

The Construction of Chinese Traditional Cultural Symbols in the Context of Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract:

Chinese cultural symbols have garnered widespread attention. However, there remains a deficiency in the phenomenon where the simple appropriation of Spring Festival symbols by the Western business sector leads to the loss of cultural connotations. This article analyzes 20 Spring Festival marketing cases of international brands in Western markets, exploring the commercial presentation methods of Spring Festival cultural symbols and their dissemination effects. Study the construction of traditional Chinese cultural symbols in the context of cross-cultural communication. Some research has analyzed that most brands only stay at the visual presentation level of symbols, while successful cases have achieved an organic integration of tradition and modernity through cultural translation. At the same time, Western audiences have obvious limitations in understanding the cultural connotations of the Spring Festival. Based on this, this article proposes the following suggestions: establish a standard system for the interpretation of cultural symbols, construct a collaborative communication mechanism among multiple subjects, develop digital communication tools, implement differentiated communication strategies, and cultivate talents in related fields to enhance the international communication effect of Chinese traditional cultural symbols.

Keywords: Chinese traditional symbols; cross-culture; cultural integration; cultural dissemination in business; cultural connotation

1. Introduction

Driven by the tide of globalization, exchanges and collisions between different cultures are becoming

increasingly active. As an important representative of Chinese culture, the traditional festival of the Spring Festival is stepping onto the world stage with its unique cultural charm. In recent years, it is not

difficult to observe an interesting phenomenon: from the Chinese New Year window displays on New York's Fifth Avenue to the red lanterns on the streets of Paris, from the lion dance performances on the streets of London to the Spring Festival elements in Hollywood movies, the cultural symbols of the Spring Festival are sparking a wave of "Chinese style" enthusiasm in the Western business world. "The application of international brands to traditional Chinese festival symbols often falls into the dilemma of 'the fracture between cultural signifier and signified'" [1]. Western commercial institutions "are more inclined to consume the visual spectacle of symbols rather than understanding their cultural context" [2]. International luxury brands such as Gucci and Burberry have launched limited-edition collections for the Spring Festival. Apple releases zodiac-themed wallpapers and short Spring Festival videos every year, and Disneyland has also made the Spring Festival celebration a regular event. However, behind these glamorous commercial packages, whether the essence of Spring Festival culture has been accurately conveyed, and to what extent Western consumers understand these symbols, are issues worthy of in-depth research and discussion [3]. By analyzing the deconstruction and reconstruction process of Spring Festival cultural symbols in Western business, new empirical cases can be provided for cross-cultural communication theory. This article takes the presentation of Spring Festival cultural symbols in the Western business field as an example to explore the construction process, current situation, problems, and optimization of Chinese traditional cultural symbols in cross-cultural communication. By analyzing the specific manifestations, communication effects, and cultural adaptations of Spring Festival cultural symbols in Western businesses, this study reveals the communication patterns and challenges of traditional cultural symbols in the context of globalization and proposes targeted suggestions.

2. The Commercial Presentation of Spring Festival Cultural Symbols in the West

2.1 Research Method

This study adopts the content analysis method. The main purpose is to study the use of Chinese traditional cultural symbols in the global business environment. The research focuses on the Spring Festival advertising of Western brands. To make the sample truly reflect the use of Chinese Spring Festival Culture in global commerce in recent years, the sample selection is based on two criteria: The

first is time (2018-2024, to capture new trends and stable trends); The second is brand influence (select brands that have important influence in China or the global market in their industries, such as luxury goods, daily necessities, technology, sports, etc.) The advertising of these brands is widely spread and highly influential, which can better represent the mainstream practice. Finally, 20 Western brands' Spring Festival advertisements were selected as analysis samples.

