

## Original Paper

# New Media and Chinese Cultural Identity among Southeast Asian International Students: A Case Study of Short Video Platforms

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### Abstract

*This study investigates how new media, represented by short video platforms, influences Southeast Asian international students' cultural identity toward China. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining in-depth interviews, short video content analysis, and surveys, it systematically examines their processes of encountering, interpreting, and internalizing Chinese cultural content. Results indicate that short video platforms significantly enhance students' recognition of and emotional connection to Chinese cultural symbols through highly immersive, fragmented, and interactive content delivery. Platform algorithms and social interaction mechanisms simultaneously reinforce cultural identity construction while potentially leading to fragmented cultural understanding. The conclusion highlights that short video platforms exert dual effects in promoting cross-cultural dissemination and identity formation of Chinese culture, with their mechanisms moderated by content quality, user engagement, and cultural context. Future practices should prioritize content ecosystem development and cross-cultural guidance to foster deeper and more diverse cultural identity cultivation.*

### Keywords

*New Media, Southeast Asian International Students, Chinese Cultural Identity, Short Video Platforms, Cross-Cultural Communication*

### 1. Introduction

The media technology in the era of short videos has opened up new channels for cultural communication

and identity construction. The culturally mobile population is closely related to the media space. As a typical representative of cross-cultural movement, the Chinese students group has constructed the spread of Chinese culture through short video content, which includes the adaptation of their cultural identity concept. At the same time, the cultural interaction between people with short videos as the medium shows the unique characteristics of the encounter between media technologies and culture (Zhang Huidian, 2024). While existing scholarship has focused on the macro-level outcomes of cross-cultural communication in the new media era, it has largely overlooked the micro-level practices through which media technologies shape cross-cultural encounters. This paper takes short videos as the medium and focuses on the Chinese students group in Southeast Asia, aiming to explore the specific media effects and paths of new media on the spread of Chinese culture.

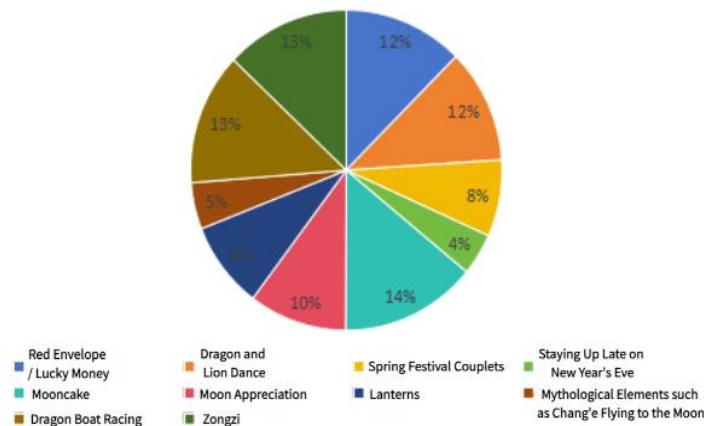
## **2. The Mechanism of Short Video Platform's Content Presentation Features on the Shaping of Southeast Asian Students' Cognition of Chinese Culture**

### *2.1 Fragmented and Visual Narratives and the Initial Perception of Cultural Symbols*

1. Fragmented symbols and highlights. Short video platforms highly condense the rich and systematic Chinese culture (such as Spring Festival customs, tea ceremony etiquette, and calligraphy art) into 15 to 60 seconds of visual "highlights." For example, the Spring Festival video focuses on the warm moment of delivering red envelopes, the tea art display highlights the gestures and demeanor of the tea ceremony, and the calligraphy creation features the subtle dynamics of the brush's lifting, pressing, turning, and folding (Luo Yi, 2021). This "compressed" narrative strategy transforms abstract cultural knowledge and complex practice systems into vivid and intuitive visual symbols, giving priority to stimulating users' sensory stimulation and emotional resonance, rather than systematic rational cognition.

