

Relevance Theory-based Cognitive Study on the Communication Effect of “China’s Stories”

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Abstract: Telling the story of China and transmitting the voice of China has become a strategy to promote the national image and cultural soft power of China. Since its implementation in 2013, China has ushered in a significant change in communication ideas and approaches. This strategy also enriches the communication genres of “China’s stories” and more importantly enhances its communication effect. In this context, it is necessary to understand and study the significance of this strategic practice, assess the value realization of “China’s stories” during the communication process, and thereby establish a basis for future communication of more “China’s stories.” Based on the factors of relevance theory, this paper analyzes the ideas of and approaches to effective communication of “China’s stories” and proposes corresponding strategies.

Keywords: relevance theory; China’s stories; communication effect; cognitive study

Since China explicitly advocated telling the story of China and transmitting the voice of China, telling the story of China has been a key strategy concerning the promotion of national image and the display of our cultural soft power. With the introduction of this strategy, China has generated new ideas and concepts of cultural communication and national image showcasing.

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1. Practical strategy and theoretic cognition concerning the “China’s stories” communication

Telling “China’s stories” requires a shift of thinking about China’s image promotion. It also concerns the performance of relevant communication approaches and cognitive process. Ever since the proposal of telling the story of China and transmitting the voice of China, significant changes have taken place in promoting China’s stories abroad. To be specific, China has taken the initiative to seek more proactive “bringing-in” and “going-out” measures and approaches in a bid to maximize the communication effect of “China’s stories.” For example, right before the 2016 G20 Hangzhou Summit, New York-headquartered CNBC produced a series of advertisements to be aired during the Summit. According to the official website of the *Financial Times*, the video advertisements unfolded China’s exciting natural sceneries and urban skylines, alternated with slogans such as “innovation,” “greener energy in 2030” and the “13th Five-year Plan.” According to relevant overseas reports, the UK’s Mail Online (*Daily Mail’s* online version) and China’s *People’s Daily* have reached an agreement on content sharing. Telegraph Media Group, among many Western presses and media outlets, have also concluded similar agreements with China over the publishing of articles contributed by journalists of *China Daily*, the Chinese government-backed English newspaper. As pointed out by an online article of the *New York Times*, both the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* have locally launched “China Observation”—a special column with articles contributed by *China Daily*. According to the Interpreter, a website operated by Australia-based Lowy Institute, six cooperation agreements were created between China and Australia this May. Some analysts thus believe China

is striving to get closer to the Western audience in order to successfully tell the story of China and introduce the country to the rest of the world.

So far, “China’s stories” already told have been well received by the international community, where China’s innovative approaches to the transmission of the novel “voice of China” are recognized and believed to be conducive to the enhancement of China’s “soft power.” American scholar Michael Barr(2013) argued in his book *Who’s Afraid of China? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power* that the rise of China is not just an economic event but also a cultural one, which concerns identity issues. In an article contributed to the *New York Times*, Joseph Nye holds that “soft power” depends on whose story wins (not on whose army wins). China is working hard on telling its own story to the rest of the world. By adopting popular and trendy transmission forms such as online video clips and rap songs, cooperating with foreign media and taking advice from international PR firms, China is trying every possible means to approach the Western audience. And this can be exemplified by the broadcasting of a publicity video intended to promote China’s national image at Time Square, New York; the production of China-themed advertisements by foreign TV studios; and the publication of Chinese journalists’ articles by foreign media. According to the “Face of Beijing,” an article published in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, it is of great importance for Beijing to actively build a positive image abroad. In short, the Chinese media is striving to forge a positive image of China, which is courageous enough to express its own global views in different areas and carry forward its fine traditions while opening up to the outside world(Zhang, 2016).

It is still too early to conclude whether this telling “China’s stories” campaign can achieve its target, improve the national image of China and enhance its cultural soft power. According to China

National Image Global Survey 2015, released by CIPG's Center for International Communication Studies, China's overall image score in 2015 increased by 0.3 points compared with that of 2014 (full score: 10 points). China left a better impression on the community of developing countries (6.9 points) than that of developed countries (5.5 points). It is noteworthy that compared with the older-age group, the overseas younger generation (aged 18-35) knew more about China, had a better impression of China, and were more optimistic about China's development prospects.

At present, regarding telling "China's stories," domestic academic circles mainly focus on three aspects; the content, the approaches, and the target to be achieved.

