

Original Research Article

Contextual adaptation in China's regional international communication: Audience fit and opportunities for emotional connection

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Abstract: Regional international communication addresses specific groups embedded in distinct linguistic, media, and cultural environments rather than a homogeneous "overseas audience." Whether messages are understood and whether audience engagement can be sustained depend on the fit between communication practices and local needs, media habits, and cultural experience. Drawing on research on targeted communication and regional studies, together with the ritual view of communication, this study uses a focused comparative case design to examine contextual adaptation and the conditions that may enable emotional connection. Four cases are examined: multilingual communication directed from Yunnan toward South and Southeast Asia, international coverage of the wandering Asian elephants in Yunnan, the Chinese musical *Flying Apsaras* at the Daegu International Musical Festival in Korea, and a China–Myanmar co-produced documentary series. The cases show that regional international communication involves more than the technical identification of audience segments. Its effectiveness also depends on whether language, platforms, narrative forms, and cultural symbols are adapted to the everyday contexts of intended audiences. Emotional connection is not produced simply through the addition of affective language; rather, opportunities for such connection may arise through recognizable local symbols, embodied experience, and shared production.

Keywords: regional international communication; contextual adaptation; audience fit; local cultural symbols; emotional connection

1. Introduction

In regional international communication, a region is more than a geographically bounded space. It is also a communicative context shaped by language, cultural experience, media systems, and everyday life. Audiences in different regions do not interpret the same message in identical ways. Visibility does not necessarily produce comprehension, and comprehension does not automatically produce identification. Audience analysis therefore needs to move beyond demographic segmentation toward concrete lifeworlds: which languages people use, where they encounter information, what narrative rhythms they are accustomed to, which symbols they can recognize, and which experiences can be related to their own lives.

Research on targeted communication emphasizes correspondence among information, communication practices, and audiences. Its central concern is not simply to subdivide audiences into smaller categories, but to improve the fit between content and situations of use by identifying audience needs ^[1]. Regional studies provide contextual knowledge of particular societies and cultures, allowing an abstract "overseas audience" to be understood as people embedded in specific social relations and media environments ^[2]. Combining these perspectives, this study defines contextual adaptation as the adjustment of language, platform, narrative form, cultural symbols, and production arrangements to specific audience environments.

Recent research on communication with Southeast Asian audiences has also identified insufficient channel adaptation and limited precision of content, stressing that media habits, cultural differences, and religious sensitivities can shape how messages are received ^[3]. The study asks two questions: How do language, platform choice, and narrative form connect communication with audiences' everyday media environments? Under what conditions do cultural symbols, embodied experience, and co-production create opportunities for emotional connection?

2. Research design and case selection

A focused comparative case design is used to examine communication mechanisms rather than to evaluate provinces, institutions, or policy systems as a whole. The unit of analysis is the point at which adaptation occurs in the communication process. Four cases were selected through maximum-variation purposive sampling. They were included because each provides publicly accessible evidence of a distinct point in the adaptation process—access, symbolic legibility, embodied encounter, or production participation—while remaining comparable as regionally oriented international communication practices. The analysis draws on institutional records, media reports, audiovisual materials, and relevant scholarship. Although the cases differ in medium, intentionality, and audience contact, they are compared through the same question of how contextual fit is produced.

The comparison follows four dimensions. The first is access: whether language and platform reduce barriers to contact. The second is symbolic legibility: whether the content can be understood without extensive prior knowledge. The third is participation: whether audiences or destination-region actors enter the communication process through experience, interaction, or co-production. The fourth is the evidential status of any claimed outcome. This design keeps the analysis at the level of observable communication practices and prevents a small set of cases from being used to support broad conclusions that the available evidence cannot sustain.

3. Contextual adaptation: From audience identification to communicative environments

Contextual adaptation treats the communication environment as a constitutive condition rather than contextual background. Audience fit refers to the alignment of content, delivery, and cultural form with that environment. Hallin and Mancini's comparative work demonstrates that media systems and their operating logics differ substantially across historical and institutional settings, making context indispensable to cross-regional comparison ^[4]. In regional international communication, this principle can be operationalized through three questions: Whether language reduces barriers to comprehension, whether media channels form part of audiences' everyday media use, and whether content forms correspond to local viewing habits and cultural experience.

Language is the first layer of access. Yunnan Gateway offers content in Chinese, English, Thai, Burmese, Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese. Following its 2024 revision, differentiated columns were introduced for different language groups, including the English short-video series Challenge Yunnan, See China Together in Thai, and AI-presenter content in Burmese and Lao. The significance of this arrangement lies less in the number of languages than in the simultaneous adjustment of language and content form. Communication is not limited to translating one standardized text; different linguistic and platform entry points are created for different audiences.

