

Original Paper

Paradigm Shift and Strategic Construction of Chinese Culture's International Communication in the New Media Era: A Dual-Case Study of Li Ziqi and TikTok

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Abstract

The international communication of Chinese culture in the new media era faces the dual challenges of the cultural discount and narrative silence. Traditional communication models exhibit prominent issues such as the cognitive gap between official and public perceptions and misalignment in content supply. Employing a methodology of case study and theoretical integration, this paper focuses on two representative cases: Li Ziqi's "Oriental Pastoralism" visual utopia and the "fragmented" communication of TikTok short videos. It systematically investigates the paradigm shift and practical pathways for Chinese culture's international communication in the new media context. The research finds that the core breakthrough of the new media communication paradigm lies in: Li Ziqi's approach of deep cultural embedding and TikTok's model of scaled dissemination, representing the diversified practical paths of "slow narrative, deep implantation" and "lightweight, viral diffusion" respectively. Meanwhile, current communication still faces challenges such as cultural decoding barriers, credibility dilemmas, and content homogenization. Based on these findings, this paper proposes communication strategies centered on "humanized narratives, localized platforms and collaborative actors" and points out new forms for the future of international communication of Chinese culture. It aims to provide theoretical reference and practical insights for constructing a future-oriented international communication system for Chinese culture.

Keywords

New Media Era, International Communication of Chinese Culture, Paradigm Shift, Communication Strategies

1. Introduction

The waves of globalization and the iteration of digital technology are reshaping cross-cultural communication. In this era empowered by new media, breaking through cultural communication barriers, achieving the effective export of cultural value, and thereby transforming it into intangible influence have become increasingly crucial.

China possesses a profound cultural heritage, yet it faces the dual dilemmas of cultural discount and narrative silence in cross-cultural communication: the grand narratives dominated by traditional media struggle to reach ordinary overseas audiences, while the fragmented dissemination on social media easily falls into the pitfalls of symbolization and superficiality. In the new media age where platforms such as TikTok and YouTube have become the main arenas for cultural diffusion, the paradigm for Chinese culture's international communication urgently requires reconstruction.

Based on this, this paper employs a methodology of case study and theoretical coupling to explore the paradigm shift and practical challenges in Chinese culture's international communication in the new media era, and attempts to propose communication strategies centered on "humanized narratives, localized platforms, and collaborative actors".

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Questions

This study revolves around two core questions: First, as current international communication of Chinese culture faces challenges such as cultural decoding barriers, credibility dilemmas, and content homogenization, how can new media facilitate a paradigm shift from "one-way output" to "two-way interaction"? Second, what communication strategies can be adopted when constructing a future-oriented system for China's cultural communication?

2.2 Research Methods

This study adopts a research methodology combining case analysis and theoretical frameworks. After analyzing the media development process of Chinese culture's international communication, it conducts an in-depth examination of the communication logic behind two major case studies: Li Ziqi and TikTok. This approach clearly demonstrates the paradigm shift in cultural communication from "one-way output" to "two-way interaction" in the new media era. It verifies that the communicative efficacy of deep cultural embedding and the scalability advantage of lightweight dissemination can jointly construct a diverse ecosystem for cultural communication via new media.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Encoding-Decoding Theory

The Encoding-Decoding Theory, proposed by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, breaks the linear perception of "communicator-audience" and emphasizes communication as a process of production and circulation of symbolic meaning. Communicators "encode" messages, embedding cultural connotations

and ideologies into content through symbols such as text, images and sound. Audiences, however, are not passive receivers. Based on their own cultural backgrounds and social experiences, they form three types of decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic (fully accepting the intended meaning), negotiated (partially accepting while interpreting through their own context), and oppositional (explicitly rejecting the intended meaning) (Hall, 2020).

In the new media context, "discount" is not the ending point. By embedding multimodal cues (visual, sensory, resonant), opening interpretative space and encouraging user participation, producers can shift potential oppositional readings towards negotiated readings. This enhances not only "effective reach" but also "effective comprehension."

