

Decoding the Li Ziqi Phenomenon: The Semiotics and Mechanics of Cross-Cultural Brand Communication

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Abstract

The current international communication ecological landscape is becoming increasingly intricate. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, to strengthen our in-ternational communication capacity, it is important to tell genuine and engaging stories, make our voice heard, and present an accurate, multidimensional and panoramic image of China. This paper is grounded in the analytical frame-work of encoding and decoding theory. By integrating empirical case study methods with interpretive text analysis, it embarks on a systematic exploration from three dimensions: the symbolic encoding, symbolic decoding and future dissemination trajectories of Li Ziqi's short videos. The aim is to comprehensively investigate how to enhance the dissemination efficacy of short videos in conveying China's stories, thereby offering constructive insights for the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords

Telling Good Chinese stories; Li Ziqi; Short videos; Encoding and decoding; Dissemination mechanism

1. Introduction

With the widespread adoption of the Internet and the continuous advancement of media technology, the closeness and integration of communication among different parts of the world have been continuously enhanced. Currently, the international political situation is becoming increasingly complex. Short videos, with their unique visual symbols and rapid dissemination characteristics, have emerged as a new channel for spreading China's excellent traditional culture, telling Chinese stories, and a new front for symbolic communication. Li Ziqi's videos have enhanced the recognition of Chinese culture among audiences in various countries through diverse symbols, attracting extensive attention on social media both at home and abroad and creating a favorable atmosphere for cross-cultural communication.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to systematically examine the existing scholarship on the Li Ziqi phenomenon, with a focus on its cross-cultural communication strategies and embedded cultural values. It interrogates the implications of this phenomenon for narrating China's stories and shaping a positive national image. It consolidates studies focusing on Li Ziqi's short-video strategies, her use of symbols, and the connection of her work to the broader project of effective Chinese storytelling.

2.1. Semiotics research and cross-cultural communication strategies

In the realm of semiotics research, the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure posited that any linguistic sign consists of the “signifier” and the “signified”. The signifier is the linguistic symbol that denotes an abstract concept within the signifying operation, and the signified is the specific entity to which the linguistic symbol refers. Charles Sanders Peirce categorized sign types into icons, indices and symbols. He regarded sign communication as a dynamic and open process of signification. “In this signification process, the meaning of a sign is constituted by three components: the representamen, the object and the interpretant.” Among them, the representamen corresponds to the signifier and the object corresponds to the signified.

In the field of cross-cultural communication strategy, American anthropologist Edward Hall defines cross-cultural communication as the transmission of information between individuals or groups belonging to distinct cultural systems and representational frameworks. Cross-cultural communication encompasses the migration, diffusion, and transformation of various cultural elements within global society, along with their impact on different groups, nations, and humanity as a whole. From the perspectives of communicators and audiences, Liu Chaoxia conducted content analysis and textual analysis on videos and comments on the YouTube platform. She found that the “rural beauty, delicious food, and scenic landscapes” in Li Ziqi's videos conform to the imagination of foreign audiences, and regards this as humanity's response to and rebellion against survival dilemmas under the symptoms of modernity. From an emotional perspective, Zeng Yiguo and Shi Jing interpreted the cultural connotations and reflections on modernity behind the pastoral imagination presented in Li Ziqi's videos. They delve into the emotional resonance these videos evoke among viewers, revealing the significance of traditional Chinese pastoral values in today's accelerated society.

2.2. Short Video Research and Telling China's Stories Well

Regarding the advancement of short video creation and knowledge dissemination, Mei Siyu and colleagues emphasize the potential of Li Ziqi's short videos to transmit cultural knowledge within the context of knowledge sociology, offering direction for upgrading short video production. Li Ziqi's success demonstrates that showcasing traditional crafts and rural life can convey rich cultural knowledge and life wisdom.

