

"Hearing" Chinese Stories: Sensory Translation of Traditional Culture in ASMR Videos : A Case Study of YouTube Creator Tingting

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Abstract. In the environment of the digital platform, the global dissemination of Chinese culture is slowly shifting from the way of "telling stories" to the way of focusing more on the senses and personal experience. In this study, we analysed the ASMR video made by a creator named Tingting on YouTube to explore how such autonomous emotional meridian reaction videos participate in the cross-cultural communication of traditional Chinese culture. In the research, we used the method of quantitative content analysis, and also combined the observation of the content of the comment area. The purpose is to find out how sensory media reshapes the cultural meaning, and what its dissemination path and mechanism are. Judging from the results, ASMR video mainly relies on a sensory translation path: transforming those cultural elements of high context into low-content directly felt stimulation. The transmission of culture is more through specific sounds and operation processes than through clear explanations. Statistics also show that this practice-based sensory presentation is positively related to the interactive indicators of views, likes and comments on the platform. Based on these findings, we put forward a circular translation mechanism of "dilution-re-concentration": cultural meaning is first diluted by sensory compression, and then re-constructed in practical experience and audience interpretation. In general, this study allows us to see more clearly how sensory media plays a role in cross-cultural communication on digital platforms, and also provides a new way of thinking for us to better disseminate traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: ASMR, cross-cultural communication, Chinese traditional culture, sensory translation, digital platforms

1. Introduction

In the current digital media environment, the global dissemination of Chinese culture is undergoing a great change. As YouTube and TikTok platforms slowly become the main positions of cultural consumption, international exchanges have also begun to shift from the grand national narrative of the past to more daily cultural expression. For young audiences on global platforms, they tend to prefer content with a strong sense of experience and touching people's hearts, rather than the traditional, explanatory way of narration.

Against this background, self-sensory meridian response (ASMR) video, as a unique sensory media, has begun to emerge. This kind of video relies on whispers, ambient sounds and gentle action pictures to create an immersive atmosphere, which makes people pay more attention to sensory feelings and relax their emotions. It is this feature that makes ASMR a low-content communication method - the audience relies more on "feeling" to interact with the content than on clear explanation.

In recent years, some Chinese creators have begun to put traditional cultural elements into ASMR videos. Things such as tea ceremony, calligraphy and traditional costumes are all presented through audio-visual forms. Tingting, the creator on YouTube, is one of the most representative of these creators. Her videos are aimed at international audiences and often integrate Chinese cultural elements, which provides us with a suitable case to study how sensory media promotes cross-cultural exchanges.

In the area of international communication, although the existing research has discussed a lot of issues related to cultural communication, most of them focus on the levels of narrative, symbols and discourse. In fact, I don't pay much attention to what role sensory media plays in cultural translation. In the current digital platform environment based on audio-visual stimulation, we really need to think deeply about how sensory experience reshapes the translation and interpretation of cultural meaning in cross-cultural boundaries. Therefore, what this study wants to explore is how ASMR video transforms traditional Chinese culture into a form of sensory experience, and to what extent this transformation will affect the communication effect and cultural understanding.

2. Literature review

2.1. International communication and digital cultural dissemination

International communication research has long emphasized the role of culture in shaping national image and soft power. Nye highlights that cultural appeal constitutes an important component of soft power in global communication [1]. Scholars have also examined how the international dissemination of Chinese culture is influenced by broader political and media structures. Rahman notes that cultural communication practices are embedded within complex international power relations [2].

With the development of digital media technologies, researchers increasingly focus on the role of platforms in cultural dissemination. Dai and Cheng argue that social media platforms not only reduce barriers to cultural output but also reshape how cultural content is organized and consumed [3]. Similarly, Xu Jian and colleagues suggest that short-video platforms have become key spaces where cultural communication and national narratives intersect [4]. However, scholars such as Bislev and Li emphasize that the effectiveness of cultural communication cannot be reduced to simple measures of acceptance, as it remains influenced by broader political and cultural contexts [5].

