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# The Construction of Internet-Famous City Images: A Case Study of Quanzhou

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## Abstract

Leveraging its rich cultural heritage, culinary traditions, and iconic film and television symbols, Quanzhou has successfully cultivated a distinctive "internet-famous city" image through coordinated efforts by both official and grassroots media, supported by digital platforms. From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, these symbols serve not merely as static representations but acquire new meanings through audience engagement, functioning as bridges connecting the city with visitors. Film and television production locations and celebrity sharing events have further amplified Quanzhou's influence, highlighting the pivotal role of cinematic culture in shaping urban identity. Moving forward, Quanzhou should continue to explore its cultural depth and enhance interactive communication strategies to inject new momentum into its sustainable development.

## Keywords

Internet-famous cities; Urban image; Symbolic Interaction Theory

## 1. Introduction

The barbecue of Zibo, the cuisine of Chaoshan, and the Ice and Snow World of Harbin—these distinctive urban features, shaped through internet media, have successfully ignited people's boundless admiration, elevating them to popular social media hotspots. Initially, "internet celebrities" referred to individuals who leveraged advancements in media technology and online platforms to build personal influence and gain fan following within their respective fields [1]. Over time, the concept of "internet celebrities" has broadened beyond individual figures; numerous locations have also gained prominence through widespread internet dissemination, giving rise to the term "internet-famous cities." In recent years, Quanzhou—the only city in China to hold the distinction of a World Cultural Heritage site—has gradually entered the public consciousness through joint promotional efforts by official and civilian media, becoming a highly sought-after tourist destination. Building on this context,

this paper employs symbolic interaction theory as its framework to delve into the process of constructing Quanzhou's image as an internet-famous city.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Definition

### 2.1. Theoretical Basis

Symbolic Interactionism, also known as Symbolic Interaction Theory, is a sociological and social psychological theory. Originally proposed by American sociologist Max Weber, this theory posits that individuals assign meaning to objects through symbols during social interactions, and these meanings subsequently influence their actions and attitudes. The core assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism include: both social reality and material reality are meaningful; we derive our understanding of the world through interpreting the meanings of symbolic signs; symbolic meanings are acquired through social interactions with others; human decisions and behaviors are not based on external stimuli but rather on subjective interpretations of the environment and societal expectations; and the self, like other social entities, is shaped through social interactions with others [2]. As a crucial component of urban competitiveness, the construction of a city's image essentially involves the selection, encoding, and dissemination of cultural symbols [3]. From this symbolic perspective, this study employs Symbolic Interaction Theory as a key framework for analyzing the symbols of Quanzhou's tourism appeal and its urban image construction. According to this theory, symbolic interaction in urban communication refers to individuals 'continuous process of assigning meaning to tourist destinations and related elements through referencing, imitation, and firsthand experiences during communicative activities. These processes not only enhance the depth and breadth of tourism experiences but also profoundly shape and disseminate Quanzhou's urban image.

### 2.2. Urban Image

Kevin Lynch defines urban image as "a public perception—a comprehensive impression arising from the interaction between psychological perceptions of the external physical world and one's own cultural background" [4]. From this perspective, and in conjunction with the definition of internet celebrities, the urban image of an internet celebrity city specifically refers to the overall impression shaped through complex interactions between online platforms and various media outlets. With the widespread reach of the internet, people's understanding of a city no longer relies primarily on firsthand experiences but rather heavily on content such as text, video, and audio produced by external media channels. This content serves as the primary source for forming initial impressions of a city and fosters strong motivations and psychological tendencies among audiences to visit the city (often referred to as "check-ins").

## 3. Elements of Quanzhou's Urban Image Communication

The elements of Quanzhou's urban image communication encompass various dimensions, including the dissemination of cultural symbols, culinary symbols, and cinematic symbols. As the only city in China to successfully be inscribed on the World Heritage List, Quanzhou itself boasts an exceptionally profound and unique cultural heritage. Through joint promotional efforts by numerous social media platforms and official media outlets, Quanzhou's specialty foods have demonstrated remarkable appeal. Meanwhile, Quanzhou has frequently appeared as a filming location in various film and television productions, establishing itself as a highly sought-after destination for film tourism. It is precisely through the powerful impetus of these communicative symbols that this World Heritage city has been brought into the public eye.

