

# **Branding Strategies for International Communication by Regional Mainstream Media: An Analysis based on Innovative Practice of Hainan International Media Centre**

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**Abstract:** Established in the context of Hainan’s Free Trade Port initiative, the Hainan International Media Centre (HIMC) has gradually emerged as a key hub in the province’s international communication system. Through sustained institutional, technological and communicative model innovations, the centre has accumulated core brand assets for building a globally oriented media brand. This article examines the branding practices of HIMC from the perspective of innovation as the media brand equity and proposes three strategic directions for media branding. First, it advocates an IP-oriented development model that emphasizes the creation of original media programs to enhance brand recognition and content stickiness; second, it suggests constructing cross-cultural communication communities in vertical fields targeting global professionals and international investors, thereby enabling more precise and effective outreach. Third, it highlights value co-creation as a branding strategy by encouraging foreign residents and digital nomads in Hainan to participate in the co-construction of regional international communication. Overall, the study argues that regional mainstream media should position innovation as the core of their brand identity and enhance international discourse power through differentiated narratives and community-based communication mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Regional Mainstream Media; International Communication; Hainan International Media Centre; Media Branding.

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## **1.Introduction**

The conceptualisation of the Hainan Free Trade Port (FTP) was announced in 2018, with island-wide independent customs operations officially commencing on 18 December 2025. To serve this strategic deployment of opening-up in a new era, Hainan International Media Centre (HIMC) was established in November 2019, acting as a crucial fulcrum for exploring innovative international communication system. As a regional institution for international communication activities, the centre serves as a pivotal intermediary node linking various levels within China’s strategic communication framework. Its fundamental positioning lies in “telling the Hainan story” and projecting the voice of the Hainan FTP, whilst simultaneously serving as a multifaceted communication platform for overseas audiences. From the perspective of precise strategic communication, HIMC’s external communication efficacy is driven by a triad of strategic dimensions, including the national strategy, the international communication strategy, and the circum-South China Sea diplomatic strategy. Consequently, the development of the centre is dedicated to fulfilling key requirements, such as enhancing national soft power, constructing a platform for convergence and exchange between Chinese and foreign media, and leveraging the role of media in public diplomacy. During the process of international communication, the media content received by HIMC’s audience is typically regarded as an experiential good, through which audiences perceive elements of brand personality, such as credibility, sincerity and aesthetics. Reflecting upon the logic of media branding, overseas audiences perceive the value of content produced by HIMC after consumption, which subsequently manifests in the expansion of the user base and even the generation of certain economic benefits, a phenomenon particularly prevalent among Western

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commercial media. For HIMC, however, innovative practices such as the “333” communication system and its strategic background are not merely instruments for innovating the international communication model of the Hainan FTP; they constitute core assets driving the branding operations of the media.

## **2.Communication Model of HIMC**

Since its inception, HIMC has progressively established the “333” international communication system, which involves developing “three major platforms” comprising provincial mainstream media, departmental and municipal platforms and home-field diplomatic events; leveraging “three major channels” incorporating media of central authorities, foreign media and commercial media platforms; and constructing “three major supports” encompassing international talents, contribution platforms and feedback mechanisms. Its system has also demonstrated innovation in establishing and integrating policies and think tanks, showcasing its distinct characteristics of collaborative governance and strategic planning advantages among the series of international communication centres established in China.

### **2.1 Integration of Systems**

The model innovation of HIMC is primarily manifested in its integrated vertical-horizontal communication matrix. Formally defined as the FTP International Communication System, this mechanism synergizes resources across multiple echelons from central authorities to provincial and municipal departments to establish a comprehensive discourse mechanism encompassing policy interpretation, content production and effect evaluation. It fosters a multi-agent participation landscape involving governments, mainstream media and social forces. From the perspective of media branding, this institutionalized systemic integration constitutes a unique brand asset. Its distinctive “Provincial-Ministry Cooperation” model facilitates high-efficiency resource allocation and provides robust official endorsement for collaborations with national outlets such as China Daily and CGTN. In 2025, extensive coverage by state media, exemplified by Xinhua News Agency’s report on the inauguration of the HIMC ASEAN Liaison Centre in Malaysia and China Daily’s exploration of narrative strategies for Hainan’s modernization, underscored the burgeoning brand influence and international prestige catalysed by HIMC’s systemic innovation.