Despite these insights, much of the existing literature still focuses on narrative representation and visual symbolism, while relatively little attention is paid to sensory experience as a communicative resource.

International communication research has long emphasised that culture plays an important role in shaping national image and soft power. Nye pointed out that cultural attractiveness is an important component of soft power in global communication [1]. Some scholars have also studied how the international dissemination of Chinese culture is affected by a wider political and media structure. Rahman emphasised that the practice of cultural communication is actually deeply embedded in the complex international power relationship [2].

With the development of digital media technology, researchers are also paying more and more attention to the role of platforms in cultural communication. Dai and Cheng believe that social media platforms not only lower the threshold of cultural output, but also reshape the organisation and consumption of cultural content [3]. Xu Jian and other scholars pointed out that the short video platform has become an important field for the intersection of cultural communication and national narrative [4]. However, some scholars such as Bislev and Li remind that the effect of cultural communication cannot be simply measured by acceptance indicators, and it will still be influenced by a broader political and cultural background [5].

Although these studies have provided a lot of insights, most of the current discussions are still focussed on narrative characterisation and visual symbols. In contrast, the research that focusses on sensory experience as a communication resource is actually not enough.

2.2. Cultural translation in digital contexts

In the study of cross-cultural communication, cultural translation refers to reconstructing meaning in different cultural contexts, rather than simply achieving reciprocism at the language level. The process of translation itself involves the reinterpretation and transformation between different cultural systems. The latest academic research also further points out that translation is increasingly affected by the intermediary role of digital technology and platforms [6]. From the perspective of media, Hepp mentioned that media technology is not passive. It will take the initiative to reshape cultural meaning by reconstructing the production and experience of cultural content [7]. Take digital media as an example, it can not only make the expression of cultural meaning simpler, but also make cultural content easier to see, while improving everyone's participation.

However, in existing studies, there is little attention to how sensory media plays a role in these translation processes, especially in those environments dominated by audio-visual experiences, and there is even less discussion in this regard.

2.3. ASMR and sensory media communication

The study of ASMR initially focuses on psychological and physiological reactions, such as relaxing and regulating emotions. In recent years, there have been some new discoveries in the field of communication and media research, and the multimodal characteristics of ASMR videos have begun to be noticed. Such videos often combine visual, auditory and tactile clues to create an immersive media experience.

Some scholars pointed out that ASMR video forms a sense of intimacy that has been mediated in the digital environment through whispering dialogue, close-up visual composition, and some symbolic actions [8]. Under such a sensory setting, the audience not only watches the content passively, but also immerses themselves in it through physical perception.

On the side of Chinese scholars, some people also study ASMR from the perspective of multimodal communication, focusing on the coordinated audio-visual design and how to create immersion and emotional resonance [9]. These studies all show that sensory media may change the way cultural meaning is disseminated and interpreted.

However, there is still not much research on how ASMR videos participate in the cross-cultural translation of cultural content. It is this research gap that has promoted the development of this research.

3. Research questions

What this study wants to explore is how ASMR video can promote traditional Chinese culture to realise cross-cultural communication on the digital platform. There are two core research issues: First, how do ASMR videos convey traditional Chinese culture to global audiences? Second, how is the communication effect behind it formed?

Focusing on these two problems, we extend three more specific small problems:

Research Question 1: In audio-visual sensory design, how to transform those high-context cultural elements into sensory experiences that can be perceived by the audience?

Research Question 2: To what extent will this sensory experience affect the participation of the audience and the final communication effect?

Research Question 3: In the environment of the platform, what kind of structural mechanism is influenced by the transformation and reinterpretation of cultural meaning?

4. Research methods

4.1. Research design

In terms of research methods, we use quantitative content analysis, and the samples analysed are ASMR videos on YouTube with the theme of traditional Chinese culture. The focus of the analysis is mainly on the audio-visual content, and how the sensory presentation and cultural elements are organised.

4.2. Sample selection

In the research sample, we selected a creator named Tingting on YouTube, who posted 30 ASMR videos between 2023 and 2025. In terms of screening, we use manual screening and also combine the tag search on the platform to ensure that these videos clearly contain traditional Chinese cultural elements, such as tea ceremony, calligraphy, or traditional costumes.

