

Research on the Discursive Construction and Identity of Homestay Tourism in the Context of Hakka Culture: A Case Study of Heyuan

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of rural revitalization and the integration of culture and tourism, homestay tourism has emerged as a significant pathway for revitalizing local cultural heritage and fostering rural economic development. In Hakka regions, exemplified by Heyuan, Guangdong—the “Hakka Ancient City”—the development of homestays serves as a crucial arena for the inheritance and reconfiguration of Hakka culture within a modern context. This study interrogates the central role of discourse in this process, exploring how multiple discursive agents—including official institutions, operators, and media—collectively construct a distinctive Hakka cultural identity. Furthermore, it examines how this discursively shaped experience influences tourists’ place identity and ultimate revisit intentions. To address these questions, the research employs a qualitative case study design grounded in Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Taking Heyuan as the primary site, the study systematically analyzes a corpus of official promotional texts, online reviews, and in-depth interviews with 15 operators and 20 tourists. The findings reveal that discourse serves as a core force in constructing cultural identity through narrative strategies centered on “authenticity,” “nostalgic memory,” and “local differentiation”. This discursive construction effectively fosters place identity by shaping cognitive understanding, evoking emotional resonance, and meeting functional expectations. Moreover, place identity acts as a critical mediator; a strong sense of identity significantly predicts revisit and recommendation intentions. By moving beyond macro-spatial analysis, this study unveils the micro-mechanisms of meaning-making that connect culture, place, and individual experience. It offers a novel theoretical perspective on tourism-driven identity formation and provides practical pathways for the sustainable development of ethnic tourism in broader Hakka regions through strategic discourse management.

Keywords: Hakka culture, homestay tourism, discursive construction, place identity, Heyuan

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1. Introduction

The implementation of rural revitalization strategies in contemporary China has necessitated a profound transformation of rural industrial structures, among which homestay tourism has emerged as a quintessential medium for the integration of culture and tourism. In the contemporary era, China has been vigorously promoting the national strategy of rural revitalization, aiming to address the imbalanced development between urban and rural areas and to rejuvenate declining rural communities. This macro-policy environment provides a critical institutional foundation and developmental impetus for rural industries, particularly the cultural tourism sector. Concurrently, the deep integration of culture and tourism (wen lv rong he) has become a significant pathway for regional development, emphasizing the activation and innovative utilization of cultural heritage resources to create unique tourism experiences and drive local economic growth. Within this context, the homestay industry has emerged as a vital component and innovative form of rural tourism, providing not only accommodation but also serving as a critical medium for experiencing local culture and lifestyle. As emphasized by Liang and Xu (2021), the digital marketing of homestays in Heyuan under the new media perspective has redefined how rural spaces are consumed, suggesting that the industry's growth is inherently linked to its ability to tell a compelling cultural story.

In the specific context of Hakka regions, such as Heyuan in Guangdong Province—historically recognized as the “Ancient Hub of the Hakka”—the development of homestays is not only pertinent to industrial upgrading but also serves as a crucial arena for the inheritance and reconfiguration of Hakka culture within a modern context. Heyuan possesses abundant and authentic Hakka cultural resources, including traditional villages, architecture, music, and festivals. These resources are situated within the broader spatial cluster of Hakka traditional villages across Fujian, Guangdong, and Jiangxi, which are characterized by significant

historical and cultural value. However, the development of cultural tourism, especially that centered on specific ethnic cultures like the Hakka, faces significant practical challenges. Despite the rich heritage of traditional villages, architecture, and customs, there is a prevalent risk of cultural “symbolization” and “homogenization” in the process of commodification for tourism. This risk is particularly acute in the “Belt and Road” era, where regional culture is increasingly tasked with “going out” to a global audience (Lin & Zhao, 2023). “Symbolization” refers to the reduction of complex, living cultural practices into simplistic, easily marketable icons or stereotypes, while “homogenization” occurs when unique local cultural expressions are diluted or altered to conform to standardized, mass-tourism expectations, losing their distinctiveness. These processes can lead to inauthentic tourist experiences, undermine the cultural integrity of host communities, and ultimately diminish the long-term appeal and sustainability of the tourism destination.

