013/05-27/4859420.Shtml>.
- [3] Liu, L. Z., & Tao, N. H. (2025, April 7). Context inheritance and gene interpretation of Lingnan culture. Southern Daily. <https://paper.southcn.com/>.
- [4] Huang, Z. C. (2011). Wild geese fly across the Caribbean. Jinan University Press.
- [5] Lin, Q. T., & Lü, L. B. (2003). An introduction to five-edge culture. Fujian People’s Publishing House.
- [6] Deng, Q. Y. (2024). The spread of Cantonese opera in Cuba and the formation of cultural identity. *Journal of Art Communication Research*, (1), 41–51.
- [7] Lai, W. L. (1993). Indentured labor, Caribbean sugar. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [8] Pon, F. C. (2018). Where are Cubans from? Editorial José Martí.
- [9] Chu, R. T. (2021). The Chinese in Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, and Panama: Lessons in history, identity, and culture, and interconnections with the Chinese in the Philippines. *Translocal Chinese: East Asian Perspectives*, 15(2), 271–302.
- [10] Poon, A. (2021, August 3). The Chinese have influenced the Caribbean in a powerful way. *Exceptional Caribbean*. <https://exceptionalcaribbean.com/2021/08/03/the-chinese-have-influenced-the-caribbean-in-a-powerful-way/>.
- [11] EveryCulture. (n.d.). Chinese in the English-Speaking Caribbean - Religion and expressive culture. *World Culture Encyclopedia*. <https://www.everyculture.com/Middle-America-Caribbean/Chinese-in-the-English-Speaking-Caribbean-Religion-and-Expressive-Culture.html>.
- [12] Lai, W. L. (2010). Images of the Chinese in West Indian history. *Anthurium a Caribbean Studies Journal*, 7(1), 54–77. <https://doi.org/10.33596/anth.143>.
- [13] Scherer, F. F. (2001). Sanfancón: Orientalism, Confucianism and the construction of Chineseness in Cuba, 1847–1997. In P. Taylor (Ed.), *Nation dance: Religion, identity, and cultural difference in the Caribbean* (pp. 153–168). Indiana University Press.

- [14] sazonytumbao. (2025, May 27). The influence of Chinese cuisine on Caribbean food. [https:// sazonytumbao. com/ Caribbean -chinese-cuisine/](https://sazonytumbao.com/Caribbean-chinese-cuisine/).
- [15] Poon, S. Y. (2015, May 18). Cantonese in Trinidad and Tobago. Language Blag. [https://languageblag. wordpress.com/ 2015/ 05/ 18/ cantonese-in-trinidad-and-tobago/](https://languageblag.wordpress.com/2015/05/18/cantonese-in-trinidad-and-tobago/).
- [16] National Library and Information System Authority. (n.d.). Chinese arrival—Economic life. NALIS. [https://www. nalis. gov. tt/resources/tt-content-guide/chinese-arrival/](https://www.nalis.gov.tt/resources/tt-content-guide/chinese-arrival/).
- [17] Palma, P., & Strabucchi, M. M. (2019). Chinese business in Latin America and the Caribbean: A historical overview. *Journal of Evolutionary Studies in Business*, 4(2), 175–203. <https://doi.org/10.1344/JESB2019.2.j064>.