4.3. Coding framework

This coding scheme mainly analyses the process of cultural translation from the two dimensions of auditory presentation and visual presentation. Under each dimension, cultural elements are divided into three presentation methods: material presentation, practical presentation, and symbolic presentation. In addition, we have also set up some additional indicators to evaluate the aspects of auditory interpretation, sensory dominance, cultural contextization, and symbolic functional orientation.

Table 1. Coding scheme

Classification Dimension	Definition	Coding	Judgment Criteria
Auditory Dimension A1	Auditory Materiality	The video presents sounds generated by natural or artificial objects, such as tapping, rubbing, etc., with the focus on physical properties.	0: No relevant sounds or associations with cultural objects.1: Occasional sounds with no clear focus on objects.2: Detailed sounds that enhance the ASMR experience.3: Cultural sounds that are clearly associated with video content.

Table 1. (continued)

Visual Dimension	A2	Auditory Practice-based	The video features sounds related to specific cultural practices, such as tea ceremonies, calligraphy, or artistic creations.	0: No connection to cultural practices.1: Sounds loosely related to cultural practices.2: Sounds clearly related to cultural practice (e.g., tea ceremony or calligraphy).3: Strong focus on cultural practices and activities.
	A3	Auditory Symbolism	The sounds present significant cultural meaning, such as phrases or specific language symbols.	0: No connection to cultural practices.1: Sounds loosely related to cultural practices.2: Sounds clearly related to cultural practice (e.g., tea ceremony or calligraphy).3: Strong focus on cultural practices and activities.
	A4	Auditory Explanation	The video explains culture through sound, presenting the history or function of certain cultural elements.	0: No explanation of cultural elements.1: Basic explanation or introduction of cultural elements through sound.2: Some explanation of cultural elements through sound.3: Comprehensive and clear explanation of cultural elements through sound.
	A5	Sensory Dominance	The video leads the sensory experience, focusing on auditory or sensory experience over content.	0: No dominant sensory experience, the video is mainly about content.1: Mild sensory experience, but not central to the video.2: Sensory experience is important and noticeable.3: Sensory experience dominates, creating strong immersion.
	V1	Physical Cultural Representation	The video presents objects or attire that can be visually perceived, like traditional clothing or utensils, demonstrating Chinese culture.	0: No visual representation of cultural objects.1: Some visible cultural objects, but not central to the video.2: Clear representation of cultural objects related to Chinese culture.3: Full focus on cultural objects or attire, directly representing Chinese culture.
	V2	Artistic Cultural Representation	The video involves artistic representation of Chinese culture or traditions through processes such as painting or dance.	0: No artistic representation.1: Artistic elements briefly presented.2: Strong artistic representation linked to cultural themes.3: In-depth and prominent artistic representation of Chinese culture.
	V4	Cultural Context Representation	The video provides cultural background or historical context, helping the audience understand the cultural context.	0: No cultural context provided.1: Minimal context or background provided.2: Adequate context or background to understand the cultural elements.3: Comprehensive cultural context is provided to deepen the audience's understanding.
	V5	Functional Cultural Representation	The video uses cultural symbols or actions that explain cultural meaning.	0: No cultural symbols used for meaning explanation.1: Symbols used but not central to meaning expression.2: Symbols and actions used to explain cultural meaning.3: Strong use of cultural symbols and actions that directly explain cultural meaning.

4.4. Data collection

Basic video information such as view counts, likes, and comment volumes was collected through web scraping of publicly available YouTube pages. After coding, all data were organized for statistical analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics reveal that auditory material presentation and auditory practice-based presentation display relatively high intensity, while auditory symbolic presentation appears less frequently. This indicates that ASMR videos mainly construct cultural experiences through sound texture and operational processes rather than explicit symbolic explanation.

