

Original Paper

Research on the Cultural Communication Mechanism of Gansu Cross-border E-commerce from the Perspective of the Spirit of Rewi Alley

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Abstract

Guided by the spirit of Rewi Alley—embodying the core principles of “hands and mind together”, “international bridge”, “rootedness in the land”, and “truthful narrative”—this paper explores the cultural communication mechanism of Gansu’s cross-border e-commerce (CBEC). The study contends that Gansu’s distinctive local products, such as “Long medicine”, “Gan flavor”, and “Dunhuang cultural creative products”, provide a solid foundation for “narrating through objects”. By establishing a communication mechanism integrating “product empowerment, platform dialogue, localized narrative, and multi-agent co-narration”, Gansu’s CBEC can transform commodities into mediums for cultural narrative. To address internal challenges in logistics, branding, talent, and external risks like cultural discount, this paper proposes optimization paths centered on promoting the “craftsman spirit”, adhering to the “bridge spirit”, and upholding the “truth-seeking spirit”. These aim to facilitate the sector’s transition from “selling products” to “engaging in cross-cultural bidirectional communication”, offering insights for enhancing regional cross-cultural communication capacity.

Keywords

Spirit of Rewi Alley; Gansu Cultural Communication; Cross-border E-commerce

1. Introduction

Driven by digital technology profoundly reshaping global trade patterns, cross-border e-commerce has evolved from a purely commercial channel into a new platform for cultural dissemination. Within this context, Chinese CBEC is undergoing a strategic shift from “rapid growth” to “steady advancement” and from “commodity export” to “supply chain globalization,” creating new possibilities for the deep embedding of cultural elements. Particularly under the impetus of digital technology, CBEC is no longer just about the cross-border flow of goods but has become a carrier of Chinese cultural symbols, integrating cultural and economic value through global digital infrastructure.

As a core node province in the “Belt and Road” initiative, Gansu, leveraging its unique Silk Road culture and product resources, is experiencing rapid development in CBEC. However, existing research predominantly focuses on the industrial scale of Gansu’s CBEC, with a systematic exploration of its cultural communication function remaining insufficient. Rewi Alley’s sixty years of practice, deeply engaged in Western China, formed a mature paradigm for cross-cultural communication, yet his spiritual legacy has not been fully integrated with contemporary digital communication practices.

Based on this, using the Spirit of Rewi Alley as a theoretical perspective and combining it with Gansu’s CBEC practices, the core research question is: How can the Spirit of Rewi Alley provide value guidance for Gansu’s CBEC and help construct a “narrating through objects” model for cultural communication? The study aims to connect historical spiritual heritage with modern digital trade, providing a solution that integrates theory and practice for building regional cross-cultural communication capacity.

2. Literature Review

Driven by digital technology, CBEC has completed a strategic transition from “commodity export” to “cultural globalization.” Academia has developed a multi-dimensional understanding of CBEC’s cultural communication function. Qiu Ling et al. (2025) systematically elaborated how CBEC, through mechanisms like diversified dialogue, precise reach, virtual-real interaction, and narrative dimension enhancement, becomes a significant force in building a more effective cross-cultural communication system. Appel & Grewal (2020) pointed out that the “contextualized interaction” of CBEC platforms can break cultural and geographical boundaries, enabling the “perceptible communication” of regional cultures through product experiences. Li Haoqiang & Zhang Meng (2024) further confirmed that CBEC, through brand internationalization strategies, precise digital marketing systems, and cross-cultural cooperation networks, significantly promotes global market understanding and respect for Chinese regional cultures. Ritzer’s (2018) theory of “digital capitalism” provides a critical perspective for CBEC’s cultural communication, emphasizing the need to avoid the “homogenized commodification” of cultural symbols—a view that resonates with Gansu CBEC’s path of relying on regional characteristics for communication. Li Shujing (2024) proposed that CBEC enterprises, through the precise alignment of cultural symbols with contemporary consumer demands, construct a bidirectional, interactive cultural communication ecosystem.

