

Chinese Traditional Culture and Art Communication in Digital Era: Strategies, Issues, and Prospects

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Abstract

The understanding of Chinese culture and arts from the perspective of other cultures and countries has been the mainstream trend in the past. From 'The Travels of Marco Polo' to the film 'Red Lanterns', Chinese culture has mostly suffered a status of being depicted and interpreted but not examined as a vibrant civilization for real communication and interaction. Mostly, Chinese culture has been depicted as a culture of difference, misery, and agony. This approach has hampered communication between China and other nations in the past and even today. Chinese culture and arts have a long history of its own, it is extensive and profound, and needs more understanding, respect, logical evaluation and new approaches to communication. Authors argue that the rich cultural characters and charm need to be communicated across cultures via new media platforms. In this new world of digital media and information, especially, on the mobile terminal and the mode of UGC (User Generated Content), the traditional cultures and arts have new opportunities for their propagation, transportation, and demystification in real time circumstances. This essay assesses the communication of Chinese traditional culture and arts in the contemporary digital era and offers social-contextual analysis to reveal the internal tensions ambiguities, strategies, issues and prospects in its communication through digital platforms.

Key Words: *Chinese Traditional Culture, Arts, Digital Communication, Across Cultures, Communication Platforms.*

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For a long time, the understanding of Chinese culture and arts from the perspective of other cultures and countries has been the mainstream trend. This approach has hampered communication between China and other nations from the past till today. When we try to understand a culture in terms of “theirs” and “ours”, it creates misunderstandings and problems (Samovar, Porter, & Daniel, 2010). This was depicted by Marco Polo in his *Travel Tales of the East*; China was a prosperous civilization with a developed industry, busy streets, gorgeous but cheap silk, a grand capital city, convenient transportation and general paper currency. This was ancient China (Feng, 2010). It has been a charming place for everyone who reads about it, though there are many different academic viewpoints about the reality of Marco Polo’s illustration. The Telegraph disclosed a research result that Marco Polo actually had never been to China.

Furthermore, an ethical film *Red Lanterns* directed by Chinese director Zhang Yimou in the 90s depicted a feudal family story of Chinese society. It explored and mirrored the dark side of an aspect of Chinese culture to the world (Zheng, 2000). It got an award for the 48th Venice international film festival in 1991, the 64th Oscar nomination in 1992, and the British academy film awards for the Best Film not in the English Language. It helped attract more and more organizations and international media to study and pay attention to the Chinese traditional culture (Gu, 2000). In 2008, the 29th Beijing Olympic Games provided yet another source for people from the entire world to familiarize themselves with Chinese culture and acquire more information about China. Thus, these

events helped clarify and improve the identity of Chinese traditional culture and arts for the other nations (Gan & Peng, 2008). Though researchers still think that the Olympics are not the only way to exhibit Chinese culture, we need to explore more channels of communication to share it with the world (Gao, 2008).

It is an imperative to seek and expand modern communication platforms such as network dramas, friends' circle, interactive magazine, and Teng Xun Open class for the propagation of Chinese culture. In this context, it is very important to find the means of digital communication which are suitable for the transmission of different forms of cultures in the contemporary world for the contemporary audience and users. Therefore, the digital media can guarantee a more effective mode to export national culture in the contemporary information era (Ji & Zhang, 2009).

These new forms of communication can not only better reflect the history, traditional culture and arts but can also be a source of better re-interpretation and construction of a new type of China with Chinese cultural characteristics. In this context, this study intends to explore what kinds of strategies, issues, and prospects Chinese traditional culture and arts have in the contemporary digital environment? Does Chinese culture have the capability to face these challenges? This study will focus on finding the answers to these questions from the perspective of cross-cultural and cultural objects and art communication.

The Categories of Chinese Traditional Culture and Arts

The Chinese traditional culture and art mainly consist of two major categories: Chinese traditional culture and Chinese traditional arts.

The former includes philosophers, emperor etiquette, and folk customs; whereas, the latter covers painting, calligraphy, music, drama, paper cutting, shadow arts, Tai Chi Chuan, Kongfu and other forms of art. These forms have become the important elements of Chinese traditional image and new image construction abroad, and also an important material and carrier of Chinese culture and art communication to other countries (Meng, 2004).