High-quality and in-depth short videos can play an important role in cross-cultural communication. Xin Jing argue that the deepening development of social media has profoundly transformed the landscape of international communication. The participatory, dialogic, and community-oriented nature of various social media platforms helps enhance the sense of identity, coverage rate, affinity, and stickiness of cross-cultural communication. Exploring and disseminating Chinese cultural symbols with the characteristics of the new era represents an urgent direction for development.

China's cross-cultural communication has entered a new stage, with storytelling becoming a key means to deepen global understanding. Chen Luyao et al., through semantic analysis of YouTube comments on "Grandpa Amu", proposed narrative and technical strategies for fostering cultural identity—offering reference for studying Li Ziqi. Feng Wei et al., using communicative ethnography, identified Li Ziqi's success in using visual beauty, emotional pacing, and traditional crafts to make Chinese culture accessible. Chen Xianhong et al. emphasized aligning storytelling with China's stance, viewing Li Ziqi's grassroots approach as complementary to national strategy. Therefore, within the complex and evolving landscape of international communication, effectively telling China's stories should involve promoting and disseminating China's historical culture and development philosophy.

A review of the existing literature reveals a substantial body of research on Li Ziqi, spanning diverse fields and focusing predominantly on content production, cultural dissemination, communication strategies, models, and audience reception. However, several limitations persist. Current studies remain largely confined to individual case analysis, lacking broader application to the short video industry as a whole. Furthermore, methodologies for assessing the actual cultural value and communication efficacy of Li Ziqi's videos are underdeveloped. The strategic use of short videos to effectively narrate China's stories within the Belt and Road Initiative framework also warrants further exploration. In summary, Li Ziqi's videos, as a form of grassroots narrative, present both new opportunities and challenges for telling China's stories under this initiative. Consequently, future research should broaden its scope and refine its methodologies to provide stronger theoretical and practical support for leveraging new media platforms like short videos in disseminating Chinese culture.

3. Nonverbal Symbol Encoding: Cross-Sensory Activation of Multi-modal Symbols and the Construction of Cultural Identity

In her choice of subject matter, Li Ziqi's return videos are saturated with symbolic signifiers. To ensure smooth cultural translation, she opts for themes with lower "cultural discount", such as rural landscapes, traditional attire, harmony between humans and nature, intangible cultural heritage crafts and traditional music. The cultural accessibility of these subjects enhances the effectiveness of cross-cultural

dissemination in short videos. Many of Li Ziqi's videos feature themes of “reviving tradition”. By leveraging audiovisual elements to create an idyllic media landscape, she crafts the fantasy of “escaping the city” against a backdrop of widespread societal anxiety. Her videos resonate deeply with viewers' imaginings of an ancient Eastern nation, offering audiences worldwide a more intuitive and profound understanding of Chinese culture through this audiovisual feast.

In terms of perspective, unlike mainstream media that adopts a grand narrative framework using rich linguistic symbols to tell China's story, Li Ziqi's return videos employ minimal linguistic symbols. Instead, non-verbal symbols are presented in an integrated manner, achieving a communicative effect where “the true meaning lies within”. This approach dissolves cultural barriers and contextual differences in cross-cultural communication, constructing a cultural world rich in Chinese elements.

3.1. Visual System Configuration: Emotional Aggregation of Pastoral Imagery

In contemporary society, culture has increasingly become visual rather than printed. Short videos, with their intuitive and straightforward presentation and accessible content, have emerged as a key to cross-cultural communication. Li Ziqi masterfully constructs an intricate pastoral visual system through symbols like clothing and crafts, thereby establishing a transnational, trans-regional, and trans-sensory synesthetic mechanism and a common space of meaning. The representation of material cultural symbols in her videos builds a narrative about the “authenticity” of Chinese culture.

Stylistically, Li Ziqi's videos are set in a Chinese-style idyllic pastoral realm, focusing on the daily life of rural communities. The scenes unfold through the rhythms of nature: picking wild vegetables during the gentle rain of early spring to share the freshness with neighbors, preserving the taste of summer by making jams as fruits ripen, harvesting wheat and grinding flour in the fruitful autumn, and enjoying warm family conversations on a snowy winter night. This portrayal of pastoral life—sowing in spring, tending in summer, harvesting in autumn, and storing in winter, not only reawakens cultural identity among Chinese audiences but also amazes international viewers with the wisdom of harmonizing with nature's cycles.

