

Original Paper

Non-Verbal Symbol Communication: A New Path for
International Communication of Culture in the Era of Mobile
Social Videos: A Semiotic Interpretation of Ziqi Li's Videos on
YouTube

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Abstract

The representation modes, meaning production, and communication effects of cultural symbols vary with changes in communication forms. Due to inherent limitations, verbal symbols have led to dilemmas such as the loss of cultural connotations and the absence of audience's sense of context co-presence in the international communication of culture. In the era of video communication based on mobile social media, the international communication of culture presents a new landscape, where the efficacy of non-verbal symbols is increasingly prominent. Transcending the constraints of physical time and space with their direct sensory impacts, strong metaphorical and symbolic nature, non-verbal symbols construct a space-oriented contextual field and a time-oriented narrative flow for both communicators and recipients by breaking through language barriers. This process prompts audiences from heterogeneous cultures to shift their attitudes to a specific culture from initial sensory arousal to cognitive restructuring and emotional resonance, ultimately achieving psychological identification and behavioral change.

Keywords: *cultural symbols, meaning production, non-verbal symbols, contextual field, narrative flow*

1. Introduction

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, symbols consist of verbal and non-verbal ones. Verbal symbols were divided into vocal verbal symbols such as dialogue, monologue in spoken language, and non-vocal verbal symbols such as dialogue and monologue in written language; while non-verbal

symbols include visual and auditory symbols. The representation modes, meaning production, and communication effects of cultural symbols evolve with changes in communication forms. In the era of papery medium, non-vocal verbal symbols (written language) were the primary form of cultural communication; in the era of broadcasting, vocal verbal symbols (spoken language) dominated; television integrated non-verbal audio-visual symbols, realizing the fusion of multimodal symbols, yet verbal symbols (dubbing + subtitles) remained the primary modes of meaning representation. In the era of video communication based on mobile social media, the efficacy of non-verbal symbols has become increasingly prominent, ushering in a new landscape for international communication of culture.

As of January 8, 2026, Chinese vlogger Ziqi Li has had 29.6 million subscribers on YouTube. Her 131 uploaded videos have garnered approximately 3.396 billion views, with the highest single-video view count reaching 130 million, making her the most influential Chinese vlogger in Chinese community on YouTube. Characterized by a unique ancient Chinese aesthetic and cultural content, her videos have attracted a large global fan base, establishing her as a benchmark for the global dissemination of Chinese culture. Taking the international communication of Ziqi Li's videos on YouTube as a case study, this paper explores the modes of meaning production and communication effects of non-verbal symbols in international cultural communication under the new communication forms. It aims to provide a new pathway reference for human cultural dissemination, thereby promoting global cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

2. Culture: The Assemblage of Meaning-Production Activities in Symbol-Systems

Saussure regarded semiotics as the scientific study of signs in social life (Barthes, 1999, p.1), pioneering the linguistic model of semiotic research, which rapidly developed into the structural tide of the 1960s. Based on structural linguistics, a symbol is a two-sided entity composed of the signifier and the signified, with an "arbitrary" relationship between them—i.e., no inherent connection exists between the signifier and the signified. By the mid-1970s, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, grounded in logic-rhetoric, gained influence. Breaking away from the linguistic model, Peirce advocated examining all types of symbols and proposed a tripartite semiotic model: a symbol consists of the medium, object, and interpretant (Cao, 2009, p. 118), marking the entry of semiotic research into the post-structural phase.