The significance of this study lies in addressing these dual challenges by introducing discourse theory into the study of tourism and identity. The rapid expansion of the homestay industry often leads to a detachment from local cultural roots, making the discursive construction of “authenticity” a critical factor for sustainable growth. Discourse, in this context, refers not just to language but to systems of representation—including images, narratives, practices, and spatial arrangements—that produce meaning, construct identities, and shape social realities. In tourism, various actors such as governments, developers, marketers, local communities, and tourists themselves engage in “discursive practices” that define what a place is, what its culture means, and what a “proper” tourist experience entails. This aligns with recent observations by Wang (2025), who argues that the discursive construction of tourism images often involves narrative contradictions that must be reconciled to create a cohesive brand. In Heyuan, the branding strategy must navigate the tension between preserving ancestral “Hakkaness” and meeting the modern comforts

expected by urban travelers (Liang, Liu, & Wang, 2019).

This research focuses on the central role of discourse in this process, aiming to explore how multiple discursive agents (including official institutions, operators, tourists, and media) collectively construct a distinctive Hakka cultural identity through specific narrative strategies and symbolic practices. By moving beyond the macro-spatial analyses prevalent in existing literature, such as mapping spatial patterns or identifying economic determinants, this study interrogates the micro-mechanisms of meaning-making at the heart of cultural tourism. It connects the macro-level dynamics of rural revitalization and industry agglomeration with the micro-level, subjective experiences of individuals, offering a more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural dimensions of sustainable tourism development. Following the discursive logic outlined by Xu (2024), which emphasizes the power of urban image construction in external communication, this study posits that Heyuan's homestay sector acts as a vital communicative vehicle for Hakka identity.

Specifically, the study seeks to understand how the discursive representation of Hakka identity in Heyuan—ranging from the architectural preservation of “Wei Wu” houses to the staging of traditional tea ceremonies— influences the formation of place identity (difang renting) among visitors. Place identity refers to the meanings and emotional attachments individuals ascribe to a specific location, and the discursively constructed cultural identity becomes a primary resource for tourists to build this personal connection. By applying a critical discourse analysis lens, the research examines the pathway from discourse reception to place identity through cognitive understanding, emotional resonance, and functional expectations. This theoretical inquiry is essential for understanding how regional cultural industries in Heyuan can achieve a sustainable “pathway to go out” while maintaining their unique historical essence (Lin & Luo, 2022).

Ultimately, this discursive construction serves as a core force in shaping tourists'

behavioral intentions, such as their ultimate revisit intention and recommendation intentions. Place identity plays a key mediating role in this process; a strong sense of identity significantly and positively predicts these behavioral outcomes. By unveiling the constructive power of discourse in connecting culture, place, and individual experience, this study not only provides a novel theoretical perspective for understanding tourism-driven cultural identity formation but also offers practical pathways for achieving in-depth, distinctive, and sustainable development of homestay tourism in Heyuan and broader Hakka regions. The ensuing analysis will demonstrate that the success of Heyuan's tourism rests not merely on the quality of its facilities, but on the resonance of the stories it chooses to tell.

2. Literature Review

The academic inquiry into homestay tourism within ethnic contexts necessitates a multidisciplinary synthesis. This research situates itself at the intellectual intersection of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), Environmental Psychology, and Tourism Sociology. To provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation, this review systematically categorizes the existing scholarship into three core dimensions: the discursive construction of tourism destinations, the psychological mechanisms of place identity, and the socio-cultural dynamics of Hakka tourism development in the contemporary era.