Similarly, within the visual dimension, material cultural presentation and practice-based presentation are more prominent than symbolic representation. Cultural elements are therefore mainly conveyed through tangible objects and operational procedures rather than abstract symbolism.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	Classification Dimension	N	Minimum Value	Maximum Value	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
A1	Auditory Materiality	30	1	3	2.6	0.621
A2	Auditory Practice-based	30	1	3	2.53	0.629
A3	Auditory Symbolism	30	0	2	1	0.743
A4	Auditory Explanation	30	0	3	1.43	1.006
A5	Sensory Dominance	30	1	3	1.93	0.740
V1	Physical Cultural Representation	30	0	3	2.03	0.928
V2	Artistic Cultural Representation	30	0	3	1.57	1.135
V3	Symbolic Cultural Representation	30	0	3	1.53	1.042
V4	Cultural Context Representation	30	0	2	0.67	0.661
V5	Functional Cultural Representation	30	0	3	1.33	0.884

Overall, the findings suggest that ASMR videos emphasize sensory immersion and experiential presentation in the communication of cultural elements.

5.2. Correlation analysis

The results of Person correlation analysis show that there is a weak positive correlation between the practice-based sensory presentation and the performance indicators of plays, likes and comments on the platform. That is to say, when cultural practice is presented through observable behaviour or specific operation process, the audience's participation tends to be higher.

In contrast, there is no obvious correlation between the purely material auditory characteristics and the communication effect. This actually shows that creating an immersive sensory environment alone is not enough to drive audience interaction. Only when sensory experience is combined with those visible cultural practices will the participation be significantly improved.

Table 3. Correlation analysis

		Pearson Correlations Among Variables (N=30)								
Variable		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A1	Auditory Materiality	-								
A2	Auditory Practice-based	-0.141	-							
A3	Auditory Symbolism	0.299	-.517**	-						
V1	Physical Cultural Representation	.383*	0.087	0.2	-					
V2	Artistic Cultural Representation	0.284	-0.148	0.327	.505**	-				
V3	Symbolic Cultural Representation	0.288	-.502**	0.357	0.124	.406**	-			
	Views	-0.135	0.066	-0.131	-0.083	0.212	0.112	-		
	Likes	-0.218	0.109	-0.074	0.013	0.156	0.061	.929***	-	
	Comments	-0.346	0.211	-0.093	-0.021	0.306	-0.017	.801***	.855***	-

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

6. Discussion: the dilution–re-thickening translation mechanism

Based on the results of quantitative research, coupled with the analysis of high-like comments, we find that the cross-cultural translation of traditional Chinese culture in ASMR videos is actually more like a dynamic process. This process can be roughly divided into three interrelated stages: sensory dilution, practical strengthening, and conditional deepening. These three stages are not simply to simplify culture. Together, they form a circular mechanism. Cultural meaning is passed back and forth between sensory experience and interpretation and understanding, constantly circulating.

6.1. Sensory dilution: experience-oriented cultural access

The results of descriptive statistics show that the number of occurrences is relatively high in the presentation of auditory materials and the presentation based on auditory practises. In contrast, the presentation of auditory symbolisation is still rare. At the same time, the level of auditory interpretation has always been relatively low. In all the sampled videos, the degree of sensory dominance is maintained at a relatively high level.

Overall, these results show that ASMR videos use sensory experience as the main communication method. The transmission of cultural elements relies more on the texture, rhythm and specific operation process of the sound, rather than on clear language interpretation or explanation of the historical background. Therefore, in this process, some cultural backgrounds, such as the historical origin, symbolism behind it, or related social practises, will be diluted to a certain extent.

We call this process the sensory dilution effect. Although cultural symbols are still there, the connection between them and the original context has obviously weakened. These symbols are no longer carriers of complex cultural connotations, but have become sensory stimulation that can be directly felt by global audiences. With the cooperation of whispering dialogue, close-ups and fine sound effects, traditional objects and customs are slowly integrated into an immersive sensory space.

This way of sensory compression can lower the threshold of understanding of cross-cultural audiences. The audience does not need to know the relevant cultural background in advance. They can have instant interaction with the content by their own perception and emotional response. From

this perspective, sensory dilution is not simply to lose the cultural connotation. It is more like an entry point to help people complete the initial cross-cultural contact.