During this stage, the Moscow-Tartu School, which applied semiotics to the study of society and culture, and German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who proposed "cultural semiotics" (Zhao, 2011, p. 198), exerted significant influence. Cassirer stated symbolic thinking and symbolic behavior are the most distinctive features of human life, and the development of entire human culture depends on these conditions (Cassirer, 2013, p. 45), concluding that all cultural forms are symbol forms and that humans are symbol-using animals. From the perspective of cultural semiotics, culture is a symbolic system in which symbolic activities are conducted. (Guo, 2006, p. 4) Man is an animal of meaning, for whom the search for meaning is the most fundamental activity. (The Paper, 2024) Thus, all cultural issues revolve

around the production, communication, and interpretation of meaning. The world of meaning relies on symbols—no meaning is expressed without symbols, and no symbol exists without expressing meaning. To express and interpret through symbols have become a fundamental characteristic of human existence. (Zhao, 2025) In summary, culture can be understood as an assemblage of meaning-producing activities of symbol-systems within a specific society. To effectively conduct international communication of culture, it is necessary to explore the meaning-producing process of culture as a symbolic system within the tripartite framework of “culture-symbol-meaning”.

The meaning production of cultural symbols is a dynamic process of signification. Roland Barthes stated that “Myth is a system of communication... It is a mode of signification” (Barthes, 1999, p. 167), and “the development of mass communication today draws unprecedented attention to a broader domain of signification” (Barthes, 1999, pp. 50-51). He shifted the linguistic perspective of semiotics to the study of social phenomena, “constructing a systematic semiotic theory to analyze practical society in a real sense” (Zhang, 2013, pp. 70-72). Driven by the need to demythologize, Barthes deconstructed the process of meaning production using semiotic concepts, pointing out that the birth of myth is a dynamic process—the flow of meaning.

Barthes referred to Saussure’s linguistic signification process of “signifier/signified=sign” as the first-order semiotic system. According to his *Mythologies* and *Elements of Semiology*, a “meaning/sign” is produced in the first-order linguistic signification (3 in the figure below), which simultaneously serves as the “form/signifier” (I in the figure below) of a higher-level system, forming the “denotation” level of the new system. It then constitutes, together with the “concept/signified” (II in the figure below) of the new system, a new signification system in a sociological sense—forming the “connotation” level of the sign. Myth is thus born at the second-order semiotic system built upon the first-order one, replete with cultural symbolic meanings and ideological attributes.

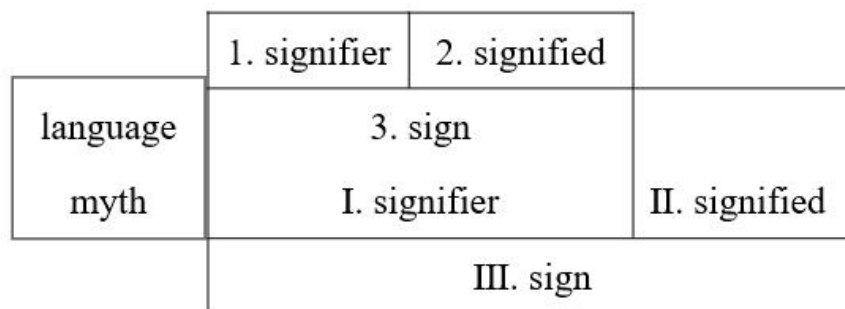


Figure 1. Two-Order Signification (Barthes, 1999, p. 173)

As illustrated above, the two-order semiotic system of myth reveals how cultural phenomena in a specific society transform the ideology of a particular class into a naturalized form through the dynamic signification—i.e., myth is the depoliticized discourse, and the meaning production of cultural symbols is a dynamic process of signification. From the perspective of communication semiotics, when the

culture of a specific society is widely disseminated through media, a communication myth thus comes into being. As how *China Central Television* (CCTV) commented on Ziqi Li's videos: "Not a single word praises China, yet she tells the Chinese story and Chinese culture well". (CCTV, 2019) Thus, it is conducive to reducing, at the practical level, a major dilemma in international communication of culture—meaning discount, by exploring the semiotic process through which Ziqi Li's videos create an international communication myth of Chinese culture.

