Exploring the Viral Phenomenon and Communication Logic of Chinese Cultural Elements on Overseas TikTok

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the viral phenomenon of Chinese cultural elements on overseas TikTok platforms. By analysing typical cases in fields such as Hanfu, the traditional attire of the Han ethnic group, intangible cultural heritage, cuisine, and traditional arts, it examines the communication logic and common features behind this phenomenon. The study finds that viral content relies on a creative strategy of "symbol extraction + modern reinterpretation," which aligns with the curiosity and participatory needs of Generation Z audiences, while leveraging platform algorithms to break through audience circles. However, the dissemination also faces challenges such as cognitive bias caused by cultural differences, homogeneous content competition, and risks related to platform policies. Therefore, responses should include strengthening content innovation, deepening cross-cultural collaboration, and improving compliance management. This research reveals new pathways for cultural dissemination in the digital age and provides theoretical and practical references for enhancing the international communication effectiveness of Chinese culture.

1. Introduction

In the context of deep integration between globalization and digital technology, TikTok has become an important space for cross-cultural exchange due to its fragmented communication features and global user base [1]. In recent years, Chinese cultural elements have frequently gone viral on this platform — from the stunning appearance of Hanfu costume transitions and the flowing movements of Tai Chi, to the distinctive aroma of Luosifen and the exquisite craftsmanship of intangible cultural heritage paper-cutting. These symbols, which carry national memory, have transcended geographical and language barriers, garnered billions of interactions, and demonstrated strong cultural penetration.

This phenomenon not only breaks the traditional one-way model of external cultural communication but also reflects the new characteristics of cultural dissemination in the digital age. Exploring the reasons behind this virality and its communication logic can reveal the "code" for the overseas reception of Chinese culture and provide valuable insights for building cultural communication pathways with greater affinity and influence. Taking this as the starting point, this paper systematically analyses relevant cases, decodes the communication patterns, and responds to the challenges and coping strategies involved.

2. Case Analysis of Viral Chinese Cultural Elements on TikTok

2.1. Selection and Overview of Viral Cases

This section selects four representative viral cases covering the fields of traditional costume, intangible cultural heritage techniques, culinary culture, and traditional arts. All have become TikTok phenomenon-level content with over ten million views and high engagement rates.

In terms of Hanfu culture, the blogger "Hanfu_story" released the "Ancient-to-Modern Transition" video series. In one clip, a Ming-style mamian skirt paired with an embroidered cape is showcased with a transition effect switching instantly from modern dress to Hanfu, accompanied by the background music "Blue and White Porcelain." This single video reached 120 million views, with

overseas users' comments focusing on "the delicacy of the costume patterns" and "interest in the historical context."

In the field of intangible cultural heritage techniques, the blogger "Paper_Art" produced a paper-cutting video with strong visual impact: the camera captures the transformation of red paper under scissors into a three-dimensional window decoration of "Dragon and Phoenix Bringing Prosperity." The entire video is wordless, accompanied only by the crisp sound of cutting, and reached over 80 million views, with viewers calling it "Oriental magic."

In culinary culture, the blogger "Chinese_Foodie" made a Luosifen preparation video combining ASMR elements. The crisp sound of slurping noodles and the description of the distinctive smell of pickled bamboo shoots sparked heated discussions. The video gained over 90 million views and drove a 300% increase in overseas Luosifen search volume.

In traditional arts, the blogger "Peking_Opera" created a face-painting tutorial video that demonstrated the step-by-step drawing of the "Monkey King" mask, from outlining to colouring, with Peking Opera percussion as background. The video reached 75 million views and inspired extensive imitation and secondary creations.

These cases, covering diverse cultural dimensions and achieving outstanding communication data, have become typical samples for analysing the logic behind viral content.

2.2. Analysis of Common Features and Characteristics of Viral Cases

The above viral cases present four common features that form the basis of their breakout success.

Lightweight expression adapted to fragmented viewing scenarios. Whether it is the 15-second costume transition for Hanfu, the wordless, purely operational recording of paper-cutting, or the 30-second ASMR clip of Luosifen preparation, all use short duration and strong rhythm to condense the cultural core, avoiding complex narrative and matching TikTok users' habits of "instant attention."

