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Immobility Behind Mobility: The Cultural Discount Problem Faced by Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Process of Commodification and Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract. As an important carrier of cultural exports, China's intangible cultural heritage faces commodification challenges and cross-cultural understanding barriers in its globalization process. This paper takes Xiu Niang Silk, a local Suzhou embroidery workshop, as a case study, using fieldwork to analyze the current situation and causes of cultural discount among Chinese intangible cultural heritage products in cross-cultural circulation. The study finds that Chinese cultural products in global circulation the process of globalized circulation are jointly hindered by external hegemony and internal limitations, forming an "imagined line" that enables Chinese cultural products to achieve physical mobility while their cultural connotations remain difficult to reach audiences from different cultural backgrounds. This paper argues that resolving this dilemma requires a shift from external critique to internal–external coordination, and, on the premise of maintaining cultural subjectivity, the realization of a transformation from "passive accommodation" to "active dialogue" by improving institutional guarantees, cultivating cultural intermediaries, and building multi-layered communication systems.

Keywords: cultural discount, Orientalism, the imagined line, Suzhou embroidery, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

In the current wave of globalization and under China's call to go global, intangible cultural heritage (hereafter "ICH") serves as an important carrier for cultural exports, bearing the mission of constructing national identity and expressing cultural confidence. For cultural products to go abroad and achieve effective exchange, they inevitably face the impact of marketization and commodification. In this process, the tension between the cultural value and market value of ICH has become increasingly prominent.

Existing research has shown that the cross-national circulation of cultural products is not naturally an equal dialogue process. Edward Said's theory of "Orientalism" reveals how the West, through knowledge production, constructs the East as the "Other," and consolidates its hegemonic position as the mainstream culture through stereotyping, simplification, and essentialization [1]. Hoskins & Mirus further proposed the concept of cultural discount, pointing out that when cultural

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products enter culturally distinct markets, their appeal declines significantly because audiences are unfamiliar with their cultural backgrounds [2].

This paper attempts to explore: how can intangible cultural heritage, rooted in local cultural backgrounds, establish its own subjective position and "co-participate in the creation of" the globalization environment amid complex power relations at the local level and the dominant perspective of Western culture? This study employs the case study method, taking Suzhou's "Xiu Niang Silk" as the research subject. Through field investigation, it analyzes the current situation and causes of cultural discount in the cross-cultural circulation of Chinese intangible cultural heritage products. This research provides practical references for Chinese intangible cultural heritage to break through the cultural discount predicament and achieve a transformation from "passive accommodation" to "active dialogue", helping it to maintain cultural subjectivity and conduct equal and effective cross-cultural communication with global culture.

2. The current situation and causes of cultural discount in the cross-cultural circulation of Chinese ICH products

The above phenomenon reveals a typical manifestation of cultural discount in everyday cross-cultural consumption scenarios: foreign consumers' interest in the "artistic form" of Suzhou embroidery did not naturally extend to their understanding and identification with its "cultural content." A disconnect occurred between form and meaning—handicraft-level embroidery was appreciated, while "Suzhou embroidery" as a cultural practice was never genuinely engaged with. This is the combined result of the aesthetic discipline of Orientalism from an external perspective and the internal factors of institutional deficiencies, closed transmission models, and market dynamics.

2.1. External path: The aesthetic discipline of orientalism

From the perspective of consumers' cultural cognition, although foreign tourists have achieved its mobility geographically, their aesthetic habits and cultural cognition are still deeply shaped by "Orientalist" discourse. Said points out that through academic research, literary creation and artistic representation, the West constructs the East as heterogeneous, mysterious, and static, requiring interpretation and salvation by the West [1]. Suzhou embroidery, as Chinese ICH, has craft products that serve only as the surface carrier of culture, while Western consumers have not truly reached the cultural core behind these products. When they encounter, appreciate, and are even willing to purchase Suzhou embroidery, they are actually buying the "Chinese concept" that this craft represents—a kind of "exotic cultural symbol." Complex, authentic, and indigenous cultural cores are stripped from their entire cultural context because of the difficulty of understanding and translation, and are not incorporated into the educational vision of mainstream Western culture [3].

