

A Study on the Cultural Identity Construction in Media Discourse from the Perspective of Cross-cultural Communication: A Case Study of *Divas Hit the Road: Silk Road Season*

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Abstract: Cultural identity plays a vital role in avoiding misunderstandings and conflicts in the process of cross-cultural communication. This paper analyzes cultural identity construction in media discourse, using the reality show *Divas Hit the Road: Silk Road Season*—set against the backdrop of the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative—as the corpus. It analyzes what kind of cultural identity the participants in the program have constructed through media discourse and what strategies were used to construct these identities. Through the collection and analysis of the program's content, it is concluded that these Chinese participants involved in the show representing the country construct two kinds of cultural identities, culture disseminator and mutual development promoter. Those identities are achieved through nonverbal communication and language choice.

Keywords: Cultural identity; Cross-cultural communication; Belt and Road Initiative; *Divas Hit the Road*

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1. Introduction

Samovar holds that intercultural communication refers to the interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems differ enough to influence the communication event ^[1]. There exists an interconnectedness between cultural identity construction and intercultural communication. It is that individuals consistently establish and reconstruct their identity through communication; meanwhile, identity also changes and adjusts so as to cater to the evolving communicative environment. The increasingly diverse society and irreversible trend of globalization have manifested the importance of cross-cultural communication for its functions in enhancing the understanding of differences and preventing conflicts. Besides, successful cross-cultural communication cannot be achieved without the appropriate recognition of cultural identity. So, the study

of cultural identity in cross-cultural communication gradually becomes a heated issue.

Cultural identity refers to individuals' recognition and sense of belonging to their cultural group, encompassing various aspects, such as gender identity, value orientation, racial identity, and national identity, and involves. In addition, it is dynamic, multiple, abstract, complex, and socially constructed. The breakthrough developments in science and technology in the 21st century have profoundly transformed the global landscape and people's lifestyles. With the rapid advancement of modern communication technologies, interactions among people have become unprecedentedly frequent and seamless, and the forms of media are innovating. In this process, the construction of cultural identity heavily depends on the media. According to Qian media serves as the presenter of culture, politics, and social life ^[2]. And the media discourse in newspapers, television, and the internet embodies culture, ideology, and values, forming a unique type of discourse. The current researches on cultural identity in media discourse concentrate on news from authorized media, adopting a formal and serious way to establish identity. While objective and fact-based news media are undoubtedly important, the construction of cultural identity also relies on reality shows that resonate with the general public. As a form of multimodal and entertaining media discourse, reality shows can construct cultural identity in a way that is closely connected to people's daily lives. *Divas Hit the Road: Silk Road Season* (hereinafter referred to as *Silk Road Season*) is a reality show against the backdrop of the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative. The seven Chinese guests who are famous actors in the show take viewers into cooperative projects and Chinese enterprises under the initiative, showcasing the changes brought about by Chinese wisdom, Chinese solutions, and Chinese strength to countries along the route. This program is also an important part of cultural identity construction. Therefore, this paper examines what kind of cultural identity the participants in *Silk Road Season* have constructed through the lens of reality show, which is a form of media discourse.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural identity

In the context of cross-cultural communication, all identities of individuals are a kind of cultural identity, which is related to culture and constrained by culture. The richness and complexity of the notion of identities are evident. Different scholars maintain different points. In a broad sense, Karen and Robles find that "identities are best thought of as stable features of persons that exist prior to any particular situation and as dynamic and situated accomplishments, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion to the next" ^[3]. It can be seen that cultural identity is constructed in the process of communication. Yep defines it as a person's conception of self within a particular social, geographical, cultural, and political context ^[4]. In Ting-Toomey's opinion, identity is the reflective self-conception or self-image that people derive from family, gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual socialization processes ^[5]. These definitions are relatively abstract, emphasizing that identity is a kind of self-conception and self-image. But in a narrow sense, Fong addresses cultural identity as a social construction and the identification of communications of a shared meaning of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behavior that are meaningful to group members who have a sense of belonging and who share traditions, heritage, language, and similar norms of appropriate behavior ^[6].