3.2 Media Convergence Theory

Henry Jenkins' Media Convergence Theory posits that cultural communication in the new media era is a combination of "trans-media storytelling" and "participatory culture" where different media platforms form a communication matrix through content extension (Jenkins, 2004). Rui Yu's research on Henan TV's "Chinese Festivals" series perfectly illustrates the practical value of this theory. The program utilizes 5G+AR technology to achieve visual integration of "virtual stages & real scenes." Through an "online-first, TV-follow" model, it releases fragmented short videos on platforms like Douyin and Weibo to generate buzz, then completes the communication loop with full broadcasts on the satellite TV channel. Concurrently, it extends into cultural and creative products like blind boxes and Hanfu, constructing a converged ecosystem of "content-dissemination-consumption" (Yu, 2022). This convergence is not merely a technological overlay; rather, it leverages "digital content creation and multi-platform distribution" to help cultural content break free from single-channel limitations and achieve a synergistic communication effect where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

3.3 Trans-cultural Communication Theory

Trans-cultural communication represents an advancement and transcendence of traditional cross-cultural communication theories (1985). Its core principle lies in replacing the concepts of "crossing, difference, opposition" with "flow, integration, and transformation" (Samovar & Porter, 2004). Distinct from the traditional "one-way output" logic, trans-cultural communication emphasizes that Chinese culture should deeply engage in global cultural co-creation, becoming an integral part of a shared human culture through interaction.

3.4 Glocalization Theory

"Glocalization" is a composite concept that blends "globalization" and "localization". It originated from the Japanese business practice of "local adaptation" and was systematically elaborated by sociologist Roland Robertson into a core theory of cross-cultural communication (Robertson, 1992). Its central tenet is the "simultaneous existence of the universal and the particular". It emphasizes that the process of globalization is not a mere cultural homogenization but rather an interaction and dynamic balance between global trends and local contexts. It advocates local adaptation within a global vision and responding to global imperatives through local practices (Robertson, 1995).

4. The Evolution of Media in Chinese Culture's International Communication

4.1 The Traditional Media Era: Grandiose Monophonic Narratives

Represented by the external publicity system of outlets such as the overseas channel of China Central Television (CGTN) and Xinhua News Agency, this traditional media era long held the dominant narrative function. It possessed advantages in authority, timeliness and organized production, capable of providing high-credibility information supply. Cao Yun points out that international communication during this period was "easily perceived as a propaganda tool". For instance, early Xinhua reports often focused on economic achievements, lacking cultural content relatable to audiences; CCTV-9's portrayal of Chinese culture remained at the level of grand symbols like the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, struggling to evoke emotional resonance (Cao, 2019).

4.2 The New Media Era: Pluralism, Interactivity and Micro-level Penetration

Platforms like TikTok and YouTube have disrupted the state-dominated communication landscape, enabling a transformation towards "everyone is media". Mobile internet and platform societies have brought about a triple transformation:

Pluralism of Actors: A shift from an "institution-centric" to a "person-centric or community-centric" model. Creators and Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) have become "micro-narrative nodes", capable of efficiently reaching and spreading content within interest-based communities.

Algorithmic Mechanisms: Recommendation systems reshuffle content visibility based on interaction signals, making content quality, engagement patterns, and publishing rhythm key variables determining cross-cultural penetration.

Fragmented and Scenario-based Content: Short videos employ a "light narrative" approach blending "scenario, emotion, and technique", strengthening the pathway of "being understandable, inspiring participation, and encouraging sharing".

4.3 Convergence and Innovation in Commercial Media: The Market-Driven Transmission of Cultural Value

Commercial forces, guided by market demand, achieve an "implicit conveyance" of cultural value. Commercial platforms and brands possess three unique advantages in cross-cultural communication:

User-Oriented Content Engineering: Utilizing data-driven topic selection, A or B testing, and multilingual localization to enhance the efficiency of the "reach-comprehension-conversion" pathway. This embeds cultural value into "consumable usage scenarios" such as cuisine, travel, lifestyle and aesthetic trends.

IP-centric and Matrix Operations: Extending the life cycle of cultural content through trans-media integration across "novel-film/TV-game-merchandise-offline immersive experiences", thereby forming sustainable narrative assets.

Industrial Spillover and Community Co-creation: Cross-sector collaboration between content and e-commerce, cultural tourism, design and fashion promotes the concept of "content as channel, product as medium". This facilitates "implicit persuasion" towards value acceptance through consumption

behaviors. For example, Chinese creators on TikTok explain the techniques of intangible cultural heritage in foreign languages, meanwhile, cross-border e-commerce and live-streaming further transform "seeing Chinese culture" into the quotidian experience of "appreciating Chinese culture".

However, commercial logic may also lead to the "excessive commodification of cultural meaning", resulting in a hollow cycle where "only the surface remains, while the essence is lost". Therefore, a collaborative governance model of "value guardrails plus creative freedom" is needed to ensure a balance between "market viability" and "cultural authenticity".