In the fieldwork, the author noticed an interesting detail: some foreign tourists would point at the lotus or carp patterns on the embroidery pieces and comment with a somewhat exoticizing tone, saying "so exotic" or "very Chinese." This form of commentary reflects an Orientalist cognitive framework: they are not viewing a lotus image that embodies the literati ideal of "rising from mud yet untainted", but a visual symbol reduced to "Chinese-style exoticism." Cultural meaning gets "discounted" at the very first step of cross-cultural contact.

From the perspective of commodity circulation, although Chinese cultural products have achieved "commodity circulation" in a geographical sense, their deeper Chinese cultural core has not

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reached the Western cultural sphere. This surface-level cultural contact is actually the reproduction of cultural distance [4].

2.2. Theoretical tool: Cross-cultural transplantation of "the imagined line"

Azoulay and Ophir, in their study of Israeli occupation checkpoints, proposed the concept of "the Imagined Line," providing an important theoretical tool for understanding the aforementioned phenomenon [5]. In their analysis, the Imagined Line is an invisible yet effective control mechanism: Israeli soldiers draw an invisible line, and while those subject to control cannot see it, they always operate within its defined boundaries; any boundary-crossing behavior incurs punishment.

This paper attempts to apply this concept into the context of cross-cultural communication: Western audiences are not aware of the existence of this line, yet they consistently consume culture within its defined boundaries. They only choose patterns that fit their own aesthetic habits, and only consume "formal symbols" that can be understood, while keeping their distance from the cultural meaning behind the forms. Although Chinese cultural products have crossed national borders, they cannot cross this "imagined line" of cultural identification.

Caution should be exercised regarding the unconditional nature of this theoretical application. Azoulay and Ophir's original text analyzes power relations in physical space—crossing the boundary would result in actual physical punishment; whereas the "line" in cross-cultural communication operates at the cognitive and aesthetic level, and its binding force is more concealed and pervasive. However, the structural similarity between the two lies in the fact that the controller does not need to be present, yet those under control will exercise self-restraint. The reason Western cultural hegemony can continue to operate is precisely because it has been internalized as a "commonsensical" standard of aesthetic judgment, causing the disciplined to cooperate with the disciplining process without realizing it [6]. In cross-cultural consumption scenarios, foreign tourists do not avoid traditional Chinese cultural symbols because of direct orders from any person or institution, but rather because long-standing Orientalist discourse has shaped their aesthetic "intuition"—and this is precisely how "The Imagined Line" operates at the cultural level.

The Imagined Line has a dual function: on the one hand, it limits the depth of Western audiences' understanding of Chinese culture, confining them to the level of superficial consumption of "exoticism"; on the other hand, it also disciplines the behavioral logic of Chinese cultural producers —in order to enter the Western market, cultural producers have to adjust product design to cater to the rules within the line, thereby unknowingly reinforcing the role of this line. The two mutually reinforce each other, forming a self-reproducing mechanism of cultural discount.

2.3. Internal path: institutional deficiencies, closed transmission, and market dynamics

However, attributing cultural discount entirely to Western aesthetic hegemony belongs to the traditional research attribution path. This study emphasizes that we must also examine the internal institutional barriers in China, as well as the complex choices Chinese cultural producers face between market logic and cultural subjectivity.

First, insufficient institutional support. China's laws and regulations for ICH protection are not yet fully improved. Although the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China" was promulgated in 2011 and ICH protection has achieved remarkable results, there are still obvious shortcomings in the relevant legal framework. Existing laws mostly focus on the "protection" level, while the institutional design for "revitalization" and "communication" is

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relatively weak. The law lacks clear norms and guidance for the commercial utilization of ICH, resulting in cultural producers lacking institutional support during market development. More importantly, the lack of specialized support policies for cultural product exports makes ICH enterprises often operate in isolation when entering the international market, making it difficult to form effective synergy in cultural communication [7, 8].