Factors Influencing Traditional Culture in Communication

The dissemination of China's traditional culture and art in the world is mainly based on the mass media through video works, literary pieces, the Confucius Institute, sporting events, network video lectures, and other activities, but the use of new media for this purpose is still at the nascent stage. The traditional media role in this cultural transmission is inadequate owing to many reasons.

1. Traditional Media Role in Traditional Culture and Arts Communication

Traditional media do not comprehensively exhibit traditional Chinese culture and arts to a targeted audience. As Gao (2008) argued that with its official nature and seriousness, the traditional mode of transmission is dominated by newspapers, television, magazines and radio media. However, traditional media relatively lacks multiple points of view, including interactive communication and evaluation according to the same event and phenomenon. Similarly, the domestic large-scale film and television productions, adopt a grand narrative, overlooking the national whole culture process, are a lack of contemporary individual people's cultural growth and changing state in a dynamic review. Hence, at this level

of communication, the channel which is required to open is post-modern context expression system which is more deconstructive to the cultural center. This point is essential to the construction of contemporary cultural exchanges and the new type of communication language system.

There is no lack of high-quality works of Oriental culture and art in domestic commercial films, such as "Shaolin Temple", "a dream of Red Mansions", "Crouching Tiger, hidden dragon", "Farewell My Concubine", "IP MAN" and so on. Movies express Chinese culture and arts in an incisive and vivid way. CCTV-4 (Chinese international channel) and CCTV-11 (Drama Channel) used China traditional culture and art forms such as ink, stroke, carving, paper cutting, opera types of facial makeup in operas to represent China image abroad, they have achieved worldwide recognition, such as CCTV drama channel image digital works were awarded the British Quantel prize in 2004 (Beijing Century Workshop, 2004) but at the same time, there are some films and television works which have caused a certain degree of biased understanding towards traditional Chinese culture and arts (Hu, 2012).

For social and humanistic distortion in critical films and television works, the extreme ethnic conflict in some martial arts novels and movies, the cultural isolation in China Palace fighting dramas, the mystery and unknowability of Oriental culture in some works with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism doctrines have been, sometimes, exaggerated.

2. The Needs of Users and Challenges

The needs of audience and users and their culture consumption methods affect the traditional culture and arts propagation. At present, the audience and the users of the digital cultural forms belong to the generations of the 70s, 80s, 90s and even 00s. McQuail (2010) explored that audiences are diverse in nature. They can be categorized according to “place (like local media); by people (gender, income category of an audience); by medium (technology and organization combined); by content (genres, styles); by time (daytime, primetime). They have their own motives and needs which are easily gratified by the digital media. Each audience member has specific needs to be gratified by the media (p. 398). As Leung, & Wei (2000) suggested that “Mobility, immediacy, and instrumentality” are the instrumental motives among different groups of women in Hong Kong during cell phone usage. Therefore, digital media platforms guarantee multiple points of views. Hence, their modes and capability of transmission are essential to the spread of traditional culture.

According to the CNNIC 37th survey report, by December 2015, the size of China's Internet users reached to 688 million; whereas, the number of annual total new Internet users is 39 million 510 thousand. Mobile Internet users' proportion has increased up to 90.1% in 2015 compared with 85.8% in 2014. Among the increase in the group of Internet users in 2015, the younger (less than 19 years old) and the student population accounted for 46.1% and 46.4% respectively (CNNIC, 2015). This means that the main body of the

digital communication is taking place between young generation by continuous adjustment and transformation, and their most preferred choice for communication are network media and mobile media (Hu, 2015). For the transmission of traditional culture and arts in the contemporary age of digital media, the young generations have an important relationship with the process.

Digital media has become an important form of international communication, through WeChat, e-mail, network video courses, and so on, to obtain multi-faceted cultural understanding (Bourdieu, 2015). In this context, the fragmentation and de-massed trend of digital transmission bring new vitality and possibilities to the communication of China's traditional culture and arts (Tian, 2015). However, there are some limitations and inherent disadvantages in the digital transmission of traditional culture and arts.

First of all, the main generations of digital culture and arts consumption are from the 1970s to 2000s. Part of them has no deep understanding and absorption of the traditional Chinese culture, which makes traditional cultural communication somewhat difficult. This is mainly due to two aspects: Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), people have not been learning enough about Chinese ancient literature. Another reason is that the current Chinese traditional culture has been affected more by cultures of other countries especially Korean, Japanese and American. This enculturation has made traditional culture transmission even more difficult in the contemporary era of digital communication with the effect of Japanese animation, Korea TV

series, American TV and the Hollywood blockbusters on Chinese youth (Yu, 2012).

