



Cultural Translation and Meaning Reproduction: International Students' Cognitive Restructuring of China-chic Brands

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Abstract. International students in China are important disseminators in external communication. Their cognition of Chinese culture and brands directly influences their attitudes and behaviors in external communication. This paper takes the china-chic brands that have been booming in recent years as the research samples, and based on in-depth interviews, explores the external communication effects of the symbolic system that integrates the authenticity of Chinese culture and the modern consumption logic. The study finds that the cross-cultural decoding of international students in China is influenced by a two-dimensional cognitive schema and forms four types: the universal value type that focuses on the functional characteristics of products, the exotic imagination type that centers on the curiosity about oriental symbols, the innovative fashion type that attaches importance to the expression of modern fashion, and the authentic exploration type that traces back to the charm of the cultural core. By expanding Hall's cultural stratification theory, this paper proposes the cross-cultural non-exclusive superimposed identification hierarchy of international students in China towards the functional layer, aesthetic layer, emotional layer and conceptual layer of china-chic brands, and based on this, puts forward the strategic paths for the communication of china-chic brands to international students in China.

Keywords. China-chic brands, International students in China, Encoding and decoding, Cultural identity, External communication

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1 Introduction

The "Global 500 Brands 2024" report indicates that a total of 50 brands from China were selected, ranking third in the number of selected brands among all countries. Among them, the emerging forces represented by china-chic brands are particularly eye-catching. In the past few years, china-chic brands such as Li-Ning, White Rabbit, and Florasis have emerged one after another, leading the new transformation of the Chinese consumer market with an innovative attitude.

China-Chic Brands is a concept that is easy to recognize, but its definition and boundaries are rather ambiguous. It is worth noting that before 2018, china-chic brands mainly referred to some niche brands created by Chinese local designers. However, after Li-Ning's "Wu Tao" collection made its debut at New York Fashion Week, china-chic brands gradually acquired a deeper cultural connotation: brands that, by deeply exploring cultural genes, reshape brand value through original design and independent innovation, and successfully attract young consumers (Xiang&Chen, 2022). This transformation is not only an upgrade of business strategies but also reflects the awakening of cultural confidence and national pride.

As the china-chic trend has gradually become a stable and widespread social aesthetic fashion and consumption craze, china-chic brands have also "radiated to many fields such as literature, art, technology, cultural and tourism, and media" (Zong&Liu, 2022). The booming of china-chic consumption marks a paradigm innovation of traditional culture in the context of consumerism. That is, china-chic brands are reshaping the cultural consumption landscape through the modern translation of traditional culture. This transformation is not only reflected in the cultural and economic effects in the domestic market but also harbors the potential for global dissemination.

In recent years, relying on the continuously improving product quality and design standards, more and more china-chic brands have gone global. The awareness of Chinese brands among foreigners has also been rising during this process. Among them, as "outsider" experiencers and disseminators of Chinese culture, international students are not only important "others" who consume Chinese brands but also, to a certain extent, serve as the "bridge group" for the cross-cultural communication of Chinese brands (Zhao et al., 2015). Their cognition and attitudes towards china-chic brands that contain the genes of traditional Chinese culture form a unique sample for

observing the construction of cross-cultural identity.

2 Theoretical Foundation and Research Questions

2.1 International Communication of China-chic Brands

The research on the international communication of china - chic brands has become a hot topic in the academic field in recent years. The rise of this phenomenon originates from the value recognition of national culture by the younger generation of consumers. In essence, it is a dual - trend form with physical brands as the carrier and traditional culture as the core (Yan, 2022). According to the query results of CNKI, the relevant research has increased explosively since 2018, covering many fields such as economic trade, art design and cultural communication.

With the dual drive of local cultural consciousness and supply chain innovation, china-chic brands are accelerating their entry into the global market. Scholars have carried out research from multiple perspectives such as culture, brand, channels, and national strategies, focusing on the challenges and strategies in their internationalization process. Researches from a cultural perspective not only pay attention to excavating the cultural connotations such as traditional festivals and philosophical thoughts, and encoding the symbols of excellent traditional Chinese culture into the design of china-chic products (Ji et al., 2024), but also emphasize that china-chic brands can achieve brand upgrading through "abundant text presentation", "deeply exploring the essence of national treasures", and "creating cultural identity" (Wang & Jin, 2021).