Moreover, Li Ziqi keenly captures the public's subconscious nostalgia and the modern preference for retro trends. In terms of intangible cultural heritage, her video “*To Those Who Know My Name*” demonstrates the complete process of creating Shu brocade and velvet flowers—from silkworms eating mulberry leaves to the final crafting of garments. The time-consuming nature of these crafts and the embodied experience of wearing them make her videos a carrier of vital, anti-modern cultural symbols. This approach distinguishes itself from the retro

simulacra criticized by Baudrillard, becoming instead a tangible practice of cultural memory.

3.2. Auditory Landscape Construction: The Cohesive Logic of Sound-scape Codes in Community

In the age of contextual media, the value of sound is immeasurable. The diversity and subtlety of auditory presentation, combined with the immersive engagement of audiovisual integration, grant viewers a sense of “being there” and help construct an emotional bond with a poetic, pastoral lifestyle.

In terms of specific categories, the auditory symbols in Li Ziqi's short videos include natural ambient sounds, soothing post-production music and narration. The integration of soundscapes creates a unique atmosphere and achieves sensory balance, giving viewers a sense of “absent presence” participation. Specifically, she employs audiovisual symbols to break down cultural communication barriers. Her videos feature an ancient aesthetic as their foundation, where natural sounds and classical-style music form a “sound montage.” As low-context symbols, these musical elements convey emotion and meaning without the need for translation, enhancing the emotional impact of the scene's symbols and subtly evoking viewers' longing for a Chinese pastoral idyll.

Meanwhile, natural sounds like roosters crowing, dogs barking, leaves rustling through forests and trickling water create a tranquil and harmonious atmosphere, constructing an authentic rural living environment. These sounds implicitly convey a back-to-basics lifestyle, facilitating the creative transformation of deeper cultural symbols. In her video *To “Those Who Know My Name”*, the elegant strains of traditional music blend seamlessly with the human voice singing the song *“As Wished”*. On one hand, the overlapping of the auditory representation (piano notes) and the visual representation (velvet flowers) enables viewers, as interpreters, to engage in cross-sensory synesthesia, linking the material “velvet flower” with the abstract concept of “ronghua” (glory and splendor), thereby generating an interpretive effect of good wishes. On the other hand, Li Ziqi's consistent use of classical instrumental music and the subconscious recognition of traditional Chinese culture create a sense of ritual and cultural resonance, allowing fans to quickly immerse themselves in a familiar ambiance and form strong identification and emotional connection.

This auditorily constructed “sense of presence” also creates conditions for overseas audiences to engage in negotiated decoding and appreciate the subtleties of Chinese cultural charm.

3.3. Ritual Spatiotemporal Inscriptions: Pathways for Anchoring Cultural Memory in the Field

The essence of artistic conception must first be grounded in “authentic settings”, yet it transcends mere external forms to convey “spiritual resonance”. Li Ziqi's short

videos exemplify this through their meticulous audiovisual language, artistic composition, and diverse scene selection, all imbued with the beauty of artistic conception. In her video *“Building a Forest Closet in the Firewood Room”*, she collaborates with neighbors to showcase the entire process—from clearing unused space, transporting bamboo, compacting the ground, laying the roof, to cleaning and treating it against insects and decay. Interspersed with conversations during labor, the “signified” of these natural, simple, and rustic pastoral scenes awakens people’s yearning for rural life. The rhythmic camera work and selection of iconic landscapes construct a media space rich in Chinese elements, immersing viewers in a virtual poetic retreat from urban life. In terms of cinematography, her videos frequently include montages of natural scenery, such as mist-shrouded mountain ranges, radiant sunlight and ever-changing skies. These visual symbols serve as signifiers pointing to the idealized retreat to the countryside, metaphorically embodying traditional Chinese cultural values of returning to nature and harmonious coexistence with all things. They weave together universal cultural memories and emotional connections.