Furthermore, at the certain time in the Chinese national history, the traditional Confucianism culture exclusion and dissipation has made Chinese traditional culture and arts suffer ideologically. This all has resulted in a new generation of Chinese youth, although they are the main group of digital communication, but they are not well familiarized with the spiritual aspects and cultural heritage of China. Similarly, there is a need for careful and critical thinking for the inclusion of Taoism culture, Confucian culture and Zen culture to Chinese traditional culture. We can only promote the true and deep understanding of the traditional Chinese culture if we have a thorough understanding of its spiritual aspects.

Secondly, art forms, such as Tai Chi, Yin-yang, Dao, Qiyun, artistic conception, and realm are very abstract in nature and beyond the understanding of ordinary people from other cultures. Therefore, these different forms of culture have not been depicted truly and meaningfully through digital representation. These difficulties in the digital transformation of traditional Chinese culture and arts pose a new challenge for cross-cultural communication in the digital era.

3. The Exploration of Traditional Culture and Arts in the International Arena

At present, the interest in the Chinese culture and arts is growing rapidly. Consequently, the number of scholars and researchers working on Chinese culture and arts is growing gradually all over the world (Zhang, 2005). People want more scientific, real-time,

comprehensive and personalized information about traditional culture and arts. Hence, to meet these demands from the scholars and researchers, the dissemination of traditional culture needs to be based on the national spirit to carry out the exploration in multifaceted directions. Hence, digitalization is the most appropriate, direct and effective way of cultural availability and dissemination among scholars and researchers.

The general characteristics of digital technology make the traditional culture achieve a broader and deeper access through digital creation (Ma & Yu, 2014), such as the opening of the "digital Dunhuang" online experience on May 1, 2016, has become a very important event in the digital cultural art communication. This new and innovative phenomenon has attracted attention from many domestic and foreign art lovers and researchers in Dunhuang. Based on the international general network environment and network technologies (such as cloud technology, satellite technology, GPS global positioning system in the digital communication interface, VR technology, etc.), software technology, hardware technology, as well as the collaboration of interactive communication platforms with these technologies, the transmission of the culture can be made more easily understandable, digestible and absorbing through the application of today's digital module system (Bresciani & Eppler, 2011).

Today's young generation living in different countries have different cultures but using same technology can benefit this cross-cultural communication of traditional culture and arts vis-à-vis digital communication platforms. They can get more content,

information and multiple points of view on digital media platforms regarding traditional culture and arts. This will help in the mutual understanding of other cultures, resulting in a more harmonious world where people own their own culture but they respect others cultures as well.

In this way, they will play a very positive role in the process from traditional culture's digital transformation (television, advertising, music, games, etc.) to the step of digital communication, especially based on mobile UGC mode. This kind of technology is connected with global network technologies through which communication among people in the different parts of the world is very smooth and easy. As a result of this change, the Chinese traditional culture and arts can flourish in a more transparent and real-time communication environment (Snickars & Vonderau 2012).

It is particularly important that government and other social institutions construct the digital platforms for traditional culture and art communication across cultures. At present, some organizations and research institutions (including Beijing municipal government and the capital of civilization project fund, etc.) have joined hands for the construction of such platforms and project production for the Immateriality Cultural Heritage Based on the new media, which undoubtedly will promote the China non-material cultural heritage to global audience and will promote its understanding and sharing in a more intuitive, fast, stereoscopic way.

Conclusion

The digitization is one of the most vibrant trends and methods to share traditional Chinese cultural communication with multi-faced users and audience in contemporary circumstance from all over the world. It will help identify the digital channels through which traditional Chinese culture and arts can be communicated and introduced with a diverse audience from different cultures. The more audience from different countries with different cultures will know Chinese traditional culture and arts, the more they will understand Chinese people, their values, and Chinese society as a whole.

The digital media platforms will provide new prospects to propagate traditional Chinese culture and arts to the global audience from a Chinese perspective. These platforms thus will enhance cross-cultural communication in a more open, diverse and plural environment, providing access to diverse audiences with multiple points of view and deep understanding about various cultural objects. There is a need for more coordination and integration among these different digital platforms for presenting the Chinese culture and arts comprehensively at a global platform with the global audience.

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