

A Study on Cross-Cultural Communication Issues of Chinese Costume Dramas Based on the 5W Communication Model

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Abstract: In recent years, the pace of China's cultural "going global" has accelerated markedly, and a number of Chinese costume dramas have rapidly gained popularity abroad via digital media. As an increasing number of costume films and television series enter overseas markets, research on their cross-cultural communication is essential to promote their international dissemination and to strengthen China's cultural communicative capacity. This paper adopts the 5W communication framework (Who, Says What, In Which Channel, To Whom, With What Effect) to examine the current status and salient problems in the cross-cultural transmission of Chinese costume dramas. Drawing on this analysis, targeted recommendations are proposed with respect to communicators, content, channels, audiences and effects, including measures to localize overseas distribution and to leverage new media platforms in order to reduce cultural discount.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Communication; Costume Drama; 5W Communication Model

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese costume television dramas exemplified by titles such as Nirvana in Fire, Story of Yanxi Palace, Eternal Love, and The Long Ballad have achieved notable domestic audience ratings and commercial success, while concurrently exerting influence across East Asia, Southeast Asia and broader international markets through streaming platforms, social media, and cross-border distribution channels. As cultural texts that carry historical narratives, cultural representations, and value systems, costume dramas' cross-cultural transmission pertains not only to the international commercial returns of cultural products but also to the construction of national soft power and the shaping of external discursive presence. Against the backdrop of globalization

and the profound reshaping of the cultural industry ecosystem by the digital economy, a systematic investigation of the mechanisms and challenges in the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese costume dramas has both theoretical importance and practical relevance.

2. Definitions and Literature Review

In 1948, the prominent American communication scholar Harold D. Lasswell formally articulated what has come to be known as the 5W model in his work "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society." The five "W's denote the basic constituent elements of the communication process: who (the communicator), says what (the message), by which channel (the medium), to whom (the receiver), and with what effect (the outcome). The 5W model represents a seminal attempt in the history of communication studies to portray systematically and comprehensively the communication process. It also constitutes the first analytical formulation that neatly partitions communicative activity into five discrete steps, thereby facilitating a clearer understanding of the nature of communication and its determining factors. This framework has made enduring contributions to scholars' comprehension of the mechanisms and functions of social communication and to the development of effective communication practice.

A comparative retrieval of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database indicates that extant scholarship on the overseas dissemination of Chinese costume dramas can be grouped into three main strands.

The first strand foregrounds dissemination strategies and distribution pathways. Representative studies include Li Lanying's analysis of strategies for promoting Chinese film and television products abroad from the perspective of international communication [1]. He Xiaoyan's investigation of overseas online platforms for Chinese television dramas, which moves from measures of clicks to considerations

of dissemination quality [2]. Li Chengjia's exploration of capacity-building pathways for the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese audiovisual works [3].

The second strand consists of region or case-specific studies that examine the circulation of particular costume dramas within particular markets. For example, Huang Huaxian and Yin Xiping analyze the popularity of Story of Yanxi Palace (Yanxi Gonglue) in Vietnam and discuss the causes and strategies behind the drama's reception there [4]. Li Zongbin offers a case study of the Cambodian market to investigate the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese television dramas [5].

The third strand addresses theoretical and semiotic questions concerning television dramas and their cultural content, transmission, and symbol decoding. Yang Jin, for instance, discusses the symbiotic relationship between audiovisual works and traditional Chinese culture [6]. While Liu Lei examines the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese costume dramas from the perspective of linguistic and semiotic decoding [7].

With respect to research that explicitly adopts the 5W communication framework, several studies merit mention. Shi Jie applies the 5W model to examine dissemination strategies for the program Classical Recitations (Jing dian Yong liu chuan) [8]. Wang Mengjie employ the 5W perspective to reflect on the overseas dissemination of Chinese films under the Belt and Road Initiative and propose corresponding strategies [9]. You Da investigates the overseas distribution of web-produced drama series through an analysis of transformations in the 5W communication model [10].

