

Original Research Article

From digital content to cultural confidence: The performance of tradition on Chinese social media*Lu Zhang**Jingchu University of Technology, Jingmen, Hubei, 448000, China*

Abstract: Against the backdrop of «cultural confidence» becoming a central national agenda in China, traditional Chinese culture is experiencing a phenomenal resurgence on short-form video platforms, most notably Douyin. This trend raises a critical question: How do these social media platforms transform the abstract, macro-narrative of «cultural confidence» into a tangible, participatory, and emotional experience for young people? This paper argues that cultural confidence is not passively received but is actively constructed through a dynamic, three-stage performance. This process unfolds through: 1) aestheticization, where tradition is packaged into appealing sensory spectacles; 2) domestication, which integrates these traditions into the familiar practices of modern daily life; and 3) communalization, where interactive rituals forge a shared collective identity. Through a textual analysis of representative short-form videos, this paper elucidates this complete pathway from digital content to cultural confidence, offering a new analytical framework for understanding the mechanisms of cultural identity formation in the digital age.

Keywords: Cultural confidence; Short-form video; Traditional Chinese culture

1. Introduction

In recent years, “New Chinese Style” fashion has transitioned from a subcultural niche to a mainstream trend; cultural and creative products from museums have become viral hits; and pastoral lifestyle videos, epitomized by creators like Li Ziqi, have sparked global interest in traditional Chinese aesthetics. These phenomena point to a profound trend: long-dormant traditional Chinese culture is undergoing a massive digital revival, propelled by short-form video platforms like Douyin, which has become a primary arena where culture is consumed and reimagined in China.

This resurgence resonates with the rise of “cultural confidence” as a grand narrative in Chinese society. Established as a key national strategy, cultural confidence has evolved from a top-level political discourse into a pervasive social sentiment, particularly among the youth. It functions as both an internal project to unify national identity and an external soft-power counter-narrative, aiming to reposition China as a confident and influential global cultural force. In this context, a crucial academic question emerges: How does this macro-narrative of the state connect with the micro-practices of individuals? In other words, how does watching a 15-second video contribute to and reinforce a sense of national identity tied to “cultural confidence”? Answering this question is vital for understanding the complex negotiations between political ideology, platform capitalism, and popular culture in contemporary China.

Existing scholarship tends to either describe the phenomenon or offer a top-down critique, often overlooking the “meso-level”—the specific processes and mechanisms through which cultural confidence is generated within media practices. This paper aims to fill this gap by arguing that cultural confidence is not passively transmitted but is actively constructed through a dynamic, multi-faceted performance. We contend that this process unfolds across three interconnected and progressive stages: aestheticization, domestication, and communalization. Together, these stages form a complete pathway from digital content to cultural confidence.

2. Theoretical framework: Cultural performance in the digital age

Traditional “transmission” models of communication are inadequate for the interactive dynamics of social media. As a corrective, this paper adopts a “ritual view”, seeing communication as the representation of shared beliefs. Building on this, we use Erving Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory as our core tool, conceptualizing cultural communication on social media as a form of cultural performance. On the “front stage” of platforms like Douyin, creators perform a cultural image, and the audience participates through interaction. Cultural confidence is thus the result of being repeatedly shaped and affirmed in this continuous digital performance.

To dissect this performance, we employ a multi-layered framework. First, aestheticization creates a new “digital aura” based on sensory intensity and shareability. Second, the domestication of tradition integrates cultural elements into modern consumer lifestyles. Third, communalization forms affective publics through interaction rituals that build collective identity. Finally, we draw from Platform Studies, recognizing that platform affordances and algorithmic curation act as an invisible director, powerfully steering the performance through the stages we identify.

3. The Three stages of performing cultural confidence

3.1. Stage 1: Aestheticization – Crafting the visual hook for emotional engagement

On short-form video platforms, where attention is scarce, the construction of cultural confidence begins with an intense appeal to the senses. This stage is a sophisticated process of translation, transforming complex cultural heritage into a format optimized for viral circulation.

First is the fetishism of craft and detail. Creators employ cinematic techniques like macro close-ups and ASMR to magnify the material and sensory details of a cultural practice, isolating them into objects of fascination. A video on silk embroidery will linger on the glistening of a single thread; one on ink-making will present the rhythmic sound of the pestle grinding. This hyper-focus on decontextualized detail turns the process into a pure sensory experience, creating a “wow” moment that evokes awe.

Second is the compression of time and narrative. The long duration of traditional crafts is antithetical to the demand for instant gratification. Aestheticization solves this by condensing a process that takes months into a 15-second montage. Labor and failure are edited out, leaving a seamless narrative of magical creation that is easily digestible.

Finally, there is the gamification of aesthetics through platform affordances. Platforms like Douyin provide a suite of built-in creative tools—filters, effects templates, and a vast library of trending sounds—that lower the barrier to aesthetic production. A user can apply a “Tang Dynasty Painting” filter or use a piece of gǔfēng music to instantly lend their content an “ancient” vibe. This gamification turns aesthetic creation into a form of playful mass participation and encourages imitation, ensuring that the aestheticized version of culture spreads rapidly.