The research aims to answer the core question is what types of spring festival symbols are used in these advertisements, what degree of "cultural integration" is reflected, and what kind of cultural image of the Spring Festival is finally constructed. The research process includes the following steps: the first step is to systematically collect advertisements and screen samples according to the above criteria; The second step is to establish an analytical framework. The framework of symbol types mainly refers to the theory of cultural semiotics and the study of Spring Festival customs, and pre constructs a classification system including core ritual symbols, visual element symbols and emotional value symbols for identifying and classifying elements; The analysis framework of cultural integration degree is based on the theory of cultural adaptation and cross-cultural communication research. It defines three core dimensions and their degree (high/medium/low) evaluation criteria of authenticity presentation, fusion transformation and instrumental utilization, which are used to measure the depth and nature of advertising treatment of spring festival symbols; Finally, combined with the theories of globalization, cultural communication and symbolic consumption, the coding data is statistically analyzed and interpreted in depth. This process reveals the selection, transformation, combination, and new meaning of Chinese traditional cultural symbols in Western commercial advertisements, as well as the specific cultural image of the Spring Festival constructed.

2.2 Research Findings

2.2.1 Direct appropriation of symbols

The results show that more than half of the samples of Western brands (12/20, accounting for 60%) show an obvious phenomenon of 'shallow cultural symbols' in the spring festival marketing. "Shallowness of cultural symbols" refers to the simplification, separation, or superficial use of cultural symbols with profound historical, spiritual connotations and complex significance in cross-cultural communication or commercial borrowing. In essence, this phenomenon peels off the original context, historical context, and spiritual core of the symbol, and only retains the most recognizable and intuitive visual or formal fea-

tures, making the symbol become an empty decoration, gimmick, or label. In the era of national creation, creators are deconstructing the authority of traditional cultural symbols through misappropriation, parody, and collage strategies [4]. Such brands mainly rely on direct copying and pasting of highly visible traditional Chinese elements, such as red, animal images of the Chinese zodiac, and the word 'Fu', but fail to understand their cultural connotation or carry out creative transformation. The use of spring festival symbols by Western brands often falls into the trap of 'cultural interception' - stripping the ritual context of symbols (such as the family nature of ancestor worship) and compressing them into visual labels that can be copied in batches. For example, Gucci's 2020 zodiac series products, Michael Kors' 'China Red' handbag, and Dior's Spring Festival red packaging are mostly designed by the simple stacking of symbols. A key finding is that the vast majority of cases in this group (8/12) triggered negative reactions from the target audience. Consumers generally criticize such advertisements as "lacking new ideas" or 'strengthening cultural stereotypes. Burberry's spring festival marketing changes provide strong evidence: the brand's 2020 advertising is widely touted as 'similar to cheap new year goods' because of its intensive and unmodified use of red and "Fu" characters; The stacking of such symbols is essentially a "dimensionless appropriation" of cultural elements, that is, stripping the original spiritual core and ritual function of the symbols and retaining only the decorative shell [5]. After turning to more in-depth expressions, such as the integration of paper-cut art, the brand's advertising in 2023 received significantly more positive reviews from consumers. It can be seen that simply piling up traditional visual symbols is not only difficult to obtain cultural identity, but also easy to lead to communication failure and even negative evaluation.

2.2.2 Reconstruction strategy of cultural symbols

Research shows that the spring festival marketing of Western brands that have received positive responses usually includes the strategy of 'cultural symbol reconstruction Trilogy'. The first step of the success path is to peel off the old label: consciously weaken or remove the original religious or historical relevance of the symbol, which may be inconsistent with the modern context or universal values. The second step is to attach a new label: after deconstructing the traditional symbols, combine their core visual or conceptual elements with the brand's contemporary value proposition (such as personality expression, family reunion, technology empowerment) or global themes (such as environmental protection, women's power) to give new commercial and cultural significance. The last step is to realize the integration of Chinese and West-

