

“Commerce as a Medium”: International Communication Mechanisms and Improvement Paths for Traditional Festival Cultural IP Products—A Case Study of Yiwu’s Festival Supplies Market

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Abstract: The successful UNESCO inscription of the Spring Festival and Yiwu’s role as a sub-venue of the 2026 CCTV Spring Festival Gala have brought more attention to the cultural communication value of Yiwu festival supplies. Based on commodity culture theory, the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Chinese culture, transnational advocacy networks, and intelligent communication studies, this paper examines how traditional festival cultural IP products enter international markets through Yiwu. The study finds that Yiwu first changes cultural symbols into physical products. These products then move through trade networks and are used and interpreted again in overseas consumer settings. Zodiac toys, multilingual New Year decorations, and licensed IP products show younger expression, local translation, and joint development. However, there is still a distance between “products being sold” and “culture being understood.” The main problems are weak explanation of symbols, a short life cycle of popular products, limited local adaptation, and an evaluation system that depends too much on transaction data. This paper therefore gives suggestions on festival cultural resources, public design, overseas cooperation, and communication evaluation.

Keywords: Commerce as a medium; Traditional festival cultural IP; Yiwu festival supplies market; International communication

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1. Introduction

Following the Spring Festival’s UNESCO inscription and Yiwu’s selection as a sub-venue of the 2026 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, Yiwu has gained attention as a place where traditional festival culture meets global trade. Its festival supplies market provides a useful case for examining how cultural symbols enter overseas daily life

through commodity circulation. Local cultural symbols, such as rattle drums, dragon lanterns, and the story of “exchanging chicken feathers for sugar,” appeared together with the trade setting of the Global Digital Trade Center. Yiwu is therefore not only a window for the production and trade of festival cultural products. It is also a practical place for observing how traditional Chinese festival culture enters overseas daily life through commodity circulation.

Previous studies explain this process from different sides. Lou ^[1] discussed the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture and stresses the need to renew both cultural content and forms of expression. Appadurai ^[2] studied the “social life” of commodities in circulation, while McCracken ^[3] explained how consumer goods carry and transfer cultural meanings. In international communication research, Zhang and Su ^[4] used transnational advocacy networks to explain cooperation among governments, companies, social organizations, and individuals. Song and Xu ^[5] noted that communication narratives are moving from broad national stories to daily life, and audiences are changing from receivers into content co-creators. These studies provide a theoretical basis, but there is still room to discuss how physical products connect cultural transformation, trade circulation, and overseas use.

In this paper, traditional Chinese festival cultural IP products are divided into two groups. The first group is developed from public cultural resources, such as zodiac signs and fu culture. The second group combines licensed commercial IP with festival elements. The paper mainly uses popular products from the Yiwu festival supplies market in 2025 and 2026 to analyze the operational mechanism, practical difficulties, and governance paths of “commerce as a medium.” Here, “medium” does not mean a normal sales channel. It refers to a cultural intermediary formed by the physical product, trade relations, and consumer participation.

2. Theoretical basis and analytical framework

2.1. Creative transformation of traditional culture and products as cultural media

“Creative transformation” means explaining traditional cultural content according to the needs of the present time. “Innovative development” means expanding its forms, uses, and social influence in a new environment. Zodiac animals, the character fu, and the idea of reunion can be made into toys, red envelopes, or home decorations. This process should not be a simple copy of symbols. It should give a modern explanation of cultural meanings and continue to renew product forms. Commodity culture theory further shows that a product is not a neutral container. Its meaning changes during design, exchange, use, and further communication. For this reason, research on “commerce as a medium” should not focus only on export volume. It should also examine how cultural meanings are placed in products and enter new social relations through circulation.

In practice, designers often use “symbol distillation.” This means taking a complex cultural idea and making it into a simple, recognizable sign. For example, a snake zodiac image can become a blind box figure. The word fu can become a door sticker or a magnet. Reunion can become a gift box for the family. These forms are easy to see and easy to buy. But the work should not stop at decoration. Good creative transformation explains why the symbol matters. A red packet is not only paper. It carries wishes for luck and family closeness. A zodiac toy is not only cute. It can also tell a small story about the lunar calendar and Chinese seasonal life.