Researches from the brand perspective not only focus on brand image positioning, china-chic narratives, and differential competition strategies (Niu, 2022), but also discuss the international marketing strategies of china-chic brands in combination with the results of market research (Liu,et al., 2024). Ma Rongzhen (2021)pointed out that china-chic brands have problems such as insufficient depth and low awareness in overseas communication, and advocated enhancing brand influence by reconstructing international communication strategies .

Researches from the perspective of communication channels explore how to integrate the advantages of new media and traditional media to build a diversified communication matrix. For example, Che Yumeng and others took china-chic beauty brands as examples and summarized their experiences during the "going global"

process, such as paying attention to the segmentation of consumers in overseas markets, adopting different strategies for different countries in cross - cultural communication, and making good use of social media platforms, short - video platforms, and e - commerce platforms (Che & Fan, 2022).

Researches from the perspective of national strategic communication focus on the impact of the overseas communication of china-chic brands on the country's cultural soft power, believing that china-chic brands can convey Chinese culture and values to the world (Yao & Li, 2018). Wang Xiaoxiao and others proposed that the "going global" of china-chic brands can be achieved by adapting to habits and fields, finding the greatest common cultural divisor between the china-chic field and foreign fields, and realizing the transformation from "being shaped by others" to "self-shaping" (Wang & Wei, 2023). Hu Yu and others took the "china-chic" coffee shop as a case to reveal a new international communication paradigm that consolidates the value foundation with a sense of cultural authenticity, enhances the communication tension with creative expressions, and improves the cultural affinity through life experiences (Hu & Chen, 2024).

The above-mentioned studies jointly provide theoretical support and practical references for improving the international communication effectiveness of china-chic brands. However, it is worth noting that in the existing studies, there is relatively little attention paid to the audience perspective, and most of the related studies focus on the domestic market, discussing the cognition and preferences of domestic consumers for china-chic brands (Wang & Fan, 2024). The research on the cultural backgrounds, consumption habits, and aesthetic needs of overseas audiences is still relatively weak. This study focuses on international students, a special group with the characteristics of cultural intermediaries, to provide a unique audience perspective for understanding the global communication of china-chic brands.

2.2 Cross-cultural Identity of Brands

The waves of globalization and digitization have profoundly reshaped the cultural logic of brand communication. Contemporary brand communication has gone beyond the scope of traditional marketing strategies and evolved into a process of symbolic game and value co-creation among different cultures, thus promoting the research on cross-cultural brand identity to shift from one-way output to multi-directional interaction and from cultural adaptation to negotiation of multiple meanings (Shi & Tong, 2022).

Since the 1950s, when American scholar Erikson put forward the theory of cultural identity, this theory has provided important inspiration for analyzing the flow of symbolic meanings and value co-creation in cross-cultural brand communication. Cultural identity originally referred to the sense of belonging of an individual to the culture of a group (such as a nation) formed through long-term living in that group. Berry and others believed that "cultural identity refers to the degree to which an individual's own cognition, attitude, and behavior tend to be consistent with those of the majority of members in a certain culture" (Berry & Annis, 1974). Hall, known as the "father of cross-cultural communication", pointed out that cultural identity is formed through interaction with others and is manifested as "identity in difference" and "difference in identity" (Hall, 1988).

Cross-cultural brand identity occurs among groups of different cultures. The academic community's theoretical exploration of cross-cultural brand identity presents a multi-dimensional perspective, and its theoretical evolution shows distinct characteristics of paradigm shift (Gong & Tu, 2017). From the 1970s to the 1980s, the cultural imperialism paradigm dominated the early research. Scholars represented by Tomlinson criticized that Western brands shaped passive cultural identity through the output of consumer ideology but ignored the subjective choice space of the audience. In the 1990s, the theories of interculturalism and the third space emerged, emphasizing the dynamic negotiation and hybridity of cross-cultural identity (Zou, 2007; Zha, 2011). The proposal of Berry's acculturation theory further revealed the tension between individual agency and structural constraints in the construction of cross-cultural brand identity (Berry, 1992).