ern elements: organically integrate the adjusted Chinese cultural symbols with the brand's iconic aesthetics, products, or narrative framework. For example, apple watch launched the new year watch strap: integrating the dragon totem, but emphasizing health and vitality; Starbucks cup design: modernize the image of the Chinese zodiac and combine it with the coffee culture of 'sharing'; Burberry's advertisement in 2023: reconstruct paper-cut art through modern aesthetics and convey brand innovation spirit. The core of this strategy is to realize the natural combination of local tradition and global brand value through the creative deconstruction and reapplication of cultural symbols. The core of this strategy is to realize the natural combination of local tradition and global brand value through the creative deconstruction and recontextualization of cultural symbols [6]. In addition, brand communication can achieve the best effect only by continuously bridging cultural differences, respecting the culture of the target country, and adopting appropriate communication strategies [7].

3. The Problems and Limitations of the Cultural Symbols of the Spring Festival

3.1 Symbol Formalization and Connotation Loss

3.1.1 Ritual simplification and cultural hollowing out

With the end of the traditional agricultural era and the change of daily lifestyle, people inadvertently ignore the spring festival customs and culture of the traditional agricultural period. The Spring Festival ceremony is simplified, the atmosphere of the Spring Festival is weakened, the function of the Spring Festival is weakened, and the attraction of the Spring Festival is weakening [8]. The dissemination of cultural symbols of the Spring Festival in the new era has taken on new characteristics. Against the background of the homogenization of global culture, the Chinese characteristics of cultural symbols of the Spring Festival have been significantly diluted, and their appeal in the process of overseas dissemination has also been weakened [9]. The core symbol of the Spring Festival, the spring festival couplet, has obvious problems of ritual weakening and nonstandard form in contemporary practice. The traditional handwritten Spring Festival couplets, which have the artistic value of calligraphy, personalized blessings, and strict literary norms (such as antithesis, flat tone, flat rise, and flat fall), are being replaced by large-scale printed materials. This substitution has caused two

main problems: first, the content is highly similar (for example, the commercial slogan “extensive financial resources” and “prosperous business” are largely repeated); Second, there are serious errors in form: the printed Spring Festival couplets often appear semantic irrelevance (for example, “Hongtu Exhibition” vs. “colorful”), confusion in tone, and even wrong posting order, which violate the traditional rules. These widespread non-standard phenomena show that the Spring Festival couplets are changing from a ritual activity with cultural depth and personal expression function to a formal and commercialized visual decoration.

3.1.2 Weakening of Emotional Experience

The fading of ‘New Year’ is a feeling, which is mainly due to the downsizing of family size, the online interaction between relatives and friends, the weakening of people’s expectations for food and clothing, the weakening of outdoor activities in festival communities, and the long-standing sound of firecrackers [10]. The core audio-visual symbols and ritual practice of traditional “Nian Wei” are faced with two main problems in modern urban life: lack of carrier and space compression. The material carrier of key symbols such as lanterns, firecrackers, ancestor worship incense, and fire, and the collective sensory experience (visual, auditory, and olfactory) created by them are significantly weakening. Changes in the urban environment and environmental protection policies (such as the general ban on fireworks) have reduced the intensity of the festival’s audio-visual atmosphere. At the same time, the core rituals such as ancestor worship and ShouSui, which are rooted in the family space and time order, are gradually marginalized or even disappear in the fast-paced and atomized urban life. The reduction of these symbol carriers and ritual practice has affected the material and spiritual basis of traditional “Nian Wei” perception. When the foundation and spirit of these symbols in the local culture weaken and the experience becomes less, they are more likely to lose depth in cross-cultural communication and commercial borrowing, and are simplified into empty visual labels or novelty-seeking elements. This change has promoted the shallowness and stereotype of cultural symbols in the global circulation.

3.2 Barriers to Intercultural Communication

3.2.1 Cultural discount and symbol misreading

The Spring Festival symbol is prone to two problems in international communication: shallow cognition and distorted meaning. In cross-cultural communication, complex cultural symbols are often simplified into a single visual symbol, resulting in the loss of deep cultural meaning [11].