Research on Rewi Alley provides important historical experience and spiritual resources for CBEC's cultural communication. Liu Xiaoxia (2021) systematically reviewed Alley's translations, arguing that he persistently adhered to a target-reader-oriented approach, introducing China and Chinese culture to the world, reflecting his selfless, compassionate, and transnational internationalist spirit. Long Zuolian (2023) stated that Rewi Alley's internationalist spirit remains evergreen, inspiring peace-loving people worldwide to continue telling China's stories well and striding forward towards the shared future of a global community. Zhao Qianxi (2025) indicated that the essence of the "Rewi Alley phenomenon" is the spiritual rebirth of a historical figure in the digital age, a cultural resonance and spiritual awakening transcending time and space. The "integration" dimension in Berry's (1997) cross-cultural adaptation theory highly aligns with Alley's advocacy of "equal and respectful cross-cultural communication," providing theoretical support for CBEC to build dialogue mechanisms. Research shows that Alley's spirit of cross-cultural inclusivity, his empowerment and care for local communities, and his practical education philosophy of "using both hand and brain, creating and analyzing" share a high degree of congruence with the current cultural communication mission of CBEC—Alley's belief that "knowledge originates from practice" is in line with CBEC's path of cultural communication through the embodied experience of products, while his cross-cultural inclusive spirit provides the value foundation for CBEC to construct cross-cultural dialogue mechanisms.

Despite significant progress, existing research still has the following gaps: Firstly, studies on CBEC cultural communication tend to be macro, lacking sufficient exploration of characteristic industry cases in western provinces like Gansu, and deep dialogue with international cross-cultural communication theories. Secondly, existing research has not organically integrated the Spirit of Rewi Alley with contemporary communication channels like CBEC and digital trade, failing to fully explore the guiding value of Alley's spirit for modern cross-cultural communication practices. Therefore, organically integrating the Spirit of Rewi Alley, Gansu cultural communication, and CBEC to construct a research framework for CBEC cultural communication that embodies both historical heritage and innovative significance holds important theoretical and practical value, providing a clear direction and theoretical basis for this study.

3. Connotation and Contemporary Mapping of the Spirit of Rewi Alley

3.1 Connotation of the Spirit of Rewi Alley

The core of Rewi Alley's spirit can be distilled into four interconnected dimensions, each possessing theoretical relevance to international communication studies.

First, the craftsman spirit of "hands and mind together" prioritizes practical action over theoretical discourse. At the Bailie School in Shandan, Alley championed "hands and mind together, create and analyze", reflecting his conviction that true knowledge and value emerge from the synthesis of labor and critical thinking. This ethos of mastering technical excellence and believing that superior products inherently convey spiritual values resonates with Johnson's (1987) theory of embodied cognition—which

asserts that cognition originates from bodily experience—thereby offering a theoretical foundation for transmitting culture through the tactile and visual qualities of products. This approach embodies the communicative principle that “the best stories are embedded within products”.

Second, the bridge spirit of cross-cultural inclusivity and humanistic care is manifested in Alley’s unwavering commitment to narrating China’s stories from a stance of equality and respect, centering on the dignity and creativity of ordinary people. This spirit calls for communicators to reject condescension and foster mutual understanding through sincere dialogue. Such an orientation aligns with the “integration” strategy in Berry’s (1997) cross-cultural adaptation theory, where individuals maintain their own cultural identity while respectfully engaging with and adopting elements of other cultures—a stance highly consistent with the foundational logic of CBEC exchanges.

Third, the dedication spirit of rootedness in the land and local empowerment was demonstrated through Alley’s long-term, deep involvement in western regions such as Gansu, where he activated endogenous local development through the “Gung Ho” (Industrial Cooperatives) movement. Central to this spirit is “local wisdom,” emphasizing that effective communication must be grounded in a profound understanding of local resources. This principle echoes Hannerz’s (1992) notion of “local culture global transmission,” offering direct guidance for Gansu’s CBEC sector in developing culture-centric communication strategies based on indigenous assets.

Fourth, the narrative spirit of truth-seeking, pragmatism, and equal respect was founded on Alley’s extensive firsthand observation and practice. His unembellished documentation of facts helped shape an authentic image of China. The ethical conviction that “sincerity constitutes communicative power” underlying this spirit corresponds to the “authentic communication ethics” advanced by Hodgins & Ziegler (2000), providing significant insight for CBEC to mitigate the narrative risks of “Othering” and establish a credible communication framework.

Together, these four dimensions form a coherent system constituting Rewi Alley’s spirit. Its emphasis on practicality, humanistic concern, local embeddedness, and authenticity offers actionable value guidance for contemporary CBEC cultural communication.

3.2 Contemporary Mapping of the Spirit of Rewi Alley

As a pioneering figure in Sino-global cultural exchange, Rewi Alley’s spiritual legacy exhibits renewed relevance in the digital economy, engaging in a fourfold correspondence with the communicative attributes of CBEC:

First, “hands and mind together” and product cultural empowerment demand that products embody “craftsmanship”—combining robust quality and skilled artistry with the infusion of rich cultural narratives and aesthetic value. Through such embodied engagement, Gansu’s traditional medicines, specialty agricultural products, and intangible cultural heritage crafts translate abstract Chinese culture into tangible, relatable, and usable lived experiences for global consumers, thereby elevating products into vessels of culture.