Festival products often meet problems abroad. Chinese culture is “high-context” ^[6,7]. Meanings depend on history, family rules, and ritual habits. If we only translate words, foreign users may not understand the deep sense. They may see the color red or the animal shape, but not the cultural reason. This causes “cultural

discount” and wrong reading. Zhang and Su ^[4] studied festival communication and showed that symbols should be remade for local users. They use four ways: information, symbols, leverage, and accountability. For products, the most useful part is “symbolic politics.” That is, we turn cultural content into things people can join without much language. Dragon boat races, drums, and market activities are examples. A product can do the same. A simple “lucky snake” gift set with pictures, short texts, and reusable items can teach culture with little explanation.

Language service is also important. Zhu ^[8] showed that in Yiwu, many traders use Putonghua, English, Arabic, Russian, Spanish, and French. Good translation needs terminology banks, multilingual websites, and trained staff. If festival product names are wrongly translated, the cultural meaning is lost. For instance, “reunion dinner” or “spring couplet” cannot be explained by a one-word translation. A standard term list and human check can reduce mistakes. In smart communication, AIGC can make multilingual texts fast, but it may also flatten meaning. Song and Xu ^[5] suggested human-machine checking. People should correct AI output so that philosophical ideas such as “harmony” or “heaven-human unity” are not turned into shallow slogans. For a festival product text, a translator or cultural editor should read the AI version before publishing.

Commodity culture theory helps us see the product as a three-layer object. First, it has use value: a cup, a toy, a lantern. Second, it has exchange value: price, market, export. Third, it has cultural value: identity, memory, emotion, and social meaning. McCracken-type and Appadurai-type views are often used here ^[2,3]; both say goods are not dead. Their meaning moves with people. A Jingdezhen cup is not only porcelain. It carries craft skill, local history, and aesthetic taste ^[9]. A Yiwu festival decoration is not just a cheap good. It carries retail speed, cross-border logistics, and small-business service ^[10]. Therefore, “commerce as a medium” means commerce does not only sell. It also carries, changes, and reproduces culture.

The actor network is not only the factory and the buyer. Governments set policies and standards. Enterprises do design and export. Platforms run online shops and recommendations. Diaspora groups, local schools, KOLs, and ordinary users also join. Zhang and Su ^[4] called this kind of cooperation transnational advocacy networks. For products, this means a festival item can start in a design studio, go to a trade fair, be sold by an overseas shop, be shown by a blogger, and then be reused by local consumers. Each step adds meaning. A buyer may use the product for home display. A recipient may use it as a gift. A blogger may use it in a short video. These acts are not “after-sales” only. They are part of cultural communication.

Young users need special attention. Z-generation and Alpha-generation like short videos, games, IP toys, and emotional consumption ^[7]. They do not wait for long explanations. They like things they can touch, photograph, and share. Labubu and other trendy toys show that emotion and identity can travel across borders better than formal texts. Still, we must avoid over-entertainment. If a festival product becomes only “cute” or “funny,” its cultural root may disappear. The safer way is micro-narrative: small stories about one family, one ritual, one object. Song and Xu ^[5] and Wang and Han ^[7] both support small, concrete stories for cross-cultural users. A short video about “how to paste spring couplets” is easier to accept than a long lecture about Chinese New Year.

2.2. Cross-domain flow, reproduction of meaning, and transnational advocacy networks

Cross-cultural communication does not move a fixed meaning overseas without change. Culture develops new explanations and mixed forms through cross-domain contact, media interaction, and user re-creation. Misunderstanding may weaken the communication effect of festival culture. The international communication

of festivals does not depend only on governments and cultural institutions. Companies, platforms, overseas communities, and individuals also form transnational networks. They reduce communication barriers through information, symbols, cooperation, and feedback. Overseas consumers therefore do more than buy festival goods. Their gifting, comments, and recreation are important parts of the reproduction of meaning.

Chinese festival culture does not move abroad as a fixed text. It changes when it meets other languages, platforms, local festivals, and foreign users. This process is called cross-domain flow. “Domain” here means not only countries. It also means trade, media, education, diaspora communities, and policy channels. When a cultural symbol moves from one domain to another, its meaning is not simply copied. It is read, shortened, combined, and sometimes rebuilt.