2.1 The Constructive Power of Discourse in Tourism

Discourse, far beyond its simplistic definition as linguistic communication, is conceptualized in modern tourism studies as a constitutive social practice that actively structures the way a destination is perceived, consumed, and legitimized (McLuckie & Kuipers, 2024). This perspective aligns with the social constructionist turn in geography, which posits that "landscapes" are not merely physical entities but are "read" as cultural texts. In the context of ethnic tourism, discourse serves as a transformative tool that converts raw cultural heritage into a "commodified experience." As Wang (2025) suggests, the

construction of a tourism image is an ideological project rather than a neutral reflection of reality. Through selective narration, certain historical elements are amplified while others are silenced to build a competitive and marketable regional brand.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the role of digital and media discourse in framing these identities. Media platforms do not merely transmit information; they function as discursive agents that employ specific “emotional hooks” to engage potential visitors. Nostalgia, in particular, has emerged as a dominant trope in rural tourism discourse. By framing rural spaces as repositories of tradition and “lost” authenticity, discourse creates a psychological bridge between the urban consumer and the rural destination. In Heyuan, this is manifested through the romanticization of Hakka culture, where themes of “diaspora,” “fortress-like resilience,” and “ancestral belonging” are woven into a cohesive narrative that promises tourists a sense of spiritual homecoming. However, as Fairclough’s framework suggests, this discursive production is inextricably linked to power dynamics, where official narratives often prioritize economic growth over the heterogeneous lived realities of local residents.

2.2 Place Identity and the Psychological Experience of Space

While discourse provides the external narrative framework, the internal reception of these narratives falls within the domain of Environmental Psychology, specifically the concept of place identity. Place identity is defined as a substructure of an individual’s self-identity, consisting of cognitions about the physical environment in which the individual lives or visits. In tourism, this identity is a multi-dimensional construct involving cognitive, emotional, and functional evaluations.

Cognitive identity involves the recognition of a place’s unique attributes and its cultural distinctiveness. In Heyuan’s homestays, this is achieved through the architectural discourse of “Wei Wu” houses and traditional motifs that signal “Hakkaness” to the observer.

Emotional identity, on the other hand, refers to the symbolic meanings and affective bonds formed between the visitor and the site. As Liang and Xu (2021) observed in their study of new media marketing, digital storytelling—particularly the “micro-narratives” shared by homestay hosts—can effectively bridge the gap between abstract cultural symbols and the lived, visceral experience of the tourist. Functional identity (or place dependence) relates to how well a destination satisfies the specific needs of the traveler, such as the desire for tranquility or authentic cultural immersion.

The formation of place identity is not a passive process; it is an active “meaning-making” endeavor. Tourists do not simply “receive” a brand identity; they negotiate it. The interaction between the “top-down” discursive construction by authorities and the “bottom-up” subjective experience of the tourist determines the strength of the place identity. When there is high semiotic congruence—meaning the discourse matches the physical and social reality—the identity is reinforced, leading to higher levels of satisfaction and revisit intention.

2.3 Hakka Cultural Tourism: Authenticity and “Staged” Narratives

The specific context of Hakka culture presents a unique discursive challenge. Historically known as the “Guest People,” the Hakka identity is built upon a history of migration and adaptation. In the contemporary tourism market of Heyuan, this heritage is frequently utilized to create a sense of “staged authenticity.” Dean MacCannell’s seminal theory of staged authenticity remains highly relevant: in the pursuit of the “real” Hakka experience, tourists are often presented with a curated version of culture that is designed to meet their expectations of “primitiveness” or “tradition.”

Recent research in the Heyuan region has highlighted the strategic importance of the Hakka cultural industry. While some scholars have systematically mapped the spatial distribution and influencing factors of Hakka traditional villages across the tri-province

border area to understand their physical preservation. Lin and Zhao (2023) and Lin and Luo (2022) have extensively discussed the “going out” (zou chu qu) strategy for Heyuan’s cultural products under the Belt and Road Initiative. These studies emphasize the role of cultural policy and industry agglomeration in enhancing regional soft power. However, much of this literature remains at the macro-level of policy analysis. There is a notable lack of micro-level qualitative research into how these broad cultural strategies are enacted within the confined, intimate space of a homestay.