In order to explore the shaping effect of short videos on the initial cognition of Chinese culture among Southeast Asian students, this study conducted a questionnaire survey on 100 Southeast Asian students in China. The results showed that when asked "What is the first visual symbol you think of when you mention Chinese traditional festivals", the influence of short videos was the most significant. Specifically, among the symbols related to the Spring Festival, as many as 82% of the students chose "red envelopes/lucky money", and 76% chose "dragon and lion dances", which were significantly higher than symbols such as "Spring Festival couplets" (51%) and "staying up late on New Year's Eve" (28%) that require more cultural context to understand. For the Mid-Autumn Festival, 93% of the respondents first thought of "moon cakes", followed by "moon appreciation" (67%) and "lanterns" (58%), while the association of mythological elements such as "Chang'e flying to the moon" was only 31%. The Dragon Boat Festival is concentrated in "dragon boat racing" (88%) and "zongzi" (85%). These data clearly show that the "highlight" symbols repeatedly presented in short videos, which are the most dynamic and colorful, have become the core source for international students to build their first impression of Chinese culture, and have initially formed a fragmented and image-based cognitive map.

**A Preliminary Survey on the Visual Symbol Recognition of Traditional Chinese Festivals among Southeast Asian International Students**



**Figure 1. Survey on the Initial Sources of Chinese Cultural Symbol Recognition among Southeast Asian International Students (N=100)**

2. Algorithm-assisted "cultural window": The platform algorithm constantly pushes similar topics according to the user's initial preferences (such as #Chinese food, #Hanfu), generating a self-reinforcing "cultural information cocoon" or "cultural window". International students repeatedly see packaged, beautified, and dramatized Chinese cultural symbols in the window, which can easily form a clear but possibly one-sided initial impression. For example, the algorithm may recommend "snow scene of the Forbidden City" and "Chongqing hot pot" with high aesthetic and impact, rather than the section of ordinary Chinese people's lives and the discussion within the culture. This "window effect" may bring about the "spectacularization" of cognition while creating positive emotional links.

3. Low cognitive threshold and emotion first: Compared with text reading or video viewing, short videos have a low cognitive threshold, and the music, fast editing, and special effects directly infect emotions (Luo Yi, 2021). International students do not need a high level of Chinese to grasp the basic emotional tone (festive, elegant, shocking) according to the picture and music. This emotional infection path of "emotion first, cognition later" makes cultural understanding turn from "knowledge accumulation-emotional identity" to "emotional infection first-interest driven-knowledge exploration", reducing the psychological barrier of cultural affinity.

## 2.2 The Pattern of Cultural Content Contact under the Logic of Algorithm Recommendation

1. The transformation from "people looking for information" to "information looking for people": In cross-cultural adaptation, international students actively search for cultural content ("people looking for information"). On short video platforms, the recommendation system based on collaborative filtering, content similarity, and user interaction behavior has realized "information looking for people" (Xu Wenguang & Yang Na, 2024). When a user clicks on a cultural marker (such as #Chinese Kung Fu) and an interaction occurs, the recommendation algorithm forms a recommendation path with the point as the center and forms a recommendation path radiating from that point to related cultural topics (such as

traditional weapons, chivalrous spirit, and Taoist culture). As shown in Table 1, by tracking and analyzing the digital footprints of 20 research subjects for one month (anonymously processed), it was found that their content culture contact has a more obvious "clustering diffusion" characteristic.

**Table 1. Cluster Analysis of Users' Contact with Chinese Culture Content under the Algorithm Recommendation Path (Example: 3 Users)**

User's Initial Interest Point	Subsequent main Content Clustering	Recommended	Cultural Cognitive Dimension Expansion
Chinese cuisine	Cuisine classification (Sichuan/Guangdong), Food culture, Cooking philosophy, Catering etiquette		From "food" to "lifestyle and etiquette"
Chinese cities	Landmark buildings, Dialect differences, City history, Citizen life Vlog		From "geography" to "social and historical levels"
Chinese festivals	Festival legends, Local customs, Related poems, Modern celebration methods		From "celebrations" to "literature and evolution from ancient to modern times"

2. The duality of the "information cocoon" and the possibility of "breaking the cocoon": While algorithms can bring about narrowing, the emergence of recommendation functions such as "topic tags" (Hashtag) and "similar" videos represented by short video platforms also means the possibility of accidental and non-preset "breaking the cocoon" technology. For example, taking the Hanfu that appears in the video as an example, when the audience on the platform through #Silk Road or #Traditional Textile tags, and the ethnic minority costumes are intertwined, they will experience the internal diversity of Chinese culture. This accidental and non-preset cross-border contact constitutes a unique cultural discovery mechanism under the algorithm.