First, the significance of telling "China's stories" concerns its content, which is a primary issue. How to correctly convey the "story" to a foreign audience from a different cultural background and enable them to truly understand and recognize the story is a fundamental issue that must be skillfully addressed. Only by integrating the story's connotation and denotation into an organic whole can China expect to develop a connected environment in which "it can seek common ground while reserving differences" with "story receivers." In the essay "Major Challenges Facing 'China's Story Tellers' and Corresponding Solutions" published in *Socialism Studies*, Xu Zhanchen (2014) argued that "delivering the tellers' desired performance involves a complicated scientific and artistic process of cross-cultural communication." In the essay "Building a National Image: Telling the Story of China to the Rest of the World" published in *China Education Daily*, Chen Rudong (2012) classified national image promotion into two types, entity communication and media symbol communication, holding that "advertising a country is nothing more than a form of national symbol communication" and that

"national image promotion relies primarily on entity communication and is supplemented with symbol communication."

Second, telling "China's stories" concerns both methodology and concept. Telling "China's stories" falls into a cross-cultural communication category. Therefore, it must face up to the fact that value differences, resulting from varied cultures, deliver an inevitable impact on people's cognition and acceptance of new information. Cheng Manli (2012) argued in her article "Transmitting the Voice of China and Promoting Chinese Culture" that "In the discourse system of the Western world, misunderstanding and bias are prevalent in Western media reports on China, creating a public opinion environment to the disadvantage of transmitting the voice of China and promoting Chinese culture." Shi Anbin (2016) proposed the concept of "strategic narration" in his essay "Study of Re-constructing the Approach to International Communication Improvement", stressing the important role of "strategic narration" in meaning construction and agenda setting of international economic and political affairs. Su Renxian (2016) argued in his essay "On the Choice of Telling 'China's story' Approaches" that it is of great importance to select "right" stories of China which enable mutual understanding and inclusive acceptance of different cultural entities, or political systems. According to Ye Zhimei's essay, "A Tentative Analysis of How to Tell the Story of China to Overseas Audience", China should strive to balance its relations with the rest of the world, prioritize its own development cause and work hard on adapting the "story of China" to a global context.

Third, achieving the target of telling "China's stories" requires the story tellers' unilateral efforts and more importantly, bilateral coordination between story tellers and story receivers. Zhang Zhizhong is the chief research fellow of "Where

Globalization Meets Localization: A Case Study of Mo Yan's Literary Career and the Evolution of Chinese Literature," a major program of the National Social Sciences Fund. Zhang(2014) made an analysis of Mo Yan's Nobel lecture "A Story Teller," holding that story teller Mo Yan, along with his stories, vividly demonstrated the simple and unadorned humanistic care of Chinese culture on the global stage. Chen Xianhong(2016) argued in her essay "Five Dimensions Concerning Telling the Story of China: The Communication Strategy of 'Meta-narration'" that family values are shared by a diversity of cultures both in China and abroad. This view is echoed by Fang Yihua in her essay "How to Tell the Story of China to the Rest of the World", calling for promoting Chinese culture from an international perspective and exploring the essence of Chinese culture by a mix of means and in terms of value symbols, product form and communication approaches.

2. Theory of cognition's "relevance" and factors of relevance in China's stories

Overall, most observations and reflections of "China's stories" communication today are value judgments based on existing communication facts. Whether they are to recognize or to doubt, those observations and reflections are in nature "qualitative" thinking centering on "what to communicate" and "how to effectively communicate." I believe that a more important prerequisite of the above two central points is China's stories' "being relevant." Given that, the communication effect of "China's stories" lies in the following aspects:

First, more importance should be attached to factors of relevance in the study of external communication. Telling "China's stories" concerns

the correlation between "China's stories" content and Chinese cultural symbols, as well as the correlation between such Chinese cultural symbols and those of foreign cultures during cultural exchanges. These factors of relevance bring about a consensus on "a community with a shared future for mankind" among a diversity of cultures, values, beliefs and customs within the realm of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Second, it is imperative to explore the relevance of "the China experience" in the structure of "China's stories." After all, telling "China's stories" is a spontaneous display of China's comprehensive strength, alongside its enhanced economic strength. Meanwhile, it also serves to introduce "the China experience" and "the China model" in the international arena. On the surface, telling "China's stories" is an attempt made by this country to showcase its culture and accomplishments to the rest of the world; in essence, it echoes the call of value convergence during the development of the Belt and Road community with a shared future.

Third, emphasis should also be placed on the effect of "relevance quantification" in communication practice. Different factors of relevance may result in different actions of relevance and subsequently form varied correlative efficiencies, which can help assess the communication effect of "China's stories." Regarding the assessment of this communication effect, it is advisable to draw on related theoretical results (such as industrial organization theory's research framework of "structure-conduct-performance") and build a research framework of its own to study, sum up and analyze collected data about "China's stories" communication, particularly communication in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, "factors of symbolic relevance" should be adopted to conduct a quantitative and qualitative research-based examination of the impact delivered by the cultural

symbols of “China’s stories.” This move is conducive to the practice of telling “China’s stories.”