For example, the “surface symbols” such as dragon dance and red envelope, which are easy to be visualized and entertained, are highly recognized; However, due to cultural differences, it is difficult to effectively transmit the “deep ritual symbols” including family ethics and time and space beliefs, such as ancestor worship and ShouSui. As a result, overseas audiences often simply understand the Spring Festival as a ‘Chinese version of Carnival’, ignoring its spiritual connotation. Another important problem is that symbol borrowing can easily cause cultural misunderstanding. Audiences with different political positions, cultural backgrounds, and values may have different interpretations of the same information [12]. For example, the Zodiac “snake” is often associated with negative images in some Western cultural backgrounds, while its positive meaning of “spirituality” and “regeneration” in Chinese culture is weakened or even ignored. This preference for surface symbols and cross-cultural changes in the meaning of symbols form the main obstacles to the in-depth dissemination of culture.

3.2.2 Simplification of output channels

Overseas Spring Festival official promotion activities (such as lantern shows and temple fairs) usually have a problem: emphasis on static display, but a lack of in-depth experience. Most of the activity designs focus on creating visual Wonders (such as large lamp sets and gorgeous decorations), but fail to effectively establish cultural interaction scenes that enable participants to immerse themselves and practice by themselves. Compared with the “Lantern Festival” in South Korea (the successful application for the world heritage through the nationwide participation in the lantern production and parade), the spread of spring festival culture needs to shift from “watching” to ‘experiencing’. For example, easy-to-operate interactive links such as paper cutting, New Year picture production, and spring festival couplet writing workshops can be added to allow overseas audiences to understand the skills and emotions behind the symbols in their participation. This deficiency of experiential design affects the effective transformation of cultural symbols from “other landscape” to “subject experience”.

4. Suggestion

4.1 Deepening the Three-Dimensional Dissemination of Cultural Connotation

Currently, there is a noticeable trend of “symbolization” in the use of traditional cultural symbols in Western business, which overly emphasizes the accumulation of visual elements while neglecting the expression and transmission

of cultural connotations [13]. To address this issue, improvements can be made in three aspects of communication. In terms of visual aspects, it is important to maintain the aesthetic value and unique charm of traditional elements. Dior's 2024 Spring Festival collection combines traditional Chinese cloud patterns with modern tailoring design, retaining cultural characteristics while conforming to international aesthetic trends [14]. In terms of narrative, it incorporates the legends, origins of customs, and cultural depth of the Spring Festival. Apple's 2023 short film "Crossing Five Passes" tells a story of family reunion through Peking Opera elements, achieving 5 million views on YouTube [15]. In terms of experience, interactive activities allow consumers to participate more directly. At the "New Year Wishing Wall" event at Shanghai Disneyland, visitors were encouraged to write their blessings, fully experiencing the atmosphere and cultural connotations of the event. This attracted a large number of visitors, with an average daily participation of up to 3,000 people. It can be seen that only through the three-dimensional communication of visual, narrative, and experiential dimensions can the deep transmission and international recognition of the cultural connotations of the Spring Festival be truly achieved.

4.2 Building a Dialogue Platform with Multiple Stakeholders

The international dissemination of Chinese traditional culture should not be a one-way export, but rather require the establishment of a dialogue relationship involving multiple parties. The prominent issue that currently exists is the homogenization of communication subjects, which is mainly manifested in the dominance of Western commercial institutions in interpreting symbols, the insufficient participation of Chinese official institutions, and the unstructured channels for folk cultural exchanges. In response to the above issues, the government can build platforms to provide policy support. During the "Sino-French Cultural Year" Spring Festival theme event, which was jointly organized by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the French Ministry of Culture, around 100,000 Parisian citizens were attracted to participate. Enterprises can promote market-oriented innovation. In the "China-Chic New Spring" series co-branded by Li-Ning and the Palace Museum, traditional patterns were combined with modern sportswear, resulting in sales exceeding 200 million yuan and receiving a very enthusiastic response. The private sector can cultivate a localized communication model. The "Spring Festival Temple Fair" organized by Chinese associations in London attracts over 500,000 tourists every year and has now become a regular

cultural event in the local area. In summary, only by establishing a multi-stakeholder collaboration mechanism guided by the government, participated in by enterprises, and promoted by the private sector, can a virtuous ecosystem for the international dissemination of Chinese traditional culture be formed.