Second, “international bridge” and platform-driven cross-cultural dialogue are evident as CBEC platforms naturally assume the “international bridge” role once personified by Alley, now within digital realms. Leveraging big data and intelligent algorithms, these platforms can precisely identify and reach overseas audiences with a latent interest in Chinese culture, achieving targeted cultural outreach. Simultaneously, integrated features like instant translation, AI-powered customer service, and live-streaming interactions significantly reduce language barriers, fostering a multi-layered, real-time space for cross-cultural dialogue. This enables Gansu’s regional culture to transcend geographical confines and interact directly and widely with global consumers, fulfilling Alley’s vision of international exchange based on equality and mutual understanding.

Third, “rootedness in the land” and the localized communication pathway require Gansu’s CBEC sector to leverage and articulate its unique local industrial resources deeply. Its competitive edge derives not from imitation but from distinctive regional treasures such as “Gan flavor” agricultural products, “Long medicine” herbs, and Dunhuang-inspired creative products. This “localized communication” strategy necessitates that CBEC narratives be deeply rooted in Gansu’s geographical context, historical legacy, and humanistic culture. By articulating the intrinsic connection between products and their place of origin, it positions the “Gansu story” as a vivid and concrete chapter within the broader “China story”, thereby avoiding homogenized competition and cultivating unique cultural appeal.

Fourth, “truth-seeking and pragmatism” and the assurance of narrative authenticity find a powerful counterpart in the live e-commerce and user-generated content (UGC) prevalent in CBEC. As Wang Lu (2025) notes, the real-time, interactive, and situated nature of live-stream commerce fosters a “what you see is what you get” sense of authenticity. Live demonstrations by inheritors of intangible cultural heritage and direct explanations from farmers in orchards often prove more persuasive than polished advertisements. Moreover, post-purchase “unboxing” reviews and usage shares by international users form a decentralized, multi-source network of authentic narratives.

In summary, the Spirit of Rewi Alley provides profound value orientation and a practical methodology for the cultural communication of Gansu’s CBEC. It guides the sector beyond purely commercial considerations, facilitating a forward-looking, sincere, and effective civilizational dialogue in global digital spaces, using “objects” as its medium.

4. Resources and Development Status of Gansu Cross-border E-commerce

As a vital corridor of the ancient Silk Road, Gansu’s profound cultural heritage and unique product resources provide fertile ground for the “narrating through objects” practice of CBEC. Gansu’s reputation as the “Land of Medicinal Herbs for Millennia” stems from genuine regional herbs like Min County Chinese Angelica and Longxi Astragalus, which embody the health preservation philosophy of the *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon*, the clinical practice recorded in the Han Dynasty medical slips from Wuwei, and the systematic theory of Huangfu Mi’s *Systematic Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion*. “Gan flavor” products like Jingning apples and Lanzhou lilies, grown in the pure land nourished by the Qilian

Mountains, develop excellent quality relying on unique light and heat conditions. Sold to Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern markets via CBEC, they tell the world stories of Gansu people's farming wisdom in conforming to nature and intensive cultivation, and the ecological story of the plateau's pure land producing healthy, high-quality ingredients. Products like Dunhuang silk scarves and Qingyang sachets integrate cultural symbols such as the flying apsaras and caisson ceiling patterns into modern designs—Qingyang sachet inheritors innovate designs combining international aesthetics, the Dunhuang jewelry brand “Mogao Goldworks” creates “flowing cultural name cards” using the Nine-Colored Deer element, achieving contemporary dissemination of Silk Road civilization through CBEC; products like electrical appliances and nickel-based new materials are exported to countries along the “Belt and Road” via B2B models, showcasing the transformation achievements of Gansu's old industrial base and injecting modernization connotations into the “Gansu story”.