Since the 21st century, Robertson's theory of "glocalization" and Appadurai's "perspective of fluidity" have propelled the research on cross-cultural brand identity towards a two-way interaction between global symbols and local practices, marking a complete shift in the research paradigm of cross-cultural brand identity (Ouyang & Liang, 2005). Empirical studies during this period have confirmed the evolution of cultural identity from an "either-or" logic to an "both/and" logic, and digital technology has intensified the liquid characteristics of brand identity. Scholars such as Fan Hong have pointed out that cultural identity emphasizes cultural differences, which may give rise to the theory of cultural superiority, while cross-cultural identity is about integrating cultural commonalities on the basis of respecting differences, and constructing consensus through equal cultural dialogue and mutual learning among civilizations (Fan & Cui, 2023).

Although the deepening of theoretical connotations has promoted the research on cross-cultural brand identity to return from strategic analysis to the cultural essence, the current research still faces two major challenges: First, under the dominance of Western-centered discourse, existing theories have insufficient explanatory power for South-South cross-cultural communication. In fact, china-chic brands are neither a pure reproduction of local culture nor a simple imitation of Western-dominated globalized commodities. Instead, they have constructed a cultural discourse system with Chinese subjectivity through the creative mutual construction of excellent traditional Chinese culture and modern fashion culture (Xue & Li, 2022).

Second, the tendency of instrumental rationality has led most existing studies to simplify cultural identity into a market segmentation tool (He, et al., 2017), but to a certain extent, it has ignored the equal dialogue among cross-cultural subjects. The process of international students in China decoding and then identifying with china-chic brands is a process in which cultural subjects establish a new meaning system in the interaction between "self" and "other". It is neither simple assimilation nor alienation, but a creative translation and regeneration of cultural symbols.

Therefore, for the research on the cross-cultural identity of international students towards china-chic brands, guided by the theory of interculturalism, it is necessary to adopt a dynamic symbolic interaction analysis framework to analyze the decoding and meaning negotiation process of the symbols of china-chic brands by international students during cross-cultural contacts, as well as the identity reconstruction mechanism, and explore the identity generation mechanism under the tension between globalization and localization.

2.3 Research Questions

In summary, the research on the international communication of china-chic brands mostly focuses on the strategic optimization of communication subjects, but rarely explores the construction mechanism of cross-cultural brand identity from the dimension of audience cognition. When the research perspective shifts to the process of audience decoding and identity realization, the unique value of the group of international students in China as "cultural translators" becomes prominent - they are not only immersed in their native cultural system but also continuously influenced by the target culture. This enables them to trigger the mirror reflection of their home culture while decoding china-chic brands and activate the creative potential of cross-cultural connections.

Studying the cognitive practices of this group towards china-chic brands not only provides a differentiated perspective for the cross-cultural communication of china-chic brands but also helps to reveal the deep logic of the reproduction of the meanings of cultural symbols in heterogeneous contexts. This study aims to explore the following core questions:

- 1.What are the characteristics of china-chic brands that attract international students in China?
- 2.How do international students in China decode the cultural information of china-chic brands?
- 3.How does the cultural cognition formed by international students through decoding affect their cross-cultural identity towards china-chic brands?

The above questions aim to reveal the dynamic mechanism of the flow of cultural symbols and the generation of identity in the context of globalization by analyzing the decoding logic of china-chic brands by international students in China. Answering these questions not only points to the strategic optimization of the international communication of china-chic brands but also touches on the structural breakthrough of the theory of cross-cultural brand identity, thus promoting the construction of a more explanatory theoretical framework for the cross-cultural communication of brands.

3 Research Methods and Sample Selection

Previous studies on the cultural identity of international students mostly adopted quantitative methods (Yao, 2021). However, cultural identity in brand communication has significant characteristics of constructiveness. In particular, there is a theoretical contradiction between the fluidity of cultural identity and the stability of brand symbols. The cultural identity scale can only measure consumers' sense of cultural belonging to brands, and it is difficult to capture the dynamic reconstruction of brand identity in the digital age, especially the variation of meanings during the localization process of china-chic brands overseas.

Based on this, this study adopts the interpretivist paradigm and explores the symbolic decoding and emotional experiences of international students towards china-chic brands through in-depth interviews. The research design follows the principle of theoretical saturation and implements a two-stage iterative verification: In the first stage, interviews with 16 typical samples were completed in November 2023,

and the constant comparative method was used until the density of new concepts was lower than 5%. In the second stage, 12 samples were supplemented in May 2024, and the theoretical stability was tested through the cross-time interval verification method. This longitudinal tracking design reduces the interference of researcher's presuppositions through the time interval and realizes the verification of theoretical saturation from the judgment of concept repetition to the structural stability.