3. Dynamically adjusted interest graph: Each user behavior (likes, comments, forwarding, complete playback) will immediately change the algorithm system, and the "cultural cognitive trajectory" of international students will enter the dynamic adjustment process. For example, the user's contact with shallow and delicious content is reduced, and the contact with in-depth cultural analysis videos is upgraded. The algorithm begins to adjust the recommendation coefficient, and the user's cognition gradually shifts from shallow symbols to deep codes. This is a two-way construction and collaborative evolution process between users and algorithms in the construction of cultural cognitive structure.

### *2.3 The Deepening of Cultural Understanding through Interactive Functions and Emotional Substitution*

1. Social interaction as a "meaning negotiation field": The comment area and bullet screen function create a real-time, cross-cultural public space for "meaning negotiation" (Cheng Sini, 2022). International

students can not only ask questions and clarify doubts (such as "Why do you post upside-down Fu characters during the Spring Festival?"), but also observe the diverse interpretations, debates and even jokes of Chinese netizens on their own culture, so as to understand the vitality and controversy of culture. For example, under a short video about "filial piety", there are praises for traditional virtues and discussions on modern significance. This "multi-channel" social text can make international students feel the complexity and dynamic nature of culture more than a single cultural display, breaking the stereotypes that may have been caused by the previous algorithm "window".

2. Emotional resonance and "quasi-social interaction": through the omniscient first-person perspective and daily narrative of Vlog-type life/cultural video bloggers, "quasi-social interaction" is carried out with fans. The establishment of this kind of relationship makes Thai students a fan, and through long-term tracking of specific bloggers, emotional attachment and projection are generated (Chen Ruhui, 2020). The viewer establishes a quasi-social interaction relationship with the blogger, and the emotional substitution of the Chinese culture cognition is far from limited to objective knowledge, but is bound to specific people, things, and emotions, and the memory is deeper and the understanding is warmer. For example, following a blogger to complete the whole picture of life from renting a house, taking the subway to getting along with neighbors, compared with the cold city promotional film, the perceptual cognition of Chinese urban life is more comprehensive and accurate.

3. Re-creation and the "embodied" practice: The low technical cost of short videos, which can be produced by anyone, has triggered the user's impulse to imitate and re-create. International students also participate in it, trying to make short videos, such as cooking Chinese food, singing popular songs in simple Chinese, and performing some popular online words or gesture dances. This is a cross from cognition to the body. They need to understand not only the intention of the behavior surface, but also the cultural emotions and social context hidden behind these behaviors. It is a participatory cultural production of "learning by doing", which is the deepest level of cultural "internalization" (Wang Meixuan & Li Weiquan, 2021). At this time, users have changed from cultural consumers and "outsiders" to active, "embodied" "insiders", and completed the individual absorption and reproduction of Chinese cultural elements from the perspective of experiencers.

### **3. The Construction Process of Chinese Cultural Identity of Southeast Asian Students Based on Short Video Platform**

