

Intercultural Communication of Chaoshan Diaspora Culture on New Media: A Case Study of Qiaopi

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Abstract: As a significant cultural legacy of Chinese immigrants, Qiaopi holds historical memories, kinship ethics, and transnational emotional ties of the Chaoshan diaspora. While new media platforms offer fresh avenues for overseas dissemination, Qiaopi still faces prominent cultural discount due to cross-cultural barriers. Existing research remains confined to historical documentation and archival preservation, with limited systematic analysis of its cross-cultural communication mechanisms. Drawing on Cultural Discount Theory and the encoding-decoding model, this qualitative study identifies three discount dimensions: symbolic, narrative, and channel discount. The core challenge lies in the mismatch between communicators' localized encoding and overseas audiences' decoding logic. History-oriented content fails to generate cross-cultural emotional resonance. This paper develops an analytical framework for Qiaopi's international communication and proposes audience-oriented strategies to mitigate cultural discount. It also offers insights for future research on overseas Chinese heritage dissemination.

Keywords: Qiaopi; Chaoshan Diaspora culture; Cultural discount; Encoding-decoding; Cross-cultural communication; Cultural heritage communication

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1. Introduction

International migration has been a pivotal feature of the contemporary era, with the Chaoshan diaspora standing as one of the world's major migratory movements. Qiaopi, a dual-purpose medium functioning both as family letters and remittance receipts, circulated across extensive networks for more than 150 years. It carries not only remittances but also emotional ties of news, filial piety, and longing. In recent years, new media technologies, such as social media, VR, short videos, and AI, have transformed diaspora heritage communication across borders. Today, Qiaopi has become a core cultural symbol of Chaoshan heritage. Its archives record the observations, thoughts, and actions of overseas Chinese under diverse social contexts,

offering rich material for constructing a complete collective memory of both overseas Chinese and their ancestral homeland ^[1]. However, the overseas communication of Chaoshan Qiaopi culture through new media is confronted with noticeable cultural discount issues, including obscure local cultural symbols, excessive localization of communication narratives, and high cognitive gaps between cross-cultural audiences. Meanwhile, existing studies often suffer from disciplinary narrowness, insufficient theoretical application, and a lack of targeted new media optimization strategies. Therefore, based on Cultural Discount Theory and the encoding–decoding framework, this paper systematically analyzes the pain points, root causes, and strategies for optimizing the cross-cultural dissemination of Qiaopi culture in the new media age.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural discount theory

Cultural discount theory, initially put forward by Hoskins and Mirus (1988) in the context of audiovisual trade, posits that cultural products suffer value depreciation when crossing cultural borders due to disparities in language, values, beliefs, and lifestyles ^[2]. From a communication perspective, scholars have further decomposed the discount phenomenon into three interrelated sources of loss: encoding losses during textual compilation, transmission losses during channel dissemination, and decoding losses during audience reception ^[3]. The theory has gradually migrated from economics into the research field of cross-cultural communication. In more recent years, scholars have begun applying it to intangible cultural heritage and regional cultural dissemination. Its relevance to Qiaopi research lies in Qiaopi's nature as a highly localized, high-context carrier of Chaoshan Diaspora culture. It features exclusive symbols such as the Chaoshan dialect, family ethics, remittance institutions, and the history of migrants, which remain largely unfamiliar to external audiences ^[4]. Mao Zhanwen and Chen Junliang further note that the moral narratives found in Qiaopi materials, including kinship bonds, justice, proxy letter-writing, and delayed mail delivery, bring about implicit cultural discount effects. These Eastern family-centered values clash with the individualism prevalent in Western societies, forming the chief obstacle to foreign audiences' development of deeper emotional resonance ^[5]. A tripartite analytical framework (encoding/transmission/decoding) offers a systematic diagnostic tool for identifying exactly where and why cultural meaning breaks down, making it indispensable for investigating Qiaopi's cross-cultural communication by means of new media.