Table 1. Statistical Table of Interview Participants

Serial Number	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Duration in China	Serial Number	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Duration in China
S1	Female	24	South Korea	More than 10 years	S15	Female	24	Italy	11 months
S2	Female	28	Kyrgyzstan	5 years	S16	Female	26	Russia	1 year and 3 months
S3	Female	27	Germany	3 months	S17	Female	22	France	3 months
S4	Male	19	South Korea	6 years	S18	Male	20	Zambia	1 year
S5	Female	30	Vietnam	5 months	S19	Female	22	Russia	4 months
S6	Female	20	Japan	More than 10 years	S20	Male	31	Italy	9 months
S7	Female	19	Japan	3 months	S21	Male	22	Brazil	2 years
S8	Male	31	Turkey	5 years	S22	Female	29	India	4 years
S9	Female	19	Thailand	3 months	S23	Male	26	Mexico	1 year and 6 months
S10	Female	30	Indonesia	6 years	S24	Female	23	Egypt	8 months
S11	Male	22	Yemen	2 years	S25	Male	27	Pakistan	3 years
S12	Male	35	The United States	4 years	S26	Female	25	South Africa	1 year
S13	Male	25	Afghanistan	8 years	S27	Male	24	Spain	2 years
S14	Female	21	Germany	3 months	S28	Female	25	Malaysia	1 year and 6 months

To ensure the validity of the research, the researcher completed the calibration of cultural concepts in advance, compiled a case manual containing 12 typical china-chic brands.. A bilingual interview strategy was adopted to reduce language barriers. The interviews were mainly conducted offline, and the interview duration ranged from 20 to 40 minutes. A small number of interviewees were interviewed via video call. All interviews were recorded throughout the process through the Xunfei Hearing platform, and eventually, interview transcripts of approximately 150,000 words were formed.

The samples were recruited on the campuses of Shanghai Jiao Tong University and East China Normal University through a combination of accidental sampling and snowball sampling. Eventually, 28 international students in Shanghai who had consumption experiences of china-chic brands were obtained. The sample characteristics showed diversity: there were 17 females and 11 males; the age ranged from 19 to 35 years old ($M = 24.86$ years old); the length of stay in China ranged from 3 months to more than 10 years ($M = 2.77$ years), reflecting a gradient distribution of the depth of cultural immersion.

4 The Representations of China-chic Brands in the Eyes of International Students

The researcher utilized the word frequency analysis function of the DiVoMiner platform to conduct a word frequency count of the keywords used by international students in their evaluations of china-chic brands. Among the evaluations of china-chic brands by international students, the words "modern" and "traditional" emerged as the most frequently occurring terms.

This may be related to the types of china-chic brands that international students often come into contact with. For example, international students who often come into contact with fast-moving consumer goods brands such as Tsingtao Brewery tend to equate china-chic brands with domestic brands. Those who often come into contact with clothing brands such as Li-Ning are inclined to define china-chic as the application of traditional cultural elements in modern design. While international students who come into contact with beauty brands such as Florasis in their daily lives generally believe that china-chic is an innovative practice that reconstructs modern fashion with ancient aesthetic styles. These brands form the frame of reference for their overall perception of china-chic brands.

However, as international students are exposed to a more diverse range of china-chic brands, their interpretation of the concept of china-chic gradually goes beyond a single dimension and shifts towards emphasizing the creative mutual construction of traditional culture and modern fashion. They are increasingly aware that china-chic brands demonstrate a deep integration of "tradition" and "modernity": china-chic brands are not simply a collage of cultural elements or a superficial improvement of traditional items, but a profound integration of traditional aesthetic genes and modern design languages.

For example, the "Concentric Lock Lipstick" launched by Florasis, on the one hand, incorporates traditional Chinese cultural elements such as the concentric lock, peony patterns, and the story of "Zhang Chang Drawing His Wife's Eyebrows" into the product design. On the other hand, it pays attention to modern needs in terms of functionality. Its color matching conforms to contemporary aesthetics, and the raw materials use safe ingredients such as flower essences and Chinese herbal medicine extracts. During the research and development process, intelligent temperature control technology and nanoscale grinding technology are innovatively applied, which not only ensures the product quality but also enhances the user experience.