Building on this literature, the present paper uses the 5W framework to conduct illustrative analyses across the dimensions of communicator (Who), message (Says What), channel (In Which Channel), audience (To Whom), and effect (With What Effect), with the aim of extracting empirically grounded lessons for the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese costume dramas.

3. Cross-Cultural Communication Analysis of Chinese Costume Dramas from a 5W Perspective

3.1 Communicators (Who): Policy-Oriented State Actors and Capital-Driven Market

Actors

Since the early 21st century, accelerated globalization and digital-technology diffusion have intensified cross-border exchanges of audiovisual culture. Under the strategic policy of encouraging cultural products to "go global," both the scale and the channels for external dissemination of Chinese audiovisual works have expanded, and costume dramas have increasingly entered the horizons of international audiences. The principal driving forces can be categorized as: (1) official communicators represented by state agencies and mainstream broadcasters; (2) market communicators represented by video platforms and production/distribution companies. These actor groups perform distinct but mutually influential functions that together shape the dissemination landscape.

3.1.1 Official international communicators: State agencies and mainstream media

At the state level, external cultural communication has been characterized historically by policy guidance and resource allocation. Governmental support has included fiscal subsidies, the acquisition and re-licensing of copyrights for overseas distribution, and the organization of cultural promotion initiatives that elevate program visibility at international festivals and exhibitions. Such official initiatives provide institutional and financial resources and enact cultural diplomacy that increases the overseas visibility of domestically produced costume dramas.

3.1.2 Marketized communicators: Video platforms and production companies

Concurrently, commercial streaming platforms and private production companies pursue market-driven strategies to expand global reach. Leading domestic streaming services have actively expanded their overseas presence—particularly in culturally proximate Southeast Asia—through localized portals, partnerships with local carriers, and distribution via international streaming platforms (e.g., global SVOD services). Production companies also engage in content partnerships or direct uploads to international platforms, leveraging internet decentralization to overcome the spatial and temporal constraints of traditional television broadcasting and to facilitate broader transnational circulation.

3.2 Message (Says What): Characterization

and Narrative; Costume and Architectural Representations

Audiovisual texts convey not only plot but also symbolically encoded cultural meanings. Costume dramas deploy character construction, narrative organization, and visual vocabularies—such as costume and architectural display—to communicate historical imagination, social order, and value orientations. Systematic analysis of these textual components and their cross-cultural legibility is thus essential to understanding dissemination effects and reception differences.

3.2.1 Characters and narrative

Different sub-genres (palace drama, historical drama, xianxia/fantasy) present distinct narrative logic's and cultural orientations. Palace dramas often dramatize power struggles and hierarchical norms; historical dramas anchor national narratives and historicity; xianxia emphasizes fantastical narration and anesthetized miser-en-scène. These differences influence claims to verisimilitude and cross-cultural tractability: historically anchored narratives depend more on audience prior knowledge, while fantastical and aesthetic narratives may cross cultural barriers by appealing through visual and emotional immediacy (i.e., “aesthetic readability”). Case studies indicate that stories with universal emotional themes (e.g., interpersonal conflict and power relations) can achieve reception beyond cultural boundaries.

3.2.2 Costume and architecture: Visual vocabulary and cultural semantics

Costume and architectural elements function as salient visual signs encoding rank, identity, region, and period. Costume design (color, ornamentation, tailoring) and set design (classical garden elements, palace architecture) are central in conveying cultural semantics and historical atmosphere, both enhancing cultural recognition and risking oversimplification or exoneration when decontextualized for foreign audiences⁴. Nevertheless, the transmission of costume codes is not a unidirectional “send—receive” process: receiving audiences may interpret these codes as “Oriental” or “exotic” spectacle, or may form simplified or erroneous historical understandings in the absence of sufficient contextualization.