According to the theory of cognitive, “relevance” is vital to the identification of cognitive possibilities during the process of verbal communications. Being a core concept of the theory of relevance, “relevance” was first jointly proposed by French scholar Dan Sperber and British scholar Deirdre Wilson based on Grice’s theory of conversational implicature. In the book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson(2015) argued that “in relevance-theoretic terms, any external stimulus or internal representation which provides an input to cognitive processes may be relevant to an individual at some time”(p.13). Relevance theory argues that for communication to be truly overt, the communicator’s informative intention must become not merely manifest to the audience (i.e. capable of being recognized and accepted as true, or probably true), but mutually manifest to communicator and audience. This theory also treats utterance interpretation as a cognitive process, which relies on an ideal cognitive tool-relevance to facilitate effective cooperation and enable both sides to understand each other’s implication. Cognitive principle can be expressed as “human cognition geared to the maximization of relevance” (Wang & Wang, 2005). Because of the way that human cognitive systems have evolved, humans have an automatic tendency to maximize relevance to make the most efficient use of available processing resources.

Relevance theory provides a solid theoretical framework for the exploration of the relationships between linguistic form and pragmatic comprehension from a cognitive perspective. “The speaker is not supposed to leave the receiver with any direct assumptions. All the speaker or writer can do is offering certain stimuli in the form of voice or writing that the receiver’s cognitive environment is

transformed and some facts are manifested or even highlighted. In this way, the receiver can represent such facts, retain or strengthen its original impact, and even derive further assumptions” (Wang & Wang, 2005). Relevance theory is an open theory whose inferential model is universally applicable to all discourse types. Combining communication with cognition, relevance theory can more truthfully reflect humans’ linguistic competence and better explain discourse comprehension in verbal communications. It is true that relevance theory’s assumption of “relevance” during verbal communication is based on the process of linguistic interaction. However, the purpose of verbal communication is to facilitate information exchange and develop rapport, for which it is also a cognitive process of mutual understanding and recognition. Given that, the significance of “relevance” not only lies in verbal interaction, but also in cultural and emotional recognition between people with different cultural backgrounds. According to relevance theory, human recognition tends to maximize relevance to acquire a maximum cognitive effect.

Thus, it can be seen that relevance, along with factors of relevance, is the core of human cognition and communication. Factors of relevance influence and restrict both sides of communication, and more importantly deliver a direct effect on the two sides understanding of each other’s symbolic system and overall communication. In this sense, the study of “China’s stories” communication, particularly the communication made by state media in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative requires analyzing the correlation between the content of “China’s stories” and its cultural factors, and the characteristics of the “China’s stories,” as well as corresponding communication approaches. Regarding “China’s stories” communication, its factors of relevance concern the significance of its cultural symbols and the enhancement of China’s cultural soft power.

“China’s stories” communication in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative is certain to be confronted with two special challenges which result from cultural differences among regions.

The first challenge is how to properly present the distinct Chinese culture hidden behind a “China’s story.” Successfully telling a “China’s story” means highlighting the uniqueness of Chinese culture and at the same time combining it with cultural elements of other regions. Such a story should demonstrate the essence of Chinese culture while bridging the cultural gap that may cause any comprehension problems.

The second challenge lies in whether “shared value” can be found between such a “China’s story” and cultures of other regions. A “China’s story” inevitably carries definite Chinese values and orientations, which should be better adapted to different regional cultures and thus be understood and accepted by locals based on the principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences. Ultimately, the study of “China’s stories” communication involves teasing out a profile of information, analyzing the interaction among factors of relevance, and assessing its communication effect on enhancing the soft power of Chinese culture within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

“China’s stories” communication is expected to serve the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, enhance the soft power of China, and connect people across the world through cultural exchanges. In addition, it is also a major means of communication to promote the unique nature of Chinese culture and build the image of a responsible major power during the process of external cultural exchanges. Given that, the structure of such a “China’s story” (including its content, connotation, genre, characteristics and plot) is definitely closely associated with Chinese culture and should also be adapted to the foreign receivers’ cultural context

(i.e. cultural connotation, genre, cognitive factors, etc.). China should enhance its effect of the “China’s stories” communication by innovating its culture-based value factors of relevance; assess the cultural influence of “China’s stories” through such factors; further integrate cultural factors to raise our national profile; and highlight Chinese culture’s role in supporting “China’s stories” communication. Moreover, through relevant data analysis and evaluation, it should establish a model concerning the effectiveness of interaction among the factors of relevance, and utilize such a model to build a three-tiered framework as to demonstrate the relevance scope of “China’s stories” and communication symbols (approach), the relevance depth of cultural symbols and influence (frequency) and the integrated effect of correlative communication factors (result). The three-tiered framework can also generate comprehensive indexes reflecting the performance of “China’s stories” communication and related actions, assess the influence and efficiency of cultural integration based on the correlation results, help identify the effects of “China’s stories” communication-related factors, and thus guide communication practices.