Gansu CBEC has made significant progress in industrial foundation and policy support: comprehensive cross-border e-commerce pilot zones in Lanzhou, Tianshui, etc., are accelerating their development; the *Implementation Plan for the China (Lanzhou) Cross-border E-commerce Comprehensive Pilot Zone* clarifies goals like brand cultivation and smart logistics center construction; the Lanzhou New Area Comprehensive Bonded Zone has successfully introduced an AliExpress industrial park; the Dunhuang Airport Economic Zone has become an important carrier of the “Digital Silk Road”. In terms of logistics and platform construction, international freight trains cover Central Asia, Europe, and Southeast Asia; the “Ganzhou collection + Lanzhou dispatch” model effectively improves logistics efficiency; some enterprises have established overseas warehouses in South Asia; local platforms like the “Misty Lanshan” cultural creative base actively explore innovative models like “online-offline experience,” forming a diversified development pattern. However, significant deficiencies persist in the dimension of cultural communication, primarily characterized by a solid foundation in “objects” but insufficient capability in “narration”: brand narratives continue to emphasize price and functionality, with a notable lack of exploration into cultural connotations; communication formats predominantly remain at basic live-streaming, with inadequate application of immersive technologies like VR/AR, resulting in relatively lagging cultural transformation; some products struggle to gain widespread acceptance in overseas markets due to “cultural discount”. This necessitates that Gansu's cross-border e-commerce practice must not only “sell products” but also master “storytelling”, integrating Rewi Alley's sincere, inclusive, and practice-based narrative spirit into modern digital communication, thereby achieving the transition from a “marketplace for transactions” to a “space for cultural exchange”.

5. Constructing the Communication Mechanism Guided by the Spirit of Rewi Alley

Based on the aforementioned theoretical perspective and practical foundation, this section aims to concretely translate the Spirit of Rewi Alley into a set of operable, replicable cultural communication mechanisms. This mechanism uses “objects” as the medium and digital platforms as the field, promoting

the leap of Gansu CBEC from pure commercial transaction to deep cross-cultural communication through the synergistic operation of four core mechanisms.

First, the product empowerment mechanism, guided by the “hands and mind together” principle, is premised on quality and imbued with culture, translating Rewi Alley’s craftsman spirit into product competitiveness. Its implementation involves several pathways: establishing end-to-end quality control and traceability systems—for instance, creating a digital “planting-processing-sales” traceability system for Min County Chinese Angelica, where scanning a QR code reveals the growing environment and processing flow, thereby communicating a “truth-seeking and pragmatic” quality culture. It also entails technological innovation integrated with cultural elements, as seen when Dunhuang cultural and creative enterprises collaborate with university design departments to apply mural color palettes to silk scarf patterns and develop home decor series featuring “caisson patterns”, thus modernizing intangible cultural heritage techniques. Furthermore, building standard systems by formulating “Long medicine” processing standards aligned with international benchmarks and pursuing international certification ensures that quality undergirds cultural communication.

Second, the platform dialogue mechanism, embodying the “international bridge” spirit, leverages cross-border e-commerce platforms to construct a cross-cultural dialogue space. Its implementation involves several pathways: precision targeting—for instance, utilizing AliExpress algorithmic tags to promote “Long medicine” to overseas wellness bloggers and directing Dunhuang cultural and creative products to art enthusiasts, thereby achieving “culture finding its audience”; immersive experiences—such as launching a “Virtual Dunhuang” livestream room on TikTok Shop, where VR technology recreates the Mogao Caves scene and hosts in Silk Road attire explain the design inspiration behind cultural products, significantly enhancing cultural reach efficiency; and multilingual community operations—as exemplified by cultivating a team of “Gansu Cultural Ambassadors” who manage “Longwei Life” communities in English, Russian, and other languages, sharing methods for brewing Astragalus tea and stories of Dunhuang murals, thus fostering sustained cultural interaction.

Third, the localized narrative mechanism, guided by the “rootedness in Gansu” principle, is deeply embedded in the regional culture of Gansu to achieve narrative dimensional enhancement, practicing Alley’s “rootedness in the land” spirit. Practical paths include: scenario-based livestreaming—for example, conducting a “Gifts of the Loess Plateau” themed livestream during the Chinese Angelica harvest season, where farmers explain the relationship between “genuine regional medicinal materials” and the local soil and water, integrating terrace landscapes to convey agricultural civilization; Dunhuang cultural livestreams set at mural restoration sites, allowing conservators to narrate cultural heritage preservation stories, thereby deepening the cultural resonance of the products; a “one-place-one-product” narrative line—linking Jingning apples to the “Loess Plateau ecological governance” story and associating Jiuquan tomato sauce with the history of “Silk Road culinary exchange,” collectively forming a diverse regional cultural panorama; and regional image building—such as livestreaming scenes from China-Europe Railway Express shipments, connecting mechanical and electrical products with the

“Western industrialization” narrative, to construct a Gansu image characterized by “the coexistence of tradition and modernity”.

