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AN EXPERIMENT ON INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF CHINESE STORIES THROUGH SELF-MEDIA BY CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTSⁱ

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Abstract:

Recognizing the limited understanding of China's modernization among foreign audiences, Chinese university students undertook a 20-week experiment in international communication using self-media videos. They curated a selection of representative videos and documentaries showcasing China's modernization and development, disseminating them to global netizens via social media platforms. Data analysis revealed that foreign netizens appreciated the intuitive, succinct, and lucid nature of the short self-media videos. They felt they gained an intuitive understanding of China's modernization and expressed interest in visiting China to learn the Chinese language and witness the country's rapid development firsthand, recognizing its potential to enhance their career prospects. The self-media communication experiment yielded favorable outcomes, notably enhancing college students' English writing proficiency through online interactions with netizens and fostering stronger cross-cultural communication skills.

Keywords: Chinese university students; self-media international communication through; China's development story; experiment

1. Introduction

Globalization and advancing productivity are fostering increased international exchanges and cooperation among nations. Consequently, a nation's image, or national

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reputation, is acknowledged as a crucial element of soft power, indicative of its global stature (Wang, 2006). A positive national image can yield significant economic, cultural, and political advantages (Zhi *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, scholars worldwide have extensively researched this subject (Li *et al.*, 2021; Gohary *et al.*, 2022).

China's sustained economic growth has propelled its GDP to \$17.53 trillion USD by 2023, representing over 19% of the global share and cementing its status as the world's second-largest economy and a leading force in manufacturing and international trade. China boasts global leadership in automotive manufacturing, high-speed rail, light industry, infrastructure, shipbuilding, and steel production and sales. Achieving a per capita GDP of \$12,500, China has effectively reduced poverty, attained widespread prosperity, achieved universal healthcare coverage, and is steadfastly progressing towards modernization and strength. It has emerged as a key driver of global economic growth and a model for developing nations worldwide (Liu Xiaoya, 2024; Wu Xingmei, 2023), emphasizing the imperative of enhancing China's national image.

Currently, television, newspapers, and online news serve as the primary sources through which the global community obtains information about China. Most studies on national images focus on portrayals through these mediums (Lu Xue, 2024; Zhang Yujian & Ji Dexiang, 2024). Chinese media actively collaborate with foreign counterparts to provide authentic coverage of China, thereby bolstering its image (Morales & Menechelli, 2023). However, anti-China forces in the West, apprehensive of China's ascent and the acknowledgment of its modern achievements and system on the global stage, persistently obstruct and limit the dissemination of Chinese news. They propagate the 'China threat' narrative and disparage China's progress, resulting in limited access to reports on China's advancement among overseas populations. Consequently, many erroneously perceive China as still mired in poverty and underdevelopment reminiscent of prereform and opening-up eras, leading to widespread misconceptions and misinterpretations (Qiu Yu & Wu Bo, 2024; Wang Zuluo, 2023).

Guided by the Global Civilization Initiative, enhancing the effectiveness of Chinese civilization's external communication entails active engagement in the global digital media landscape. This involves taking a proactive stance on global digital platforms, addressing issues of civilizational diversity, and highlighting the value of cross-cultural wisdom to tackle shared global challenges. Specifically, proactive international communication is essential to framing discussions on Chinese civilization and its interactions with other civilizations. This involves promptly addressing and rectifying negative public perceptions and misinformation about China through factchecking, disseminating an accurate portrayal of Chinese civilization, and bolstering the creativity, appeal, and credibility of foreign discourse. Additionally, nurturing individuals proficient in traditional Chinese culture and adept in cross-cultural communication is crucial. This endeavor aims to foster a supportive public opinion milieu, thereby bolstering the global standing and influence of Chinese civilization while enhancing the efficacy of international communication (Xing, 2023). Technological advancements like artificial intelligence and the metaverse have profoundly transformed the shaping of China's national image. They highlight its credibility, appeal, and dignity through multimodal communication, thereby boosting international communication efficiency. Utilizing multi-modal expression enabled by new media technology has ushered in a new era in national image construction. Leveraging visual, auditory, and interactive channels enhances the vividness, comprehensiveness, and depth of the national image portrayal. This fosters deeper foreign audience engagement and identification with China's national image, thereby amplifying its dissemination effect and bolstering its international promotion efforts, ultimately cultivating a credible, appealing, and esteemed Chinese national image (Zhang & Xu, 2024).