3. Inherent Limitations of Verbal Symbols

Language is generally regarded as a communicative tool for expressing thoughts, conveying meanings, and emotions in daily life. Wittgenstein referred to the unity of language and activities as a "language-game". A "language-game" is not an isolated activity but part of life. "To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life." (Wittgenstein, 2016, p.10) Here, the "form of life" refers to the shared practices, value traditions, and cultural concepts of a group, which constitute the background for the smooth conduct of "language-game". For example, when a Christian exclaims "Jesus Christ" in communication, it simultaneously links to his religious life. But for those without this religious belief, such verbal communication fails to evoke an equivalent emotional response. This life-embedding nature of "language-game" endows language with practical and rule-based characteristics derived from different ways of life on the one hand, while also rendering it diverse and incommensurable—perhaps an inherent limitation of verbal symbols.

In cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication dominated by "language-game", this inherent limitation of language becomes more pronounced due to the need of translation. Consequently, in the international communication of culture, texts dominated by verbal symbols will inevitably undergo meaning-discount during the processes of meaning production, communication, and interpretation, manifested in the following two aspects:

3.1 *Loss of cultural connotation caused by translating verbal-symbol texts*

Modern linguistic research since the early 20th century can be divided into two major schools: one emphasizes the natural attributes and rule-based nature of language, viewing it as a system of phonetic and written symbols formed through convention, and advocates establishing linguistics as an objective and precise science (e.g., Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield, Noam Chomsky); the other emphasizes the social attributes of language, arguing that language is inseparable from its social context and should be studied within the broader framework of social culture (e.g., Franz Boas, Edward Sapir). From the perspective of the former one, communication between different languages involves the conversion between different conventional or rule-based linguistic symbols, and cross-linguistic communication can be achieved through the conversion of phonetic symbols (interpretation) and written symbols (translation). However, the later one holds that human language is embedded in social culture. Understanding the symbolic system of a language does not equate to grasping the meaning of its linguistic symbols. Semantic reference can only be generated through cultural structure conversion

after linguistic structure conversion (interpretation or translation). As shown in the figure below, in cross-linguistic communication, only when the linguistic structure at the thinking level interacts with the cultural structure, can verbal symbols at the first-order symbol system produce semantic reference.

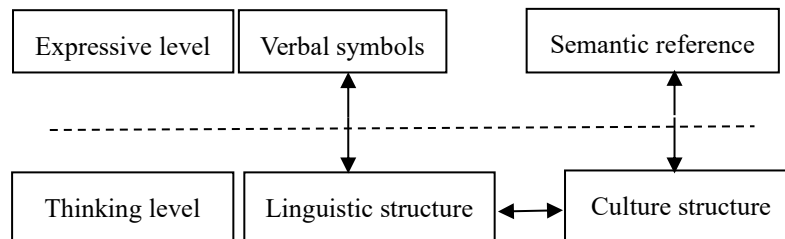


Figure 2. Cross-Linguistic Communication (Ping & Zhang, 2000, p. 55)

For example, in communication activities, Chinese expression “Zhōng Guó Xīn Nián/Chūn Jié” can be directly translated into “Chinese New Year/Spring Festival” which can be understood by English-speaking audiences at the expressive level. However, the scenes and embedded cultural connotation of “Chinese New Year/Spring Festival” cannot be reproduced to them at the thinking level. Another example: the Chinese title of Ziqi Li’s 2024 comeback video, *Dīāoqī Yīnhuā, Dīāo Chū Zīqì Dōnglái*, was directly translated on YouTube as “Carved lacquer with hidden flowers, carrying auspiciousness!” At the expressive level of the verbal-symbol information, it can be literally understood by English-speaking audiences as “carved lacquerware with hidden patterns is an auspicious omen”; however, at the thinking level, they fail to receive other information rooted in Chinese culture, such as the connotation of the four-characters phrase “Zīqì Dōnglái” (purple qi coming from the east) and the homophonic reference of “Qī” (lacquer) to “Qì” (Ziqi’s given name) and “Zīqì” (purple qi) to “Ziqi” (Ziqi’s given name).