The comments left by the audience also confirm this point. Those comments with higher likes are more about emotional comfort and relaxation experience than directly explaining the cultural connotation in the video. For example, many people will describe these videos as "reassuring" and "very relaxing". This shows that when the audience interacts with the content at the beginning, it is mainly at the sensory and emotional level. In this sense, in such an experience environment, cultural elements are more about creating a sense of atmosphere.

6.2. Practice-based reinforcement: cultural meaning through operational experience

Although the sensory dilution effect is conducive to the transmission of information, the results of quantitative analysis also tell us that the relationship between the communication effect and the practice-oriented display method is actually closer. From the perspective of correlation analysis, whether it is an auditory-based practice-oriented display or a visual-based cultural display, there is a relatively weak but true positive correlation between the performance indicators such as views, likes and comments on the platform.

This finding shows that if cultural practice is presented through observable behaviours and specific operational processes, its attractiveness will be significantly stronger. Such as writing calligraphy, making tea, or operating traditional tools are all typical examples. Through this practice-oriented display, even without a clear oral explanation, the audience can clearly see the promotion process of cultural activities.

Compared with pure material sensory elements, the operation process can bring a sense of development in time, and also make the narrative have a coherent rhythm. The audience can predict the next move in advance, and the attention is more likely to be attracted continuously. This practice-based presentation not only enhances the sense of immersion, but also provides a clear structural framework for the audience's participation.

Interestingly, to a certain extent, this stage also makes up for the lack of meaning brought about by sensory dilution. Even if the cultural context may still be simplified, those visible and audible practical processes can make the audience feel the cultural activities themselves more directly. In this way, cultural meaning is embedded in sensory practice, instead of relying on symbolic narratives to carry.

The audience's feedback also confirms this way of interaction again. Many people mentioned that the rhythm of the video is very good, and the traditional skills are presented in this way, which makes people feel particularly attractive. Compared with abstract cultural concepts, the audience obviously pays more attention to the process of practice itself. This also shows that in the process of transforming cultural meaning, operational experience actually plays a very key intermediary role.

6.3. Conditional re-thickening: symbolic triggers and audience interpretation

Judging from the statistical results, although there is not much symbolic presentation as a whole, individual videos do show a higher level of symbolic function orientation. Once this situation occurs, there will be some obvious changes in the audience interaction, and the depth of the explanation will follow.

In these videos, the audience can begin to recognise specific cultural objects and customs, such as traditional costumes, hair ornaments, or some decorative crafts. On the one hand, everyone's comments will praise these things for their beauty, and on the other hand, they will also directly

regard them as a part of traditional Chinese culture. Slowly, these cultural symbols began to have their own interpretation.

More importantly, some viewers will also add more cultural background information in the comment section to deepen the discussion. For example, when talking about traditional armour, some people will talk about its evolution in history, its relationship with the social elite, and the social hierarchy behind it. Through these additions, the cultural connotations that were originally condensed by sensory experience were gradually reconstructed.

We call this phenomenon conditional re-thickening. This statement borrows Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" [10], emphasising that context interpretation is actually very important when understanding cultural practice. In the context of ASMR, symbolic elements occasionally play a triggering role, guiding some audiences from simple sensory immersion to explanatory participation.

However, the statistics also show that this process is not common. Only when the presentation of symbolic elements reaches a certain degree of prominence and is not completely covered by sensory dominance, it is more likely to appear. Therefore, symbolic presentation is not achieved by the accumulation of quantity, but plays a role through selective activation at some specific moments of communication.

6.4. Cyclical cultural translation under platform conditions

In the environment of the digital platform, these processes together constitute a circular mechanism for cultural transformation. Cultural elements are first diluted by the senses and simplified to make them more acceptable. Then, through the practice-oriented presentation, the cultural content is embedded in the observable process, and the participation also rises. Under certain conditions, symbolic elements will also trigger some explanatory reactions to make up for the lost part of the cultural connotation. As shown in Figure 1, the cultural translation process in the ASMR video is presented as a circular mechanism: starting from the "sensory-dominated content design", through "sensory dilution" and "practical enhancement", it triggers the audience to reinterpret under the "symbol trigger", and reverse the subsequent content production through comment feedback.