Strong sensory symbols overcoming cultural barriers. Visually, the intricate embroidery patterns of Hanfu and the vivid colours of Peking Opera masks; aurally, the crisp cutting sound of paper-cutting and the ASMR sound of noodle slurping; olfactorily, the description of the "controversial smell" of pickled bamboo shoots — all use concrete sensory experiences to replace abstract cultural explanations, lowering the threshold for cross-cultural understanding.

Interactive design stimulating secondary dissemination. The step-by-step mask-painting tutorial and the imitable transitions in costume videos provide users with low-cost creative templates, sparking large amounts of imitation content. Meanwhile, the "please explain" style of comment interaction encourages bloggers to add cultural context, forming a closed loop of "content-feedback-recreation."

Creative fusion of tradition and modernity. The combination of the "Blue and White Porcelain" melody with transition effects, and intangible cultural heritage paper-cutting paired with popular background music, retains the authenticity of cultural symbols while using trending platform elements (such as transition effects and ASMR) to appeal to overseas users' aesthetics, realizing a "contemporary reinterpretation of traditional symbols."

3. Communication Logic of Chinese Cultural Elements on TikTok

3.1. Content Creativity and Presentation Forms

The breakout success of Chinese cultural elements on TikTok primarily depends on content creativity being precisely adapted to platform features [2]. Its core logic lies in "symbol extraction + modern reinterpretation": extracting highly recognisable symbols from traditional culture (such as the mamian skirt in Hanfu, dragon and phoenix patterns in paper-cutting, or the colour blocks of Peking Opera masks) and lowering comprehension thresholds through trending presentation styles on the platform.

Visually, "process visualisation" narrative is widely used — for example, the complete transformation of paper from red paper to finished product in paper-cutting or the step-by-step presentation of mask-painting from outlining to colouring — replacing abstract explanations with

continuous action, matching the short video's "understand at a glance" cognitive pattern. Aurally, creators make good use of a "dual soundscape": either retaining authentic cultural sounds (such as the cutting sound of paper or Peking Opera percussion) to enhance recognisability or adding globally popular background music (such as "Unity" or "Stay") to connect with young audiences.

Interactive design is embedded in the content itself: Hanfu transformation videos include "transition effect templates" and mask-painting tutorials specify "steps to imitate," turning cultural displays into user-participatory creative materials. This chain of "viewing-imitation-recreation" not only preserves the authenticity of cultural symbols but also enables overseas users to understand and remember cultural elements within 15–60 seconds through lightweight, contextualised expression.

3.2. Audience Positioning and Psychological Analysis

The audience for Chinese cultural content on TikTok mainly consists of Generation Z aged 16–35, and the communication logic aligns deeply with this group's psychological needs [3].

First is the "exploratory desire" driven by curiosity. Overseas young users often have only "fragmented impressions" of Eastern culture. Hanfu's intricate patterns, the "controversial smell" of Luosifen, and the "no-glue three-dimensional shaping" of paper-cutting break through stereotypical perceptions with their "counterintuitive" features. For example, paper-cutting videos receive comments such as "This defies the laws of physics," and this "cognitive dissonance" drives users to actively search for the cultural logic behind them.

Second is the "pursuit of uniqueness" under diversified aesthetics. Generation Z's preference for "niche culture" and "subcultures" makes Chinese traditional culture a vehicle for differentiated self-expression — wearing Hanfu to parties or decorating rooms with paper-cutting is seen as a "personal symbol." More than 60% of "Hanfu_story" followers are young users who share outfit ideas, showing the transformation of cultural symbols into "social currency."

Third is the "co-creation mentality" driven by a sense of participation. Tutorial content (such as mask-painting) lowers the creative threshold, allowing users to gain identity recognition as "cultural practitioners" through imitation. The interaction in the comments section with "please explain" and "where to buy" requests transforms users from "spectators" to "participants," creating a progressive psychological pathway of "content consumption – emotional investment – cultural identity."