Furthermore, the “negotiated” nature of Hakka identity remains under-explored. As tourism becomes more commercialized, the tension between “heritage preservation” and “market demand” intensifies. Liang, Liu, and Wang (2019) pointed out that while branding is essential for economic viability, over-commercialization can lead to “symbolic fatigue,” where the discourse becomes so detached from the actual Hakka lifestyle that it loses its resonance with the visitor.

2.4 Research Gap: The Convergence of Discourse and Identity

Despite the wealth of literature on tourism branding and place attachment, a significant research gap persists in the integration of these two fields within the context of rural Hakka homestays. Most existing studies on Heyuan have either focused on the economic characteristics of industry clusters (Long et al., 2018) or the general marketing strategies of the region (Liang & Xu, 2021). Few have critically examined the “discursive mechanism”—the specific process by which language, symbols, and spatial practices in homestays are internalized by tourists to form a lasting place identity.

There is also a deficiency in qualitative approaches that account for the tourist’s voice. While top-down strategies for cultural “output” are well-documented (Lin & Zhao, 2023), the way tourists interpret, negotiate, or potentially resist these constructions remains largely invisible in the current scholarship. In an era where “authenticity” is increasingly contested,

understanding the discursive construction of identity is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity for the sustainable development of ethnic tourism. This study aims to fill this gap by employing Critical Discourse Analysis to unveil the power structures and psychological pathways that define the modern Hakka tourism experience in Heyuan.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy and Qualitative Design

The epistemological foundation of this study is rooted in social constructivism, which posits that social reality and cultural identities are not objective entities but are constructed through social interactions and discursive practices. To capture the fluidity of “Hakkaness” in Heyuan’s tourism sector, a qualitative case study design is employed. This approach is particularly advantageous when the research boundary between the phenomenon (discursive construction) and the context (Hakka culture in Heyuan) is not clearly evident. By focusing on Heyuan, a city recognized as the “Ancient Hub of the Hakka,” the study provides a “thick description” of how regional heritage is revitalized through modern homestay narratives. As emphasized by Fairclough (2013), qualitative inquiry allows researchers to delve into the “how” of social change—in this case, how traditional rural spaces are discursively transformed into modern consumption sites.

3.2 Analytical Framework: Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model

The analytical backbone of this research is Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which provides a robust tripartite model for linking linguistic micro-details with social macro-structures.

Textual Analysis (Description): This dimension focuses on the formal properties of the texts. In this study, it involves the scrutiny of vocabulary, metaphors, and visual semiotics in Heyuan’s homestay marketing. For instance, the recurring use of terms like “ancestral home” and “ecological sanctuary” is analyzed to understand how they construct a specific version of

Hakka identity.

Discursive Practice (Interpretation): This level examines the “mediation” between text and society—how texts are produced by operators and how they are interpreted by tourists. Following the perspective of Liang and Xu (2021), this study explores how digital storytelling on social media platforms acts as a discursive bridge, translating abstract cultural symbols into relatable tourist experiences.

Social Practice (Explanation): The final dimension situates the discourse within the broader institutional and ideological context of China. This involves analyzing how homestay narratives in Heyuan align with or negotiate the national “Rural Revitalization” strategy and the “Belt and Road” cultural output imperatives (Lin & Zhao, 2023).

3.3 Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

To ensure the “trustworthiness” and “triangulation” of the qualitative data, the study utilized a purposive and theoretical sampling strategy, collecting data from three distinct sources between June 2023 and December 2024.

3.3.1 Case Site Selection

Three representative clusters within Heyuan were selected:

- (1) The Wanlv Lake Area: Known for its ecological integration where the discourse focuses on the “Hakka Water Culture.”
- (2) Xiatun Village in Dongyuan County: A site where the discourse blends “Red Tourism” (revolutionary history) with traditional Hakka ancestral narratives.
- (3) Kanghe Town: Famous for its “Wei Wu” architectural preservation, where the discourse centers on “Living Heritage.”