From the available studies on cultural identity, most of which concentrate on how cultural identity is represented in translation and how it influences the translators and the changes and development of cultural identity of EFL learners ^[7-10]. Beyond that, there are also some studies focusing on the construction of cultural identity in

cross-cultural communication, which incline to the demonstrations of related theories and the relationship between the improvement of intercultural communicative competence and cultural identity ^[11]. However, the research on cultural identity through media discourse is relatively less. And with the rapid development of the Internet and the ongoing innovation of communication technology, the means and forms of communication are getting diverse, among which the media is of great importance in showing and constructing identity. Thus, this paper tends to study cultural identity presented in media discourse from the perspective of cross-cultural communication.

2.2. Media discourse

The construction of cultural identity needs language, which is an important tool for human communication and cross-cultural transmission. Through language, people not only can express their ideas, emotions, feelings, etc., but also identify themselves in the course of communication. Discourse, as the actual use of language and as language in social practice, reflects and potentially constructs social reality and social relations. Fairclough conceptualizes discourse as “a form of social practice”, playing a significant role in the construction of identities ^[12]. Through discourse, individuals construct various identities, various forms of the “self” as well as social relations and systems of knowledge and belief. As Yan said, discourse constructs social meanings and social relations, participates in social change, and exerts controlling power in interactions and communications among actors ranging from states to individuals ^[13]. This enables people to strategically construct, highlight, and activate appropriate identities through discourse. There are different kinds of discourse, like conversation, speech, political discourse, and media discourse, but this paper mainly focuses on media discourse. Usually, formal media discourse like news from authorized media, speeches of national leaders, and official policies is the first choice to learn about cultural identity. While official media discourse serves as a necessary carrier for people to quickly and accurately understand cultural identity, entertaining media discourse, such as various TV shows and film programs that promote the construction of cultural identity, is also an indispensable part. Meanwhile, the study of cultural identity in reality shows is relatively rare. Therefore, this paper chooses the reality show *Silk Road Season* as the corpus to explore the cultural identity and its construction in media discourse.

In general, the construction of cultural identity is closely connected with discourse, which is the practical use of language. Media discourse, as one of the fundamental and vital communication vehicles in cross-cultural communication, promotes the presentation and construction of cultural identity. Based on these, this paper selects the reality show *Silk Road Season* in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative as the corpus to investigate the following two questions: 1) What kind of cultural identities have the participants constructed? 2) How are these cultural identities constructed?

3. Research design

3.1. Research corpus

This paper selects the “Required Course” segment from the reality show *Divas Hit the Road: Silk Road Season* on Mango TV as the data source, focusing on the changes brought about by Chinese wisdom and Chinese solutions in Saudi Arabia, Croatia, and Iceland, and analyzing the cultural identity constructed within this context. The program, against the backdrop of the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, narrates the vast theme of the initiative by breaking it down into perceivable and understandable life details, thereby presenting a credible and respectable cultural identity. Over the past decade, the Silk Road has undergone significant

development, with exciting changes continuously occurring along the new Silk Road. The Chinese solution subtly influences the world, constantly refreshing the cultural identity of China. Since its broadcast, the program has achieved a cumulative video playback count of 8.69 billion and attracted an overseas viewership of 230 million, garnering nearly 100.5 billion exposures on platforms such as RED, Weibo, and TikTok. The *Silk Road Season* comprehensively and authentically showcases the cultural identity of the Chinese along the Silk Road, gaining popularity and influence both domestically and internationally, providing a basis for analyzing the construction of cultural identity in the practice of the Belt and Road Initiative.