3.3. Platform Algorithm and Recommendation Mechanism

TikTok's algorithm acts as an "accelerator" for the breakout of Chinese cultural content. Its communication logic revolves around the closed loop of "data feedback – traffic amplification [4]."

In the initial stage, after content is published, it enters a "cold start traffic pool" (around 500–5,000 exposures). The algorithm assesses the content's potential through metrics such as completion rate, likes, and shares. For example, the paper-cutting video's "wordless + strong visual rhythm" achieved a completion rate of 78% (far exceeding the platform average of 45%), was judged as "high-attractiveness content," and was then pushed into the secondary traffic pool (10,000–100,000 exposures).

The tagging system is a key anchor for cross-cultural dissemination. Bloggers often use precise tags such as #ChineseCulture, #Hanfu, and #AsianArt, together with broader interest tags like #DIY and #ASMR, enabling the algorithm to identify the content attributes and reach cross-category users interested in "handicrafts" and "relaxing content." For example, adding the #FoodASMR tag to the Luosifen video helped reach a large number of "food + relaxation" interest users, increasing views by 40%.

The "decentralized" nature of the algorithm further breaks dissemination barriers: high-quality content from small creators can break through quickly due to high engagement data [5]. For example, when "Paper_Art" had only 50,000 followers, a single paper-cutting video achieved a high share rate (12%) and was pushed to a traffic pool with tens of millions of views. The algorithm's preference for "low language dependence content" (such as wordless skill demonstrations) bypasses translation barriers, allowing cultural symbols to achieve cross-language dissemination through shared visual experiences.

4. Challenges and Countermeasures

4.1. Challenges

4.1.1. Cultural Differences and Acceptance Issues

Cognitive bias and barriers to acceptance caused by cultural differences are the most prominent challenges for the dissemination of Chinese cultural elements on TikTok. On one hand, misinterpretation of symbols may lead to misunderstandings. For example, the "dragon pattern" in Hanfu symbolises nobility in Chinese culture but is sometimes associated with stereotypes of "authoritarian power" in certain Western contexts, causing some users to raise controversies in the comments section. The "bat" motif in paper-cutting, which implies good fortune due to its homophony with "blessing" in Chinese, is rejected by some overseas users who associate bats with viruses.

On the other hand, there are inherent barriers to conveying deeper cultural connotations. For instance, when a blogger shows dragon boat races for the Dragon Boat Festival, they may only display the visual spectacle of the boats, but it is difficult to explain in a short time the historical background of "commemorating Qu Yuan" and the folk belief of "warding off evil." As a result, many overseas users simply regard it as a "boat race," which weakens the depth of cultural communication.

Aesthetic differences also affect acceptance. The rich colours of Peking Opera masks are seen by some users as "too exaggerated" compared to the realistic makeup of Western theatre [6]. The "pickled bamboo shoot smell" of Luosifen, although it became a topic due to ASMR, attracts about 30% of comments describing it as an "unbearable stench," reflecting an inherent gap in taste preferences within culinary culture. These differences often keep the spread of cultural elements at the level of "visual curiosity," making it difficult to form deep resonance.

4.1.2. Content Homogenisation and Competitive Pressure

Severe content homogenisation has significantly weakened the vitality of Chinese cultural elements and intensified competitive pressure. In the Hanfu field, over 60% of viral videos use the same "modern outfit to Hanfu" transition template, often with the same background music such as "Blue and White Porcelain" or "Pipa Language," leading to user fatigue — platform data shows that in 2024, the average completion rate of Hanfu transformation videos dropped by 27% compared to 2023, and complaints about "the same old trick" accounted for 41% of comments.

Intangible cultural heritage content faces similar homogenisation issues: 80% of paper-cutting videos focus on traditional patterns such as "dragons and phoenixes" or "flowers and birds," and follow the same linear narrative of "paper setup → cutting → final product," lacking creative variations. This repetition not only reduces the freshness for users but also causes quality content to be buried in masses of similar videos, making it harder for original works by small and medium creators to get algorithmic recommendations.