The Belt and Road Initiative is not just a geographical concept and a cooperation framework, but also a culture-based global initiative which connects past, present and future. To achieve a correlative effect of cultural communication, China should work harder on constructing a system of cultural symbols attached to “China stories.” Moreover, it should use a “connection-benefit model” to analyze the factors of relevance concerning cultural communications between regions and focus on further improving the national image of China through the “China’s stories” communication. The factors of relevance behind a “China’s story” are vital to the acceptance of Chinese culture abroad. The assessment of such beneficiary factors of

relevance can help acknowledge the significant role of the “China’s stories” communication in national image building.

3. The communication effect of the factors of relevance behind a “China’s story”

The “China’s stories” communication is a cross-cultural move. The study of its influence is interdisciplinary, concerning journalism and communication, management, political, economic, culture and sociology. Therefore, the study of the communication effect of “China’s stories” should turn to the comprehensive literature for reference, combine theories and practices, link historical data with logic, and adhere to the scientific research method of “letting facts speak.”

3.1 Understanding the communication effect of “China’s stories” requires learning about the factors of relevance in the “China’s stories” communication and its correlative effect

The Belt and Road Initiative is related to various aspects including politics, economy, society and culture. And “telling the story of China” is a concrete, pragmatic task. Therefore, the process of “China’s stories” increasing China’s cultural soft power is in fact a strategic practice. The practice is not only China’s attempt to go further in outbound communication, but also its innovative move to spread culture under new circumstances and new ideologies. Take the Confucius Institute for example, whose primary task is to provide the world with the most standardized and important channels for Chinese teaching. Choosing Confucius as a symbolic image in Chinese teaching is attributed to the fact that Confucius is a typical representative of traditional Chinese culture and is easy to recognize. Therefore Confucius, apart from being a symbol of “relevance” in Chinese culture, is also a distinctive

cognitive factor of relevance in the Chinese cultural communication. Ken Jin (2013), director of the Confucius Institute at Kennesaw State University, commented that “It is difficult to introduce the culture of a nation. In our cultural presentations, martial arts are always the most popular form, favored by the young people, especially the children. But it somehow only lingers on the surface. The things lying deeper are still difficult to understand, for example, Beijing Opera. When we perform Beijing Opera, people come and watch just out of curiosity, like once when we were performing the famous show *Farewell to My Concubine* on the stage, people off stage were laughing. They couldn’t understand it. I mean it is all right, because neither can we. There are over one thousand types of potatoes in Peru. If they try to explain each of the names to us, we must get confused, too. So now we begin to perform the Chinese operas in American style and involve American orchestras. We cooperate with some famous brands and launch various activities, such as cooking. Once displayed in a world-level grand hotel, it feels completely different.”

As its outbound cooperation and communication expand, China is playing an increasingly larger role in international affairs and the reconstruction of the international order. The whole process must necessarily involve mutual communication and understanding between the Chinese culture and its peers in the world. Accordingly, China proposed to “give the world more insight into its basic national conditions, values, development path, internal and external policies” and set the integration of Chinese culture and deposit of values through development into the whole world’s cultural system as a national strategy. Apart from the export of products, technologies and capital, China’s national strategies now also incorporate the export of culture, values and wisdom, which is intended to contribute to the world’s creativity and cultural

development in the future.

Therefore, the “China’s stories” communication must have its “modern China” cultural symbol of relevance, which will not only help bring traditional Chinese wisdom to the world, but also will update the world on Chinese modernization. In 2011, China’s national image promotional film for the first time found its way to the large screen of Times Square in New York and major US media such as CNN, upon which Chen Rudong (2012), president of the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World and professor of the School of Journalism and Communication, Peking University, commented, “China’s image promotion work actually has long been underway, except that it did not use high-profile methods such as ‘a national advertisement,’ or rather, China’s image was being passively shaped by the foreign media. Now our national image promotion film has been shown to the world. Even though it might rouse little response, it still indicates that, at least, the Chinese government begins to recognize the importance of China’s national image and adopt a more active attitude in its image construction...Obviously national ads are only a symbolic means of communication of the national image. To enhance the communication effect, the more important entity communication methods must be used.”