3.4. Transcription of Bodily Practices: The Production of Labor Codes in Li Ziqi’s IP

Bodily expression, as a form of non-verbal communication, also functions as a bridge connecting tradition and modernity, China and the world. Through her physical presence and emotional expression, Li Ziqi’s personal IP embodies this linkage. Individuals perform on the “front stage” to shape their image and gain social recognition, such cultural practices can be transformed into symbolic capital and become a form of competition within power relations.

In her video *“Carving Lacquer and Hidden Blossoms: Crafting an Auspicious Aura”*, she embeds the transmission of craftsmanship into the context of family ethics, using mundane activities like repairing a wardrobe to represent grand concepts such as intangible cultural heritage. To some extent, this deconstructs foreign viewers’ stereotypes of Chinese culture and constructs an ethical imagery centered on filial piety and rural community. It can be argued that the grassroots narrative mechanism in Li Ziqi’s videos facilitates a shift from cultural otherness to a shared interpretant. Audiences interpret the content based on their own cultural backgrounds, while the communicative symbols trigger cognitive and emotional responses. Such narratives, built on non-verbal symbols and focused on intangible heritage and poetic pastoral life, retain a sense of authenticity in the age of mechanical reproduction—reminiscent of Benjamin’s aura.

Shooting from a first-person perspective, Li Ziqi immerses viewers in rural life. Her narrative strategy, using no dialogue and subjective camera angles, enhances the audience’s sense of virtual presence. The camera follows her as she chops bamboo, sews clothes, and engages in other labor, reinforcing a feeling of “being there”.

Slow-motion close-ups of craft processes, such as peeling silk from cocoons or the drying of lacquer, paired with natural sounds like rustling leaves, create a de-mediated illusion of reality. Micro-expressions convey emotion subtly, for instance, her grandmother's soft smile while admiring the lacquered wardrobe communicates a universally relatable warmth. This narrative mode transcends language barriers, allowing global audiences to connect with these shared human emotions.

4. Symbol Decoding: Audience Symbol Interpretation and the Triple Logic of Interaction

In cross-cultural communication, the sender encodes and transmits symbols based on their own objectives. Upon reception, the receiver may interpret these symbols from a dominant, consultative, or adversarial stance according to their own experiences, thereby forming attitudes or altering behaviors. When individuals with differing cultural perceptions and symbolic systems engage in communication, their cultural cognitive differences are sufficient to alter the communication event itself. Therefore, deciphering this triple-interaction logic is crucial in cross-cultural communication.

4.1. Dominant Decoding: Emotional Resonance and Value Recognition in Receptive Aesthetics

As a renowned international opinion leader, Li Ziqi's short videos enjoy extensive reach. Her followers identify with the messages and perspectives she conveys and encodes, making them highly likely to engage in dominant decoding of her content. These fans may share a deep emotional connection with Li Ziqi, viewing her high-quality pastoral lifestyle content as a poetic escape from the pressures of modern urban life. Their own experiences, such as camping in the mountains or immersing themselves in rural landscapes, foster greater empathy for the core intent behind Li Ziqi's video messages. Combined with long-term engagement and habitual identification with Li Ziqi's video style and content tone, this has fostered quasi-social relationships, making them more inclined to actively interpret and accept the information conveyed in her videos. For instance, in the comment sections of Li Ziqi's three latest return videos, most viewers express joy at her comeback. Highly upvoted comments like "So productive! Wow! With this much footage, you must have kept recording all these four years and never forgotten us, right?" and "Love this sense of peaceful days and focused living" clearly show widespread positive recognition of her short videos. Internationally, Li Ziqi enjoys significant recognition. Countless foreign viewers have gained foundational understanding of Chinese culture through her series like *Morning Flowers Gathered by Ziqi*, *Oriental Intangible Cultural Heritage*, *Ancient Flavors*, and *The Life of Food*, making them particularly eager for her updates. Related comments reveal fans' profound identification with Li Ziqi's short videos themselves.

