

Embodied Practice and Cultural Identity: "#BecomingChinese" through Wellness Imitation and Cross-Cultural Communication on TikTok

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How to cite this paper: Guo, Q., & Luo, X. (2026). Embodied Practice and Cultural Identity: "#BecomingChinese" through Wellness Imitation and Cross-Cultural Communication on TikTok. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 6(3), 68–75. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9213>

Published: 2026-09-14

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Abstract

In the digital streaming era, the mechanisms underpinning the formation of cultural identity are undergoing profound transformations. Initiated by diasporic Chinese creators on TikTok, the viral "#BecomingChinese" trend attracted widespread global participation. Foreign users actively mimicked Chinese everyday wellness practices—such as drinking warm water, practicing Ba Duan Jin, and consuming herbal broths—spontaneously expressing cultural affinity and identity within short-video spaces. Drawing upon Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory, digital embodiment, and platform affordance frameworks, this study systematically analyzes the communicative subjects, content features, and audience responses within this trend. The study uncovers a bottom-up, reverse pathway of identity construction: rather than relying on prior cultural literacy or political alignment, global audiences start from low-barrier bodily imitation, proceed through utilitarian physiological feedback and affective lifestyle affinity, and eventually consolidate identity-based community belonging. Diasporic creators serve as essential "cultural intermediaries" who deconstruct and translate cultural symbols, while algorithmic recommendations accelerate cross-cultural diffusion. By replacing macro-ideological persuasion with everyday embodied practices, this phenomenon highlights a paradigmatic shift in China's cross-cultural communication—from external projection "going out" to everyday integration "blending in".

Keywords

#Becoming Chinese; Cultural Identity; Embodied Communication; Digital Platform Affordances

1. Introduction

The rise of global short-video platforms has fundamentally reshaped the architecture of cross-cultural communication. Platforms such as TikTok—powered by decentralized recommendation algorithms, low-threshold content production tools, and highly interactive social affordances—have decentralized cultural flows away from state actors and institutional media conglomerates. Instead, micro-level

daily practices performed by grassroots individuals are emerging as decisive drivers of intercultural engagement.

In late 2025, the "#BecomingChinese" trend, initiated by Chinese-American creator Sherry Zhu on TikTok, emerged as a landmark case in digital cross-cultural communication. With a playful remark, "Starting tomorrow, you're becoming Chinese," Zhu triggered a viral phenomenon; within three months, her account gained 740,000 followers, with international users affectionately dubbing her "Chinese Cousin." Under this hashtag, non-Chinese global users recorded and shared their lifestyle transformations by imitating Chinese daily wellness habits, such as drinking hot water, wearing padded indoor slippers, practicing Ba Duan Jin, and brewing herbal soups. Accumulatively, related hashtag views surpassed 4 billion.

The core characteristic of this phenomenon lies in its spontaneous, bottom-up, and de-politicized nature. Rather than being driven by top-down geopolitical narratives or state-sponsored campaigns, it propagated through mundane, highly replicable lifestyle behaviors. Micro-level daily routines demonstrated a unique capacity to penetrate ideological and cultural barriers that often hinder conventional public diplomacy.

In traditional cross-cultural communication frameworks, cultural identity is frequently conceptualized as a static, essentialist entity, reducing communication to a top-down, unidirectional transmission of fixed cultural heritage. However, in an era marked by heightened geopolitical tensions and international trust deficits, expecting foreign audiences to acquire deep historical literacy prior to developing cultural empathy often triggers symbolic defense mechanisms and cognitive resistance. To overcome this theoretical deadlock, this study adopts Stuart Hall's (1990) cultural identity framework, which posits that identity is not a static origin but an ongoing process of "becoming"—produced, negotiated, and embodied through symbolic resources and everyday rituals.

This study operationalizes Hall's theoretical perspective into three progressive tiers of micro-level identity formation:

- Utilitarian Identity: Audience endorsement driven by positive somatic and physiological feedback.
- Affective Identity: Transformation of physiological comfort into emotional affinity for a holistic lifestyle.
- Identity-based Belonging: Active adoption of cultural symbols in social interactions to project personal style and achieve community affiliation.

Accordingly, this study addresses three core research questions:

- RQ1: How do digital platforms and "cultural intermediaries" co-constitute the de-politicized, everyday discourse of Chinese wellness culture?
- RQ2: Through what embodied mechanisms do global audiences construct bottom-up cultural affiliation toward Chinese culture?
- RQ3: How does the "#BecomingChinese" phenomenon reflect a paradigmatic shift

in China's cross-cultural communication—from elite/top-down cultural projection to grassroots/embodyed integration?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. From Symbolic Representation to Embodied Communication

Traditional scholarship on Chinese international communication has long emphasized elite cultural symbols—such as classical philosophy, historical narratives, or traditional arts. While symbolically rich, these high-barrier domains often demand substantial contextual knowledge, resulting in significant "cultural discount" among foreign audiences. Recent scholarship indicates a critical shift toward "embodied communication," wherein the human body operates not merely as a passive recipient of cultural messaging, but as an active medium for sensing, interpreting, and internalizing cross-cultural experiences.

