

Original Research Article

Cross-cultural communication of Chinese traditional culture in the perspective of intersemiotic translation: Cultural symbols in Li Ziqi's YouTube videos*Qiaochu Zhao**Department of modern language and culture, Durham University, Durham, UK*

Abstract: This paper examines the cross-cultural communication of traditional Chinese culture through the lens of intersemiotic translation, focusing on the cultural symbols showcased in Li Ziqi's YouTube videos. Li Ziqi, a renowned Chinese video blogger, has garnered international attention for her content that revolves around traditional Chinese rural life, food, folklore, and non-traditional crafts. The study employs Roman Jakobson's theory of intersemiotic translation as a framework to analyze the verbal and non-verbal symbols in Li's videos. By examining the title, synopsis, subtitles, and dialogues in her videos, the paper highlights the use of domestication and foreignization strategies to bridge cultural gaps. Furthermore, it delves into the visual and auditory non-verbal symbols, showcasing how they contribute to the immersive cultural experience for international viewers. The analysis reveals that Li Ziqi's videos effectively utilize a combination of verbal and non-verbal symbols, adopting strategies that reduce cultural misunderstanding while preserving the authenticity of traditional Chinese culture. This study provides insights into the successful cross-cultural dissemination of traditional Chinese culture in the digital age and offers implications for cultural translation and international communication.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication; Intersemiotic translation; Li Ziqi

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese video blogger Li Ziqi has rapidly become popular on the international video social platform YouTube and has received widespread acclaim from netizens. State-run CCTV praised her and stated "Without a word commending China, Li promotes Chinese culture in a good way and tells a good China story."^[1] Journalists have indicated that her videos may be viewed by some as a means of promoting Chinese government soft power^[2]. Li's vlogs focus on traditional Chinese culture and are set in the mountainous village where she lives. The content is about her rural life, involving Chinese food, folklore and non-traditional crafts. According to Nox Influencer, as of July 2021, she has posted 127 videos on YouTube, with over 17.4million subscribers and 29.33million views, ranking first in the 'Top 100 Most Subscribed Youtubers'. It is ranked number one in the "Top 100 Most Subscribed Youtubers in China". Since her last video in July 2021, Li has put her blogger career on hiatus due to a legal dispute with her business partners^[3]. However, her work is still useful for cross-cultural studies of traditional Chinese culture.

In this essay, from the perspective of intersemiotic translation, I try to analyse the cultural symbols shown in Li Ziqi's short video and the translation effect it achieves by combining both translation science and semiotics. In the following I will first explain the theoretical basis of this essay. Then, using Li Ziqi's video as a case study, analyse the verbal and non-verbal symbols in these videos from both semiotic and translation perspectives. To summarise the success factors in achieving cross-cultural communication and dissemination of traditional Chinese culture.

2. Translation theory and intercultural communication

Roman Jakobson's theory of intersemiotic translation linked translation studies to semiotics. In his proposed three-part division of forms of translation, He defined intersemiotic translation (transmutation) is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems^[4]. He divided the forms of translation into three categories: Intralingual translation (rewording), Interlingual translation (translation proper) and Intersemiotic translation (transmutation)^[4]. He argues that the meaning of words and phrases in a language system is both linguistically and semiologically represented. The process of translation, on the other hand, is the equivalence of the information conveyed in one symbolic system to another. And this equivalence involves conversion within the same language system (intralingual translation), conversion between different language systems (interlingual translation) and conversion between linguistic and non-linguistic systems (intersemiotic translation)^[4]. Although the source and target sign systems of the three forms of translation are different, the essence of the translation activity is still grasped in the same way: that it is the equivalence of information. Jakobson's theory of translation makes 'translation as a medium for the production of meaning, as a synonym for understanding'^[5]. The development of digital technology has brought us into the "era of image reading", and in this context the concept of literacy has been extended from the traditional narrow sense of literacy within the linguistic system to a broader sense of multimodal symbolic literacy, i.e. images, music and other elements can also be included in the audio-visual symbol system. Readers need to have the literacy to interpret information using both linguistic and non-linguistic systems. In the face of the proliferation of pictorial symbols in the Internet era, the traditional intralingual and interlingual translations are no longer able to meet the needs of translation in this era^[6]. Interlingual translation, on the other hand, has a broader and more effective application in terms of cultural communication and multidimensional interactive communication"^[6].