According to Roland Barthes’ two-order semiotic system, the first-order symbol system is a crucial prerequisite for the occurrence of the communication myth in the second-order one, for the “meaning/sign” of the first system simultaneously serves as the “form/signifier” of the second system. Therefore, as for the international communication of culture, the encoded symbols in the first-order system should be context-free symbols that are less constrained by a specific society or culture, avoiding excessive use of verbal-symbols inherently infused with cultural connotations. Only in this way can cross-linguistic and cross-cultural audiences maximize their understanding of the communicator’s intent when decoding symbols, achieving optimal communication effects, and lay the foundation for the generation and acceptance of myth in the second-order system.

3.2 Sense Absence of Contextual Co-presence Caused by Verbal-symbol Narration

Verbal-symbol narration can be a micro one, being localized, diverse, and emotional; it can also be a grand one, being holistic, unified, and rational. However, the abstract and generalizing nature of verbal-symbols (characters, concepts) enables them to easily construct grand frameworks transcending specific contexts—a feature exploited by “grand-narration”. Jean-François Lyotard, the French

philosopher, argued in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* that “grand-narration” attempts to pursue universal and ultimate truths such as rational progress and human emancipation by transcending regional, cultural, and linguistic differences. Yet “the quest for a universal consensus seems impossible, even imprudent”, for “such a consensus contradicts the heterogeneity of language-games”, (Lyotard, 2011, p. 223) declaring the crisis of “grand-narration”. Lyotard referred to this skepticism toward “grand-narration” as “postmodernism”, arguing that postmodern society should prioritize the “micro-narration” featuring by being localized and diverse, acknowledging heterogeneity, and respecting differences—i.e., “local determinism” (Lyotard, 2011, p. 5).

Taking China’s international communication as one example. Since 1980s, the narrative subject has often been official media representing the state or government, and the narrative content has tended to focus on development achievements and contributions to humanity through verbal-symbol texts against the backdrop of grand-history, presenting China’s international image as an ancient civilization with a 5,000-year history and vast territory. For example, starting with “descendants of the dragon” and the “Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors”, Chinese culture has always been globally disseminated through recounting its grand-history and classics, aiming to “influence the mentality and cognition of international audiences and shape the narrative framework of its culture international communication by utilizing the verbal-symbol texts featuring by concepts, logic and consensus” (Li, 2025, p.33-34).

However, this “grand-narration” model based on verbal-symbol texts fundamentally ignores the embedding nature of “language-games”, which consequently results in overlooking the acceptability and resonance of audiences from heterogeneous cultures. As a result, together with their associated “concept/signified”, such kind of verbal-symbol texts become the “form/signifier” of Barthes’ second-order semiotic system, which then constitutes the signification practices infused with ideological attributes in a sociological sense. It thus has always been perceived by audiences from heterogeneous cultures as a “political rhetoric”— i.e., “a rhetorical behavior, typical of employing certain political linguistic skills around political interests conducted by political entities, with the purpose of achieving their political goals by persuading audiences” (Zhao & Li. 2010, pp. 56-57).

In recent years, recognizing the limitations of this “grand-narration” in verbal-symbol texts, “micro-narration” model has been prioritized in China’s culture international communication. However, apparent differences exist in terms of how exactly it has been conducted between state media Chinese vloggers of we-media. For example, in 2021, CCTV produced a five-episode micro-documentary *Jasmine Blossom*. Eschewing the traditional “grand-narration” strategy of tracing the development and historical inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), the documentary focused on five foreigners living in China, showing their interacting with and learning from ICH inheritors to present the beauty of traditional Chinese culture through their perspectives.

However, it did not achieve significant communication effects. As of November 22, 2025, the highest single-episode view count of *Jasmine Blossom* on YouTube was 7,701, far lower than Ziqi Li’s single-episode views of tens of millions or even over 100 million, and also lagging far behind similar

creator *Dianxi Xiaoge*, whose single-episode views reach three to four million. The reasons may be multifaceted, but in terms of the presentation of culture symbols, compared to the videos of Ziqi Li and Dianxi Xiaoge, *Jasmine Blossom* still adopted a narrative model dominated by verbal symbols (dubbing + subtitles) without translation. In spite of the fact that verbal symbols can also enable localized, diverse, and emotional “micro-narration”, a large number of untranslated verbal symbols not only increase the difficulty of audiences’ understanding but also greatly reduce the possibility of constructing a shared communication sense of time and space by non-verbal symbols, leading to the absence of emotional resonance rooted in contextual co-presence among audiences from heterogeneous cultures and perpetuating the dilemma of meaning discount in culture international communication.