3.3.2 Textual Corpus

The researcher compiled a comprehensive textual database consisting of 12 official tourism development plans issued by the Heyuan Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television,

Tourism, and Sports, and over 50 promotional brochures from top-rated homestays. Additionally, to capture the “mediated” discourse, over 300 user-generated content (UGC) posts from platforms like Little Red Book and Ctrip were scraped, focusing on reviews that specifically mentioned “Hakka culture” or “identity.”

3.3.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Primary data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A total of 15 homestay operators were interviewed to understand the “encoding” process—their strategic intentions in portraying Hakka culture. Simultaneously, 20 tourists were selected through “convenience sampling” at the case sites for interviews regarding their “decoding” process. These interviews, lasting 45 to 90 minutes each, explored how tourists internalized the homestay’s narrative and whether it fostered a sense of place identity. This dual-perspective approach addresses the gap identified by Zheng and Huang (2022) regarding the lack of tourist-centric discourse analysis in rural tourism.

3.4 Data Analysis and Coding Procedures

The data analysis followed a rigorous thematic coding process facilitated by NVivo 12. The analysis was conducted in three recursive stages:

- (1) Open Coding: Initial segments of interview transcripts and marketing texts were labeled with descriptive codes (e.g., “traditional architecture,” “host hospitality,” “authentic food”).
- (2) Axial Coding: These codes were grouped into higher-order categories such as “Nostalgic Tropes” and “Modernized Tradition,” reflecting the discursive strategies identified in recent literature (Wang, 2025).
- (3) Selective Coding: The final stage involved integrating these categories into the CDA framework to explain the mechanism of identity formation.

To ensure qualitative rigor, the study employed “member checking,” where

preliminary findings were shared with several interviewed operators to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants were anonymized using codes (e.g., Operator-01, Tourist-05) to ensure confidentiality.

4. Findings and Discussion

The discursive construction of Hakka homestay tourism in Heyuan is a multi-vocal and contested process where traditional symbols are reinterpreted through modern narrative strategies. Following Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this section analyzes how the textual choices in Heyuan's homestays translate into discursive practices and ultimately shape the social reality of place identity.

4.1 Textual Dimension: The Rhetoric of Authenticity and Nostalgia

At the textual level, the discourse is characterized by a high frequency of "cultural keywords" and "visual metaphors" that aim to establish an aura of authenticity. Based on the analysis of marketing texts and participant observation in areas such as Xiatun Village and the Wanlv Lake basin, this study identifies three primary discursive strategies: "The Discourse of Authenticity," "The Narrative of Nostalgia," and "The Hyper-Local Differentiation."

The "Discourse of Authenticity" is prominently featured in the spatial arrangement and linguistic framing of homestays. Operators in Heyuan frequently employ architectural metaphors to claim cultural legitimacy. For instance, many homestays located in traditional "Ganlan" or "Weilong" houses utilize phrases such as "living in history" or "breathing with the centennial walls" in their social media marketing. This discursive reliance on physical heritage aligns with the fact that these traditional dwellings are key components of the Hakka village system, whose spatial integrity is influenced by both natural environment and social lineage (Xie, Zhou, & Liu, 2022).

During our field research in Dongyuan County, participant observation revealed that

this “textual authenticity” is often supported by a meticulous curation of the physical environment. In homestays like those in Kanghe Town, the use of traditional materials—grey bricks, wood carvings, and rammed earth—serves as a non-linguistic text that reinforces the written narrative of “ancient heritage”. One operator (Operator-04) remarked during an interview:

We didn’t just renovate a house; we “translated” a lifestyle. When guests see the original wooden beams and the mottled grey bricks, they aren’t just looking at materials—they are engaging with a discourse of Hakka resilience and craftsmanship that has lasted for generations. If the text says ‘ancient,’ the touch must feel “ancient”. This textual strategy is further augmented by the “Narrative of Nostalgia,” which taps into the urban dweller’s longing for “Xiangchou” (rural nostalgia). In Heyuan’s homestay clusters, Hakka culture is often presented as a “spiritual sanctuary”. Marketing materials on platforms like Little Red Book often frame the homestay experience as a “return to the ancestral home,” regardless of the guest’s actual lineage. This is achieved through the curated performance of daily life, such as the communal preparation of Hakka ground tea (Lei Cha). As Wang (2025) notes, this type of discourse constructs a romanticized past that functions as a consumable experience, allowing tourists to temporarily adopt a “Hakka identity” through participation in these staged authenticities.