### 3.1. Cultural Symbol Communication

As a renowned historical and cultural city, Quanzhou boasts abundant cultural heritage sites such as the former Maritime Trade Office ruins, Tianhou Temple, Kaiyuan Temple, and Luoyang Bridge. In the ancient urban area, Quanzhou West Street−a historic district with over a millennium of history−serves as a city landmark embodying local historical and cultural significance. Although this main street runs linearly in one direction, its sides are crisscrossed by countless ancient alleys, each resembling an open-air museum that documents Quanzhou's historical evolution and cultural legacy. Red brick walls, terracotta roofs, and swallow-tail eaves are ubiquitous examples of typical Minnan architectural style, showcasing not only the region's unique aesthetic but also the deep emotional connection of Quanzhou residents to their homeland. In certain areas, residential buildings blending Eastern and Western architectural elements can be observed, such as the arcaded buildings along Quanzhou's Zhongshan Road, which skillfully integrate both styles and vividly reflect the city's multicultural integration.

Beyond its status as a UNESCO World Heritage-listed historical and cultural city, Quanzhou boasts a wealth of intangible cultural heritage. These heritage elements serve as the "living genes" of urban culture, preserving the city's historical memory and cultural essence. The city's image − representing the public's collective perception and emotional connection to the city [5]−is constructed and manifested through these cultural symbols. The traditional Shumpu women's head ornament, the Zanhua Wei, gained widespread recognition through celebrity Zhao Liying's iconic Zanhua style. This originally local cultural symbol has undergone three transformative meanings: First, it evolved from a "symbol of faith" to a "visual symbol," losing its original functions of blessing and identity recognition in social interactions, retaining only its vibrant, visually striking appearance. Second, it shifted from a "community symbol" to a "personal symbol": no longer representing Shumpu women's collective memory or community identity, it became a medium for

tourist self-expression—wearing Hanfu, adorning the Zanhua Wei, and posing for photos in Oyster Shell Houses formed a complete "cultural experience" narrative. Tourists consumed not the Zanhua Wei itself but the self-expression embodied by this symbol. Third, it transformed from a "local symbol" into a "mobile symbol": through cross-regional dissemination, the Zanhua Wei transcended its regional context, becoming a replicable cultural element applicable to any city. When similar Zanhua experience stores emerged in Chengdu, Xi 'an, and Suzhou, the symbol's significance became universally recognized.

Nevertheless, the cultural tourism fervor sparked by the hair ornament tradition shows no signs of waning. According to data from Douyin, as of December 14,2024, the Quanzhou-related topic had attracted 1.7065 million participants, with cumulative views reaching 24.376 billion and nearly 30 days of interactions totaling an impressive 2.733 million. During the 2024 Spring Festival, Shumpu Village in Quanzhou saw a surge in tourist visits due to its hair ornament customs, receiving 361,000 visitors—a 600% year-on-year increase [6]. These figures not only demonstrate the extensive dissemination and profound impact of Quanzhou's cultural symbols on modern social media but also reflect the public's keen interest and enthusiastic response toward its culture. From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, Quanzhou's cultural symbols have evolved beyond static historical relics, architectural styles, or head ornaments; through audience engagement, they are infused with new vitality and meaning, allowing this World Heritage city to shine brightly in global consciousness.