Socrates said, “Communication occurs between soul and soul, and both parties should be physically present at the same time”. (Plato. 2002, p. 52) In today’s mediatized society, compared to verbal symbols, non-verbal audio-visual symbols lays emphasis on sensory experience, avoiding the inherent limitations of verbal-symbol text through direct perception brought by the construction of a shared space-time context.

4. Non-Verbal Symbol Communication: A New Landscape for Culture International Communication in the Era of Mobile Social Videos

Historically, China has been regarded by Westerners as a mysterious East. Ziqi Li’s videos have lifted this veil of Eastern myth. Roland Barthes pointed out that “myth is defined not by the object of its message but by the way in which it utters this message” (Barthes, 1999, p. 167), highlighting the importance of symbol form. Yiheng Zhao stated, “A literary text exists first as a form, not as an intention, a theme, creative experience, meaning, utility, or content.” (The Paper, 2024) In the era of new media, the international myth of China’s culture communication benefits first from the integrated and fission-style communication of multimodal symbols in mobile social media videos.

4.1 Integrated and Fission-style Communication of Multimodal Symbols

The communication text of videos is first and foremost a form which is meaningful—i.e. meaning can be formalized, and form has breadth rather than depth. The formal breadth of a video text lies in the multimodal integration of various symbols—dubbing, subtitles, images, synchronous sound, etc. with syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships to construct a comprehensive meaning text. For example, in Ziqi Li’s videos, there are a few vocal verbal symbols (dialectal dialogues between characters) and textual annotation symbol; a large number of dynamic visual symbols, such as body language symbols, behavioral symbols of food or ICH craft production, and image change symbols representing the passage of time; numerous static visual symbols, such as costume symbols (e.g., Hanfu, indigo printed cloth), tools symbols (e.g., traditional papermaking and lacquerware tools), and idyllic scene symbols (e.g., bamboo forests, streams, flowers); unencoded synchronous audio symbols, such as chicken crowing, bird singing, and the sounds of weaving and woodcutting; and encoded audio symbols, such as background music played on traditional Chinese instruments such as *Guzheng*, *flute*, and *Pipa*.

The meaning-text composed of multimodal symbols generates a fission-style communication effect through likes, comments, and layers of forwarding by social media fans. However, this does not mean that all symbols contribute equally to the communication myth. “Mythical discourse is composed of materials already processed to be suitable for communication.” (Barthes, 1999, p.169) Apparently, Ziqi Li’s videos avoid the use of verbal symbols—for example, no Chinese/English verbal narration or translated subtitles are provided; instead, the text of materials suitable for communication is constructed by a large number of non-verbal audio-visual symbols.

4.2 Effectiveness Advantages of non-verbal Symbols

Both in the era of traditional media and current mobile social media based on the Internet, verbal symbols have always been the preferred communication materials, with narration accompanied by Chinese/English subtitles being the most common form of text construction. Roland Barthes identified two main functions of verbal-symbol information in video communication texts: ancrage and relais. (Zhang, 2013, p. 72) By ancrage, it refers to the function of verbal-symbol information to clarify concepts—i.e., explaining video information and restricting the excessive expansion of video-text meaning by answering the question of “what it is”, such as textual annotations. By relais, it refers to the complementary relationship between verbal-symbol information and non-verbal, audio-visual information, improving the meaning of the video text, such as narration.