3.3 Channels (In Which Channel): Traditional Television and New Media Platforms

3.3.1 Traditional television channels

(1) Domestic international television channels

From the 1990s onward, China's external television broadcasting system has progressively internationalized. Central television channels (e.g., CCTV-4, CCTV-9) have expanded their foreign-language services and have accessed overseas markets via cable and satellite distribution, thereby fulfilling state-level external communication functions. In recent years, provincial and municipal broadcasters have also pursued international broadcast channels, establishing overseas feeds or cooperating with foreign carriers (e.g., Zhejiang Television, Hunan Television). These national and regional television channels possess institutional resources and established broadcast networks, providing relatively stable platforms for the overseas dissemination of costume dramas.

(2) Overseas Chinese-language television channels

Overseas Chinese-language channels also play a significant role in disseminating costume dramas, particularly in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and regions with large Chinese diaspora populations, where audience bases are relatively robust. As China's external communication capacity grows, the number and influence of Chinese-language channels in Europe and North America have likewise increased, contributing to rising visibility and acceptance of costume dramas in those markets. Overall, traditional television remains an important concentrated broadcast channel, especially for reaching culturally proximate regions and overseas Chinese audiences.

3.3.2 New media platforms (online dissemination)

The rapid development and high efficiency of new media have created new opportunities for the overseas dissemination of costume dramas. New media platforms can be categorized into three types: overseas versions of domestic video sites, international video platforms, and social media. Domestic portals (e.g., Youku, formerly LeTV) host extensive costume drama catalogs; international platforms (e.g., YouTube, iPlayer) stream numerous Chinese costume dramas annually; social networking services (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) facilitate uploading, re-posting, and sharing, significantly amplifying overseas dissemination. The interactivity, recommendation algorithms, and global

accessibility of these platforms enable costume dramas to reach diverse audiences more rapidly and to stimulate participatory fan practices.

3.4 Receivers (To Whom): Audience Composition and Audience Needs

Audience analysis is crucial for understanding cross-cultural dissemination effects and reception differences. In recent years, the international export volume of Chinese television programming has expanded, and the target audiences have diversified geographically and culturally.

3.4.1 Audience composition

Geographically and culturally, the initial dissemination territories for Chinese costume dramas are centered on Chinese-language regions and radiate outward to East Asia and Southeast Asia, culturally proximate areas characterized by shared historical or Confucian cultural legacies, thus facilitating higher degrees of cognitive and affective resonance⁵. Empirical data indicate that Southeast Asia has seen rapid market growth; Japan, Korea, and Greater China remain important export destinations. With continued opening and initiatives such as the Belt and Road, adoption in more distant markets (Europe, Africa, Latin America) is gradually increasing, but acceptance in these disparate cultural contexts varies substantially; some works (e.g., *The Legend of Zhen Huan* in the North American market) have performed below expectations.

3.4.2 Audience needs

Audience acceptance of costume dramas is driven both by cultural commonalities and by differences in cultural preference and aesthetic taste. Some foreign viewers are attracted by curiosity about Eastern history and aesthetics; conversely, viewers lacking relevant cultural background are more likely to be captivated by visual aesthetics, emotional narratives, or widely accessible plot structures. The effectiveness of dissemination largely depends on the congruence between content/channels and audiences' cultural expectations and media consumption habits⁶. Moreover, the long-term efficacy of cultural export is influenced by localization strategies, the quality of subtitling/dubbing, and the specific communicative context. Therefore, implementing differentiated dissemination strategies tailored to distinct cultural spheres and audience segments is necessary to enhance cross-cultural receptivity.

3.5 Effects (With What Effect): Industrial Development and Cultural Impact

Communication effects encompass economic indicators (e.g., market share, rights sales, paid subscribers) as well as cultural impacts (e.g., cultural identification, value transmission, expansion of discursive influence). In recent years, overseas dissemination of costume dramas has both extended industrial value chains and produced notable cultural effects.