4.2 Discursive Practice: Encoding by Hosts and Decoding by Tourists

The second dimension of Fairclough’s framework—discursive practice—focuses on how these texts are produced and consumed. In Heyuan, the “encoding” process by hosts is often a strategic negotiation between cultural preservation and commercial viability. Hosts act as “cultural brokers,” translating complex Hakka customs into digestible narratives for outsiders.

Our analysis of over 300 user-generated content (UGC) posts indicates that the “production” of homestay discourse is no longer a top-down process. Instead, it is a co-construction where operators provide the “cultural hooks” (e.g., specific architectural details or ritualized tea services), and tourists amplify these narratives through their own social media sharing. This aligns with Liang and Xu’s (2021) observation that new media marketing has redefined rural space consumption through digital storytelling.

The transition from consuming a discourse to forming a robust place identity is mediated by the tourist’s “decoding” process—their cognitive and emotional engagement with the narrative. In the context of Heyuan, place identity is not an immediate outcome of visitation but a gradual accumulation of “meaning-making” moments. Our qualitative data from semi-structured interviews suggests that when the discursive construction of a homestay aligns with the tourist’s functional expectations and emotional needs, it fosters a strong sense of “belonging to the place” (place identity).

A tourist interviewed at a homestay near Wanlv Lake (Tourist-07) shared her experience:

Before coming, I read about the “Ecological Hakka” identity of Heyuan. But it was only after staying here, hearing the host explain how the local architecture protects against the humid river air, and eating food grown in the backyard, that I felt a real connection. The discourse in the brochure was just a hook, but the host’s stories provided the substance. I don’t just like this room; I feel I understand the logic of this land.

This highlights a crucial finding: cognitive identity—the intellectual understanding of a culture’s logic—serves as the foundation for emotional identity. When the discourse moves beyond “showing” (text) to “explaining and involving” (practice), the bond with Heyuan is

solidified. Participant observation confirmed that guests who engaged in “host-led storytelling” reported a deeper connection to the local heritage than those who only consumed the visual aesthetics of the property.

4.3 Social Practice: Ideological Tensions and “Symbolic Fatigue”

At the macro-level of social practice, the discourse of Heyuan’s homestays is situated within the ideological framework of “Rural Revitalization” and the “Belt and Road” initiative’s cultural output goals. As discussed by Lin and Zhao (2023) and Lin and Luo (2022), Heyuan’s cultural industry is increasingly tasked with “going out” (zou chu qu), requiring a discourse that is both globally appealing and locally authentic.

However, tensions arise when there is a “discursive gap” between the high-level policy narratives and the actual tourist experience. In some highly commercialized areas of Heyuan, we observed a phenomenon of “over-curation,” where the pursuit of a standardized “luxury” experience contradicts the discourse of “authentic rural Hakka life.” Some homestays emphasize “traditional Hakka values” in their brochures but provide services that are indistinguishable from urban luxury hotels, lacking what locals call the “soil smell” (tu qi) or local soul.

This leads to what Lin and Zhao (2023) describe as “symbolic fatigue” or “discursive alienation”. When tourists perceive the culture as a mere “staged performance” devoid of genuine social practice, it results in a superficial “tokenistic identity”. One tourist (Tourist-12) noted during an interview:

The website said this was a “Hakka immersion,” but it felt like a theme park. The staff didn’t speak the dialect, and the “traditional dinner” was a generic buffet. The discourse promised roots, but the reality was rootless.