However, inherent limitations exist in verbal-symbol texts. Firstly, as mentioned above, language is strongly constrained by specific societies and cultures, and even with translation, the loss of cultural connotation is inevitable. Secondly, compared to non-verbal audio-visual symbols that stimulate the senses, verbal symbols arouse the audience’s cognitive understanding, requiring higher interpretive capability. Thus, for video-based communication, whether “grand-narration” or “micro-narration”, verbal symbols incur higher international communication costs and weaker audiences’ feedback effect. The effectiveness advantage of non-verbal symbols lies in the fact that people tend to prioritize intuitive and easy-to-understand audio-visual one when acquiring information. “Seeing comes before speaking.” (Berger, 2005, p. 1) Non-verbal symbol information awakens the senses, presenting information with greater vividness, appeal, and impact. In the era of visual communication, a historical reversal has occurred between images and verbal texts. “Verbal texts are parasites of images... They elevate images, making them touching or rationalized.” (Barthes, 2005, pp. 13-14) Ziqi Li’s early videos also employed more verbal symbols—her work *Double Ninth Cake* contained extensive narration and subtitles. Gradually, however verbal narration and subtitles were abandoned, leaving only a few explanatory texts at the edge of the frame, yet the communication effect continued to improve. Many English-speaking netizens commented on Li Ziqi’s videos, “Although there are a few dialogues, I can understand the main story through your video. The video is short but depicts everything—truly amazing!” or “I really don’t understand your language, but through a few Chinese characters I recognize and the exquisite video images, I can understand the story.” (Xin & Ye, 2020, p. 19) In the era of mobile social video communication, the effectiveness advantage of non-verbal symbol

communication lies in the fact that the ideological nature is concealed through intuitive and vivid its representational functions, transforming culture communication texts into the audience's naturalized, daily, and emotional cognition.

4.3 Meaning production and communication effects of non-verbal symbols

Communication effects are categorized by James Potter, the American educator in media literacy, into five types: physiological effect, cognitive effect, emotional effect, attitudinal effect, and behavioral effect. (Potter, 2012, pp. 91-93) Also, a set of communication persuasion principles are summarized by Dorwin Cartwright, the American psychologist as follows: first, the communicator's information must be attention-catching and distinctive to grab people's senses; second, information must be then transformed into part of the receiver's cognitive structure; third, information is then emotionally accepted by receivers after recognizing that information aligns with their vital interests; finally, the receiver's attitude changes and take actions. (Dong, 2008, p. 227)

The meaning production of symbol texts occurs through two axial relationships: syntagmatic and paradigmatic. "Syntagmatic relation refers to an arrangement of elements that are associated through a presence relationship, and each element gains its value through co-existence with elements before and after it; paradigmatic relation refers to the association of elements in memory through an absence relationship, forming various governing relationships." (Barthes, 1999, pp. 50-51) In the case of Ziqi Li's videos, non-verbal symbolic elements are simultaneously coexisting with relevant elements in the audience's memory on the paradigmatic axis, which may be experienced holistically and intuitively by the audience in an instant. A space-oriented contextual field is then jointly constructed by both the sender and receiver. Meanwhile, non-verbal symbol elements on the syntagmatic axis are linearly arranged, and interpreted by the audience sequentially and logically. A time-oriented narrative flow is then co-built. The space-oriented contextual field and time-oriented narrative flow constitute the core of the viewing experience of Ziqi Li's videos, prompting audiences from heterogeneous cultures to shift their perception of Chinese culture from initial sensory arousal to cognitive restructuring and emotional resonance, and ultimately achieving psychological identification and behavioral change.

4.3.1 Space-oriented contextual field: from sensory arousal to emotional resonance

The space-oriented contextual field refers to the field formed by the simultaneous aggregation of non-verbal symbols in the video and those in the audience's memory, characterized by "parataxis" which was first proposed by Joseph Frank, the professor in comparative literature from Princeton University, in his book *The Spatial Form in Modern Fiction*. Deriving from his analysis of the narration of modernist novels, Joseph Frank pointed out that "modernist novels break the traditional single temporal sequence by using space-time interleaving and inversion, demonstrating a tendency to pursue spatialized effects." (Frank et al., 1991, p. I) Because language proceeds in a temporal process, only by breaking the temporal sequence can the audience achieve perceptual simultaneity. "Parataxis" was then put forward as an important approach to realizing formal spatialization by placing various images, hints, symbols, and connections outside the narrative process in the text, weaving images spatially. So that the

unity of the text lies in the building of spatial relationships. In Ziqi Li's videos, "parataxis" refers to the simultaneous appearance and joint action of non-verbal symbols both in the video and in the audience's memory, achieving the spatialization of the symbol text. Both the sender and receiver are fixed in the same spatial field within a limited time, understanding the signifier and signified of the symbols and completing the signification process.