Wellness practices, as embodied daily routines, inherently align with the micro-mechanisms of identity construction. Grounded in holistic health philosophy, practices like hot water consumption and slow-movement exercises transform abstract cultural wisdom into tangible somatic benefits. When mediated by short videos, bodily sensations (e.g., thermal warmth, muscular relaxation) serve as immediate, unforgeable empirical evidence that validates the utility of the cultural practice.

2.2. Algorithmic Affordances and Cultural Intermediaries

The global circulation of cultural practices on TikTok is profoundly governed by platform affordances. TikTok's recommendation engine prioritizes high completion rates, re-creation, and user-generated engagement over institutional authority. This decentralized distribution mechanism lowers the visibility threshold for ordinary creators while amplifying content centered on authentic, relatable daily life.

In this ecosystem, diasporic creators act as vital "cultural intermediaries." Positioned at the intersection of Chinese heritage and Western youth culture, these creators possess the dual cultural literacy necessary to translate, deconstruct, and recontextualize traditional concepts into accessible, internet-native vernaculars (e.g., meme formats, self-deprecating humor, viral challenges). This translation bridges cognitive divides and strips cultural symbols of potential geopolitical friction.

3. Data and Methodology

To empirically investigate the "#BecomingChinese" phenomenon, this study employed a mixed qualitative approach combining multimodal discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Data collection spanned from November 2025 to May 2026, focusing on public posts and user interactions on TikTok.

3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

A multi-stage sampling strategy was implemented:

- 1) Video Corpus: Utilizing TikTok's API and keyword searches (#BecomingChinese, #ChineseWellness, #Chinsesbaddie), the top 100 most-viewed videos were retrieved. Filtering removed non-relevant or purely commercial promotional posts, yielding a final analytical sample of 60 high-impact videos.
- 2) Comment Corpus: From the final video sample, top-level user comments were harvested based on engagement metrics (likes and replies). A total of 2,500 representative comments were compiled for qualitative textual coding.

Table 1. Sampling and data metrics breakdown.

Metric / Category	Value / Source	Analytical Scope
Total Hashtag Views	> 4 Billion (China News Service, May 2026)	Macro platform reach
#BecomingChinese Single Hashtag Views	> 500 Million (TikTok Topic Page)	Core topic engagement
Seed Video Plays (@sherryxiiruii)	> 1.0 Million Plays	Trend initiation benchmark
Sampled Video Corpus	60 High-Impact Short Videos	Multimodal & discourse analysis
Sampled Comment Corpus	2,500 Top-Engaged Comments	Thematic qualitative coding

3.2. Analytical Procedure

Data analysis proceeded through two synchronized qualitative tracks:

- Multimodal Video Analysis: Video content was coded for visual staging, bodily performance, text overlays, audio tracks, and narrative tone (e.g., irony, instruction, transformation narrative).
- Thematic Comment Coding: Comments were subjected to inductive thematic coding, guided by Hall's identity dimensions. Codes were organized into three main categories: (1) physiological & functional feedback, (2) affective alignment & lifestyle praise, and (3) identity performativity & community affiliation.

4. Findings: Communication Mechanisms and Multimodal Discourse

4.1. De-politicized Everyday Content Features

Qualitative examination of the video corpus reveals that user participation concentrated within three primary domestic wellness domains, each exhibiting marked de-politicization:

- Thermal Dietary Adjustments: Videos predominantly featured the substitution of cold water with warm water, along with the preparation of simple boiled fruit

teas (e.g., apple and cinnamon water, goji berry infusions). Complex Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) concepts were translated into straightforward health hacks focused on gut comfort and digestion.

- **Somatic Motion and Posture Tuning:** Simplified tutorials of Ba Duan Jin and morning stretches framed traditional routines as stress-relief exercises suitable for home environments, removing athletic or esoteric barriers.
- **Domestic Living Routines:** Visuals emphasized home comfort, like wearing thermal slippers, keeping the abdominal area warm, and taking short midday rest. These habits were coded as expressions of "self-care" and cozy lifestyle aesthetics.

Table 2. Key practices and discursive framing across wellness domains.