### **2.2 Channel Innovation**

HIMC has established a multi-platform communication network under the unified account identity of “@HiHainan”, forming an integrated domestic–international media matrix. This matrix covers major Chinese social media platforms targeting domestic audiences, such as Douyin, WeChat Official Accounts, WeChat Channels, Bilibili, and Weibo, as well as overseas platforms primarily oriented toward international users, including Facebook and X. A notable innovation lies in the multilingual and hybrid audience orientation of its domestic platforms. Content is released not only in Chinese but also in English, Korean, Russian, and Japanese, addressing both Chinese audiences and foreign residents living in China. This strategy aligns closely with Zhang’s concept of “Bridge Crowd” in cross-cultural brand communication, which emphasizes the mediating role of culturally hybrid groups in international discourse transmission<sup>[1]</sup>. Those foreign residents in China, endowed with dual cultural identities and interpersonal communication advantages, function as key intermediaries between Chinese regional brands and overseas audiences. In addition to its official accounts, the centre has also encouraged collaboration with semi-official and non-official social media creators producing Hainan-related content. This “official + social” linkage further expands the communication network, forming a decentralized but coordinated dissemination structure. Such channel innovation reflects a shift from a single authoritative voice toward a networked branding model, enhancing the visibility, credibility and participatory nature of regional international communication.

### **2.3 Shift in Content Strategy**

Another key innovation in HIMC’s branding practice is the strategic shift in content orientation, moving away from traditional hard news focused on political or economic themes toward scenario-based storytelling centred on

FTP opportunities. This transformation reflects an effort to reposition regional international communication as experiential, immersive and lifestyle-oriented rather than policy-driven. Taking X as an example, the account @hiHainan had published 6,501 posts and attracted 5,915 followers by January 2026. Its content formats include short texts, images and short videos. More importantly, the narrative focus shows a gradual attempt to shed the label of “over-politicization” commonly associated with official Chinese international communication. Instead of didactic or slogan-driven messaging, the account increasingly highlights vivid moments of local life, encouraging audiences to engage emotionally with the media environment constructed through these narratives. For instance, a post published on January 14, 2026, showcased the China Extreme Dance Competition in Sanya, emphasizing the integration of fashion, sports and creative expression. Another post on January 8, 2026, presented sunset scenes at Lingshui Fishing Port, combining visual imagery of coastal landscapes with narratives of seafood dining and helicopter sightseeing. Similarly, a post on December 31, 2025, documented a rural music concert in Tunchang, featuring Qiong Opera, fireworks, bonfire dancing and tourism-related discounts, thereby blending folk culture with contemporary leisure consumption. Through such content, HIMC attempts to embed the abstract concept of FTP into everyday life scenes and cultural experiences, allowing international audiences to “sense” development opportunities through affective and aesthetic engagement rather than explicit policy explanation.

### **3. Internal Logic of Innovation as Media Branding**

#### **3.1 Institutional Innovation Empowering Contents**

HIMC was established in the context of the official launch of FTP initiative, which constituting a source of legitimacy and professional authority for policy communication. HIMC has also pursued continuous internal institutional innovation, reshaping both the production logic and communicative function of policy-related content. As a result, FTP policies have gradually been transformed from objects of conventional promotion into practical action guides for international audiences. As a regional international communication institution serving national strategy, HIMC’s core function lies in narrating China’s reform and opening-up in the new era through concrete FTP practices. At the operational level, HIMC has advanced institutional innovation in content production around FTP policies. One example is its bilingual financial talk show Free Trade Dialogue (*Zimao Jia*), which features interviews with economic experts, industry representatives and policy professionals. Through dialogic formats, the program systematically interprets economic trends and policy issues while balancing policy authority with market readability. In addition, HIMC has established coordinated communication mechanisms with institutions such as the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, the China International Consumer Products Expo, and Sansha TV, thereby expanding both the thematic scope and hierarchical reach of policy-related narratives. Overall, HIMC’s media branding innovation is not based on spontaneous journalistic expression but on an institutionally embedded model of content production. Within this model, policies are functionally translated from symbolic value statements into information resources tailored to specific international groups.