The second characteristic is metaphoricity and symbolism. Metaphor, originally a linguistic phenomenon, can be traced back to the rhetorical tradition of ancient Greece. Aristotle first proposed and systematically discussed metaphor in his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, defining it as attributing the name of one thing to another to make expression clear, pleasant, and innovative. As a rhetorical device, its essence is to beautify or persuade through analogy or mapping due to similar cognition and expression. (Aristotle, 2016, pp. 88-93) Symbolism was first manifested in Plato's philosophy—for example, in Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato used the "Allegory of the Cave" to illustrate the deep connection between the visible world and the intelligible world, which was further developed by Neoplatonism. For further illustration, metaphor establishes a connection between the two sides (the signifier and signified) of a specific, perceptible sign, enabling the establishment of "signifier/signified=sign" in Barthes' first-order system; while symbolism, on the other hand, represents an abstract, complex, and invisible idea or thought—a relationship not dependent on superficial similarity but on deep connection endowed by culture, tradition, or context, i.e. the cultural signification process in the second-order system completed by the "meaning/sign" formed in the first-order one.

In Ziqi Li's videos, the space-oriented contextual field is formed by the aggregation of two types of non-verbal symbols. The first type is static visual symbols: natural environment symbols of Chinese rural areas such as bamboo forests, streams, flowers; Chinese rural life scene symbols such as wooden houses, bamboo furniture, pottery cookware, earthen stoves; traditional Chinese food symbols such as peach porridge in spring, lotus tea in summer, zongzi for Dragon Boat Festival, mooncakes for Mid-Autumn Festival; traditional Chinese costume symbols such as Hanfu, indigo printed cloth; color and composition symbols such as cool tones, low saturation, low brightness, central or symmetrical composition. The second type is unencoded, synchronous audio symbols such as chicken crowing, bird singing, the sounds of woodcutting, rice transplanting, fire-making, and cooking, as well as a few dialectal dialogues.

Connecting with awakened elements in the audience's memory, these symbols coexist in parataxis through an absence relationship to jointly construct a spatialized symbol text. At the signifier level, it presents the scenic language of China's mountains, rivers, and four-season life, arousing the audience's senses at the physiological level; at the signified level, it demonstrates the Chinese rural lifestyle and the hardworking spirit of the Chinese people through metaphor, prompting the audience to transform their perceptual results into cognition of Chinese rural areas and Chinese people, and finally move audiences, through symbolism, from heterogeneous cultures from visible world to intelligible world—Chinese culture and society. At the communication effect level, from scenic resonance to

cognitive shift, audiences from heterogeneous cultures emotionally accept the information, and the dynamic signification process of Chinese culture symbols finishes its closed loop in the space-oriented contextual field.

4.3.2. Time-oriented Narrative Flow: From Emotional Resonance to Behavioral Change

The time-oriented narrative flow refers to the dynamic narrative sequence formed by the linear changes of non-verbal symbols on the syntagmatic axis. Its first characteristic is linearity and sequentiality—narrative meaning is generated through the linear order of symbols, explaining “what it is” for the audience. Its second characteristic is processuality and logicity—dynamically changing symbols tell a story by demonstrating certain logical relationships, narrating “why or how it became like this” for the audience.