Second, the closed nature of the transmission model. ICH transmission has long followed the closed model of "master-apprentice system," which, while beneficial for maintaining the purity of craftsmanship, has to some extent limited the sharing and transmission of knowledge. The core knowledge of traditional handicrafts is often held by a small number of inheritors, lacking a knowledge transformation mechanism accessible to the public and the world. When foreign consumers face a Suzhou embroidery piece, they have no way of understanding how the embroiderer selects threads, splits threads, or handles needles—this knowledge is sealed within the transmission system, making it difficult to transform into cultural stories that can be understood and told [9].

Third, the subjectivity dilemma under market logic. In the globalized market, Chinese ICH enterprises and cultural producers face a profound choice dilemma. Most enterprises gain smoother market access by catering to Western aesthetics. Many enterprises choose to produce modern-style, geometric-patterned products to adapt to Western markets. In the short term, this can reduce the difficulty of cultural understanding and thereby lower cultural discount, but in the long run, it may lead to the "loss of voice" of Chinese culture—when traditional cultural symbols are systematically stripped from products, cultural subjectivity is unknowingly dissolved [10, 11].

3. Breaking through the immobility: Toward equal and effective cross-cultural communication

Breaking through the cultural immobility behind surface-level mobility requires a shift from "passive adaptation" to "active dialogue" However, this paper argues against reducing solutions to abstract policy slogans, and instead advocates returning to the specific case of Suzhou embroidery to propose practical pathways with operability.

3.1. Letting craftsmanship "speak": reconstructing the narrative system of ICH products

The biggest dilemma currently faced by Suzhou embroidery products in cross-cultural communication is not that they "cannot be sold," but that they "cannot speak": products are sold, yet the cultural narratives attached to them fail to be transmitted alongside them. The first step to breaking through is to enable ICH products themselves become complete narrative carriers, rather than merely attracting consumers through their visual appeal.

Taking Suzhou embroidery as an example, a piece with traditional themes—such as a round fan embroidered with lotus flowers—has value that goes far beyond being a silk-embroidered fan. In Chinese culture, the lotus symbolizes the literati ideal of "rising from the mud yet remaining unstained." Suzhou embroidery transforms this into a tangible silk fabric using "needle as brush and thread as ink," and this transformation process itself is a unique cultural practice. However, current Suzhou embroidery product rarely conveys this information to foreign consumers. The labels attached to embroidery pieces usually only include material, size, and price, lacking explanations of the pattern's cultural meaning and the history of the craft.

Specifically, this can be approached from two levels: first, providing multilingual cultural explanation cards for each product, briefly introducing the cultural significance of the patterns (such as the literary origins of the lotus imagery) and the craft's unique features (such as the "two different

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sides" technique of double-sided embroidery), embedding cultural information into the consumption process; second, setting up multimedia display areas within shop spaces, using short videos or interactive screens to demonstrate core Suzhou embroidery techniques—for example, using macro lenses to show how an embroiderer splits a single silk thread into sixty-four filaments, or how different needlework techniques create light and shadow effects, enabling foreign consumers to "see" the exquisite craftsmanship before making a purchase. When cultural stories transform from "tacit knowledge" requiring word-of-mouth transmission into "explicit information" that can be independently accessed, cultural discount will naturally decrease.

3.2. From "master-apprentice secret transmission" to "public knowledge": Establishing an open knowledge transformation mechanism for ICH

The closed nature of ICH transmission is one of the deep-rooted causes of cultural discount. The master-apprentice transmission model seals core craft knowledge among a small number of inheritors. Although this model has historically effectively guaranteed the intergenerational inheritance of craftsmanship, it creates a structural contradiction with the requirement of "knowledge accessibility" in cross-cultural communication. The key to breaking through lies in establishing a "layered openness" knowledge transformation mechanism that both protects the core of transmission and opens understandable cultural knowledge to the public. Taking Suzhou embroidery as an example, three levels can be distinguished: the first level is the "physical presentation of craftsmanship," which is the finished embroidery pieces visible to consumers—this already exists; the second level is the "process display of craftsmanship," letting consumers see "how this thing is made" through videos and live demonstrations; the third level is the "cultural explanation of craftsmanship," telling consumers "why it is done this way"—why does Suzhou embroidery use silk thread rather than cotton thread as the main material? Why is it emphasized that the "grain of the silk" should follow the texture of the object itself? The aesthetic philosophy and worldview behind these "whys" are precisely what is most easily eroded by cultural discount and most worthy of being transmitted.