Peng ^[6] argued that international communication is essentially meaning reproduction in cross-domain contact. Chinese culture is high-context: meanings depend on history, family norms, ritual memory, and shared symbols. When these meanings go to low-context or unfamiliar contexts, foreign users may catch only the outer form—color, animal, decoration—but miss the inner reason. This is cultural discount. It does not mean the symbol fails completely. It means the original meaning loses some parts and gains new parts through local use. A useful way to study this is the hybrid meaning loop. First, a cultural idea such as reunion, zodiac, or fu enters a new domain. Second, local actors rename, reshape, or reuse it. Third, users give feedback through purchase, gifts, comments, or re-creation. Fourth, this feedback returns to designers, exporters, and cultural institutions. The return is similar to the “boomerang” noted in advocacy-network studies. The loop shows that meaning is never finished. A Spring Festival product may start as a lucky symbol in China, become a gift item in Europe, and later be used in a local store display or a school activity. Each step adds a new layer.

Transnational advocacy networks (TANs) give structure to this loop. Zhang and Su ^[4] used TANs for Chinese festival communication and propose four strategies: information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability. In the framework, these four strategies explain how commerce, media, and policy work together. For example, Yiwu’s Christmas supplies go to over 100 countries and cover a very large share of the global market. The same distribution channel, buyer relationship, and sample system can also carry Chinese New Year items, lanterns, or gift sets. In TAN terms, actors agree on goals and report results. For festival communication, this can be done through export categories, event records, platform data, and partner feedback. A cultural office, an exporter, and a local community group can set simple targets: how many products, which symbols, what user activities, and what correction is needed next season. This turns “cultural promotion” into a manageable workflow instead of a vague slogan.

Jingdezhen ceramics show a similar network with a different emphasis. Liu ^[9] showed that government, enterprises, and artists work together to sell ceramics through exhibitions, e-commerce, and tourism. The product moves from local craft to a global aesthetic object. The meaning is reproduced not only by the cup or vase, but by the exhibition text, the buyer’s story, and the overseas user’s photo. This is cross-domain flow: craft, trade, media, and local culture act together. Young users add another reproduction layer. Wang and Han ^[7] showed that Gen Z and Alpha prefer emotional and identity-based formats: IP toys, short videos, games, and shareable objects. In a TAN framework, young users are not the last receivers. They are co-producers. They unbox products, make clips, compare symbols, and invite friends. Their comments become feedback for the next export season. This feedback should be collected, not ignored.

2.3. The “symbol–product–network–scene” framework

Based on the above theories, this paper develops the “symbol–product–network–scene” framework shown in Figure 1.