In video communication texts, this means that the audience’s meaning acquisition stems from the communicator’s dynamic linear arrangement of symbols, as evidenced by the famous film language theory—the Kuleshov Effect which refers to the way films convey meaning or emotion through the syntagmatic relationship (montage) among different shots. For example, “when the previous shot shows a dead young woman, the audience will see grief on the face of the subsequent expressionless actor; when the previous shot depicts a cute child, the audience will interpret a smile on the face of the expressionless actor.” (Shen, 2024, p. 72) The Kuleshov Effect refers essentially to an reception response to narrative information from the audience, and some scholars have pointed out that “the key to montage becoming myth lies in the fact that it regards the audience rather than the director as the creator of film information” (Wang & Cao, 2024, p. 17). Similarly, for Ziqi Li’s videos, the key to the myth of international communication of Chinese culture in lies in the fact that audiences from heterogeneous cultures rather than communicators are regarded as creators of information—i.e., communicators must balance the narrative resonance of co-presence between senders and receivers. As mentioned above, non-verbal symbols clearly have greater effectiveness advantages in this regard.

In Ziqi Li’s videos, the time-oriented narrative flow is manifested by the following dynamically arranged non-verbal symbols. For instance, shots of seasonal and climate changes are followed by key moments of farming such as the sowing, sprouting, shooting, flowering, and fruiting of crops; time-lapse photography depicts the passage of time through rolling wind, drifting clouds, and the alternating sun, moon, stars; melodious and lingering background music played on *Guzheng*, *flute*, and *Pipa* is accompanied with labor activities such as weeding by the stream, cooking, bricklaying, and grain drying, as well as dialectal dialogues with her grandmother and villagers... At the signifier level, the linear changes of these dynamic non-verbal symbols tell the personal life stories of ordinary Chinese people; at the signified level, they express the Chinese people’s affection for family, hometown, and even the motherland, dynamically presenting the Chinese nation’s view of harmony between humans and nature, as well as the openness and inclusiveness of Chinese culture emphasizing “harmony in diversity”. In practice, an increasing number of people are eager to travel to China to experience its food and life. This shift from emotional resonance to attitudinal and behavioral change

completes its closed loop for the dynamic signification process of Chinese culture symbols in the time-oriented narrative flow.

Non-verbal symbols in the spatial and temporal dimensions do not independently complete the signification process and meaning production of cultural symbols; instead, they are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Shots of seasonal and climate changes can be both a temporal narrative process and a spatial environmental change; rural-life scene symbols such as wooden houses and bamboo furniture can both display the architectural space of Chinese rural life and provide contextual support for the narrative of ordinary Chinese people's life stories. Together, they constitute the core of the viewing experience of Ziqi Li's videos, immersing audiences from heterogeneous cultures to like, comment, and forward those videos, which leads to the international communication myth of Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

There is a Chinese four-character "yì zài yán wài" which is usually employed in artistic creation, indicating that "The meaning lies beyond the words" or "There is more than what is said". From a semiotic perspective, it implies that verbal symbols retreat from the dominant position in communication, while non-verbal symbols construct a broader space-time of meaning with their direct sensory impact, strong metaphoricity and symbolism by breaking through linguistic barriers. For this reason, the meaning interaction between senders and receivers becomes more effective, and the communication effect is more pronounced.

The representation modes, meaning production, and communication effects of culture symbols vary with changes in communication forms. The success of Ziqi Li's videos in disseminating Chinese culture globally lies not only in the aesthetic value of the content but also in the strategic choice of the culture symbols. Non-verbal symbols in videos construct a shared space-oriented contextual field and time-oriented narrative flow for both senders and receivers. Intertwined and mutually reinforcing, these two dimensions build a perceptible and empathetic meaning-text for audiences from heterogeneous cultures, effectively avoiding the meaning discount caused by verbal symbol texts.

Non-verbal symbols emphasize senses and experience, facilitating the naturalized, daily, and emotional communication of culture symbols. Studying the meaning production and communication effects of non-verbal symbols in international culture communication is conducive to encouraging different countries, nations, and cultures to share and appreciate the unique beauty of their respective cultures on the basis of mutual respect and understanding, thereby promoting culture mutual understanding, the exchange and mutual learning of civilizations globally.

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