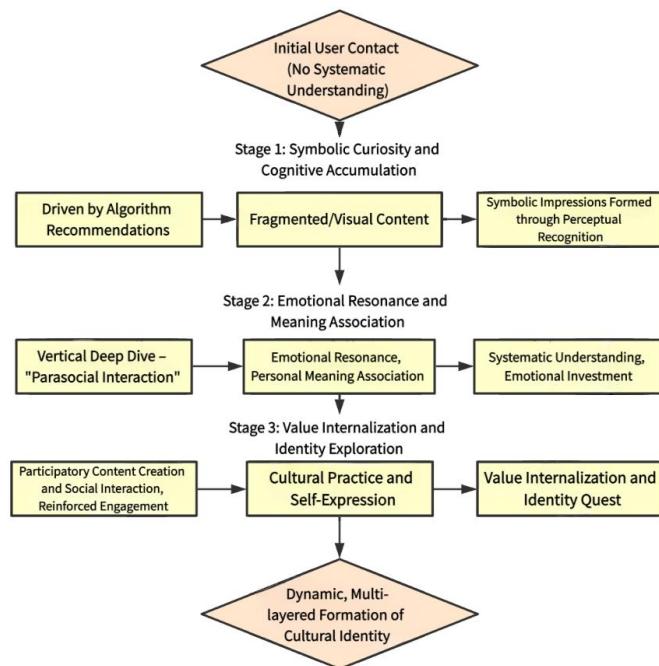
#### *3.1 The Phased Evolution from Cultural Cognition to Emotional Identification*

Short video platforms have reshaped the traditional path of cultural identity formation, condensing and reconstructing it into a dynamic and progressive evolutionary process, which is clearly presented in the model shown in Figure 2 of this study. The model specifically explains the three-stage path that users experience from initial contact to deep identity. The first stage is "symbolic curiosity and cognitive accumulation". In this stage, driven by the platform algorithm, users start with the state of "no systematic cognition" and come into contact with a large number of fragmented and visual content pushed. These

contents stimulate users' curiosity with highly recognizable cultural symbols (such as food, festivals, and scenery), forming a perceptual and superficial symbolic impression, and completing the initial accumulation of the "surface characteristics" of Chinese culture. This process satisfies the user's "curiosity" psychology and lays the foundation for subsequent deepening of cognition.

When users develop a sustained interest in a specific cultural field, the model shows that they have entered the second stage, namely "emotional resonance and meaning association" (Zhang Xin, 2020). User behavior has shifted from passive and generalized browsing to "vertical deep cultivation" around personal interests (such as handicrafts and history). In this process, users and bloggers in specific cultural fields have established a "quasi-social interaction" relationship, that is, a kind of social connection generated through continuous viewing and interaction. This virtual connection prompts users to have emotional resonance with the cultural content presented, and to find meaning associations from historical and cultural connotations or personal experiences, thus realizing the transformation from "symbolic cognition" to "systematic cognition" and "emotional investment".

In the third stage, the model points out that users will move toward "value internalization and identity seeking". Users are no longer just viewers of culture, but through "participatory production" and "social interaction" such as comment interaction, content imitation, and secondary creation, they move from "cultural practice" to "self-expression". This deep participation fosters the integration of cultural elements into one's personal value system—a process of "value internalization"—and stimulates active "identity exploration" regarding their relationship to the culture. Finally, after the progression and circulation of these three stages, users form a dynamic and multi-level Chinese cultural identity in the field of algorithm and social logic.



**Figure 2. The Phased Evolution Model of Cultural Identity on Short Video Platforms**

### *3.2 The Role of Social Interaction and Group Belonging in Strengthening Identity*

On the one hand, the interactive characteristics of short video social platforms make the construction of cultural identity no longer limited to isolated individual media use, but fully integrated into the meaning negotiation and belonging of virtual communities. "Meaning negotiation in comments and bullet screens" is the most common social platform media environment (Dai Lili, 2024). "Through such social media engagement, international students can not only fill information gaps and have questions answered, but also observe the diversity and inconsistency of information interpretation involved in the same cultural phenomenon by Chinese audiences, and discover the 'dynamic and complex nature' of culture." This negotiation participation makes the original passive cultural indoctrination a process of two-way meaning negotiation, deepening the level of understanding. On the other hand, "interaction based on common hobbies" in virtual communities enables international students to pay attention to the blogger accounts in certain cultural fields, and even join relevant fan groups or participate in certain topic challenges. The virtual communities formed by the aggregation of common cultural hobbies, based on common hobbies (such as Hanfu matching and dressing, ancient style music) will produce a strong sense of group belonging (Zhang Zida, Nong Jinhua, & Wei Xin, 2022). This "we" feeling mitigates the loneliness and alienation experienced in real cross-cultural settings, transforming interest in Chinese culture into a tangible social identity that overseas students may feel in actual cross-cultural situations, and develop their interest in Chinese culture into a socialized label identity. Finally, in the "confirmation and strengthening of identity through social feedback", overseas students upload original content (experience videos) about Chinese culture and receive feedback such as likes, bullet screens, and reposts, which is undoubtedly immediate and positive social feedback. Beyond gratifying self-display, this immediate positive feedback serves as a form of "social identity" validation. It confirms and sustains their status as a "Chinese culture enthusiast" or "active participant," thereby practically verifying and consolidating their cultural identity as a "Chinese culture lover" or "positive experiencer", and strengthens the practical verification and consolidation of cultural identity.