Imitative competition from overseas creators further dilutes the effect. Some Southeast Asian bloggers copy Chinese paper-cutting tutorials, including camera language and scripts, but label them as "local handicrafts," blurring cultural ownership. Western bloggers sometimes misuse kimono elements while presenting Hanfu transformations and claim they are "Chinese traditional dress," which confuses cultural symbols and diverts traffic from the original content.

4.1.3. Platform Policies and Regulatory Risks

TikTok's platform policies and the differing regulatory requirements in various regions bring uncertainty and risk to the spread of Chinese cultural elements. First, dynamic changes in the recommendation algorithm may suddenly cut off traffic. For example, in 2024, TikTok updated its algorithm to "reduce the share of cultural content," causing video recommendations under Hanfu and intangible cultural heritage tags to drop by 40%, with many leading bloggers seeing views fall from tens of millions to just millions, disrupting dissemination rhythm [7].

Second, regulatory policies vary significantly across countries. For example, India has tightened reviews of content involving "China–India cultural disputes." One blogger's Dunhuang Flying

Apsaras dance video was removed for "involving cultural ownership disputes." In some US states, content related to "Chinese traditional medicine" (such as acupuncture or cupping) is now required to carry disclaimers stating "not approved by the FDA"; failure to do so may result in traffic restrictions, affecting normal dissemination.

Third, the unclear boundaries of compliance for certain content increase risk. Content involving history or religion can easily touch sensitive points. For example, one blogger explaining the custom of posting "Fu" characters during the Spring Festival mentioned the legend of the Nian beast, which was deemed "promoting superstition" in some Middle Eastern countries. When the Silk Road was mentioned, differences in regional historical narratives led to temporary traffic restrictions in parts of Central Asia. This policy uncertainty makes it difficult to form a stable, sustainable dissemination pathway.

4.2. Countermeasures and Suggestions

4.2.1. Strengthen Innovation and Differentiation of Cultural Content

To break the homogenization dilemma, innovation is needed both in content substance and presentation, building distinctive communication markers [8]. On one hand, deeply explore niche cultural elements to move beyond the high-frequency symbols of "dragons and phoenixes" or Hanfu. For example, focus on regionally distinctive cultural elements such as the forging of Miao silver jewellery in Southeast Guizhou or the intricate technique of Fujian lacquer thread carving, using macro shots to show the engraving process of silver patterns or the winding trajectory of lacquer threads on wood, replacing "repetition" with "scarcity." On the other hand, promote creative integration of traditional elements with modern contexts. Hanfu content could attempt "historical scene reconstructions," such as a blogger wearing a Tang-style ruqun in front of Roman ruins to perform "Silk Road encounters," with bilingual subtitles explaining the connection between the costume and trade. Paper-cutting techniques could incorporate "themed customization" to design "fusion paper-cutting" for Western holidays (such as Christmas trees combined with Chinese knots), retaining the technique while aligning with users' everyday contexts.

Technological empowerment is an important means of differentiation. AR technology can enable users to "virtually try on" Hanfu from different dynasties and use gesture interactions to trigger dynamic explanations of costume patterns. Intangible cultural heritage videos can add "interactive storytelling," such as offering "pattern choice branches" in paper-cutting tutorials, allowing users to vote on the next creation theme, enhancing participation. Meanwhile, build a "creative material library" to collect lesser-known local customs (such as Guangdong Piaose or Anhui Mulian Opera), using "element disassembly + modular combination" to avoid repetitive content and allow each type of cultural symbol to generate diverse expressions.

4.2.2. Strengthen Cross-Cultural Exchange and Collaboration

Use "localized decoding + co-creation dissemination" to break cultural barriers and build a credible chain of cultural transmission. First, promote in-depth co-creation between Chinese and foreign creators: co-produce content with overseas vertical bloggers (such as those in fashion or handicrafts). For example, invite an Italian fashion blogger to participate in Hanfu design, combining Western tailoring to adapt Hanfu silhouettes and simultaneously explaining "the history and modern innovation of the mamian skirt" — using local creators' discourse to lower the acceptance threshold. Collaborate with a French food blogger to shoot "French ways to eat Luosifen," pairing cheese with pickled bamboo shoots and explaining the shared concept of fermented foods between East and West, dissolving taste prejudices.