5. In-depth Analysis of Dual Case Studies

5.1 Case Study 1: Li Ziqi - Constructing a Visual Utopia of "Oriental Pastoralism"

5.1.1 Construction of Visual Symbols

Li Ziqi utilizes symbols of Eastern aesthetics for encoding, achieving cross-cultural communication with minimal decoding barriers. In terms of practice, she employs sweeping landscape shots of nature and close-up depictions of the entire process involved in intangible cultural heritage crafts, complemented by traditional attire and seasonal rituals. This constructs a visual utopia embodying the concept of "harmony between man and nature". Although Li Ziqi's YouTube videos contain no narrated commentary, relying solely on subtitles and a silent cinematic language, her single video has achieved an unprecedented view count exceeding 80 million. Even after a three-year hiatus, her channel continues to gain an additional 5 million subscribers.

5.1.2 Innovation in Communication Formats

Li Ziqi engages in differentiated content distribution across multiple platforms, catering to the fragmented viewing habits and demand for in-depth content among diverse platform users. In terms of practice, she releases 18-minute long-form videos on YouTube organized into thematic series; edits 1-3 minute highlight clips optimized for TikTok's algorithm and promotes vertical short videos and live streams on domestic platforms.

5.1.3 Transmission of Cultural Values

The yearning for a slow-paced life, natural beauty as well as pastoral poetry is a universal human sentiment. Li Ziqi uses these universal emotions as a bridge, enabling cultural values to resonate across different contexts. In terms of practice, narratives involving interactions with her grandmother and depictions of persevering labor convey values such as diligence, benevolence, and environmental consciousness, thereby eliciting a sense of healing and resonance.

5.1.4 Innovation in Cultural Heritage Transmission

Li Ziqi integrates intangible cultural heritage crafts into everyday narratives, facilitating a transformation from "heritage" to "livelihood". In terms of practice, her videos comprehensively showcase the entire processes of crafts like carved lacquer, Shu brocade and velvet flowers, avoiding didactic or purely expository approaches. The average view count of related intangible cultural heritage videos exceeds 15 million, driving a 300% increase in online sales of heritage products such as velvet

flowers and Shu brocade.

5.2 Case Study 2: TikTok Short Videos - The "Fragmented" Display and Viral Spread of Everyday Culture

5.2.1 Content Democratization

Short video content encompasses street-style Hanfu photography, Chinese-style dance, calligraphy practice, street food and more. This diversity makes the content more relatable and persuasive. Concurrently, ordinary users have become subjects of cultural dissemination, aligning with the "everyone is media" characteristic of the new media era.

5.2.2 Algorithm-Driven Dissemination

The platform's algorithm recommends content based on user behavior tags(e.g., likes, comments, searches). This enables a tiered dissemination model: "niche cultural content precisely reaching target users - mass cultural content achieving broad coverage", thereby avoiding ineffective exposure. Furthermore, the interest-based recommendation mechanism allows overseas users interested in Chinese culture to easily discover relevant content.

5.2.3 Challenges and Memes

The TikTok "Transformation Challenge" is an interactive short video format on the platform centered around rapid, contrasting costume changes. It often forms memes through standardized procedures and highly symbolic content, achieving viral spread through user-generated content (UGC) diffusion and algorithmic amplification. The "replicability" and "variability" of memes allow them to adapt to different cultural contexts - overseas users can adjust Hanfu styling and scene selection based on local aesthetics (Blackmore, 1999). This enables Hanfu culture to retain its core essence while incorporating local characteristics during dissemination, reducing resistance in cross-cultural communication.

A comparative analysis of the TikTok short video case and the Li Ziqi case reveals that "Challenges and Memes" possess advantages in being lightweight, scalable and interactive. In contrast, Li Ziqi's videos are characterized by "slow narrative and deep cultural embedding". This demonstrates the multidimensional nature of cultural communication paradigms in the new media era.

6. Real-World Challenges

6.1 Cultural Discount and Narrative Gaps

According to Hall's "decoding" theory (Hall, 2000), the philosophical connotations of concepts like Daoism in Chinese culture or the complex logic of a relationship-based society are often difficult for overseas audiences to grasp. The essence of this challenge lies in the discrepancy between the cultural presuppositions of the encoder and the decoding context of the audience, leading to deviations or obstacles in the decoding process.

6.2 The "Propaganda" Label and the Credibility Dilemma

Overseas audiences often maintain a degree of skepticism towards content perceived as having an official background or agenda.