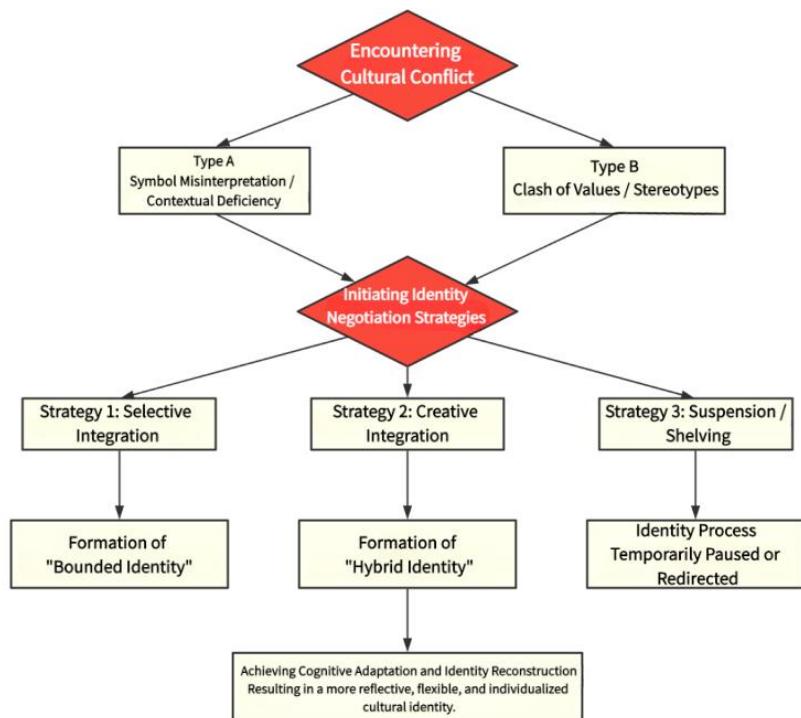
### *3.3 Identity Negotiation Strategies in Cultural Conflicts and Adjustments*

In the cross-cultural contact field constructed by short video platforms, Southeast Asian students inevitably encounter "cultural conflicts" (Chang & Zhang, 2025) in the process of exploring Chinese culture. This conflict mainly comes from two situations: one is that the fragmented presentation of short videos leads to "symbol misreading and context loss". For example, they may misunderstand a traditional ritual as an ordinary daily behavior; the other is when they come into contact with content reflecting Chinese social concepts (such as collectivism and family ethics), they produce deeper "value collisions and critical reflections". For example, the discussion of the "involution" phenomenon may cause their confusion or doubt.

Faced with these conflicts, users do not passively accept them, but actively launch a series of "identity negotiation strategies" to adjust their cognition. Figure 3 clearly shows this dynamic negotiation path. As shown in the figure, after "encountering cultural conflicts", users will adopt three different strategies

according to the nature of the conflict and their own judgment. The first is "selective integration", that is, users selectively accept cultural elements compatible with their own values (such as food, landscape aesthetics), while temporarily shelving or rejecting other parts, thus forming a "bounded identity". The second is "creative integration", which is a more active construction strategy. Users integrate and recreate Chinese elements with their own cultural background, such as singing Chinese songs in their own language, thus forming a unique "hybrid identity". The third is "suspension/shelving", that is, users temporarily shelve conflicts that are difficult to understand or accept for a while, and their cultural identity process is therefore temporarily suspended or turned to other directions.