Figure 1. Florasis' Concentric Lock Lipstick

This "integration of tradition and modernity" is interpreted by international students as "the modern translation and functional rebirth of traditional culture" - traditional culture is no longer just a decoration, but is deeply bound to the practicality of the product. S3 from Germany believes that "Tea Bai Dao uses traditional Chinese tea as the base to create a variety of popular modern beverages with different flavors, which is in line with the modern living habits of young people."

In addition to the core representation of the "integration of tradition and modernity", "strong cultural color" also occupies a prominent position in the cognitive representation system of china-chic brands by international students. Specifically, china-chic brands use traditional cultural elements in product design and packaging through design languages. S2 from Kyrgyzstan said, "The hand-painted canvas shoe series launched by Warrior. Some of them feature classic images from ancient Chinese art. For example, when I saw the Jade Rabbit, I knew it was related to the Mid-Autumn Festival, and this also helped me understand Chinese culture better."

Moreover, thanks to the transformation and upgrading of China's manufacturing industry, china-chic brands have shown remarkable improvements in terms of technical standards, product design, and functional innovation. The research found that the interviewees generally recognized the quality upgrade of china-chic brands. For instance, S18 from Zambia emphasized, "Compared with different brands from all over the world, the quality of china-chic brands is really good." This technological innovation has enabled china-chic brands to successfully reverse the stereotypes of Chinese brands in the past, such as "cheap and low-end", "imitative and plagiarized", and "poor quality". Many international students believe that the unique design language and functional innovation of china-chic brands have created a unique brand experience.

5 The Decoding Types of China-chic Brands by International Students

The decoding of china-chic brands by international students is a process of cross-cultural translation, which is influenced by their "cognitive schema" (Hu Anning, 2020). The "cognitive schema" refers to the mental framework formed by an individual in a specific cultural environment, which is used to understand and interpret external information. Markus et al.'s self-construal theory reveals the influence mechanism of cultural differences on the cognitive process (Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S., 1991), providing a cognitive-psychological basis for this study to deconstruct the cognitive schema into the external cultural-distance dimension and the internal cultural-orientation dimension.

In terms of the external dimension, based on Hofstede's cultural-distance theory, the "cognitive schema" of international students can be divided into two types: "proximal isomorphic" and "distal heteromorphic". Groups with low cultural distance (such as students from East Asia and Southeast Asia) are more likely to trigger "proximal isomorphic" decoding due to the kinship between their home cultures and Chinese culture. Groups with high cultural distance (such as students from Europe and America) are more likely to trigger "distal heteromorphic" decoding because of the estrangement between their home cultures and Chinese culture.

In terms of the Intrinsic dimension, the "cognitive schema" of international students is mainly manifested as the choice of value orientation in cultural decoding, that is, whether to give priority to "cultural modernity" or "cultural traditionality".

Further analysis shows that the type of brand exposure and the accumulation of cultural capital jointly shape the decoding orientation of international students: international students who have high-frequency exposure to pop-up events and hot marketing of china-chic brands tend to form a modern value orientation, while those with experience in studying traditional culture are more likely to strengthen the anchoring of traditional values; international students who are exposed to more catering china-chic brands are more likely to activate modern decoding and focus on product function innovation; while those who are exposed to more beauty brands tend to conduct traditional decoding and pay attention to the aesthetic expression of cultural symbols.

When the external cultural distance dimension ("proximal isomorphic"/"distal heteromorphic") and the internal value orientation dimension ("cultural modernity"/"cultural traditionality") interact with each other, four decoding types are generated (as shown in Table 2): the universal value type focuses on the functional characteristics of products, the exotic imagination type focuses on the curiosity about oriental cultural symbols, the innovative fashion type attaches importance to the expression of the modern style of Chinese culture, and the authentic exploration type traces the core charm of Chinese culture.

Table 2. Types of Cross-cultural Decoding of China-chic Brands

Decoding Type	Cognitive Schema		Core Characteristics	Cultural conflict possibility
	External dimension	Intrinsic dimension		
the universal value type	distal heteromorphic	cultural modernity	Focus on the technology of brand products and the interests of consumers	High
the exotic imagination type		cultural traditionality	Focus on the exotic aesthetic features of the culture carried by the brand	Relatively high
the innovative fashion type	proximal isomorphic	cultural modernity	Recognize the fashion creativity of the culture of local brands	Relatively low
the authentic exploration type		cultural traditionality	Form a deep resonance with the connotations of traditional culture in the brands	Low