Furthermore, "cross-cultural communication is the process of interpersonal interaction between members of societies with different cultural backgrounds, and the flow, sharing, penetration and transfer of information from one culture to another"^[7]. Schleiermacher proposed two approaches to translation for intercultural communication: either to leave the author alone as much as possible and bring the reader closer to the author, or to leave the reader alone as much as possible and bring the author closer to the reader. Later, Venuti expressed these two approaches as domestication and foreignization^[8].

Thus, in the following analysis I will use Roman Jakobson's theory of inter-symbolic translation as a framework to analyse the cultural symbols presented in Li's videos and the strategies of foreignization and domestication used by these cultural symbols in the process of cross-cultural communication, in terms of both verbal and non-verbal symbols.

3. The verbal signs in Li Ziqi's videos

Table 1. Verbal symbols in the short video “A special program on New Year snacks”.

Verbal symbols in the short video “A special program on New Year snacks”	
Title	A special program on New Year snacks 年货小零食特辑 Li Ziqi
Synopsis	<p>Liziqi channel-snacks for Spring Festival 花生瓜子糖葫芦，肉干果脯雪花酥——年货小零食 Another Spring Festival is coming! Candied haws on a stick, fried peanut and seeds, and sweets of all kinds... These were festival treats when we were little. This year we've come up with a special program on New Year snacks for as long as 10 minutes! 又过年喽哈哈哈哈哈！ 冰糖葫芦，炒花生瓜子，各种好吃的糖果... 小时候总是眼巴巴地盼着这些。 今年多加了一个年货小零食新年特辑。 10 分钟呐！</p>
Subtitle	冰糖葫芦、花生芝麻糖、烤板栗、雪花酥、麻辣手撕牛肉干、爆米花、炒瓜子、炒落花生、香酥蛋卷、芒果干
Characters' dialogues	Dialects of Sichuan

In Li's videos, verbal symbols are used less frequently. They are the written language, which includes the title, synopsis, and subtitle's; and the spoken language, which is the characters' dialogues. I will analyse the verbal symbols and cultural expressions in his most-viewed video, “A special program on New Year snacks”, as an example, see **Table 1**. This video is about the production of snacks, with the traditional Chinese festival of Spring Festival in the background.

Firstly, before we start analysing the linguistic symbols in elements such as titles and profiles, the tags “Li Ziqi”, “李子柒” (Li's Chinese name) or “Li Ziqi Channel” are also worth notice, they appeared frequently in Li's YouTube account information and video messages. Li Ziqi's name has also become a cultural symbol in a sense, and it has a double meaning of autonomy and ethnicity. On the one hand, she constructs a personalized lifestyle with her personal narrative; on the other hand, through the promotion of Chinese official media, she is portrayed as a promoter of traditional Chinese culture. We can say, “We can see a community made up of many symbols such as the East, the countryside, food and women though Li Ziqi.”^[9].

In terms of the titles and synopsis section, all the titles and synopses of Li's videos are a combination of Chinese and English translations. In this case there is a difference in interpretation between “New Year” in the title and “Spring Festival” in the synopsis. Similar to the celebration of Christmas in the West, before the Spring Festival the Chinese will prepare many goods to celebrate the festival, such as food (both staples and snacks), which are known as “年货” (New Year goods). Since “年货” is a term specific to the Chinese New Year period, it can be inferred from the word “年货” that this is the traditional Chinese festival “Spring Festival”. The title translates this as “New Year”, which can be seen as a cultural naturalisation. Considering the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, and the lack of understanding of the Chinese lunar calendar and traditional culture such as the traditional Chinese zodiac, the Chinese New Year is translated as “New Year”, considering the common meaning of “the beginning of the year”, thus avoiding the cognitive barrier caused by cultural differences in the cross-cultural process.

The first two lines of the synopsis re-emphasize the title, separately in English translation and in Chinese. These two parts are of the same general meaning, but the Chinese is more specific in its content: “花生瓜子糖葫芦, 肉干果脯雪花酥”, this sentence consists of the names of the snacks, which are listed in the video, while the English translation is summarized by the word “snacks” only. This is also a method of domestication that considers the fallibility of verbal symbols in cross-cultural communication. These snacks are unique to the Chinese New Year period, so their name is also a cultural symbol, as well as “年货”, born from the deep ethnic culture of the traditional Chinese festival culture, with a special national cultural significance. While Chinese audiences who are familiar with national culture can easily identify and understand such verbal and cultural symbols with the names of various snacks and the word “年货”, foreign audiences who lack knowledge of Chinese national culture cannot directly associate the Spring Festival with those words. Therefore, Li’s team used the broader symbol ‘snacks’ to refer to “年货” and the names of the snacks listed in the original text. Moreover, the production of food to celebrate festivals is a common part of various national and ethnic festive cultures, and Li’s team has successfully grasped this commonality, thus simplifying the problem of cultural symbols which is difficult to handle in translation.