6.3 Content Homogenization and a Lack of Innovation

A significant portion of content remains concentrated on a limited set of traditional symbols, failing to adequately showcase the diverse, innovative, and modern facets of contemporary China.

7. Strategies and Future Outlook

7.1 Narrative Strategy: From "Telling about China" to "Storytelling"

This strategic shift emphasizes a people-oriented approach and emotional resonance, using individual narratives to carry grand cultural themes. The reason lies in the fact that ordinary people's daily practices implicitly embody cultural values, for instance, a food blogger's vlog about making zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival not only shows the craft of rice dumpling wrapping but also conveys the cultural meanings of family reunion and respect for ancestors behind the festival.

7.2 Platform Strategy: Deepening "Glocalization"

This requires content customization based on the cultural habits and preferences of target markets. Different overseas markets have distinct dominant new media platforms shaped by internet infrastructure and user behavior, thus, blind cross-platform replication often leads to communication inefficiency. The key lies in abandoning a one-size-fits-all platform strategy and deploying tailored content formats based on each region's platform ecology.

7.3 Actor Strategy: Building a Collaborative Ecosystem of "Government Guidance, Corporate Leadership, and Public Participation"

The government's role is to build platforms and establish rules together with enterprises acting as pioneers in innovation and market exploration as well as grassroots creators providing a continuous stream of vitality and authenticity.

7.4 Future Outlook: Embracing Trans-cultural Communication and Technological Revolution

7.4.1 Moving Towards Trans-cultural Communication

Chinese culture can engage more deeply in the co-creation of global culture, becoming an integral part of a shared future human culture.

Cross-border collaborative creation breaks the limitation of "self-telling" of Chinese culture and integrates local contexts to produce culturally resonant works. A typical case is the animated film *Ne Zha*'s global co-production project: its overseas version collaborated with local dubbing teams in Europe and Latin America to adjust lines and humor styles, while retaining the core theme of "defying fate". Meanwhile, the film's derivative products were co-designed with international artists, blending traditional Chinese mythological symbols (lotus, wind chimes) with modern Western aesthetic trends (minimalist design, sustainable materials). This model transforms Chinese cultural symbols from "exotic elements" into shared creative resources.

7.4.2 AI and VR

Current technologies like AI-powered translation can help lower language barriers, while Virtual Reality (VR) can offer immersive cultural experiences, such as virtual tours of the Palace Museum.

In the context of new media-driven Chinese cultural external communication, the integration of AI and VR transcends the limitations of traditional text and video dissemination, constructing a multilingual, sensory-engaged and interactive communication paradigm that enhances the accessibility and appeal of Chinese culture for global audiences.

8. Conclusion

The iteration of new media technologies and the restructuring of the global communication landscape present a historic opportunity for the international dissemination of Chinese culture. However, opportunities coexist with challenges. Core bottlenecks constraining effective communication persist, including the cross-contextual decoding gap of cultural connotations, the credibility dilemma of official or state-affiliated content, the over-reliance on traditional symbols, and the insufficient communication of a modern Chinese image. This signifies that the international communication of Chinese culture cannot rely on a singular model, instead, it necessitates the construction of a pluralistic system that integrates both depth and breadth, blending local specificity with global relevance.

Looking ahead, the international communication of Chinese culture should adhere to a "people-oriented" core in its narratives, using personal stories to carry cultural essence and emotional resonance to dissolve cultural distance. It should deepen the "glocalization" of platform operations, customizing content according to the cultural context of target markets to achieve "localized expression and globalized dissemination". A collaborative ecosystem of "government guidance, corporate leadership and public participation" must be constructed to integrate the strengths of various actors and form a synergistic communication force. Simultaneously, it should actively embrace the waves of technological revolution and trans-cultural communication, leveraging technologies like AI and VR to break down language, temporal and spatial barriers, and promoting the deep participation of Chinese culture in global cultural co-creation.

Only in this way can the profound Chinese culture maintain its unique charm while integrating into the dialogue of global civilizations, truly achieving the leap from being "recognized" to being "identified with", and from "cultural export" to "value sharing". This will inject enduring cultural strength into the building of a shared future for mankind.

This study has certain limitations, for instance, both the number of cases analyzed and the amount of first-hand data collected are limited. Future research could further expand the scope of case studies, focusing on communication differences across diverse regional cultural contexts, to provide more robust empirical support for the formulation of refined communication strategies.

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