3.2. Research procedures

This article primarily focuses on the “Required Course” segment from 14 episodes of *Silk Road Season*, collecting excerpts related to China’s participation in the construction of Saudi Arabia, Croatia, and Iceland for further discussion and analysis.

First, the subtitles of the selected program excerpts for further analysis are transcribed into text format and verified for accuracy. Then, the transcribed text is coded and integrated again to study how the participants, through these texts, establish their cultural identity. Finally, the research results are presented. This article selects three typical excerpts as examples for analysis, with each excerpt transcribed in Chinese.

4. Research Findings

In the process of cross-cultural communication, there are many ways to present cultural identity; media discourse is a widely used one. In *Silk Road Season*, the seven guests, who are all Chinese actors, have communicated with Chinese overseas and locals in Saudi Arabia, Croatia, and Iceland, during which they constructed different cultural identities.

4.1. Culture Disseminator

Jiao argued that cultural transmission is the competition of national soft power among countries^[14]. In the new era and on the new journey of the country, strengthening the dissemination of socialism with Chinese characteristics is an inevitable requirement for achieving the second centenary goal and comprehensively promoting the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese-style modernization. It is also an important means to advance cultural self-confidence and self-reliance. In cross-cultural communication, cultural transmission is an unavoidable part, and people can inherit and express the unique characteristics of their own culture with the help of media discourse. The reality show *Silk Road Season* itself vividly exhibits how the Chinese culture communicates with the world in the practice of the Belt and Road Initiative. When they go abroad, the seven guests not only represent themselves but also every Chinese and the country. In the program, they creatively employ different Chinese cultural cards, such as Xinjiang garments, Tianjin kuaiban, and costumes of Northeast yangko, to engage in cultural exchanges with people from other countries, through which not only can people better disseminate their own culture but also enhance mutual understanding. The display of those distinctive cultural cards presents the process of their cultural identity construction as a culture disseminator. For example:

(1) “This is the ethnic clothing of Xinjiang, China. The clothes are very beautiful. I want to go out and communicate with everyone so that they can learn about the culture of some ethnic groups in Xinjiang, China. Whether it is dance or song, I think that if I can bring out a little bit, I can let everyone understand China a little bit.

So I conveyed my heart to these foreigners who do not understand Chinese culture, so that the red pomegranate flowers of Xinjiang can also bloom overseas” (Translated from Chinese).

This is the introduction of the Chinese ethnic garment, Xinjiang edeles, happening in a party where seven guests who first come to Croatia share Chinese culture with foreigners in the form of nonverbal communication. From example (1), it can be seen that intercultural communication is not limited to verbal communication. Nonverbal communication, like attire, is not only omnipresent and an essential ingredient in cross-cultural interaction but also responsible for establishing identity. As Adler and Rodman state, “Clothing can be used to convey economic status, education, social status, moral standards, athletic ability, or interests and belief systems and levels of sophistication.” So, clothes are not just something to wear but are often used to help establish one’s cultural identity. Through Chinese ethnic costumes, the participants construct their cultural identity as culture communicators with great cultural confidence and acknowledgment in the hearts of both domestic and international audiences, promoting a comprehensive and authentic presentation of China.

4.2. Promotor of mutual development

Faced with unprecedented, profound changes unseen in the world, China has consistently devoted itself to maintaining world peace, promoting mutual development, and building a community with a shared future for mankind. The principle of pursuing shared growth through discussion and collaboration emphasized in the practice of the Belt and Road Initiative is concretely demonstrated in *Silk Road Season*. The cross-cultural communication between China and other countries involves many aspects, except culture, in which the economy is also an important part. Based on the Belt and Road Initiative, China has designated many excellent engineers to participate in the infrastructure building in Croatia and Saudi Arabia, respectively Pelješac Bridge and the Haramain High-Speed Railway. They not only bring unique and robust infrastructure technology of China to these regions but also boost the economic development of Croatia and Saudi Arabia, fostering mutual development and win-win cooperation among nations. Those Chinese engineers are not simply those who are proficient in building, but also gain a new cultural identity as mutual development promoters, meanwhile representing the country. For example:

(2) “The Mecca-Medina High-Speed Railway passes through four cities: Medina, Rabigh, Jeddah, and Mecca. Over several years, we built eleven railway bridges, eighteen highway bridges, five underpasses, and more than one hundred culverts along this long-distance high-speed railway, finally completing Saudi Arabia’s first and only high-speed railway to date” (Translated from Chinese).