### 3.2. The Dissemination of Culinary Symbols

When mentioning Quanzhou, most people instinctively think of its distinctive culinary symbols rich in regional character—such as Quanzhou's noodle soup, meat zongzi, and ginger-fermented duck. These dishes are not only culinary delights but also vital carriers of Quanzhou's culture. The traditional adage "food is the paramount necessity of the people" elevates dining beyond mere physiological satisfaction, making it a significant vehicle for local cultural significance. Much of Quanzhou's tourism appeal stems precisely from these unforgettable regional flavors. In today's consumer society, media technology has profoundly reshaped the dissemination dynamics of culinary symbols. As Baudrillard noted, electronic media's strong immediacy and textual nature eliminate traditional aesthetic distance, playing a decisive role in the textualization of aesthetic phenomena in consumer society [7]. Official media and social media platforms leverage diverse formats like videos and images to transform Quanzhou's cuisine into visual content that can be instantly viewed, shared, and consumed, creating vivid and tangible impressions of the city for audiences.

Taking the Douyin platform as an example, a search for "Quanzhou Mianxianhu" reveals that the video posted by self-media blogger "Special Wulala" ranks among

the top results with 427,000 likes. The video not only provides a detailed explanation of the preparation techniques and unique flavor of Quanzhou's signature dish—Mianxianhu—but also skillfully incorporates other local delicacies such as Quanzhou Tusan jelly and oyster omelette. Through the blogger's eating demonstrations and carefully crafted close-up shots, it comprehensively showcases the color, aroma, and taste of these foods from multiple perspectives, successfully sparking viewers' keen interest and admiration for Quanzhou cuisine.

In the video's comment section, Quanzhou locals and visitors engaged in a positive exchange. The locals not only enthusiastically explained the proper way to enjoy the noodle paste but also recommended other local delicacies. This firsthand information from "local residents" undoubtedly provided visitors with a more authentic and profound experience of Quanzhou's cuisine. Meanwhile, as they absorbed this information, visitors continuously infused these culinary symbols with new meanings and interpretations through interactions with locals, thereby developing a more comprehensive and insightful understanding of the city. This process aligns precisely with the Symbolic Interaction Theory, which posits that individuals construct and reconstruct the meaning of themselves and their surroundings through the reception, interpretation, and feedback of symbols in interpersonal interactions.

When examined within a broader cultural framework, Quanzhou's culinary delights —such as Tusan jelly, ginger-fermented duck, and noodle soup—are originally merely functional foods catering to physiological needs. Yet through centuries of interaction between the Maritime Silk Road legacy and the culture of this overseas Chinese hometown, they have evolved into cultural symbols embodying local memories. During dining experiences, tourists' immediate sensory perceptions engage in continuous dialogue with their internalized societal expectations, transforming individual taste responses into culturally meaningful interpretations aligned with principles of authenticity. This redefinition of tourism contexts elevates everyday meals into ritualistic practices with performative qualities. On social media platforms, food bloggers amplify these dishes' regional symbolism through visual rhetoric, while audiences participate in co-shaping meaning through comments, check-ins, and creative adaptations—a dynamic cycle of "symbol‑interaction‑re-symbolization." Ultimately, through the mechanism of internalizing "generalized representations," Quanzhou cuisine transcends its role as mere consumables, becoming a cultural bridge connecting personal emotions with collective identity.

As a vital symbol of urban culture, Quanzhou's cuisine has not only captured public attention through the combined efforts of official media and social media platforms, but also evolved from a local culinary tradition into an iconic representation of the city's cultural identity through the continuous flow and reinterpretation of its significance. This process deepens audiences 'understanding and appreciation of Quanzhou's historical heritage and distinctive regional characteristics, establishing

culinary symbols as one of the core cultural resources in shaping the city's image and tourism appeal.

### 3.3. The Communication of Film and Television Symbols

The meaning of film and television symbols is not inherent in the imagery itself, but is endowed and reproduced through continuous interaction among creators, texts, and audiences. As dense carriers of symbols, TV dramas and films not only contain rich storylines and visual elements but also often incorporate the distinctive expressions of celebrities. These elements collectively create a powerful magnetic force that attracts audiences, particularly fan communities. Celebrities, as symbols with significant social influence, often evoke strong emotional resonance and a sense of identity among their fans through their words and actions. Thus, when celebrities share personal experiences related to their works on social media−such as Li Xian's consecutive Weibo posts about Quanzhou, the filming location, during the broadcast of her leading role in the TV series "Spring Colors for Lovers" −these actions serve as potent symbolic communication that resonates deeply with fan communities.