2.2. New media and overseas communication of local Chinese culture

Scholarship on the new-media transmission of local Chinese culture has recognized various digital routes, including resource databases, digital cultural products, and multi-platform distribution. Social media, Zhang Huanping argues, transforms the “dual absence” of overseas Chinese migrants into a form of “co-presence” ^[6]. For short-video platforms, their real-time interactions and low-threshold operations help reshape the communication landscape of intangible heritage and enable breakthroughs in terms of aesthetic experience and emotional involvement ^[7]. But it also introduces communication losses through digital adaptation — algorithms favor visually striking, highly interactive content that pushes cultural narratives towards superficiality and homogenization ^[8]. On top of that, most existing research is still centered on domestic communication ecology, with relatively little attention paid to overseas reception effects and the cross-cultural reception mechanisms of local Chinese cultures in digital environments.

2.3. Qiaopi culture research

The existing research on Qiaopi has predominantly evolved through three academic domains: history, sociology, and archival science. Prior studies have historically centered on economic institutions, social structures, and archival organization ^[9]. Deng and Qiu classify the literature into four themes: concept and connotation, collection and preservation, architectural heritage, and multi-faceted value research. While recent studies have begun exploring Qiaopi's digital transformation and new-media promotion strategies, the vast majority remains confined to historical documentation and local cultural preservation. Research on its content and the social-historical conditions it shows is still insufficient and needs further in-depth study ^[10].

2.4. Summary of research limitations

A review of available studies points to one noticeable gap within current-day research. Although the theory of cultural discount has been used to examine regional cultural dissemination and abundant work has covered new-media approaches for local heritage, none of the existing studies has systematically studied Qiaopi's cross-cultural communication via new media from the perspective of cultural discount. Specifically, few studies have explored three key communication deficiencies in Qiaopi research. These encompass encoding losses tied to its dialect and symbolic system, transmission losses due to algorithmic curation, and decoding losses from non-Chaoshan foreign audiences. This paper fills this research gap through cultural discount theory to analyze Qiaopi's new media overseas communication chain. It clarifies the specific mechanism of value depreciation throughout the encoding-transmission-decoding chain, and puts forward targeted strategies for optimization.

3. Theoretical framework and methodology

3.1. Integrated theoretical framework

3.1.1. Core theory: Cultural discount theory

This study employs cultural discount theory as its main analysis method to thoroughly recognize and describe various types of cultural losses in Qiaopi's foreign communications via new-media channels, as well as to examine how they form and what their main features are. It provides a full analysis of the entire research, responding to three core research questions: the appearance of cultural discount loss, the development process of cultural loss, and enhancement measures for reducing loss. Thus, the theoretical underpinning is established for subsequent empirical investigation.

3.1.2. Auxiliary analysis tool: Encoding–decoding model

While the cultural discount theory can effectively identify both the representation and extent of value loss, it offers little insight into the actual inner mechanisms. Namely, the ways communicators encode their messages, how audiences decode that content, and the sources of misinterpretation arising between both sides. In order to tackle these questions, the paper introduces Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model as an auxiliary analytical model. This model states that cultural communication is not just a straight line. Communicators embed messages shaped by their own cultural contexts, while receivers interpret those messages through their own social-cultural lenses. Divergences between encoding practices and decoding behaviors emerge from this gap, which in turn leads to the erosion of the intended original meaning. This model has been widely applied to explain communication obstacles within cultural products because of the

mismatch between encoding–decoding processes. It functions like a magnifying glass, aiding us in better understanding why there is cultural discount, rather than being an independent theoretical framework. On the one hand, the cultural discount theory addresses the question of what gets lost. On the other hand, the encoding–decoding model gives an answer to how this loss happens. These two theories complement each other in both aspects: knowing what is being lost and also the cause of the loss, which together provide a solid foundation for this article.

3.2. Research approach

The study utilizes a qualitative research paradigm, incorporating case studies as well as literature reviews. Selected cases involve three distinct forms of new media communication: pictures and texts, short videos, and foreign social platforms content. Historical Qiaopi documents also form part of the materials examined within this research. The case selection methodology covers two types of samples — one is the new media dissemination technique of Qiaopi Letters aimed at a domestic audience; the other refers to international communications directed towards overseas Chaozhou-Chaoshan immigrants and audiences outside this native cultural circle. In this way, this approach covers every phase in the intercultural communication process.

3.3. Analytical procedures

The following is an account of the analytical procedure employed in this study. (1) Carry out systematic arrangement and organization of Qiaopi culture’s real-life communication methods used by new media. (2) Identify cultural discount displays based on different cultural communications, utilizing a three-level loss framework from cultural discount theory. (3) Use the encoding–decoding model to identify fundamental reasons for generating discounts and specific mismatch points during the process from encoding to decoding. (4) Drawing upon the discovered categories and causes of losses, improving international dissemination strategies for the promotion of Qiaopi culture under the new-media context.