The interaction mechanism on the platform is also strengthening this circular effect. The cultural background information supplemented by the audience themselves can often get a high degree of exposure in the comment area, and gradually become a reference for other audiences to understand the content. In this way, cultural understanding is no longer decided by one person, but has become a collaborative process in which the scattered audience participates and shapes together.

In addition, the audience's feedback will also affect the creator's subsequent content strategy. When the audience shows great interest in a cultural element or wants to know more, the creator will often extend these themes in the following videos. In this way, the whole translation process forms a closed loop, which connects the production of sensory media, the interpretation of the audience, and the interaction on the platform.

Importantly, this cyclical dynamic does not fundamentally disrupt the sensory structure of ASMR videos. Even when symbolic interpretation increases, the overall format remains centered on immersive audiovisual experience. Cultural meanings therefore continue to circulate between sensory perception and interpretive engagement rather than shifting entirely toward discursive explanation.

In summary, the cross-cultural translation of Chinese traditional culture within ASMR videos can be characterized by a structural pattern of high sensory dominance and low symbolic density.

Cultural meaning is not transmitted through direct explanation but emerges through a dynamic interplay between sensory experience, cultural practice, and audience interpretation.

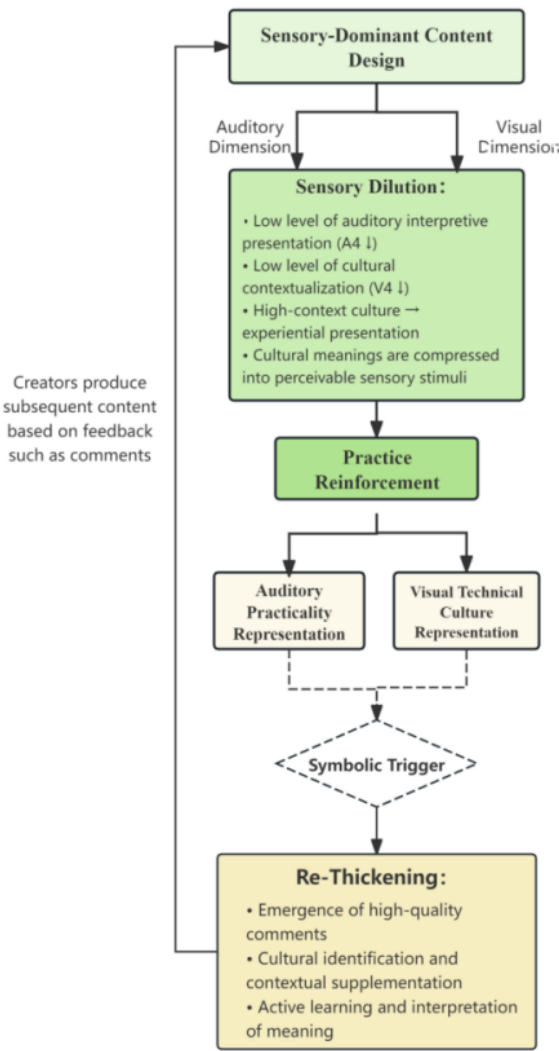


Figure 1. The sensory dilution–re-thickening cycle in cross-cultural translation

7. Conclusion

This study examines how ASMR videos participate in the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese traditional culture on digital platforms. Through the analysis of Tingting's ASMR video, we find that the way this kind of sensory media conveys cultural connotation relies more on experiential presentation than clear narrative interpretation.

Among them, the sensory presentation based on practice has an obvious effect on improving the participation of the audience. Symbolic elements may lead cultural interpretation to a deeper level. Based on these findings, we have proposed a circular transformation mechanism of "dilution-re-concentration" to explain how cultural meaning is disseminated in the sensory media environment.

On the whole, this study shows us that sensory communication is becoming more and more important in digital cultural communication, and also provides a new perspective for us to understand how cultural meaning is transformed and negotiated between global platforms.

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