Recent studies document how a Yunnan-based video studio distributed content through multilingual websites, overseas social-media accounts, and regional-language channels ^[3, 5]. In the short-video series Challenge Yunnan, foreign participants experience local food and everyday life, presenting Yunnan culture through action and interaction rather than exposition. This experiential format reduces the amount of background knowledge required from viewers. Yet contextual adaptation cannot be completed merely by using a foreign language or placing foreign participants on screen. Religious practices, dietary restrictions, and social values may still create misinterpretation. Precision is therefore better understood as continuous contextual calibration than as a one-time audience label.

Platforms are part of the context as well. Television, multilingual portals, short-video platforms, and social media correspond to different viewing durations, modes of participation, and expectations of interaction. The analytical value of platform choice lies not in counting channels but in asking whether content enters the actual media pathways of intended audiences. Only when language, medium, and content form are aligned can a communication channel move from being technically available to being meaningfully usable.

4. Local symbols: From visibility to emotional connection

Contextual adaptation explains how information enters an audience's field of attention; emotional

connection concerns why audiences may continue to watch, discuss, or remember it. Local cultural symbols are important because they convert abstract regional categories into perceivable objects. Animals, rivers, food, music, and ordinary life usually require less interpretive background than institutional or conceptual discourse. Their communicative value, however, does not arise from locality alone; it depends on whether audiences can connect these symbols with recognizable experience.

The long-distance movement of Asian elephants in Yunnan provides a clear example. In 2020, a herd began a long northward movement that developed into a sustained media event. Existing case research notes the use of first-person storytelling, data journalism, detail-rich imagery, and social-media circulation, all of which contributed to the event's high external visibility ^[6]. The event was highly legible across cultures because it had a recognizable visual subject and a continuous sequence of actions. Audiences did not need detailed knowledge of Yunnan to understand images of animal movement, human–animal proximity, and everyday encounters.

The elephant case suggests that local symbols work most effectively as narrative entry points rather than as containers for excessive abstract meaning. Recognizable visual objects can lower the threshold of comprehension, but stable emotional connection still depends on narrative organization. When too many macro-level interpretations are attached to a local symbol, its openness may be reduced. A more productive approach is to preserve the visibility of animals, people, places, and ordinary actions, allowing audiences to develop initial understanding through concrete experience before contextual information is added.

5. Embodied experience and aesthetic translation: Flying apsaras in Daegu

James W. Carey's ritual view of communication emphasizes that communication is not only the transmission of information but also a process of shared participation, symbolic experience, and relationship formation ^[7]. This perspective is useful for interpreting performances, festivals, and other forms of cultural experience. Audiences do not simply receive explanations of a culture; they encounter it through viewing, listening, movement, and shared time and space.

In 2024, the Chinese musical *Flying Apsaras* was presented at the 18th Daegu International Musical Festival in Korea and received the festival's Grand Prize. Built around the preservation of Dunhuang murals, the production translates visual heritage into music, stage performance, digital imagery, and character-centered storytelling. For audiences without detailed knowledge of Dunhuang history, performance converts cultural information into sound, movement, and visual scenes, making comprehension less dependent on explanatory text.

The case is most useful when treated as a mechanism of aesthetic translation rather than as evidence of a broader cultural effect. First, stage performance converts static mural imagery into bodily movement and dramatic action. Second, the musical genre provides a relatively familiar formal entry point for international festival audiences. Third, the festival places the production in a comparative setting alongside works from several countries. The award demonstrates recognition within a professional festival evaluation system, but it should not be equated with generalized audience identification. Audience comprehension, affective response, and cultural association would require separate evidence.

6. Co-production: From one-way translation to shared narrative production

A further form of contextual adaptation occurs when media organizations and creators in the destination region participate in production itself. Compared with translating a completed program after production, co-production can bring local interviewees, narrative conventions, and broadcasting norms into the process at an earlier stage. In 2025, Myanma Radio and Television (MRTV) and China's Yunnan Media Group began jointly producing the documentary series *Lancang-Mekong: Towards a Golden Future*. Publicly available project records describe it as a one-year co-production intended for later broadcast on television channels in both Myanmar and China.

The significance of co-production lies in the changed narrative relationship. Media in the destination region are no longer only receivers or distribution channels; they become participants in topic selection, interviewing, filming, editing, and broadcasting. Such shared production does not imply complete agreement between the parties. Rather, it allows local context to enter the formation of content earlier. For regional international communication, this represents a deeper form of adaptation than linguistic translation alone because language, interview subjects, visual selection, and broadcast settings can all be negotiated

during production.