In the era of globalization and digitalization, self-media has transcended the communication limitations of traditional media by embracing traits such as openness, equality, anonymity, immediacy, interactivity, and flexibility. It has emerged as an integral component of international communication, profoundly influencing the shaping and projection of a nation's image (Zhang, 2022a). Particularly in disseminating Chinese narratives and demonstrating Chinese confidence, trajectory, and systemic uniqueness, self-media dispels certain negative stereotypes about China prevalent among global audiences through its grassroots, populist perspective, and personalized approach. By narrating anecdotes and personal stories, self-media vividly portrays the diversity and authenticity of China's national identity, fostering a stronger connection to Chinese culture and bolstering international recognition of its national image. In contrast to traditional mainstream media, self-media's intimate rapport with audiences and high credibility engenders a distinct "private domain traffic" phenomenon, effectively amplifying and solidifying the traits and implications of the national image (Zhang, 2022b).

To facilitate an understanding of China's development among citizens of other countries, the research team conducted a 20-week experiment, spanning one semester, on the international communication of China's developmental achievements. Embracing the prevalent short video self-media dissemination model (Chen Lan, 2023; Sun Yinzhe, 2023), they shared short videos and photographs illustrating China's significant progress since the Reform and Opening Up on various social platforms abroad. The objective was to convey to global netizens an authentic portrayal of China's modernization drive, coupled with its principles of peaceful coexistence and shared development. Through direct interactions with netizens worldwide, they aimed to present a comprehensive, genuine, and nuanced image of China, fostering an understanding of Chinese society's actual conditions and the opportunities arising from China's rapid economic growth.

The primary research questions of this experiment are:

- 1) How effective is the utilization of Chinese university students' multilingual selfmedia in international communication regarding China's achievements? What are the limitations of this method, and how can they be addressed?
- 2) What is the level of receptivity among foreign netizens to these short videos depicting China's development? Has their comprehension of China's modernization efforts improved?

2. Experimental Design

2.1 Mode of Communication

Sixty proficient senior English major students from a Chinese university were chosen for this study. Each student created accounts on five platforms: YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Quora. They were tasked with posting at least one short video or tweet weekly on each platform, highlighting notable achievements in Chinese culture and the nation's reform and opening-up in various domains. Content could be in either English or Chinese, with Chinese videos accompanied by English translations prior to reposting. Non-profit public video reposts depicting China's development were deemed exempt from copyright infringement. The experiment spanned one semester, lasting 20 weeks.

2.2 Content of Communication

Enhancing international communication effectiveness requires several key steps. Firstly, respecting the diversity of world civilizations and fostering an external public opinion environment conducive to communication is imperative. Secondly, advocating for universal human values, diversifying international communication themes, and dispelling external misconceptions and prejudices regarding China's image are crucial. Moreover, prioritizing the preservation and revitalization of civilization, showcasing a blend of ancient and contemporary Chinese culture, safeguarding historical and cultural heritage, and highlighting modern values are essential. Finally, bolstering international cultural exchanges and cooperation, leveraging digital and social media platforms, is vital to showcasing Chinese civilization globally and fostering dialogue and mutual understanding among diverse civilizations (Zhang & Xu, 2023). This study compiled approximately 150 articles and videos focusing on current domestic issues to serve as content for Chinese university students to enhance China's global image. The research team will provide multilingual subtitles or dubbing for select videos. The materials encompass a range of topics, including domestic political developments, scientific advancements, cultural and artistic endeavors, and China's efforts in combating epidemics. Sourced from reputable foreign media outlets and user-generated content on platforms like Douyin, Weibo, WeChat, and Bilibili, these materials are freely available for dissemination and reposting without copyright restrictions. The primary content is summarized as follows:

A. "Amazing China"

"Amazing China" is a documentary showcasing China's modernization achievements since the reform and opening up, covering technological advancements, economic growth, innovation, national defense, environmental protection, poverty reduction, and international relations. As of 2023, China boasts a GDP representing nearly 20% of the global total, with a per capita GDP of \$12,400, positioning it as the world's second-largest economy. Leading in manufacturing and global trade, China drives worldwide economic growth. Domestically, it excels in automobile manufacturing, high-speed rail, light

industry, infrastructure, shipbuilding, and steel production. To achieve food selfsufficiency, China's rural areas have achieved comprehensive prosperity.

B. "Masters of Their Craft"

"Masters of Their Craft" presents stories of skilled Chinese workers across diverse professions pursuing their dreams with dedication and expertise. Its multilingual version allows a global audience to appreciate the commitment and exceptional skills of Chinese workers in achieving remarkable feats.