4.2. Negotiated Decoding: Symbolic Reinforcement of Cultural Identity in Low-Context Cultures

In the dissemination of Li Ziqi's videos, collaborative decoding manifests as viewers demonstrating proactive engagement during interpretation. They actively share personal insights in comment sections, absorbing and internalizing the content through personal life experiences. Simultaneously, as time progresses, comments directly addressing the videos themselves gradually decrease, while companion-style comments increase, such as sharing daily life, personal reflections, and requests for updates. In cross-cultural communication, Li Ziqi's short videos leverage their immersive soundscapes, authentic rural settings, and credible personal brand to foster virtual communities worldwide. Fans engage through likes, comments, and shares on social media, transforming into tightly-knit circle members whose cultural identity is reinforced through interactive exchanges. While Li Ziqi conveys the aesthetic sensibilities of high-context culture through character actions and natural sounds, the inherent simplicity, visual nature, and brevity of short videos significantly mitigate language barriers and cultural divides. This approach communicates universally relatable values and content. At the same time, misunderstandings about Li Ziqi's content can arise, such as the perception that her videos overly romanticize rural life, presenting a false, constructed media reality. However, the active discussions and interactions in the comment sections allow viewers from different cultural backgrounds to gain fresh perspectives. This fosters the idea that "while her portrayal may not be entirely accurate or authentic, it offers us a window and angle to understand Chinese culture." Even if viewers don't fully endorse the content itself, they adjust their attitudes based on their individual cultural contexts and life experiences through communication and interaction, adapting their perspectives to suit their own circumstances.

4.3. Confrontational Decoding: Critical Intervention in Cultural Barriers and Subjective Experience

In the new media era, audiences empowered by the internet have broken free from the established "sender-receiver" framework and its limitations, gaining greater agency in online discourse. An individual's acceptance of information disseminated through media is closely tied to their personal experiences. As one dimension revealing audience agency in communication, audiences engaging in adversarial decoding can comprehend the key elements conveying meaning in Li Ziqi's short videos, yet they intervene through critical interpretation. From a communication studies perspective, this fundamentally reveals the cultural tension arising from ideological clashes and cultural value system barriers between communicators and audiences. For short-video creators, adopting a global perspective to understand cross-cultural audience empathy and resonance can provide fresh inspiration and new topics for future content. Notably, as a cultural phenomenon in cross-cultural communication,

Li Ziqi's high-quality video production, picturesque pastoral landscapes, and noble themes like intangible cultural heritage preservation inherently align with mainstream value expectations. This reduces cognitive dissonance among viewers, making them more inclined to seek value resonance in her content rather than engage in singular criticism. This complex communication landscape offers crucial creative direction and practical guidance for communicators seeking to adopt new perspectives, empathize with audiences and engage in cross-cultural communication.

5. Cross-Cultural Communication Pathways for Telling China's Stories: Shared Symbols, Emotional Resonance, and Joint Production

Although the three different interpretive approaches differ in their starting points and outcomes, Hall argues that symbols are fluid in the communication process. They can be interpreted based on different perspectives and may also shift and transform among the three states depending on one's position, cultural context, and personal experience. Therefore, by leveraging the starting points and focal points of these three interpretations, communicators can refine their symbolic encoding and transmission methods. This approach enables them to achieve their communication objectives, enhance the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication and reduce cultural discounting.