4. Research findings and analysis

4.1. Specific manifestations of cultural discount in Qiaopi’s new media overseas communication

4.1.1. Symbolic discount

The red envelopes, which refer to the outer covers of Qiaopi, symbolize auspiciousness, joy, and peace, while those printed with landscapes, flowers, and birds incorporate traditional Chinese motifs including bamboo, sparrows, and auspicious clouds. Besides, the words in the inner letters also carry profound clan ethics, including greetings like “Respected Mother” and “May my parents enjoy every blessing and good fortune.” Meanwhile, remittance instructions like “three silver dollars for household use” manifest Confucian filial piety and local ethical values. Yet this symbolic system lacks cognitive foundation among overseas audiences beyond the Chaoshan diaspora. According to the Shantou Qiaopi Archives Museum, Qiaopi was largely unknown to the general public when it was included in the UNESCO Memory of the World Registry. Qiaopi, translated by Western scholars as “Overseas Chinese Remittance Letters,” is literally correct yet incomplete. It fails to reflect the profound emotions contained in both letters and remittances. Symbolic split leads to the loss of value in cross-cultural communication. When auspicious patterns are treated merely as decorative elements, when filial ethics turn into casual greetings, Qiaopi’s cultural memories cannot reach audiences

from different cultures.

4.1.2. Narrative discount

Current new media Qiaopi stories are mostly derived from history books and localized geographic networks, which results in prominent cognitive gaps among overseas people. Many short videos employ a panoramic documentary style listing of archival facts that miss personalized viewpoints and emotional access points. Research on the cross-cultural communication of intangible cultural heritage indicates that effective narrative transmission requires the integration of human universal values like family relationships, persistence, and nostalgia into the narration. But existing Qiaopi narratives mostly focus on genealogical records, remittance accounts, and post history, which cherish historical truth more than emotion. Dull expressive methods further aggravate narrative discounts—“document plus emotional reflection” format becomes clichéd, without exploring diverse stories such as documentaries, interactive stories, and character-centered stories. As a result, the hardships endured by migrants, the family’s anxious anticipation, and the wordless love embedded within each Qiaopi letter cannot be fully conveyed. Such genuine stories are difficult for foreign audiences to comprehend and also fail to strike an emotional chord among young overseas Chinese groups.

4.1.3. Channel discount

Qiaopi’s overseas new-media dissemination suffers secondary-order discount at the channel level. Firstly, overseas dissemination mainly depends on a small number of major platforms like YouTube and TikTok, but adaptations on vertical and regional platforms remain superficial, which results in a narrow audience reach ^[11]. Secondly, current platform adaptation strategies only stay at a superficial level. Many practices merely translate titles or alter video lengths without adapting content according to the algorithmic logic or characteristics of audiences of each platform. Research suggests that cultural discount is no longer an obstacle standing in the way of mutual understanding between individuals. Instead, it has evolved into a loss caused by structures such as platforms and algorithms. Different platforms have different mechanisms for operations: YouTube favors traffic generation for specific content, TikTok prioritizes algorithmic recommendation, and Facebook focuses on social connections. If context-specific Qiaopi cannot be adapted for different platforms, then it will hardly enter recommendation feeds and yield sub-optimal communication performance. Such shallow adaptation brings about a “secondary discount” — where the cultural content loses part of its value when moving from one culture to another, and after encountering setbacks again due to mismatches with platforms, it finds it difficult to reach an overseas audience.

4.2. Internal causes of Qiaopi’s cultural discount: Based on encoding–decoding mismatch

Communicators from the Chaoshan area portray Qiaopi culture with local color and focus on conveying their family’s ethical values and local history. Yet overseas audiences, including overseas foreigners or the new generation overseas Chinese, lack corresponding background knowledge. Thus, misinterpretation, shallow understanding, and opposite interpretation may occur when they encounter this type of information. It can therefore be seen that the discrepancy existing between encoding and decoding procedures constitutes the major force that generates Qiaopi’s culturally-discounted communication in cross-cultural communication processes.