Figure 1. “雪花酥” - “sweets of all kinds”.

In addition, the video’s translation of Chinese snacks includes both interlingual and symbolic translations. The videos’ synopsis shows some of the English translations of the snacks, which are presented through linguistic symbols and are interlingual translations: for example, “糖葫芦” - “candied haws on a stick”, “花生瓜子” - “fried peanut and seeds”, “雪花酥” - “sweets of all kinds”, all are not directly translated and use cultural domestication. Meanwhile, Li’s videos mostly use images instead of words, and subtitles rarely appear in the videos, even in Chinese without English translation: In this video, after each snack has been prepared, Li will use a close-up shot to focus on it, and at the same time type the corresponding Chinese subtitles on the screen, using image symbols to translate the language symbols visually and sensitively, see **Figure 1**. In this case, the finished image instead of the English subtitles translation is the way of intersemiotic translation.

In addition to the verbal symbols mentioned above, Li’s videos also contain a special kind of linguistic symbol, that is, character dialogue. The dialogue in the video is in the Sichuan dialect mostly and is not subtitled. It’s often used as a background sound, which is not intended to be understood by the viewer; It’s used here as a means of foreignization - the dialogue has little or no effect on the comprehensibility and logic of the characters’ actions in the video itself, but only serves to create a localised, regional character to the video. Thus, although the viewers cannot understand the conversation between the characters, they can still perceive the strong cultural

flavour of the video's vernacular labour. As one Western viewer commented on YouTube, "I don't understand what they are saying, but it all looks very good".

4. Non-verbal symbols in Li Ziqi's video

Non-verbal symbols can be divided into visual non-verbal symbols, auditory non-verbal symbols and body language^[10]. Li's video makes great use of visual symbols and auditory symbols. The use of non-verbal symbols fully engages the multiple senses of the audience, thus enhancing the infectiousness of the videos.

Li's videos contain several empty shots, which show nature or close-ups of objects. For example, the first image in the video is a close-up of chestnuts in dead leaves, see **Figure 2**. In the scene where Li is picking chestnuts, the camera focuses on natural objects such as animals and plants, blending the characters with nature. These non-verbal symbols represent health, originality, nature and harmony. According to Zhan Yan^[11], the aesthetic of art embodied in language is "serene and contemplative", while the aesthetic of art embodied in images is intuitive in nature. In the former case, one has to keep reminiscing to appreciate the meaning. The latter relies on intuition and seeks the visual impact of the first glance. As the most intuitive symbols in videos, these natural visual symbols are the best expression of the theme of Li's videos. In addition, the various furnishings and objects in the living space are also the focus of the camera. As well as showing life in these shots, some of the images also contain cultural messages. For example, the bamboo table features objects such as narcissus, grapefruit, apples and oranges. Here the camera gives a close-up of the custom in traditional Chinese culture- "Sui Zhao Qing Gong", see **Figure 3**. It refers to the elegant objects that are offered in front of the table at Chinese New Year, capturing and refining the beauty of the Chinese people in their daily labour and production^[12]. The "Sui Zhao Qing Gong" in Li's video also reflects the theme of her video: to record aesthetics and happiness in the ordinary life of rural labour.

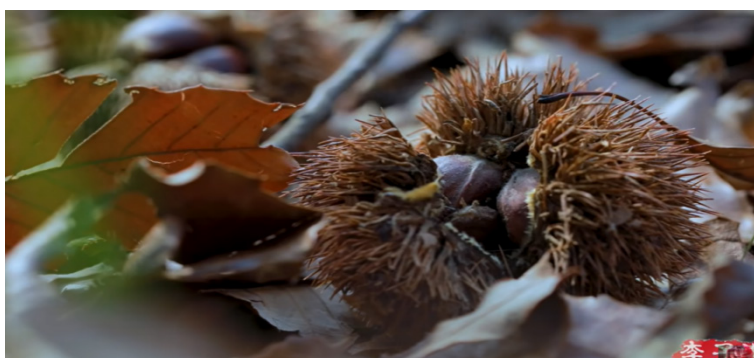


Figure 2. Chestnuts in dead leaves.