3.5.1 Development of the audiovisual cultural industry: rights trade and industrial linkages

The globalization of costume dramas has facilitated rights trading, paid channel openings, and bilateral adaptation/co-production. A number of Chinese costume properties have attracted foreign adaptation interest; for example, South Korean broadcaster SBS acquired the rights to *Bu Bu Jing Xin* (*Scarlet Heart*) and produced a Korean version (*Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo*), and other titles (e.g., *You Fei*) have also been purchased by Korean entities. The scale of foreign remakes of China Chinese television dramas has reached a certain magnitude and is increasing in both number and frequency, indicating expanding industrial linkages.

3.5.2 Cultural effects: Narrative dissemination and soft-power construction

Through overseas dissemination, costume dramas have conveyed elements of Chinese culture in a relatively soft, persuasive manner, enhancing cultural visibility and strengthening international public's awareness of Chinese historical and cultural motifs. The appropriation or incorporation of Chinese costume, culinary, and other cultural elements by foreign productions (e.g., in Korean, Thai, or other regional dramas) demonstrates the demonstrative effect of such cultural penetration. Nevertheless, cultural effects should not be conflated with mutual understanding: Texts circulating across cultures are subject to reinterpretation, simplification, or misreading. Therefore, refined dissemination strategies and contextual cultural annotation are required to reduce misinterpretation risks and to deepen and sustain intercultural exchange.

4. Problems and Shortcomings in the Cross-Cultural Communication of Chinese Costume Dramas: A 5W Perspective

4.1 Communicators (Who): Weak Consolidated Power and Insufficient Competitive Capacity

Official channels are constrained by the institutional nature of state communication: their content and discourse styles are often limited, and their dissemination tends to be unidirectional and top-down, which may provoke resistance among certain audiences or media actors. Commercial capital, notably streaming platforms and production companies, pursues multi-channel, market-oriented dissemination strategies that are often more acceptable to international audiences. However, excessive catering to foreign viewing preferences can result in uneven quality among exported costume dramas. Furthermore, domestic firms have not aggregated into sufficiently powerful clusters; relative to large international media conglomerates, they remain comparatively weak. According to statistics, more than fifty major international media corporations (including Disney, Vivendi Universal, Viacom, Time Warner, and Sony) occupy approximately 95% of the global media market share. These conglomerates command substantial resources and dominate overseas audiovisual markets. By contrast, Chinese media enterprises are generally smaller in scale and lack comparable group strength, placing them at a disadvantage in competition with global media giants. For Chinese costume dramas to achieve sustained global presence, greater scale and more robust international media alliances will be required.

4.2 Message (Says What): Insufficient Production Quality and Lack of Innovation

Historical costume dramas often adapt real historical narratives and thus have the potential to authentically reflect historical events and personages, using the past as a mirror on the present. Nevertheless, many such dramas have been criticized by historians for historical inaccuracies. If costume dramas are to serve as effective vehicles for presenting China's traditional culture, accurate depiction of historical facts must be regarded as a foundational requirement, an area that still needs attention. In addition, although Chinese costume dramas have achieved a measure of overseas recognition, this visibility has exposed a number of problems: formulaic plots remain widespread; despite variation in themes, many productions

lack substantive innovation and exhibit narrative homogeneity. Such outdated or repetitive story lines risk inducing audience fatigue or rejection over time and, more importantly, constrain the long-term development and creative vitality of the genre.

4.3 Channels (In Which Channel): Weak Channel Infrastructure and Limited International Influence

In the era of convergent media, television distribution is no longer a single-mode activity; rather, optimal dissemination requires the application of new technologies and methods across multiple channels. Television dramas are dynamic cultural products capable of conveying large volumes of cultural information and thus play an important role in exporting Chinese cultural content. At present, however, cooperation between domestic costume-drama producers and international platforms in production and distribution remains insufficiently deep. Moreover, there is a disjunction between offline and online dissemination channels, and no extensive, dense transmission network has been established. From a structural perspective, China has not yet built a systematic, professional, stable, and mature multilevel dissemination architecture. Consequently, relative to other overseas-successful drama forms such as Korean or American series, Chinese costume dramas still exhibit many shortcomings in their capacity for overseas dissemination. Although channels have broadened in recent years, significant effort is still required for Chinese costume dramas to secure a substantial international position.