4.3 Innovating Digital Communication Paths

In the digital era, the dissemination of traditional culture must keep pace with the times. There are numerous obstacles at present, among which the inefficiency of traditional dissemination methods, the lack of systematic application of new media, and the need for improvement in localization are the three most prominent ones. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram can be utilized to facilitate creative creation and dissemination. For instance, it can organize short video challenges to engage global netizens in discussions about traditional Chinese culture. On the other hand, it can leverage AI and other technological advancements to develop digital media experience projects, allowing overseas audiences to experience authentic traditional Chinese culture right where they are [16]. However, it must be vigilant of the risks pointed out by JIN: "The algorithmic logic of short video platforms can deconstruct the integrity of cultural narratives, leading to a 'fragmented understanding'" [15]. Therefore, when utilizing digital technology for cultural dissemination, it is essential to focus on maintaining the integrity and depth of cultural narratives and avoid falling into the pitfall of fragmented dissemination.

4.4 Implementing Differentiated Communication Strategies

Differentiated communication strategies should be implemented based on the characteristics of different regions and groups. In the European and American markets, emphasis can be placed on highlighting the universal values inherent in Chinese culture, such as family values and harmony between humans and nature. In Southeast Asia, cultural homology and historical connections can be emphasized. For younger groups, it is important to utilize forms that they are familiar with and enjoy, such as short videos and games. This indicates that only by formulating targeted communication strategies based on the cultural backgrounds and acceptance habits of different audiences can the effective dissemination and value recognition of traditional Chinese cultural symbols be achieved.

4.5 Emphasizing the Cultivation of Relevant Talents

Talent cultivation is the fundamental project for cultural

dissemination. Currently, there is a severe shortage of professionals who possess both an understanding of traditional Chinese culture and knowledge of international communication principles. It is suggested to establish a major direction of “International Communication of Traditional Culture” in universities to cultivate versatile talents. At the same time, a professional talent pool for cultural communication should be established to provide intellectual support for various communication activities. It can also draw inspiration from France’s “Cultural Ambassador” system, selecting and training a group of cultural envoys with cross-cultural communication skills, and stationing them around the world to promote Chinese culture. It is evident that strengthening the cultivation of professional talents is a crucial support and long-term guarantee for enhancing the international dissemination effect of Chinese traditional culture.

5. Conclusion

To strengthen the vitality of spring festival symbols, it should go beyond the superficial traditional elements and explore the modern expression or deep narrative integration of cultural symbols. The rise of digital media has opened up an innovative channel for the contemporary dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, and the Spring Festival, as the most important cultural season of the Chinese nation, is building a three-dimensional picture of the living inheritance of traditional intangible cultural heritage in the deep integration with new media technology. The construction of dynamic inheritance ecology requires the deep activation of cultural genes. Using the “Chinese aesthetic gene bank” project of Peking University for reference, abstract values such as reunion and blessing are classified and coded into AI content generation, such as a customized Spring Festival couplets algorithm to avoid symbol collage. The essence of the modern dilemma of the Spring Festival symbol is the game between the right of cultural interpretation and the adaptability of the times. In the future, it needs to avoid “Museum” preservation and instead build a “dynamic inheritance ecology” so that the symbols become the media of value resonance rather than the endpoint. The vitality of the spring festival symbols always stems from the true reflection of current life.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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