Figure 3. "Sui Zhao Qing Gong".



Figure 4. Candy wrappers with the image of a pig.

What's more Li and his grandmother wrapped the nougat together. The candy wrapper is printed with a picture of a pig and a message of blessing, which is also a cultural symbol, see **Figure 4**. The year 2019 is the Lunar Year of the Pig, so the candy wrappers are printed with the image of a pig to express good wishes for the New Year.



Figure 5

There are three characters in the video: Li in an indigo jacket, Grandma in a cotton pants and military cap, and Uncle Popcorn in cotton shoes, see **Figure 5**. The clothing of the characters in the video is also a cultural symbol: the character's clothing, on the other hand, is the first visual impression of the character displayed to the audience, and the clothing shows the character's identity, character, social class and other qualities^[13]. At the beginning of the video, Li is dressed in an indigo cotton jacket and trousers, collecting chestnuts, see **Figure 6**. Indigo is the colour most often used in the characters' clothing in Li's video. In another of her videos, "The life of blue calico dresses hand-dyed by Li Ziqi?" she learns and demonstrates the traditional Sichuan Batik craft of blueprint and personally dyes her own clothing and bedding. The colour indigo has a special cultural significance in Li's video. It reflects Li's imagination when creating the visual symbols of her characters' clothes, and also a record of her deliberate inheritance and promotion of traditional Chinese culture. Furthermore, the figures' cotton garments, trousers, and shoes depict them as labourers, bringing them with traditional ideas about working people, see **Figure 5**. The clothes thus have a practical character as well. In her other videos, she also shows how to make dresses with grape skins and dye clothes with homemade dyes, thus the clothes of the characters in the videos become a unique visual symbol that is functional, artistic and cultural at the same time.



Figure 6. Li Ziqi Li is collecting chestnuts within an indigo cotton jacke.

In addition, auditory symbols, as an assistant symbol, are also involved in the construction of village life in the video. Firstly, the human, natural and process sounds included in the background environment are all stereo and clearly perceptible, bringing the audience closer to the lives of the characters. The sounds of the characters' chatter and laughter, the sounds of the wind blowing leaves, grass and trees rubbing together, and the sound of chickens crowing and dogs barking at sunrise and sunset, enhance the audience's sense of being there. The aural symbols aurally reinforce the viewer's visual impression of the image by reproducing the live sound. Secondly, the soundtrack in the video is all pure music with no vocals and no lyrics, and the music is played with a variety of Chinese classical instruments, with soothing tunes and ethnic characteristics. The soundtrack is a combination of nature sounds and human voices, which together create a picture of country life in which everyone enjoys themselves.

In the non-verbal symbolic expression, the video chooses the strategy of alienation, where the non-verbal symbols in the video are not given any additional treatment, preserving the living scenes and cultural elements of the Chinese working people. Although many unfamiliarised foods, objects, events and dialects will appear, it is these elements that make up the traditional Chinese cultural symbols in the video, allowing foreign viewers to experience Chinese culture in a more comprehensive and immersive way.

5. Conclusion

Today visuals have gradually become the dominant force of the modern senses, and video, as the most direct visual medium, has become the natural carrier of visual culture^[9]. And the distribution impact of its content continues to climb. Cisco has predicted that video will account for 82% of all internet traffic by 2022^[14]. YouTube, as the world's largest social platform for video, has an undeniable influence in international distribution. This context provides the reality for the success of the cross-cultural distribution of Li.

Apart from grasping the opportunities of the era when we communicate traditional culture across cultures, the advantages of Li's videos themselves are also worthy of our consideration:

Li's videos use fewer verbal symbols, reducing the cultural understanding barriers caused by language barriers in cross-cultural communication; At the same time, in order to reduce cultural discounting, domestication strategies are used appropriately in the translation of verbal symbols to help viewers understand, and foreignization methods are used for the translation of specific cultural symbols. The videos use a lot of non-verbal symbols and use the strategy of alienation in the expression of audio-visual symbols to convey symbolic cultural meanings in a pictorial way. Her success offers new ideas for cultural translation, cross-cultural communication and the outreach of Chinese culture.

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