In such cases, the intention to revisit is significantly lower because the discursive experience lacks the “uniqueness” and “depth” required to sustain a long-term emotional

bond. This illustrates the power dynamics at play in Fairclough's social practice dimension: the dominance of commercial/industrial discourse can sometimes overwrite the "lived discourse" of the local community, leading to a loss of cultural integrity.

Our participant observation in Xiatun Village provided a counter-example where "Red Tourism" and "Hakka Ancestral narratives" were successfully integrated. By involving local villagers in the storytelling process, these homestays maintained a "semiotic congruence" between the text and the lived reality. This alignment between the textual, discursive, and social dimensions of CDA is therefore the prerequisite for successful and sustainable cultural identity construction in Heyuan (Zheng & Huang, 2022).

In conclusion, the discourse of Heyuan's homestays functions as a bridge between macro-level revitalization policies and micro-level individual experiences. The most successful homestays are those that curate a "layered discursive system"—combining visual authenticity with intellectual engagement and social integrity—to foster a profound and lasting place identity.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Research Summary

This study concludes that discourse is far more than a mere marketing instrument; it serves as the fundamental mechanism through which Hakka cultural identity is constructed, negotiated, and commodified within the homestay tourism sector of Heyuan. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, this research has systematically demonstrated that effective identity-building is a multi-dimensional process. It requires a harmonious alignment between the Textual dimension (the symbolic use of architecture and language), the Discursive dimension (the dynamic host-guest interactions and digital storytelling), and the Social dimension (the macro-frameworks of national policy and ancestral tradition).

The research reveals that a “layered discursive system” is essential for successful cultural transmission. This system effectively integrates macro-narratives, such as “Rural Revitalization” and the “Ecological Heyuan” initiative, with the intimate micro-narratives of individual host stories and lived experiences. This intersection of top-down policy discourse and bottom-up personal storytelling creates a robust cultural landscape that fosters a profound sense of place identity among tourists.

5.2 Key Findings

A central finding of this study is that place identity acts as a critical mediator in the Heyuan tourism experience, bridging the gap between discursive consumption and behavioral loyalty. The empirical data suggests that the more a tourist internalizes the discursively constructed “Hakkaness” — moving from mere visual observation to an intellectual understanding of Hakka resilience and ecological wisdom—the higher their likelihood of becoming a loyal advocate for the destination. This process is particularly evident in clusters like Xiatun Village and Wanlv Lake, where the discourse of “homecoming” and “ecological harmony” resonates deeply with urban travelers.

However, the study also identifies a significant “discursive gap” in over-commercialized settings, which poses a substantial threat to the sustainability of the Hakka brand. When marketing texts promise “authentic immersion” but provide standardized, soulless luxury services, it leads to “symbolic fatigue” and discursive alienation. As emphasized by Liang, Liu, and Wang (2019), authentic place identity requires more than the passive consumption of visual symbols; it necessitates a genuine intellectual and emotional “resonance” with the local lifestyle. Furthermore, this study highlights that the construction of identity is increasingly mediated by new media practices, as noted by Liang and Xu (2021), where digital narratives act as a precursor to physical experience.

Ultimately, for Heyuan to maintain its competitive edge as the “Ancient Hub of the Hakka,” it must ensure that its tourism discourse remains rooted in the lived reality of the local community. By aligning official “going out” strategies (Lin & Zhao, 2023; Lin & Luo, 2022) with authentic, host-led storytelling, Heyuan can create a sustainable tourism model that balances economic growth with cultural integrity, ensuring that the Hakka identity is not just consumed as a product, but experienced as a living heritage.