Fourth, the multi-agent narrative mechanism, adhering to the “truth-seeking and pragmatism” ethos, builds a decentralized narrative network that implements Alley’s “authentic narrative” spirit. Implementation pathways comprise: user-generated content incentives—for instance, establishing a “My Gansu Story” section on platforms where overseas users share scenarios of decorating homes with Qingyang sachets or using lilies in Western cuisine, with high-quality content rewarded by coupons, thus fostering a grassroots narrative atmosphere; producer narratives—such as inviting intangible cultural heritage inheritors and medicinal herb farmers to become “principal narrators,” as exemplified by Qingyang sachet inheritor Zhang Xuemei, whose personal account boasts over 100,000 followers and whose “Inheritance Stitch by Stitch” video series sparks cross-cultural resonance; and authentic evaluation dissemination—compiling feedback from international users on “Long medicine” to produce “International User Testimonial” short videos, which are then redistributed via social media to enhance cultural credibility.

These four mechanisms collectively form a closed-loop system for cross-border e-commerce cultural communication, with the Spirit of Rewi Alley at its core: product empowerment serves as the foundation, providing the material vehicle for cultural dissemination; platform dialogue acts as the channel, facilitating cross-cultural communication links; localized narrative constitutes the core content, infusing regional cultural connotations; and multi-agent co-narration functions as the safeguard, enhancing communication credibility. The four components are interdependent and synergistic, collectively driving Gansu’s cross-border e-commerce to ultimately achieve a profound transformation from “selling products” to “storytelling”, “building trust”, and “transmitting culture”.

6. Challenges and Optimization Paths

Gansu’s CBEC encounters dual challenges in its mission of “narrating through objects”, arising from both internal constraints and the external environment. Internally, it grapples with high logistics costs, a shortage of interdisciplinary talent, and fragmented brand development. Externally, it faces significant cultural discount, increasing trade barriers, and narrative homogenization. In addressing these challenges, the Spirit of Rewi Alley offers vital guidance for the sector’s innovative development. The optimization pathways include practicing the “hands and mind together” spirit to strengthen brand and talent development—through establishing a “Gansu Select” standard system with third-party quality certification, and collaborating with institutions like Lanzhou University of Finance and Economics to develop “CBEC + Cultural Communication” programs that cultivate talent skilled in both commercial operations and cultural interpretation. Embracing the “bridge spirit” helps overcome cultural and logistical barriers by creating a standardized cultural content repository to make Dunhuang culture and TCM theory accessible to global audiences, while expanding overseas warehouses in Central Asia and Europe to build a cost-effective “railway + overseas warehouse” logistics network leveraging the China-

Europe Railway Express. Adhering to the “truth-seeking and pragmatism” spirit mitigates external risks through forming cross-cultural advisory teams to ensure culturally appropriate messaging, establishing trade barrier early-warning mechanisms, and encouraging enterprises to integrate unique cultural elements like Majiayao pottery motifs into product design to achieve distinctive competitive positioning.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates how the spirit of Rewi Alley systematically informs Gansu’s cross-border e-commerce practice through international cross-cultural communication theory. The four dimensions of Alley’s spirit provide a comprehensive value system: the Craftsman Spirit establishes product foundations, the Bridge Spirit guides cross-cultural dialogue, the Dedication Spirit directs localization efforts, and the Narrative Spirit ensures communicative authenticity. Each dimension engages meaningfully with international theories like embodied cognition and cross-cultural adaptation, enhancing the framework’s theoretical relevance. The constructed “product empowerment—platform dialogue—localized narrative—multi-agent co-narration” mechanism enables Gansu’s transition from commodity trading to meaningful cross-cultural exchange, with cases like Dunhuang cultural products and “Long medicine” confirming its effectiveness in enhancing cultural communication. Ultimately, Gansu’s CBEC cultural communication must remain deeply rooted in regional resources while using Alley’s spirit as its ethical compass to overcome cultural discount and homogenization, achieving the virtuous cycle where “objects convey culture, and culture promotes trade”.

Looking forward, Gansu’s CBEC cultural communication holds substantial potential. As technologies like generative AI and the metaverse mature, a “digital Rewi Alley” could emerge as a virtual cultural ambassador on CBEC platforms, providing global consumers with immersive Gansu cultural experiences through intelligent dialogue and virtual tours. CBEC platforms will thus evolve from mere transactional spaces into comprehensive realms for cultural experience, educational dissemination, and emotional connection, playing an increasingly significant role in advancing mutual learning among civilizations.

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