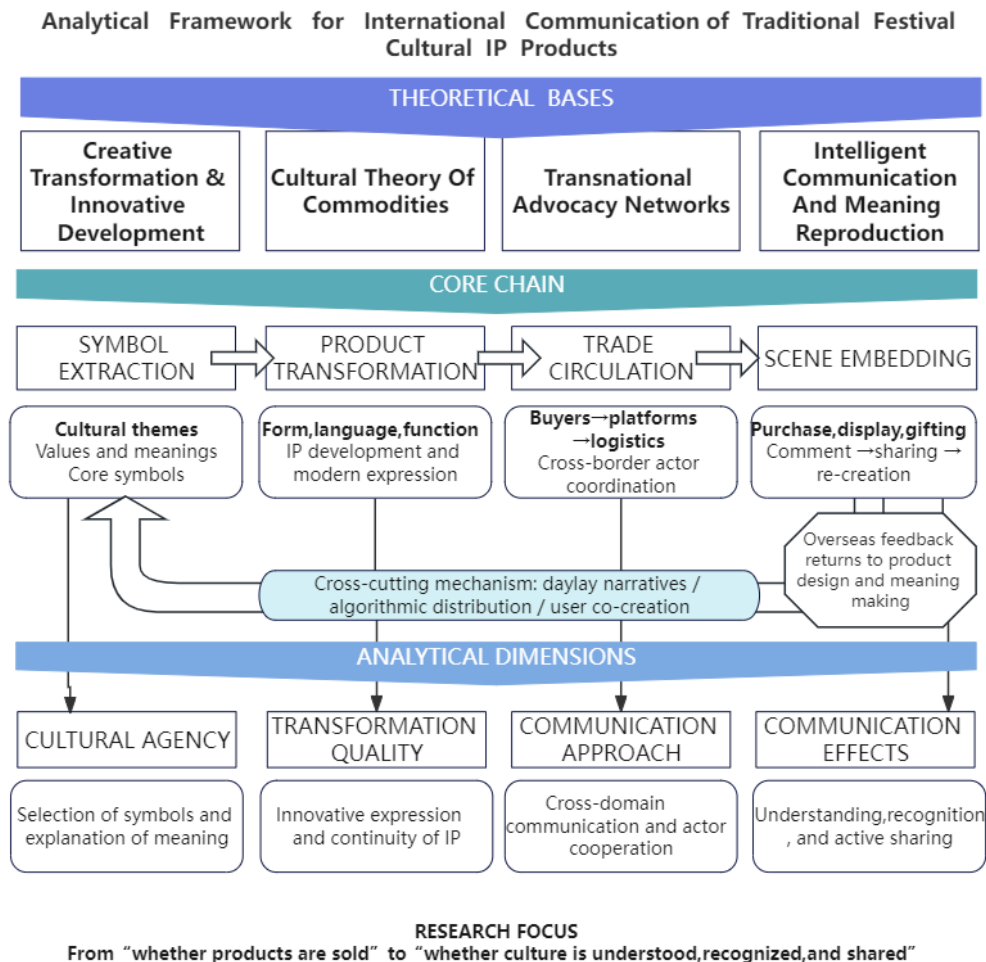


Figure 1. Analytical framework for the international communication of traditional festival cultural IP products

The four parts of the framework are not a one-way line. Cultural themes move across regions through product design and trade networks. Overseas consumers then rebuild meanings through purchase, use, and sharing, and their feedback may affect later symbol selection and product development. Everyday narratives, algorithmic distribution, and user co-creation run through the whole process. The framework therefore helps distinguish “product reach” from “cultural recognition.”

3. Development and communication mechanisms of Yiwu festival cultural IP products

3.1. Industrial clustering supports the large-scale flow of cultural symbols

Yiwu is both an export window and a domestic wholesale center. It has formed a global distribution capacity for festival goods and a supply chain connecting design, production, purchasing, logistics, and cross-border

e-commerce. Cultural meanings enter new social relations together with trade and use. During purchasing, transport, and consumption, products keep entering new networks. This process supports the view that cultural meanings gain a new “social life” as objects move.

In 2026, the “Crying Horse” became popular after a Yiwu seller mistakenly sewed a toy with a sad face. Social media users gave it meanings such as “accepting imperfection” and “an emotional outlet for workers.” The seller then quickly expanded production and introduced a “Smiling Horse + Crying Horse” set. The case changed the zodiac horse from a fixed lucky symbol of success into a character that carries personal emotions. It shows a modern expression of a traditional symbol. Online naming, jokes, and sharing also changed audiences into content co-creators. However, its character story, visual rules, rights ownership, and operation across zodiac years are not stable. It is more suitable to call it a popular zodiac cultural product than a mature IP.

3.2. Trade networks support cultural translation and scene embedding

For Southeast Asian markets, multilingual couplets, lanterns, and fu decorations use Malay, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Thai. Licensed “My Little Pony + Spring Festival” products combine commercial IP with square New Year decorations, red envelopes, and lucky phrases. These practices show that Yiwu’s communication mechanism has moved from turning symbols into objects to market adaptation. However, real cross-cultural translation still requires feedback from overseas buyers, local communities, and ordinary consumers. Products need to be used in families, schools, communities, and shopping malls. Only when they enter real settings and cause explanation, interaction, and re-creation can cross-border sales become a reproduction of cultural meaning.

Against this backdrop, Yiwu’s small commodity producers and trade operators have gradually adjusted their cross-cultural operation strategies. They have shifted from one-way output of Chinese festive cultural symbols to two-way interactive co-construction of cultural meaning. The traditional production model only relies on experience to design Chinese-style festive products. Unlike this model, current market players increasingly add local cultural needs and aesthetic preferences to the early product development stage. They collect feedback from local distributors and consumers through online communication platforms and offline trade fairs. Then they optimize product design, wording, and shape matching in time. This adjustment has two main effects. First, it helps improve the market acceptance of Chinese Spring Festival-related products in Southeast Asia and other overseas markets. Second, it promotes the soft spread of Chinese traditional culture in the process of daily commodity circulation. At the same time, this interactive model also brings new possibilities for the integration of different cultures. It lays a practical foundation for exploring more sustainable cross-cultural communication paths through global commodity trade. The following sections will systematically sort out the specific operational logic of this cross-cultural communication path based on field investigation data of Yiwu’s festive commodity industry. They will also discuss its theoretical inspiration for the study of contemporary cultural communication.