Wellness Domain	Key Practices & Visual Cues	Discursive Framing
Thermal Diet	Boiling water, brewing apple tea, thermos usage	"Gut health," "bloat removal," thermal comfort
Somatic Motion	8-minute Ba Duan Jin routines, gentle stretching	"De-stressing," posture correction, accessible movement
Domestic Living	Padded slippers, abdominal warmth, regulated rest	"Self-care," cozy living, harmonious daily rhythm

4.2. Subject Synergy: Cultural Intermediaries and Mirroring Audiences

The trend's viral expansion relied on a synergistic relationship between two main actor categories:

1. **Cultural Intermediaries (Diasporic Creators):** Creators like Sherry Zhu leveraged their dual cultural heritage to demystify traditional practices. Through lighthearted formats—such as comedic skits comparing Western vs. Chinese household rules—they lowered symbolic boundaries. Their authority derived not from institutional credentials, but from lived experience and relatable digital persona.
2. **Mirroring Imitators (Global Audiences):** Non-Chinese users engaged in "secondary diffusion" by uploading original reaction and routine videos. Characterized by an absence of explicit promotional intent, these first-person narratives ("Day 3 of drinking warm water") established high peer trust. By demonstrating tangible personal benefits, these creators effectively bypassed political framing.

5. Tiers of Identity Formation: From Somatic Sensation to Digital Affiliation

Systematic thematic coding of the comment corpus demonstrates that audience identity negotiation follows a three-tiered progression:

Table 3. Progressive tiers of cultural identity formation.

Identity Tier	Core Mechanism	Representative Comment Data
1. Utilitarian Identity	Positive physiological feedback & bodily comfort	"I've been pooping every day since I started. Never felt better!" "My gut feels so good, the bloat is completely gone."
2. Affective Identity	Emotional resonance with wellness philosophy	"Adopting this lifestyle made me realize how harsh I was on my body." "Chinese wellness is so gentle and caring."
3. Identity-Based Belonging	Symbolic identity performance & playful check-ins	"Day 5 of hot water! I'm fully converting." "I am officially a Chinese Baddie now."

5.1. Utilitarian Identity: Somatic Feedback as Validation

At the initial tier, audience engagement was driven by pragmatic health motives. Users reported immediate, tangible physiological changes, such as improved digestion, reduced bloating, and elevated energy levels. This unforgeable somatic feedback established a functional endorsement of Chinese wellness as an effective personal utility. In cross-cultural settings, bodily experience often precedes cognitive processing, laying an empirical foundation for subsequent emotional engagement.

5.2. Affective Identity: Lifestyle Resonance and Aesthetics

As habits persisted, functional satisfaction evolved into affective appreciation for the broader lifestyle philosophy. Commenters frequently articulated admiration for principles of balance, self-care, and living in rhythm with bodily needs. Chinese wellness was no longer viewed merely as isolated health tips, but as a desirable, holistic approach to modern well-being.

5.3. Identity-Based Belonging: Performativity and Digital Subculture

At the highest tier, engagement consolidated into symbolic identity performance. Global users utilized digital markers—such as "Chinese Baddie" or "10% Chinese"—to signal social style and subcultural affiliation. Playful check-ins ("Day 5 of drinking hot water") functioned as digital rituals through which users actively performed and reinforced their evolving cultural stance within online peer communities.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Theoretical Implications: Reversing the Persuasion Paradigm

The "#BecomingChinese" trend demonstrates a fundamental reversal of the traditional linear persuasion model ("Cognition → Attitude → Behavior"). Conventional international outreach often assumes that foreign audiences must first

absorb historical or political information before developing positive attitudes and adopting related behaviors. In environments marked by political skepticism, this top-down sequence frequently encounters symbolic defense.

The empirical findings point to an inverse pathway ("Practice → Somatic Experience → Cultural Identity"). By placing low-barrier bodily imitation at the entry point, the practice generates immediate somatic rewards that bypass ideological friction, gradually cultivating organic affective and identity-based affiliation.

6.2. Strategic Implications: From "Going Out" to "Blending In"

For China's international communication paradigm, this phenomenon illustrates an evolution across three strategic orientations:

- "Going Out" (Projection): Institutional broadcasting centered on state narratives, achieving broad reach but sometimes encountering contextual disconnects.
- "Going In" (Appreciation): Aesthetic and cultural representation (e.g., cinematic or culinary arts) fostering cross-cultural empathy.
- "Blending In" (Integration): Grassroots, everyday practices that seamlessly embed cultural wisdom into the daily routines of global audiences.

Ultimately, cultural communication achieves its deepest impact when cultural knowledge transitions from abstract representation to lived, daily practice. The viral resonance of "#BecomingChinese" highlights that when micro-level cultural routines become meaningful components of global everyday life, cultural identity is continuously constructed and sustained through embodied practice.

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