In the end, whether it is to form boundaries through selective integration or to achieve innovation through creative integration, users can achieve "cognitive adjustment and identity reconstruction" after experiencing a dynamic cycle of conflict, negotiation and adjustment (Chen Xi, 2024). This process prompts them to go beyond simple cultural absorption and establish a cultural identity that is more personally reflective, more resilient, and more personal. The short video platform has become a "social laboratory" that promotes international students to actively reflect, adjust and reconstruct their cultural identity by providing materials that cause conflicts and interactive spaces that facilitate negotiation.



**Figure 3. The Dynamic Negotiation Pathway of Cultural Conflict and Identity Adaptation**

In short, the construction of cultural identity of Southeast Asian students on short video platforms is gradually completed in the field formed by the intersection of algorithmic logic and social logic, and in the spiral upward process of knowledge accumulation, emotional binding, community belonging, and conflict negotiation (Luo Shuanglan & Yang Liping, 2020). While the platform provides them with

cultural materials, it also builds a real-time dynamic "social laboratory" for them to explore meaning, social connection and identity experiment, which promotes the formation of a diversified, three-dimensional and dynamic pattern of self-cultural identity.

#### **4. The Dual Effect and Optimization Path of Short Video Platforms in the Cross-cultural Communication of Chinese Culture**

Leveraging high interactivity, immersive experiences, and personalized recommendations, short video platforms play a significant role in promoting the cultural identity of Chinese culture among Southeast Asian students, but also bring structural limitations such as superficial cognition and stereotypes (Zhao Xiao, 2024). Based on interviews with 30 Southeast Asian students in Shanghai and analysis of 500 related short video contents, this study explores the dual effects and optimization paths of the platform from the perspective of specific behaviors and experiences.

##### *4.1 The Promotion Effect and Its Limitations of the Deepening of Cultural Identity*

Short videos greatly lower the threshold for cultural contact through emotional and interactive narratives. Interviews show that 87% of respondents first came into contact with cultural symbols such as "Hanfu" and "tea ceremony" through short videos, and became interested in them (Jia Yue, 2024). For example, Indonesian student A took the initiative to search for knowledge about the shape of Hanfu and tried to buy it online after watching a short video of "Hanfu transformation". The audio-visual stimulation and emotional rendering of short videos form the "stickiness of the first impression", prompting the transformation of cultural curiosity into in-depth exploration. At the same time, the "secondary creation" function of the platform provides the possibility of "practical identity" for international students. In the interview, Vietnamese student B repeatedly imitated the "Chinese cuisine tutorial" in the short video to make Mapo tofu, and shared the process in a video, which was encouraged by the interaction between Chinese and Thai users. This participatory practice internalizes cultural symbols into personal experiences, promoting identity from "watching" to "action".

However, the "instant-gratification logic" of short videos also brings the limitation of flattening the meaning (Yuan Yuan, 2023). In a sample of 500 popular cultural short videos, more than 70% focused on superficial symbols such as food, scenery, and festivals, and the interpretation of cultural background and philosophical concepts was less than 3% (Ji Li & Huang Hong, 2024). Thai student C mentioned in the interview: "I have seen many videos of the Forbidden City, which are very beautiful, but I am not very clear about why it is such a layout and what it symbolizes." This cognitive state of "knowing what it is but not knowing why" easily makes cultural identity stay at the level of "visual consumption", and it is difficult to form a spiritual resonance based on value understanding.