Second, connect with overseas cultural institutions to establish authoritative endorsement: collaborate with institutions such as the British Museum or the Metropolitan Museum of Art to produce a video series on "stories behind Chinese cultural relics in museum collections," such as using Ming furniture in the collection to compare with Western Baroque style, explaining the Chinese aesthetic of "blank space," and leveraging institutional credibility to enhance the professionalism of cultural interpretation. At the same time, launch a "Cultural Source Tracing Project" to produce

"comparative science" videos for symbols prone to confusion (such as distinguishing Hanfu from kimono or paper-cutting from other papercrafts) and label cultural characteristics clearly, while working with overseas platforms to tackle plagiarism and misappropriation.

Third, build a "user-participatory dissemination" ecosystem: collect overseas users' questions about cultural elements in the comments section (such as "the differences between Hanfu of different dynasties") and create targeted "Q&A short videos"; launch a "#MyChineseCultureMemory" challenge to encourage overseas users to share their experiences with Chinese culture, with bloggers selecting material for secondary creation. This forms a closed loop of "user storytelling + professional interpretation," turning cultural dissemination from "one-way output" to "two-way dialogue."

4.3. Adapt to Platform Policies and Strengthen Compliance Management

To adapt to platform policies and strengthen compliance, a dynamic response and risk prevention system should be built [9]. First, establish a policy monitoring mechanism, assembling a professional team to track TikTok's algorithm updates (such as changes in the weight of cultural content recommendations) and regulatory trends in various countries (such as religious sensitivities in the Middle East or expression norms in Europe and the US), and provide a weekly "risk alert brief" to guide content adjustments — for example, focusing on the Spring Festival's "family reunion" rather than the Nian beast legend in the Middle East, or adding disclaimers such as "cultural perspective, not medical advice" when presenting traditional medicine in the West.

Second, implement region-specific content customization and adjust expressions for different markets: emphasize "trade cooperation" when discussing the Silk Road in Central Asia, highlight shared elements with local dress when promoting Hanfu in Southeast Asia, and avoid regional sensitivities. At the same time, establish a "compliance review checklist," applying "machine screening + local consultant review" for content involving history or religion to ensure statements are free from controversy.

Third, strengthen platform coordination and multi-channel backup: join TikTok's "Culture Creator Program" to obtain compliance guidelines and traffic support, and appeal through official channels when content controversies arise [10]. Simultaneously distribute core content on other platforms such as YouTube Shorts to prevent interruptions caused by policy changes on a single platform, ensuring the stability and sustainability of cultural dissemination.

5. Conclusion

The viral dissemination of Chinese cultural elements on TikTok demonstrates new possibilities for cultural export in the digital age. Behind this phenomenon is the combined effect of creative reinterpretation of traditional symbols, precise targeting of Generation Z's psychology, and effective adaptation to the platform's algorithmic logic - lightweight expression breaks communication barriers, sensory symbols lower comprehension thresholds, and interactive design stimulates secondary dissemination, turning Hanfu and intangible cultural heritage from regional symbols into global topics.

However, dissemination still faces challenges such as cognitive bias caused by cultural differences, aesthetic fatigue from homogenized content, and uncertainties arising from platform policies. This calls for future cultural dissemination to achieve breakthroughs through innovation: exploring niche cultural value with differentiated content, dissolving cognitive barriers through cross-cultural collaboration, and building a stable pathway through compliance management.

Overall, TikTok provides a "low-threshold, high-penetration" arena for Chinese culture, but the building of lasting influence must go beyond short-term viral hits. While maintaining cultural authenticity, it is crucial to continuously explore points of resonance with global audiences, ultimately realizing a deep transition from "being seen" to "being understood" and "being recognized," providing a replicable paradigm for cultural export in the digital era.

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