4.3. Comprehensive summary of cultural discount mechanism

The rigid local encoding method, monotonous new-media dissemination patterns, and cross-cultural cognitive gaps among overseas audiences lead to cultural discount in Qiaopi cross-cultural communication. Under these constraints, Qiaopi culture ends up in a communication dilemma of “efficient circulation within cultural circles yet severe discount in cross-cultural contexts.”

5. Discussion

5.1. Key findings and optimization paths of Qiaopi’s cross-cultural communication

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes three guiding principles: maintaining cultural core while broadening universal principles, tailoring new-media stories for international understanding, and targeting communication for diaspora and general foreign audiences. Accordingly, three optimization paths are outlined. First, tell stories with emotions that resonate, such as family bonds, perseverance, and patriotism. The Chaoshan dialect film *Dear You* takes Qiaopi as its narrative letter. Through a story of overseas migration spanning half a century, it transforms faded letters into a medium of profound ethical values and emotional resonance. Here, Qiaopi functions as an emotionally charged symbol with historical depth, achieving broad affective resonance in a global context through narrative reconstruction^[12]. Second, create lightweight, scenario-oriented content to facilitate comprehension among overseas audiences. “Lightweight communication” boasts the advantages of conciseness, high efficiency, and strong interactivity^[13]. For instance, short-video productions do not open with introductions to the Memory of the World heritage and the remittance-letter system. Instead, they may start with a line such as “Do not worry. I am safe.” from a yellowed family letter, telling the intimate story of a Chaoshan migrant who traveled across the ocean to make a living in Southeast Asia and sent money and messages home to reassure his family. This can effectively enable Qiaopi stories to be well told, widely spread, and internationally recognized in a gentler and more penetrating way. Third, personalize content according to different audiences. Make a distinction between the overseas audience that is familiar with the culture and other foreign audience groups. As Henry Jenkins argued, ideal transmedia storytelling will have each medium using its own strong points^[14]. Some audiences are used to fragmented watching, while others prefer to learn thoroughly. Fragmented communication scenarios depend on algorithmic recommendations in order to reach general foreign audiences via visual symbols. On the contrary, in-depth situations adopt systematic narratives to turn curiosity into a lasting sense of cultural identity within the diaspora audiences.

5.2. Implications about the present communication misunderstandings

Finally, this study reflects on a significant misunderstanding in current practice, which is that domestic content could be sent directly to overseas markets without cognitive adjustment. This fallacy treats cross-cultural communication merely as a one-way broadcast rather than an interactive exchange, and this very bias keeps generating persistent cultural-discount effects. Rectifying this misconception shifts the core assignment away from plain translation and toward deliberate re-encoding for broader audience groups. Taken together, outcomes shift from diagnosis to intervention, yielding both theoretical insights and practical insight into Qiaopi’s digital international communication.

6. Conclusion

Drawing on cultural discount theory, this paper discusses how Chaoshan Qiaopi culture communicates across different cultures through new media. This study adopts three frameworks such as the encoding framework, transmission framework, and decoding framework to detect the presence of three types of cultural discounts in Qiaopi's intercultural interaction: Symbolic discount, Narrative discount, and channel discount. It verifies that the encoding-decoding gap stemming from Chaoshan-specific encoding and the cultural distance between local content and overseas audiences is the core internal mechanism behind communication loss. Theoretically, it expands the domain of cultural discount theory from traditional audiovisual trade to digital heritage communication and presents an analytical framework for identifying cultural value discount of locally meaningful content. Practically, it provides four improvement paths, which include creating a multi-platform setting, redeveloping emotion-oriented storytelling, adopting lightweight and context-adaptive encoding, and delivering targeted audience communications. It shifts the research focus from problem diagnosis to strategic intervention, providing operational practical guidelines for the international communication of Qiaopi culture in the contemporary digital landscape.

Nevertheless, this study draws only on Qiaopi as a single-case sample. It has not conducted extensive empirical research on overseas reception through qualitative analysis. For future research, this framework can be extended to other cultural carriers for comparative studies in the hometown of Qiaoxiang, such as Teochew Opera and Chao Embroidery. Quantitative approaches including audience surveys and content analysis may be deployed to precisely quantify the extent of cultural discount, which in turn can refine the communication strategies for China's regional-specific culture within the global digital ecosystem.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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