C. "The Pillars of a Great Power"

"The Pillars of a Great Power" emphasizes China's advancements in infrastructure, highspeed rail, and equipment manufacturing, showcasing stories of machine production infused with Chinese ingenuity. It provides a distinct outlook on the innovative growth of China's equipment manufacturing sector, highlighting both ordinary workers and influential figures propelling its evolution, innovation, and global competitiveness. Through personal narratives and manufacturing insights, it illustrates the evolution of China's equipment manufacturing industry, from its origins to surpassing global benchmarks, and envisions its trajectory towards high-end production.

D. "5G: The Road to a Super-Connected World"

The fifth generation of mobile communication technology, abbreviated as 5G, represents a new era of broadband mobile communication characterized by high speed, low latency, and extensive connectivity. Serving as the backbone of a network infrastructure, 5G enables seamless interconnection among humans, machines, and objects. As a revolutionary mobile communication network, 5G not only facilitates interpersonal communication but also delivers immersive user experiences such as augmented reality, virtual reality, and ultra-high-definition 3D videos. Moreover, it addresses communication challenges between individuals and objects, as well as among objects themselves, meeting the demands of IoT applications including mobile healthcare, smart homes, and industrial control. Ultimately, 5G is poised to become a pivotal new infrastructure driving the digital, networked, and intelligent transformation of economies and societies worldwide. China has spearheaded the global adoption of 5G technology, boasting the world's largest 5G network. By the end of 2020, over 718,000 5G base stations had been deployed, providing comprehensive coverage in all prefecturelevel cities. The number of 5G terminal connections has exceeded 200 million. The significant role of 5G in fostering economic growth, enhancing societal well-being, and serving the populace continues to evolve, emerging as a critical catalyst for high-quality economic development. China's leadership in 5G development sets a global benchmark, positioning it as a key transformative force in global development.

E. "Rapidly Developing Chinese Cities"

It offers a comprehensive overview of the construction and evolution of several key Chinese urban centers, encompassing Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, Wuhan, and Hangzhou, spanning multiple decades. Beyond documenting the rapid urbanization process, the film delves into the challenges arising from this swift expansion while also conducting a comparative examination of the living standards, work environments, and educational landscapes within these locales. Through its meticulous analysis, the documentary provides an impartial depiction of China's journey towards achieving intelligent urban development.

F. "The Story of One Hundred Million People's Poverty Alleviation"

This documentary, produced by the audio and video department of Xinhua News Agency, comprises three episodes titled "A Centenary Mission," "Finding the Way in China," and "Striving for All." It narrates the narrative of China's poverty alleviation campaign, which, between 2016 and 2020, successfully lifted the last 100 million impoverished mountainous farmers out of poverty. This effort propelled all 1.4 billion Chinese citizens into an era of national prosperity, marking strides towards a modern and robust nation.

G. "My Beautiful Countryside"

Presented in the form of a "travelogue," this documentary invites viewers on a journey through various picturesque rural landscapes in central China. Reporters lead the audience to explore local customs, rural tourism attractions, and sustainable agricultural practices, showcasing the construction and evolution of modern China's rural areas. It dispels the notion of the countryside as impoverished and backward, depicting lush greenery and pristine waters akin to treasures. The comfortable living conditions, including small villas in every household, rival those of urban cities, enticing many urban youths to embrace rural life.

H. "Development of Education in China's New Era"

This documentary chronicles the reform and evolution of preschool, primary, and higher education in 21st-century China. Basic education has become fully subsidized, with a total of 498,300 schools across all levels and types by 2023, catering to 291 million students. Preschool education boasts a 91.1% gross enrollment rate, encompassing 274,400 kindergartens nationwide, attended by 40.9298 million children. Among them, 236,400 are inclusive kindergartens, accommodating 37.1701 million children. The consolidation rate for compulsory nine-year education stands at 95.7%. The nation hosts 143,500 ordinary primary schools, serving 108 million students, 52,300 junior high schools with 52.4369 million enrolled students, 15,400 ordinary high schools with 28.0363 million students, and 7,085 secondary vocational education schools with 12.9846 million students. The gross enrollment rate for higher education stands at 60.2%, with 3,074

higher education institutions enrolling 47.6319 million college students, including 3.2729 million master's students and 612,500 doctoral students.

I. Beijing Winter Olympics and Hangzhou Asian Games

Hosting the Modern Olympic Games stands as the highest honor for a host city. Beijing, China, successfully hosted both the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics, making it the only city worldwide to accomplish such a feat, a milestone of immense significance in Olympic history. The Beijing Olympics symbolizes China's new development paradigm, narrates the nation's narrative, and embodies the Olympic spirit, serving as a beacon for global peace.