Co-production, however, should not be treated as proof of communication effects. A collaborative production can demonstrate a change in production mechanisms, but it does not automatically demonstrate a change in audience attitudes. A more rigorous analysis should distinguish three levels: whether local participation occurs in production; whether local experience is visible in the text; and whether audiences show comprehension or emotional response. The first two can be examined through production records and textual analysis, whereas the third requires audience surveys, interviews, or behavioral data.

Table 1. Cases, communication mechanisms, and evidential limits.

Case	Observable feature	Primary mechanism	Evidential limit
Yunnan Gateway / Challenge Yunnan	Multilingual columns and differentiated short-video formats	Language and platform adaptation	Shows adaptation of access and format, not audience effects
Yunnan elephant migration	Sustained international circulation of elephant imagery	Visual symbol and low-threshold comprehension	Shows visibility and cross-cultural legibility, not stable identification
Flying Apsaras	Live festival performance and Grand Prize	Embodied experience and aesthetic translation	Shows professional recognition and live exposure, not generalized audience identification
China–Myanmar documentary	Co-production and planned broadcast in both countries	Production participation and shared narrative	Shows a change in production mechanisms; audience attitudes require separate evidence

7. Comparative discussion: Mechanisms, depths, and evidential boundaries

Across the four cases, contextual adaptation can be understood as a sequence of related but non-equivalent mechanisms. The first is access: Language and platform reduce barriers to contact. The second is symbolic legibility: local symbols, familiar genres, and concrete situations reduce the interpretive cost of cultural difference. The third is participation: live performance, experiential formats, and co-production allow audiences or destination-region actors to enter the communication process more directly. Affective outcomes such as interest, familiarity, memory, and identification can be assessed only at a later stage. This sequence is analytical rather than deterministic: easier access can facilitate comprehension, and participation can increase opportunities for connection, but none of these steps automatically produces durable identification.

The cases also differ in the depth at which adaptation occurs. Yunnan Gateway works mainly at the access layer. Multilingual columns and differentiated short-video formats reduce linguistic and platform barriers, while topic selection and production remain largely sender-led. The elephant case operates differently because the communicative object is highly legible before formal explanation begins. Images of a moving herd, resting animals, and encounters with people can be interpreted through broadly shared visual experience; scholarship on the case likewise notes the importance of vivid detail, diversified formats, and social-media circulation ^[6]. Flying Apsaras moves adaptation toward aesthetic translation: Dunhuang imagery is reorganized through dramatic characters, music, movement, and digital stage imagery within a musical-theatre form that international festival audiences can readily enter. The China–Myanmar documentary project shifts adaptation further upstream, because contextual adjustment begins during production and can affect interviewee selection, visual choices, narration, and later distribution.

Two comparative patterns follow. First, incorporating contextual knowledge at an earlier stage of production potentially allows more dimensions of communication to be adapted. Translation mainly alters language; platform adaptation changes access and format; aesthetic translation reorganizes form and embodied experience; co-production can influence selection, representation, and distribution together. Second, the emotional potential of communication does not rise mechanically with the depth of adaptation. The elephant event generated extensive attention with little designed adaptation because its visual symbol was immediately legible, whereas a carefully co-produced documentary may still require audience research to determine whether viewers interpret it as intended. Contextual adaptation and emotional connection are therefore related but analytically distinct variables.

This distinction also sets evidential boundaries. A multilingual website demonstrates expanded linguistic access; broad circulation of elephant imagery demonstrates visibility; a festival award demonstrates professional recognition within a specific evaluative setting; and co-production demonstrates

a change in production relationships. None of these indicators, by itself, establishes stable audience identification. Stronger claims about reception require evidence at the audience level. Methodologically, textual analysis can be combined with overseas ethnography, participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and platform data such as comments, completion rates, sharing paths, and interaction patterns^[8]. These methods make it possible to test whether language adaptation actually reduces comprehension barriers, whether local symbols are read in the intended way, and whether experiential formats produce durable memory rather than short-term attention.

8. Conclusion

The central issue in regional international communication is not the expansion of topics or channels but the fit between communicative practices and specific audience contexts. Language, platform, and content form shape whether information enters everyday media environments; local symbols, embodied experience, and shared production shape whether communication becomes perceivable and relational. Together, these processes form a micro-level pathway from contextual adaptation to possible emotional connection.

The four cases examined here illustrate different mechanisms: Multilingual and platform adaptation in Yunnan's regional media, visually legible local symbols in the elephant migration, aesthetic and embodied translation in Flying Apsaras, and production participation in the China–Myanmar documentary project. Their value lies primarily in identifying communication processes rather than presuming macro-level effects. More reliable research should continue to narrow the unit of analysis to specific audiences, platforms, and content and test the boundaries of these mechanisms through fieldwork, interviews, audience data, and textual analysis.

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