4.4 Receivers (To Whom): Audience Misunderstanding and Obstacles to Cultural Acceptance

Viewing habits vary markedly across countries, with many markets favoring shorter series formats. In the current era of fragmented media consumption, excessively long series present a particular challenge for foreign audiences. Popular domestic costume dramas commonly take the form of long-running serials; even contemporary dramas may run to 32 episodes, while some costume series extend to 60-80 episodes. Such lengths can negatively affect viewership and engagement in markets accustomed to shorter series. Additionally, Chinese production companies often possess an

incomplete or biased understanding of foreign audiences. As the ultimate terminals of dissemination, audiences determine the real effects of cross-cultural transmission, yet many domestic costume dramas lack nuanced knowledge of and deep insight into overseas viewers. Given that aesthetic preferences and cultural psychologies differ across cultural contexts, viewing demands will likewise vary. The industry must therefore consider how to produce costume dramas that both satisfy international audience expectations and retain distinctive characteristics.

4.5 Effects (With What Effect): Considerable Challenges in Breaking Cultural and Price Boundaries

Although Chinese television has established an initial overseas market and China ranks among the world's leading producers of films, television, and web dramas, its performance in overseas distribution, sales, and dissemination does not yet reflect the status of a global audiovisual powerhouse. Compared with the number of imported foreign dramas in China, the volume of Chinese drama exports remains limited; a stable foreign consumer base has not yet been formed, and consequently the international influence of Chinese productions is constrained. Thus, "breaking through" existing audience circles and achieving wider mainstream penetration remain pressing problems for domestic costume dramas. In addition to broadening audience reach, overcoming the international price ceiling is critical. Despite favorable domestic market conditions, Chinese series generally command lower sale prices and yield less profitability internationally than competing titles from Japan or Korea.

5. Recommendations for the Cross-Cultural Dissemination of Chinese Costume Dramas from a 5W Perspective

5.1 Communicators (Who): Broaden Cooperative Horizons and Strengthen Group Capacity

With respect to overseas distribution of Chinese costume dramas, government policy should adopt a market-oriented approach supplemented by regulatory support. Authorities ought to broaden their strategic perspective, create a more enabling policy environment for international dissemination, and use policy incentives to

cultivate a cohort of high quality production and distribution enterprises. Commercial capital, particularly production and distribution firms, should proactively seek overseas partnerships and pursue consolidation into larger integrated production and distribution groups. Successful export of costume dramas requires not only substantial financial and human capital investment but also the aggregate market strength that large corporate groups provide in order to achieve effective overseas promotion. Overseas cooperation may take two principal forms: content collaboration (e.g., co-productions with foreign directors, casting international actors, on-location shooting abroad, and securing foreign investment) and platform collaboration (e.g., distribution partnerships with foreign broadcasters and international streaming platforms to broaden channel access).

5.2 Message (Says What): Ensure Rigorous Production Standards and Enhance Content Quality

Guaranteeing high production quality is a foundational prerequisite for sustainable overseas export. Producers should cultivate a "quality first" ethos, preferring fewer high-quality works to a larger quantity of mediocre outputs, and select projects that embody distinctive Chinese cultural themes while retaining their cultural core when adapting to foreign tastes. At the production level, creators should avoid both cheaply executed special effects and an excessive emphasis on spectacle at the expense of cultural substance, which can lead to wasteful cost inflation. Aesthetic standards among creative personnel must be elevated: hair, makeup, costume and set design should be subject to rigorous scholarly and aesthetic scrutiny; dialogue and staging should withstand critical scrutiny; and representations should accord with plausible historical context where historical authenticity is intended. By balancing artistic aesthetics with consumer appeal, the industry can develop a repertoire of well-crafted costume dramas that are both culturally representative and internationally competitive.