The 19th Asian Games held in Hangzhou, China, in 2023 marked the third instance of China hosting the continent's highest-level international comprehensive sports event, following the 1990 Beijing Asian Games and the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games. The Hangzhou Asian Games saw unprecedented participation from Asian countries and athletes, underscoring its historical significance.

J. Chinese Cuisine

The documentary "China on the Bite of the Tongue" vividly showcases the characteristics and culinary techniques of thousands of unique dishes from across China. The film is visually captivating, rich in color, and meticulously detailed, enticing the audience's taste buds and offering a feast for the eyes. It extensively employs close-up shots to highlight the food's textures, emphasizing its sensory appeal. Food takes center stage in "China on the Bite of the Tongue," with the camera focusing on ingredients, utensils, and the dedicated individuals behind the dishes. Through a combination of wide-aperture shots and intimate close-ups, the documentary weaves together mouthwatering narratives and stunning landscapes, evoking both hunger and awe. Additionally, it has spurred the online sale of numerous specialty food items from regions spanning the Yangtze River.

K. Chinese Tourist Attractions

The documentaries "Aerial Photography of China" and "Beautiful China" offer aerial perspectives of China's natural wonders and cultural landmarks, including the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Terracotta Warriors, Potala Palace, Guilin landscapes, West Lake in Hangzhou, Sanya's coastline, Mount Huangshan's sunrise, Harbin's ice sculptures, the vast grasslands of Inner Mongolia, and more. These films also capture local customs, festivals, and activities, providing a comprehensive overview of China's diverse tourist attractions.

2.3 Survey Methods and Tools

Researchers created and administered a questionnaire titled "Investigating the International Communication of China's Modernization Construction Stories by Chinese College Students on Social Media" to survey 60 participating college students, to understand the experimental conditions. This questionnaire comprised six dimensions with ten questions, detailed in Table 1.

Simultaneously, these students conducted online surveys among overseas netizens who engaged with their social media posts to evaluate the effectiveness of international communication. To achieve this, they utilized a customized questionnaire called the "Survey on Overseas Netizens' Understanding of China's Development Status," consisting of six dimensions and thirteen questions, as outlined in Table 2. The development of this questionnaire drew on relevant instruments used in previous studies by Guo (2018) and Ma (2015). Before formal implementation, the questionnaire underwent pilot testing and several rounds of revisions, yielding an overall Cronbach's alpha value of 0.87, indicating strong internal consistency.

3. Experimental Results and Analysis

The experimental survey data underwent statistical analysis using SPSS 22.0 and is presented in the table below. Analysis of Table 1 reveals that the average monthly English writing volume of the 60 junior college students participating in the experiment was approximately 1,000 words, while the average monthly translation volume was about 800 words. Surprisingly, the average monthly English posting volume was zero, indicating suboptimal performance in the English writing course, with an average score of 67.24 (out of 100). However, following a 20-week experiment spanning a semester, their average monthly English writing amount through online communication with netizens surged to 5,470 words, marking a remarkable 447% increase.

Additionally, the average monthly AI translation and proofreading volume soared to 5,090 words, reflecting a 536% increase. The average number of English posts per capita, along with the average number of likes and followers per capita, and the average number of English exchanges with foreign netizens, stands at 196. This extensive English communication has honed their writing and translation skills significantly, leading to a substantial improvement in their English proficiency. Consequently, the average score for the English writing course at the end of the second semester (which comprises two semesters) stands at 86.57 points, representing a notable 28.75% increase. While this communication model demands a high level of English communication speed, students with weaker English application abilities may encounter significant challenges. Nonetheless, AI offers the potential for enhancing translation speed, and with continued practice, their English proficiency is poised for significant enhancement.

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Self-Media International Communication Situations = 60 students	Mean	Sig p
Pre-experiment monthly average English writing volume per son (words)	≈1000	
Monthly average English writing volume per person for online interactions with netizens during the experiment (words)	5470±19.47	
Percentage of increase	447%	.000***
Pre-experiment monthly average translation volume per person (words)	≈800	
Monthly average AI-augmented translation review volume per person during the experiment (words)	5090±18.35	
Percentage of increase	536%	.000***
The average number of English posts per person before the experiment (posts)	0	
Average number of English posts per person during the experiment (posts)	37±1.33	.000***
The average number of likes and followers gained per English post during the experiment (person-times)	5683±20.59	
The average number of English interactions with overseas netizens per person during the experiment (person-times)	196±4.63	
Pre-experiment average score in English writing course (out of 100 points)	67.24±2.11	
Post-experiment average score in English writing course (points)	86.57±2.92	
Percentage improvement in English writing course scores	28.75%	.000***

Table 1: College Students' Participation in International Communication through Self-Media