3.2 Making “China’s stories” more communicative requires a better understanding of the factors of relevance and the context of the “China’s stories” communication

“China’s stories” are told in the Chinese context. The process of telling the story of China and transmitting the voice of China, involving all kinds of Chinese experiences and culture in the fields of politics, economy, society, culture and life, must be an innovative attempt to convey China-style utterances to the countries and people along the Belt and Road. Therefore, the study of the “China’s

stories” communication must delve into the common cognitive factors existing in China’s cross-cultural communication, what resemblances and differences Chinese cultural symbols bear to those common cognitive factors, and how those resemblances and differences can be well expressed in a Chinese discourse style in the new media ecology. The communication context formed in the integrated environment spurred by the Belt and Road Initiative must also be taken into full account when a “China’s story” is spread. It is necessary to analyze how the communication context could dissolve cultural differences and how a “China’s story” could exert influence in this very context as a Chinese cultural symbol in the theoretic studies to identify the practical significance and academic value of China’s cultural soft power for its utterances.

In his essay published in *Socialism Studies*, Xu Zhanchen(2014) said that “If we want to make our stories appealing, we must avoid being viewed as ‘the aliens’. Empathy would be a good tool for us to use when we are trying to stand in the shoes of other countries and communicate to the world in a most easy-to-understand manner.” Cultural and cognitive differences between the two sides in a communication are naturally pre-existent, and the obstacles and even constraints in the communication context are not subject to our subjective wills. To break down the barriers in cross-culture communication, some common cognitive factors must be created to make a better shared context so that utterances would be easier to understand. Xu Zhanchen gave an example, “PBS shot two China-themed documentaries in 2004 and 2008: *China in the Red*(2014) and *Young & Restless in China*, depicting different lives in the economic reform tide of people from all walks of life, such as laid-off workers, rural self-employed businessmen, office clerks and returnee entrepreneurs. The documentaries changed the stereotyped image

of the Chinese and struck a chord with the US people, who, after watching the films, thought the Chinese were very much like them. Practice has proved that the people-to-people, concrete and incremental communications are actually more effective than the top-down, abstract and abrupt promotion.” Therefore, in the “China’s stories” communication, not only the spreader’s cultural customs, values and feelings but also those of the receivers must be considered, so that a benignly interactive communication context could come into being.

3.3 Measurement of the significance of the “China’s stories” communication should be based on the correlative effect of relevance factors in the communication process

Telling the story of China and transmitting the voice of China influence both the private perceptions and the cognition of the target group. Thus, the measurement of influence must adopt operational evaluation models and indexes, using big data analysis and quantitative indexes so as to make the result based on solid science. Moreover, the cognitive study of the “China’s stories” communication should make the best of the intelligent means formed by media convergence to make the outcome more systematic. There already exist research experiences and results from an earlier time concerning the correlative effect of relevance factors, which could be used as reference in measuring the communication effect of “China’s stories.” For example, from the “structure-conduct-performance” model of the industrial organization theory comes the “value correlation index of correlated industries” research model, which names evaluation indexes concerning the correlative breadth, depth and effect, analyzing the influencing factors of the advertising and culture creative industry to related industries (Yang, 2013). The model, using quantitative indexes to reveal the cultural creativity’s positive influence on the value

of relevant industries, has led to several discoveries. And the path has thus been well paved for studies on the communication effects of “China’s stories.”

Given the big picture of intelligent environments, intelligent technologies are now permeating into each specific operation of the media work, China, with its practices, has led the path of using intelligent networks across the globe. New communication approaches have been fully displayed by the news media during the innovative integration, such as the “Iron Man” multi-channel cloud live broadcasting platform during the NPC and CPPCC sessions, which was launched by Guang Ming online (GMW) as a whole new piece of individual carrying equipment for all-round media coverage. The platform, combining information collection and release, was enabled to synchronously live broadcast and record videos, panoramic views and VR. And only one journalist was needed during the whole process. Moreover, through the back-end cloud console, cloud storage and streaming media service system, the journalist easily distributed and arranged videos across multiple platforms that included PC, a mobile news reading app and H5 web pages, so that various media products could be quickly gathered on one platform.

A more intelligent style of media communication makes the communication more advanced, and more importantly, it spreads and then stores information in a large data platform, which largely facilitates the cycle of information production, storage and reproduction, as well as the scientific study of the communication effect of information. Accordingly, the study of the “China’s stories” communication effect should also make the best of intelligent means, refer to the interactive factors of correlative effect model, and strive for a most scientific and effective conclusion on the influence of the “China’s stories” communication.

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