The Weibo posts released by Li Xian, such as the phrase expressed in Minnan dialect "Wagali Gong, Quanzhou Jia Shui" (meaning "Quanzhou is truly beautiful"), serve not only as direct praise for the city's scenery but also as a bridge for fans to forge emotional connections with their idols. Fans have flooded the comments section with messages like "Traveling through Quanzhou with Li Xian" and "I want to visit Quanzhou." These posts are not merely expressions of personal emotion; they also reflect fans' attempts to recreate similar experiences−both in virtual and real worlds −through imitation and sharing of their idol's actions. This deepens their affection and identification with the idol while fostering shared memories and discussion topics within the fan community, thereby strengthening its cohesion and sense of belonging.

Furthermore, when Li Xian posted "Clearing Quanzhou's inventory" accompanied by a nine-grid photo, comments such as "I'll share my Quanzhou inventory too" and "Looking at your photos 4 and 9 from afar" in the comment section demonstrated how fans participated in this celebrity-initiated "symbolic interaction" by mimicking their idol's behavior−specifically, sharing personal memories or photos of Quanzhou. This interaction not only strengthened fans' emotional connection to the city but also facilitated the broader dissemination and reproduction of the symbolic meaning originally generated by the celebrity's individual actions, ultimately forming a complex and rich network of symbolic interactions surrounding TV dramas, celebrities, and filming locations. This process exemplifies the core tenet of symbolic interaction theory regarding how individuals shape their self-perception and social relationships through symbolic interactions.

In summary, the construction of Quanzhou's urban image is the result of the

combined influence of cultural symbols, culinary symbols, and cinematic symbols. Through interaction with audiences, these symbols continuously acquire new meanings and interpretations, thereby fostering a comprehensive and profound understanding of the city of Quanzhou.

## 4. Conclusion

As a renowned historical and cultural city, Quanzhou has effectively leveraged its rich cultural symbols, culinary landmarks, and film-related icons during its rise as an internet-famous destination. Through the combined efforts of official and grassroots media, coupled with extensive dissemination via online platforms, these elements have successfully shaped Quanzhou's distinctive urban identity, attracting numerous visitors eager to experience its unique charm.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, Quanzhou's cultural symbols, culinary symbols, and cinematic symbols are not merely static representations but serve as vital media for dynamic interaction with audiences. Through this interaction, these symbols acquire new life and meaning, functioning as bridges between Quanzhou and its audience. As audiences receive these symbols, they continuously interpret, respond to, and reproduce them, thereby fostering a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Quanzhou.

Furthermore, the unique role played by film and television dramas as well as celebrity culture in contemporary society cannot be overlooked. As one scholar noted, "There exists an ontogenetic primordial relationship between cities and cinema; this 'primordial relationship' constitutes a mother-child dynamic where the city serves as the nurturing matrix for cinema" [8]. It is precisely through this mother-child relationship that Quanzhou has successfully attracted substantial fan attention and on-site visits via film and television production locations and celebrity engagement activities, significantly expanding the reach of its urban image and enhancing its influence. This process not only profoundly illustrates the core tenet of symbolic interactionism regarding how individuals utilize symbolic interactions to shape self-perception and social relationships, but also highlights the pivotal role of film and television dramas and celebrity culture in shaping urban identities and driving urban development.

In summary, Quanzhou's successful establishment as an internet-famous city is attributable to its rich symbolic resources and effective communication strategies. Moving forward, the city should further explore its unique cultural heritage and tourism assets, enhance interaction and engagement with its audience, and further elevate the visibility and reputation of its urban image, thereby injecting new vitality and momentum into its sustainable development.

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