5.3 Channels (In Which Channel): Leverage New Media Platforms to Reduce Cultural Discount

China's ancient culture is rich and complex, and differences between its cultural codes (including

background knowledge and nonverbal cues) and those familiar to many foreign audiences can create significant “cultural discount” during transmission. The rapid rise of internet, based new media, with advantages in speed, reach, and short-form, easily digestible video content, provides an opportunity to mitigate this discount. For example, producers can establish official accounts for a drama on emerging short-video platforms such as TikTok to provide concise explanatory content (contextualizing story background, character names, props, or the meanings of classical poems), or to analyze salient nonverbal cues (e.g., a character’s glance or gesture). Such micro-content both raises the profile of a drama and supplies viewers with interpretive tools, thereby lowering cultural barriers and improving reception.

5.4 Receivers (To Whom): Segment Audience Preferences and Pursue Effective Localization

A key to successful international dissemination is localization. High-quality translation and localization are indispensable: uploading domestic dramas to platforms such as YouTube with poor subtitles or inadequate language adaptation will impede comprehension and negatively affect viewer engagement. Despite policy supports such as the Belt and Road Initiative and translation subsidies, substantial work remains to professionalize overseas dissemination. Under national policy guidance, collaboration with internationally experienced subtitling/dubbing providers and network platforms should be strengthened; the advantages of user-generated content (UGC) models should be harnessed to increase translation efficiency and cultural mediation. Beyond adapting to existing audience tastes, the industry should pursue the more ambitious and longer-term objective of cultivating audiences. From the standpoint of cultivation theory, cinematic and televisual representations shape foreign viewers’ perceptions of China over time; fostering a fuller and more accurate understanding of China is a gradual, cumulative process⁹. Therefore, producers and dissemination should adopt strategic, long-term perspectives that prioritize audience development, creating demand and nurturing appreciation for culturally rooted content rather than merely pandering to short-term preferences.

5.5 Effects (With What Effect): Strengthen

International Outlook and Enhance Audience Segmentation Awareness

Although shortcomings persist in overseas dissemination, recent breakout series have helped to build loyal overseas audiences and to open markets, indicating favorable development potential. Nevertheless, for Chinese costume dramas to establish enduring global brands and secure a stable foothold in international markets, more concerted efforts are required. Production companies should deepen their understanding of foreign markets and leverage international networks for reputation building during project planning and production. Efforts to clear rights obstacles and to coordinate simultaneous global releases can promote the emergence of internationally recognized domestic costume-drama brands. Given cultural heterogeneity, overseas promotion must fully account for segmented-audience dynamics: campaigns should be tailored to regional audience identities and should consider demographic variables(such as gender and age),since recognition and reception of the same genre vary substantially across these strata¹⁰. Ultimately, the overseas dissemination of costume dramas should integrate a global perspective and cultural confidence into all stages of domestic production, distribution, and circulation, thereby advancing Chinese television into a new phase of global cultural engagement.

6. Conclusion

In the context of globalization, cultural competitiveness has become increasingly salient. As an effective cultural carrier, costume dramas can facilitate the international dissemination of Chinese culture and enhance its global competitiveness. This paper, employing the 5W communicative framework, examined the communicators, messages, channels, receivers, and effects of Chinese costume television dramas abroad. The analysis identified the current status and shortcomings of these productions’ overseas circulation and proposed targeted recommendations intended to inform industry practice. Implementing these recommendations can help maximize the comparative advantages of Chinese costume dramas in foreign markets, mitigate adverse factors, and enable more strategic and effective exports. Moreover, the findings and suggestions offered here are expected to have broader

applicability for non-costume Chinese television dramas seeking international dissemination, assisting them in entering overseas markets, redressing their disadvantaged position in the global market, and ultimately strengthening China's cultural competitiveness.

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