#### **3.2 Technological Innovation Driving Forms**

HIMC’s technological innovation has further emerged as a key driver of transformation in the forms of international communication. In its practices, HIMC has progressively introduced multi-platform adaptation strategies and audiovisual storytelling, enabling communication forms to better align with international audiences’ media consumption habits and cognitive pathways. By developing an understanding of the technical rules and algorithmic logics of different social media platforms, HIMC has promoted a shift in content production from a “one-size-fits-all” distribution model to a platform-adaptive approach. On overseas platforms such as X and Facebook, content differs noticeably from that produced for domestic platforms (WeChat Channel and Bilibili, etc.) in terms of length control, hashtag usage and narrative pacing, thereby enhancing visibility and readability within algorithm-driven information flows. In this context, technology functions not merely as an operational tool but as a structural factor that shapes both communicative forms and modes of audience engagement. Moreover, through the

extensive use of short videos, aerial footage and scene-based editing, HIMC embeds FTP development, urban life and local culture into concrete and perceptible everyday scenarios. This visual-oriented approach allows international audiences to form an intuitive understanding of Hainan with reduced reliance on linguistic explanation. Such perception-driven formal innovation helps to mitigate the sense of distance often associated with official communication and enhances the media brand's approachability.

### 3.3 Model Innovation Expanding Boundaries

Compared with institutional and technological innovations, model innovation more directly addresses issues related to subject configuration and discursive boundaries in international communication. In practice, HIMC has gradually moved beyond the traditional model in which official media function as the sole speaking subject. Through approaches such as "speaking through others" and "joint incubation", HIMC has explored more decentralized and networked pathways for international communication. The strategy of "speaking through others" is primarily manifested in the operation of the Overseas Communication Officer mechanism. By engaging foreign residents in Hainan, international students and content creators with cross-cultural communication competence, HIMC encourages the narration of Hainan-related stories through personal identities and non-official discursive styles. These communicative actors neither fully represent official positions nor operate independently of institutional objectives; instead, they maintain a loose alignment with official communication goals while adopting expressions embedded in everyday life contexts. Such an arrangement helps reduce international audiences' psychological resistance to official communication and enhances both the credibility and acceptability of the information conveyed. At the same time, the centre has implemented a "joint incubation" approach by co-creating content with foreign media organizations, international creators and professional teams. Within this model, official media increasingly assume the role of resource integrators and coordinators rather than narrative dominators, allowing content production to be partially delegated to collaborative partners. Overall, model innovation has enabled HIMC's international communication practices to evolve from one-way information output to multi-actor participation, providing new possibilities for enhancing the extensibility and vitality of the media brand within global communication networks.

## 4.Strategic Optimization Based on Innovative Brand Philosophy

### 4.1 IP-based Survival

Building upon multidimensional innovations at the institutional, technological and operational model levels, HIMC has gradually accumulated media brand assets with innovation at their core. For regional international communication, innovation is no longer merely an operational tool but an internal logic through which media brands can be trusted, perceived and engaged with in global communication contexts<sup>[2][3]</sup>.

Among these strategies, IP-oriented development represents a crucial pathway for regional media to achieve brand sustainability in international communication. By creating original programs such as "Free Trade Dialogue" and "Insight", the centre has gradually established stable content styles and thematic orientations. This approach allows the media brand to move beyond dependence on isolated events or policy milestones and instead build enduring brand memory through continuous content output. Characterized by fixed program titles, relatively stable narrative frameworks and predictable audience expectations, such programs enhance brand recognizability and audience stickiness, thereby supporting the long-term viability of the media brand in international communication environments.

### 4.2 Community-based Connectivity

In an international communication environment marked by highly segmented audiences, communication strategies aimed at "everyone" have become increasingly ineffective<sup>[4]</sup>. HIMC can therefore shift its focus toward vertical audiences such as global professionals and international investors. Through issue-based aggregation and

targeted content production, the centre seeks to cultivate cross-cultural communication communities. This community-based connectivity not only improves the precision of communication but also transforms the media brand from a mere information disseminator into a hub that connects diverse professional groups, thereby enhancing its structural value within international communication networks.

### **4.3 Value Co-creation**

Value co-creation constitutes a further extension of the innovative branding philosophy in international communication<sup>[5]</sup>. By encouraging foreign residents and digital nomads in Hainan to participate in content production and dissemination, HIMC can partially open the process of media brand construction to its audiences. This co-creation mechanism not only enriches the perspectives and expressive forms of communication content but also shifts the media brand from a “consumed object” to a “participatory process” thereby strengthening interactivity and audience identification in international communication.

## **5. Conclusion**

Overall, HIMC’s practices demonstrate that regional mainstream media should regard innovation as the core of their brand identity in international communication rather than as a short-term or instrumental strategy. Through institutional innovation that reinforces content legitimacy, technological innovation that optimizes communicative forms, and model innovation that expands communicative boundaries, regional media can gradually cultivate media brands characterized by recognizability and participation within the global communication system. Looking ahead, how to further enhance emotional resonance and cultural depth while maintaining institutional advantages remains a critical issue for sustained reflection in regional international communication.

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