3.2. Stage 2: Domestication – Making tradition relatable, usable, and integrable

If aestheticization solves the problem of “attraction,” domestication addresses the problem of “relevance.” This performance “tames” tradition, transforming it from a “museum exhibit” into “a part of my life.”

This is achieved first through the recontextualization of ritual into lifestyle. Traditional practices, often bound by strict social contexts, are transplanted into modern, individualistic settings. A young professional prepares a bowl of whipped tea using Song dynasty tools in a modern office, shifting the focus from social ritual to personal well-being. Wearing a modified mǎmiànqún (horse-face skirt) with sneakers recontextualizes historical attire as a personal fashion statement. These videos convey a powerful message: traditional culture is a stylish and functional lifestyle choice.

Second is the personalization and curation of heritage. Tradition is no longer presented as a monolithic sys-

tem but is broken down into modular elements that individuals can pick and choose from to construct a unique identity. On Douyin, a user can be a fan of Ming dynasty furniture or Sichuan culinary traditions. This “a la carte” approach allows users to domesticate tradition on their own terms, making the engagement feel authentic and self-directed.

Finally, there is the commodification and instrumentalization of culture. This is the heart of the “Guochao” (National Trend) economy. Brands integrate traditional motifs into modern products like sneakers, while knowledge-focused creators “translate” complex cultural knowledge into applicable “life hacks.” Culture ceases to be a burden and becomes a source of empowerment and, crucially, a consumable good. As users practice and purchase these cultural elements, cultural confidence transforms from an external narrative into a genuine self-realization.

3.3. Stage 3: Communalization – From individual resonance to collective affirmation

The final consolidation of cultural confidence requires a leap from “I” to “we,” a process facilitated by the interactive ecosystem of short-form video platforms.

First is the formation of affective publics in digital ritual spaces. The comment sections become theaters for “interaction rituals.” When a video showcasing a great ancient Chinese feat appears, it provides a shared focus of attention and generates a common emotional mood (awe, pride). The comment section becomes the space for manifesting this mood collectively. Top comments like, “This is what’s engraved in the DNA of Chinese people,” function like a collective oath. By liking or repeating these comments, users participate in a ritual that generates “emotional energy” and strengthens group solidarity.

Second is memetic embodiment and algorithmic enclaves. Platform features like “challenges” and “duets” encourage “memetic embodiment,” summoning countless users to participate in the “re-performance” of culture. Users are no longer just spectators; they actively use their own bodies to interpret and disseminate tradition. The algorithm plays a crucial role by identifying a burgeoning trend and pushing it to more users, creating an “algorithmic enclave.” Inside this bubble, users are constantly exposed to reinforcing content and positive feedback, intensifying their sense of belonging.

Finally, there is the policing of boundaries and negative solidarity. An often-overlooked aspect of communalization is defining the group by what it is not. The same interactive spaces can quickly turn into arenas for policing cultural boundaries. Any perceived slight or critique can be met with a swift and overwhelming backlash. This “defensive” communalization, while often toxic, is extremely effective at reinforcing in-group identity and shows that the process is not always benign.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the process by which the abstract, state-promoted narrative of “cultural confidence” is transformed into a tangible, lived experience on Chinese social media. Our analysis demonstrates that this phenomenon is not a simple act of transmission but a dynamic and multi-layered performance. We have argued that this performance unfolds across a three-stage pathway, beginning with aestheticization, where traditional culture is rendered into visually spectacular content; followed by domestication, a crucial stage where these aestheticized symbols are integrated into the rhythms of modern life; and culminating in communalization, where the platform’s interactive architecture allows individual feelings of pride to be collectively affirmed into a shared group identity. This three-stage model constitutes the core mechanism for “producing” cultural confidence in the digital age.

The significance of this model extends beyond a mere description of a social media trend, offering important implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, this research contributes a process-oriented framework that moves beyond simplistic transmission models, highlighting the platform as a crucial intermediary that

actively shapes cultural meaning. For practitioners aiming to “tell China’s story well,” this framework offers a practical playbook: successful communication requires an “experience design” mindset that strategically aestheticizes content, domesticates it for relevance, and designs for communal participation.

However, it is crucial to approach these findings with a critical perspective, acknowledging the limitations of this study and the inherent paradoxes of this digital performance. As a non-empirical analysis, this paper leaves questions about the substantive quality and long-term effects of this performance open for future investigation. This gives rise to what we term the “Confidence Paradox,” a series of tensions between authenticity and virality, empowerment versus homogenization, and confidence versus fragility. A confidence built on fleeting aesthetic pleasure and often defensive online communities may lack the critical depth of one rooted in deeper historical understanding. These tensions point toward rich avenues for future research, including qualitative audience studies and critical inquiries into the economic and political logics shaping this powerful digital stage. Ultimately, understanding cultural confidence in the digital age requires a dialectical approach that recognizes both its unprecedented reach and its potential vulnerabilities.

Subject information

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