6. Implications

The findings of this study offer significant insights into the intersection of discourse, cultural heritage, and tourism psychology. By deconstructing the “discursive construction → place identity → behavioral intention” chain within the specific context of Heyuan, this research provides both academic depth and actionable strategies for the sustainable development of ethnic tourism.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this research advances the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within the field of tourism geography and heritage studies by shifting the focus from macro-level destination branding to the micro-level of homestay interactions. This shift is critical as it challenges the traditional, essentialist view of cultural identity as a static, inherited “resource.” Instead, this study conceptualizes Hakka identity as a dynamic “discursive product” that is continuously negotiated, performed, and reconstructed between multiple agents—hosts, guests, and state institutions. By integrating Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework, the research reveals the intricate process through which the structural power of national “Rural Revitalization” policies is translated into the individual, localized narratives of homestay hosts. This provides a theoretical bridge between macro-

level political ideology and the micro-level, subjective “lived experience” of the tourist (Zheng & Huang, 2022).

Furthermore, this study enriches the literature on “Place Identity” by identifying the specific “Cognitive,” “Emotional,” and “Functional” pathways through which discursive reception is internalized as psychological attachment. Unlike previous studies that treat place identity as a monolithic construct, this research argues that in the context of Heyuan, identity is formed through a “semiotic congruence” between the text (marketing), the practice (host-guest interaction), and the social context (Hakka tradition). This adds a more nuanced layer to Dean MacCannell’s theory of “staged authenticity.” The findings suggest that for the modern “post-tourist,” the perceived authenticity of a culture depends less on historical “facticity” and more on the internal coherence and resonance of the discursive framework presented during the stay (Wang, 2025). This move toward “discursive authenticity” represents a significant theoretical evolution in how we understand the consumption of ethnic heritage in the digital age.

6.2 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the study provides a strategic and evidence-based roadmap for homestay operators and tourism policymakers in Heyuan to transcend the superficial “symbolization” and “commodification” of Hakka culture.

First, for Managers and Operators, the research highlights the necessity of building a “layered discursive system” (Liang, Liu, & Wang, 2019). The study demonstrates that visual motifs alone—such as displaying Hakka “Wei Wu” architectural elements—are insufficient to foster long-term loyalty. Operators must transition from being “facility providers” to “cultural

curators.” This involves the curation of “small stories” and “micro-narratives” (e.g., the specific lineage history of a village or the botanical lore behind Hakka Lei Cha) that allow tourists to engage in active “meaning-making.” By providing these discursive entry points, operators can help tourists move from being passive observers to active participants in the Hakka story.

Second, regarding Marketing and Communication, the findings suggest a radical shift in digital storytelling strategies. In an era dominated by platforms like Little Red Book and Douyin, marketing should prioritize “living culture” over over-idealized, static imagery (Liang & Xu, 2021). The discourse that resonates most with contemporary travelers is that of the “unscripted rural life”—the daily rhythms, dialects, and social interactions of Hakka residents. This approach not only enhances perceived authenticity but also builds a “digital place identity” before the tourist even arrives in Heyuan.

Third, for Public Policy and Community Development, the study emphasizes the importance of empowering local residents as “discursive co-producers” rather than mere “background characters” in the tourism narrative (Lin & Zhao, 2023). When the narratives shared with tourists are rooted in the genuine lived reality and pride of the local community, Heyuan can avoid the “reality gap” and “symbolic fatigue” that often lead to “tokenistic identity.” Policymakers should support training programs that help local villagers articulate their own heritage narratives, ensuring that the “output” of Hakka culture under the Belt and Road Initiative remains both competitive and culturally integral (Lin & Luo, 2022). Ultimately, these discursive strategies facilitate a more resilient and sustainable form of tourism that balances economic imperatives with the authentic preservation and innovative

activation of Heyuan's unique Hakka soul.

7. Limitations and Future Prospects

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. First, the single-case focus on Heyuan may limit generalizability to other Hakka regions like Meizhou (Lin & Luo, 2022). Second, the cross-sectional design captures only a “snapshot” of identity, overlooking its long-term evolution (Fairclough, 2013).

Future research should conduct cross-regional comparisons to identify diverse “discursive markers.” Additionally, investigating the impact of AI and the Metaverse on “virtual” Hakka heritage presents a new frontier (Wang, 2025). Longitudinal studies are also recommended to track the tourist “identity lifecycle” and its effect on sustained revisit intentions.

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