##### *4.2 Potential Risks of Cultural Stereotypes and Cognitive Biases*

While the platform algorithm accurately feeds content, it may also reinforce the narrowing of cognition. Data analysis shows that among international students who continue to watch content of the "Chinese Kung Fu" category, more than 60% of the subsequent recommended content focuses on "spectacular"

themes such as martial arts fighting and weapon display, while the exposure rate of content related to martial arts philosophy and modern development is less than 5% (Wu Meihong, Shi Tian, & Chen Xiang, 2024). This "algorithm window" has led to the formation of a single cognition among some international students. For example, D, an international student from Myanmar, believes that "all Chinese people know a little Kung Fu", which is actually due to the repetitive shaping of his information environment.

At the same time, the "performative logic" of short videos may distort the authenticity of culture. In the short videos of "rural life", in order to attract traffic, some contents deliberately strengthen the narrative framework of "pastoral idyll" or "backward exoticism", which forms a significant gap with reality. E, a Malaysian student, said: "The Chinese countryside in the video is very poetic, but when I travel, I find that many places are actually very modern." This "hyper-real" presentation, although it arouses interest in watching in the short term, may cause cognitive gap in the long term and weaken cultural trust (Zeng Xiaoyan, Wu Yinghui, & Gou Shiyu, 2020).

#### *4.3 Construction of Content Ecology and Communication Strategy Based on Multiple Coordination*

In order to optimize the communication effect, a three-dimensional path of "content-algorithm-scene" should be constructed:

First, promote the structural upgrading of the content supply side. Encourage universities, cultural institutions and high-quality creators to cooperate to produce easy-entry, deep-dive content (Su Yongyan, 2024). For example, under the topic of "Hanfu", micro-documentaries on ancient clothing etiquette and weaving techniques can be integrated, combined with the needs expressed in the interviews with international students who "want to know more about the story behind", to enhance the depth of the content. This study found that the completion rate of short videos with cultural commentary subtitles was 40% higher than that of pure entertainment content.

Second, implement the inclusive design of the "breakthrough algorithm". The platform can add the weight of "cultural expansion" in the recommendation mechanism, and automatically implant related but more in-depth extended videos when users continuously watch similar content. For example, smoothly transition from "Chinese cuisine" to "dietary philosophy" and "regional culture" topics to break the information cocoon. Test data shows that the cognitive score of international students who have received such push on the multi-dimensional Chinese culture has increased by about 25%.

Third, build an immersive cultural scene that links online and offline. Short videos can be used as an interest entry to guide systematic cultural experiences (Wang Cang, Zhu Tao, & Ao Yongchun, 2025). For example, East China Normal University has tried to promote the "Chinese Calligraphy Workshop" through short videos to attract international students to participate offline. In the interview, F, a Filipino international student who participated in such activities, said: "Writing brush calligraphy by hand made me understand why calligraphy is a kind of cultivation in China, and it is no longer just a beautiful pattern." This closed loop from "online perception" to "offline experience" can effectively promote the transformation of cognition from sensibility to rationality, and from symbol to meaning.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the short video media use behavior of Southeast Asian students in China, and finds the "advantages" and "disadvantages" of new media in constructing the identity of Chinese culture. The short video platform reduces the threshold of cultural engagement through its highly immersive, in-depth interactive and personalized algorithmic distribution system. Through the way of "appealing to emotions, fostering closeness through shared feeling, and facilitating interaction", it arouses the interest of Southeast Asian students in Chinese culture, and gradually realizes the phased identity of Chinese culture from the surface to the inside. At the same time, the risk of "shallow reading" and "cognitive fixation" of cultural cognition brought by this platform feature and algorithm logic makes it easy to narrow the rich and colorful cultural phenomena into several "different views" of cultural labels. It can be seen that the short video platform is the "catalyst" for the construction of cultural identity, but it is also the "soft constraint" for the upgrading of cognition. If Chinese culture is to "go out", future cultural exchanges in the context of the "Belt and Road" need to break away from the excessive focus on the efficiency of communication, and create an all-round ecology of "platform optimization + content deep cultivation + online and offline linkage". While leveraging its power to engage and connect audiences, efforts must prioritize the in-depth interpretation of cultural meanings and authentic, diversified representation, so as to promote the formation of more solid, rational and inclusive cultural cognition and cultural identity.

## Funding

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