<.001***

Throughout the 20-week self-media communication experiment, a comprehensive survey was conducted among 1,183 overseas netizens. Statistical analysis showed that 39.48% were aged 18 to 25, 46.67% were between 26 and 40, and 13.85% were 41 or older, indicating a majority of young adults between 18 and 40. Merely 0.59% had visited China previously. A significant portion, 78.28%, of those with knowledge of China primarily relies on domestic media, often characterized by negative narratives; however, domestic media coverage is susceptible to the relationships between countries and China. Merely 27.39% possess a genuine understanding of China, albeit colored by their respective nation's relations with China. Remarkably, approximately 17-22%, had experienced Chinese cuisine or frequently utilized Chinese products. In the latter phase of the experiment, 81.49% of surveyed netizens subscribed to and bookmarked the videos posted by Chinese college students regarding China's modernization and development. They responded positively to this form of self-media video communication, acquiring direct insights into China's economic development, domestically manufactured goods, and urban growth scenarios. They expressed astonishment at China's rapid development pace, which stood in stark contrast to the negative narratives prevalent in their local context. A significant portion, 23.25%, expressed a desire to learn Chinese and glean insights from China's experiences, while an impressive 71.77% expressed a desire to visit China to study its developmental journey and potentially adapt it to their own country's progress. Furthermore, their professional growth benefited from this newfound understanding.

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Table 2: Online Survey on Foreign Netizens' Understanding of China			
Survey Items	Pre- experiment (People, %)	During Experiment (People, %)	Sig P
Respondents		1183, 100.00	
18-25 (Age)	1	467, 39.48	
26-40 (Age)	/	552, 46.67	
>41(Age)		164, 13.85	
Number of people who have visited China.	7, 0.59	24, 2.03	.000***
Number of people who mainly learn about China through domestic media sources.	926, 78.28		
Number of people who now watch our videos on China's development situation frequently.		964, 81.49	
Number of people who know China's population size.	165, 13.95	837, 70.75	.000***
Number of people with a general understanding of China's economic development situation.	324, 27.39	1126, 95.18	.000***
Number of people are aware that China's modernization and construction are progressing rapidly.	291, 24.60	1115, 94.25	.000***
Number of people who know that Made-in-China products are bestsellers globally.	433, 36.60	1079, 91.21	.000***
Number of people who regularly use Chinese products.	204, 17.20	855, 72.27	.000***
Number of people who understand and have tried Chinese cuisine.	261, 22.06	736, 62.21	.000***
Number of people who are aware that Chinese cities are clean and tidy.	85, 7.19	947, 80.05	.000***
Number of people who know that China's high-speed rail network covers the entire country within 10 hours.	107, 9.04	893, 75.49	.000***
Number of people who know that mobile payments are widely used in China.	93, 7.86	784, 66.27	.000***
Number of people who wish to travel to China.	126, 10.65	849, 71.77	.000***
Number of people preparing to learn Chinese and gain experience from China.	52, 4.40	275, 23.25	.000***

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<.001***

4. Conclusion

Analysis of experimental survey data reveals that the experiment on China's self-media modernization among college students has yielded positive outcomes. Firstly, college students' English writing proficiency has significantly improved through online interactions with netizens, enhancing their cross-cultural communication skills. Concurrently, China's modernization progress is disseminated globally via self-media platforms through video/documentary formats, enabling netizens from diverse nations to intuitively grasp China's developmental trajectory. Many individuals aspire to visit China to learn Chinese and gain insights from its rapid developmental success, which can significantly enhance their career prospects. Through self-media and other communication tools, this experiment effectively showcased the multifaceted appeal of China's national image, emphasizing attributes like reliability, friendliness, and respect.

This endeavor markedly enhanced the efficacy and reach of international communication. Leveraging the diverse communication modalities of new media technologies, it heralded a new era in crafting the national image. By integrating visual, auditory, and interactive elements, the portrayal of China's national image became more vivid, comprehensive, and three-dimensional, fostering a deeper understanding and emotional connection among international audiences. This initiative significantly bolstered the quality and efficacy of international image dissemination, laying a robust groundwork for securing advantages in the global public opinion arena and meticulously crafting a trustworthy, amicable, and highly esteemed Chinese national image. Foreign netizens also perceive this self-media short video dissemination model as intuitive, concise, and clear. This communication mode demands rapid English expression, posing significant challenges for students with limited English proficiency. They can leverage AI to enhance translation speed, leading to notable improvements in their English proficiency over time.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Ying Tao is a student majoring in English education, School of English Studies, Zhejiang International Studies University. Her research interests include TEFL and education studies.

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