5.1. Leveraging shared symbols to build "self-expression," innovating dimensions of content dissemination

Telling China's stories effectively relies on symbols, with diverse symbols providing multiple vehicles for this multimodal narrative. In the cross-cultural communication and public storytelling of China's narratives, greater emphasis should be placed on showcasing symbols of vibrant folk life and shared narrative themes across cultures. Nonverbal symbols such as paralinguistic elements, body language, and formulaic symbols possess high recognizability and low cultural discounting in international communication, making them more effective in reaching audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds during cross-cultural transmission. By encoding and expressing oneself through universal, shared symbols, communicators create videos grounded in audiences' potential dominant, negotiated, or adversarial decoding approaches. This facilitates shared interpretation, achieving intended communication goals and desired reception. For instance, the pastoral cultural symbols embodied in Li Ziqi's short videos offer modern audiences a vision of returning to nature and pursuing simplicity. Through small yet profound details, they convey the essence of harmony between humanity and nature inherent in Chinese culture. Simultaneously, they communicate values such as diligence, kindness, and reverence for the natural world, thereby enriching the connotation of fine traditional Chinese culture and strengthening China's global cultural influence. More significantly, Li Ziqi's videos

showcase traditional craft symbols, increasing public awareness and interest in lacquerware, bamboo weaving, silk floss flowers, Shu brocade, and other traditional crafts, thereby promoting their preservation and development. Future cross-cultural communication will require more outstanding creators with unique perspectives who are willing to personally experience and pass on intangible cultural heritage. Their participation will help tell China's stories well and shape a China that is approachable, endearing, and admirable.

5.2. Fostering cross-cultural identification through emotional resonance to broaden the dimensions of memory transmission

Ideological and cultural barriers in cross-cultural communication may lead to empathy gaps in cultural understanding. Focusing on universal human values can better convey the boundless wisdom and timeless charm of China's outstanding traditional culture. Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative, enhancing cross-cultural communication effectiveness requires seeking shared development with participating nations. In cultural dissemination, we must identify points of convergence between Chinese and foreign interests and emotional resonance, tailoring expressions to align with foreign audiences' receptive psychology. Expanding communication dimensions can deepen cultural affinity. Simultaneously, prioritizing audience interaction and feedback, using engagement to foster cultural exchange and amplify impact through interactive symbols, is crucial. More importantly, communicators should recognize the potential for fan or audience recoding. The self-media era has created a "microphone for everyone" landscape, where numerous KOCs, KOLs, and UGC creators engage in secondary creation and redistribution of content like Li Ziqi's videos based on their interpretations, creative expressions, and media empowerment. This can generate a breaking-the-circle effect, expanding the depth and breadth of communication. In cross-cultural communication, communicators should also recognize how audience interactions, such as comments and shares, influence symbol decoding. Increasing audience engagement fosters a powerful symbolic transmission network, evolving from individual identification, interpersonal communication, and online dissemination to collective contagion, fan community building, and ultimately promoting positive audience recognition of China's outstanding traditional culture.

5.3. Expand narrative strategies through co-production and broadcasting partnerships to optimize communication action dimensions

Currently, narratives that rely on commentary to tell China's stories often tend to be overly grand and monolithic, and cultural discounting occurs due to the cultural gap between high and low contexts. Amid the digital wave, the communication landscape is shifting from a single authoritative narrative to a collaborative ecosystem involving diverse voices. Therefore, future efforts to effectively tell China's stories

should adopt a new perspective, drawing inspiration from Li Ziqi's short-video approach to convey China's outstanding traditional culture through micro-narratives and non-verbal symbols. By adopting a grassroots perspective, audiences are prompted to recall personal experiences while viewing, fostering a narrative model that cultivates individual perceptions and value judgments. Simultaneously, amid increasingly complex international dynamics, telling China's stories effectively requires building a collaborative framework among diverse actors. This involves encouraging the integration of grassroots micro-perspectives with official macro-perspectives to enrich cross-cultural communication pathways.

6. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of rising international tensions, the positive image of China cultivated through Li Ziqi's short videos offers fresh perspectives and pathways for future cross-cultural communication. This study acknowledges certain limitations, such as the restricted sample size of video materials. Future research could adopt broader methodologies and analyze larger text datasets to further investigate how different types of short video symbols influence the dissemination of China's outstanding culture. This would better leverage semiotics theory to guide cross-cultural communication practices.

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