In practice, this knowledge transformation can take multiple forms. Digital museums are one approach—Suzhou has begun building ICH digitalization platforms in recent years, but current digitalization mostly stays at the level of "information input", lacking multilingual and immersive presentation for foreign audiences. An even more innovative approach is to embed knowledge transformation into the consumption scene itself: setting up "experience stations" in shops like "Xiu Niang Silk," inviting consumers to try basic needlework techniques under the guidance of embroiderers—even a few minutes of experience would be enough to transform consumers from "bystanders" into "participants," from lacking understanding" to "being able to touch and experience". When cultural contact shifts from passive viewing to active participation, the possibility of cultural understanding undergoes a qualitative change [12, 13].

3.3. Cultivating "cultural intermediaries": Building professional bridges for cross-cultural understanding

A key missing link in cross-cultural communication is the professional "cultural intermediary". The "cultural intermediary" discussed here is not a simple language translator—language translation only solves the problem of "what to say," while cultural mediation addresses "why it is said this way" and "what it means to them"

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In the cross-cultural communication scenario of Suzhou embroidery, a qualified cultural intermediary needs at least three capabilities: first, a deep understanding of Suzhou embroidery's craft knowledge and historical context, and the ability to accurately convey the technical sophistication and cultural significance of a piece; second, knowledge of the target audience's cultural context and cognitive habits, knowing which cultural concepts need explanation and which can be helped by analogy—for example, when introducing Suzhou embroidery to a Japanese tourist, one could naturally compare it with Japanese embroidery (such as Edo embroidery) to lower the understanding threshold; third, the ability for narrative transformation, able to translate specialized craft knowledge into vivid, relatable, and engaging cultural stories.

This cultural intermediary role can be fulfilled by various actors: professionally trained ICH guides, curators engaged in cross-cultural communication research, international students or volunteers with bicultural backgrounds, and even embroiderers themselves who have received training. In fact, letting embroiderers directly tell their own creative stories to foreign consumers might be more impactful than any third-party intermediary—an embroiderer using simple English to describe how she spent three months completing a double-sided embroidery piece, how the color of each stitch went through repeated adjustments—this kind of first-person narrative from the creator is itself the most powerful form of cultural communication.

4. Conclusion

This paper takes Xiu Niang Silk, a Suzhou embroidery workshop, as a case study to examine the cultural discount encountered by China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the process of commodification and cross-cultural communication. The study finds that the cross-cultural circulation of Chinese ICH products is doubly hindered by external hegemony and internal limitations: externally, the Western-centric Orientalist discourse constructs Chinese culture as the "exotic Other," causing traditional symbols to be systematically "discounted" in cross-cultural scenarios; internally, there exist complex factors including insufficient institutional support for ICH laws regarding revitalization and communication, limited knowledge sharing caused by the master-apprentice transmission model, and cultural producers' active adjustment of product design to cater to the market. These two factors intertwine to form an invisible Imagined Line that enables Chinese cultural products to achieve geographical physical mobility, yet their deeper cultural significance remains inaccessible to audiences from different cultural backgrounds. This paper argues that breaking through this dilemma requires approaches including improving institutional guarantees, building public knowledge transformation mechanisms for ICH, and cultivating cultural intermediaries, while maintaining cultural subjectivity to promote the paradigm shift from "passive accommodation" to "active dialogue" in order to foster equal and effective cross-cultural communication. It should be emphasized that these solutions should not remain at the level of abstract policies, but should return to specific ICH categories and practical contexts to explore operable implementation pathways.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, the case only selected one location (Suzhou) and one craft (embroidery), and the generalizability of the conclusions awaits cross-validation with more ICH categories. Second, the analysis of Western consumers' consumption psychology mainly relies on fieldwork observation, lacking support from systematic questionnaire surveys or in-depth interview data. In the future, this research will quantitatively measure the market discount differences of different cultural symbols from an economic perspective, aiming to construct a more explanatory cross-cultural communication model; alternatively, it will use focus group interviews to deeply explore Western consumers' aesthetic preferences and local merchants' market psychology.

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