(3) “The bridge we built not only helped Croatia connect its land territory completely, but we also ensured that its water traffic was not hindered. When it opened to traffic last year, they held a very grand ceremony. On that day, whenever they saw Chinese people, they would say “Hello, China, thank you.” So on that day, you felt very proud as a Chinese person. You helped them realize a long-cherished wish and a dream of several generations” (Translated from Chinese).

The above two examples are from the Chinese project leaders of the Haramain High-Speed Railway and the Pelješac Bridge, Qi Xiaolei and Zhang Fei, in *Silk Road Season*. It is obvious that those Chinese infrastructure builders like Qi and Zhang are very proud of their contribution to the countries cooperating with China. Overseas, they construct a new cultural identity on behalf of China. The process of establishing a new identity is reached by the language choice occurring in cross-cultural interaction. Fang and Lu hold that the choice of language is the most important element of personal identity, social identity, and cultural identity in cross-cultural communication^[15]. Individuals with different identities, driven by specific goals, utilize languages to express their feelings,

motivations, and needs, conveying their values, attitudes, and intentions to others. Thus, it is extremely important to focus on the relationship between language choice and identity in cross-cultural communication. In *Silk Road Season*, the cultural identity of those Chinese engineers is constructed through language choice as well, mainly embodied in the application of address terms in discursive practice. The pronoun “we” used in the aforementioned examples not only refers to the Chinese infrastructure builders but also indicates that they play a vital role in promoting common development on behalf of China. Chinese often have a tendency to use the pronoun “we” as shown in examples (2) and (3) to express not only group views but also personal ones, which is greatly influenced by the collectivism-oriented culture emphasizing cooperation and group benefits. This also clearly demonstrates why, in those Chinese engineers’ minds, they bear dual identities, themselves and mutual development promoters representing China. In example (3), it can be seen that the discursive practice that the Croatians employ is also a kind of language choice, choosing simple Chinese such as *xie xie*. Actually, this is the presentation of their support and identification with China, not only in infrastructure technology but also in the friendship between Croatia and China. In this way, the cultural identity of those Chinese infrastructure builders is established from the perspective of others. That is to say, they undertake the responsibility that China has given them for motivating the common development and high-level cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road.

5. Conclusion

Over the past years, many approaches have been employed to tell China’s stories well. But making the world acknowledge the voices of China is full of challenges, so broadening various paths and methods to construct cultural identity with its own characteristics is of great necessity. With the appearance and development of new technology, new applications, and new media, the ways of cross-cultural communication are enriched, in which media functions as a significant tool. Besides official formal media, variety shows such as reality shows broadcast on television and various online platforms contribute to cultural identity construction as well as to intercultural interactions. This paper takes the reality show *Silk Road Season* as an example to explore the cultural identities that the Chinese have constructed when they go abroad, representing the whole country. By analyzing the corpus collected in *Silk Road Season*, it can be drawn that during communicating with foreigners, the seven guests establish their cultural identity as Chinese culture disseminators with the assistance of nonverbal communication, traditional ethnic attire. Those infrastructure builders employ strategies of language choice to construct their cultural identity as a mutual development promoter.

Therefore, in the context of cross-cultural communication, two kinds of cultural identities are constructed, culture disseminator and mutual development promoter, through employing strategies which are nonverbal communication and language choice. However, this study has limitations due to the limited data used for analysis. Further research can include more samples or supplementary data, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to validate the findings.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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