4. Main problems in international communication

First, symbol visibility does not match cultural explanation. The color red, zodiac animals, the character fu, the God of Wealth, and gold ingots are easy to recognize in Spring Festival products. However, the Spring Festival is not only about family reunion. It also contains ideas of leaving the old year, welcoming the new year, seeking blessings, and remembering ancestors. Western audiences may only see it as an “Eastern New Year celebration”

with large gatherings, fireworks, and holiday travel. It is more difficult for them to understand the related social values and cultural symbols. Cultural discount, misunderstanding, and the simple collection of traditional symbols all show that cross-border circulation does not directly produce cultural understanding.

Second, there is a gap between a popular product and a long-term IP. Yiwu sellers are good at following zodiac cycles and online trends, but product development may remain at the level of shape imitation and single-item sales. The bargaining power of simple processing is also falling. Competition now depends more on product innovation, adaptation to use settings, brand operation, and fast response between production and sales. Compared with the continuous development of the “Zodiac Museum” series, many sellers still follow only the zodiac animal or online trend of the year. Without clear rights, story accumulation, and operation across several years, sales are difficult to turn into cultural assets.

Third, cross-cultural adaptation still mainly means changing the language. Traditional Chinese festivals are part of a high-context culture. Their meanings depend on historical memory, social relations, and specific customs, so mechanical translation can cause a loss of meaning. Existing products mainly serve overseas Chinese communities. Research on the aesthetic habits, religious restrictions, family spaces, and use practices of non-Chinese consumers is limited. At the same time, too much localization may weaken the cultural identity of the festival.

Fourth, communication and evaluation pay more attention to transactions than understanding. Sales channels have expanded from wholesale markets to trade fairs, live streaming, independent cross-border websites, and community group buying. Evaluation still focuses on sales, orders, and page views. Platforms prefer short and highly interactive content. This makes it easy to treat product arrival as cultural understanding and ignore audience interpretation, recognition, and sharing.

5. Improvement paths for international communication through commerce

5.1. Improving public design services and popular IP incubation

Existing intellectual property services can support a chain of market discovery, design improvement, fast rights confirmation, content development, and cross-border operation. Popular images should receive timely advice on trademarks, copyright, design rights, and overseas rights. Universities and design institutions can help improve character settings, visual rules, stories, and product series. Design vouchers, sampling support, and joint licensing can reduce the cost for small and medium-sized sellers. The purpose is to change a tradable product into an IP asset with stable cultural meaning and a longer social life.

5.2. Forming a “product + content + scene” micro-narrative system

Packaging and cross-border e-commerce pages can provide short festival stories in several languages. QR codes can connect users with videos, explanations of symbols, and display guides. Overseas schools, communities, and shopping malls can also offer festival activities. The Yiwu sub-venue of the 2026 Spring Festival Gala can become a resource for city narratives. It can connect the trade tradition of “exchanging chicken feathers for sugar” with the market network and the stories of ordinary sellers. Compared with abstract publicity, specific people, family use, and community interaction are more suitable for micro-narratives and user co-creation.

5.3. Building an evaluation system from commercial reach to cultural recognition

Evaluation should not stop at export value, order quantity, and page views. It can follow five stages: reach,

participation, understanding, recognition, and sharing. Useful indicators include visits to multilingual content, emotions in comments, correct explanation of symbols, participation in offline activities, user-created content, and repeat purchase. This approach is close to the multi-dimensional evaluation proposed in intelligent communication research, including reach, participation, emotional tendency, cognitive change, and behavioral intention. It helps judge whether “products being sold” have really led to “culture being understood.”

6. Conclusion

“Commerce as a medium” does not mean replacing cultural communication with trade. It uses the physical form of products, the connections of market networks, and consumer participation to support the explanation and reproduction of festival culture across regions. The Yiwu sub-venue of the Spring Festival Gala and the popularity of the “Crying Horse” offer new communication opportunities. They also show that there is still a distance between a popular product, online traffic, and a mature IP. The local government and Yiwu market need to include creative transformation and innovative development, multi-actor cooperation, cross-cultural translation, and effect evaluation in one governance chain. Only then can Yiwu develop from the “World Supermarket” into a more sustainable international communication center for festival culture.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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