5.1 The Universal Value Type

The universal value type of decoding stems from the fact that international students view china-chic brands through the cognitive schema of "distal heteromorphic + cultural modernity". From the perspective of "the other", they go beyond cultural differences and pay more attention to product functions and universal values, and examine china-chic brands according to the standards used for international big brands. For example, S7 from Japan believes that *"Young people like us like to buy Florasis' cosmetics because they look nice. But the quality is not as good as that of Japanese products."*

This decoding method enables international students to break away from specific cultural symbols and extract common value concepts. For instance, S11 from Yemen connects the culture of china-chic brands with the patriotic feelings of the Chinese people. He said, *"I once saw online that Chinese people launched a campaign to buy Li-Ning products to support domestic brands. If I see someone wearing Li-Ning clothes on the street, I will subconsciously think that he is patriotic."*

The drawback of the universal value type of decoding lies in its excessive emphasis on the commonalities of cultures, which may weaken the cultural uniqueness and profound connotations of china-chic brands. Some international students simplify the application of traditional culture by china-chic brands as a market strategy to cater to the local consumer market, rather than a sincere expression of cultural inheritance. S12 from the United States said, *"Most of the time, when brands use traditional culture, it doesn't necessarily mean that they truly care about the culture, but rather they are catering to the market and consumers. If you were born in the United States, you may have grown up in a system that focuses a great deal on expressing your own opinions, which leads American brands to adopt more values of multiculturalism. If Chinese brands want to be competitive in the international market, they need to maintain a certain distance from their local culture."* In addition, the universal value type of decoding may blur the cultural authenticity of china-chic brands, reducing them to an empty shell of abstract values and failing to fully showcase the unique charm and innovative vitality of Chinese culture.

5.2 The Exotic Imagination Type

The exotic imagination type of decoding originates from the cognitive schema of "distal heteromorphic + cultural traditionality" of international students. From the

perspective of cultural outsiders, they focus on the traditional cultural load of china-chic brands and simplify the dense cultural symbols into a narrative of curiosity about the "mysterious East". S15 from Italy said, "*The culture from the East is really attractive to people on the other side of the world.*" However, the essence of this decoding is to transform china-chic culture into social currency. By purchasing cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum and other such behaviors, they display their cultural capital of the East and satisfy the curiosity in cross-cultural social interactions. In fact, it fails to truly achieve a deep decoding of the cultural connotations. Due to the sense of cultural alienation, international students find it difficult to deeply understand the connotations of the symbols. For example, S27 from Spain is confused about the concept of "Tao" in Li-Ning's "Wu Tao" series.

The drawback of the exotic imagination type of decoding lies in its simplification of the cultural connotations of china-chic brands into superficial oriental symbols, resulting in dual limitations in cross-cultural communication. Firstly, this decoding method narrows down china-chic brands to a "*niche existence that pleases Chinese culture enthusiasts*" (S17, France), ignoring their potential global value and restricting the expansion of the brand's international influence. Secondly, the decoding path that overly relies on Chinese-style elements enables foreign consumers to only appreciate the symbolic forms from an aesthetic level. However, due to the lack of cultural background, it is difficult for them to establish a deep emotional connection. S20 from Italy believes that "*China-chic brands pay more attention to traditional culture, but foreigners lack the corresponding cultural background. They only appreciate it from an aesthetic perspective and will not have a deeper connection.*"

5.3 The Innovative Fashion Type

The innovative fashion type of decoding stems from the cognitive schema of "proximal isomorphic + cultural modernity" of international students. International students adopting this decoding method can keenly capture the innovative genes of china-chic brands and regard them as a unique expression of modern Chinese popular culture. They compare china-chic brands with the brands in their home countries and are surprised to find that there are few brands similar to china-chic brands. S7 from Japan introduced, "*In Japan, the preferences of young people for brands have largely been westernized. Even for Japanese brands, consumers will prefer the European and American styles to some extent under the same conditions. China-chic brands in China*

are good at packaging their own national culture, and Chinese young people love their own culture very much." Regarding this phenomenon, S4, a Korean of Japanese descent, explained, *"The national culture itself exists, but it will not be integrated with the brand fashion culture."* He believes that *"China-chic brands represent China's fashion culture and are also a manifestation of being free from westernization."*

There are two reasons why the innovative fashion type of decoding can break through cross-cultural conflicts. On the one hand, china-chic brands create a local experience through a sense of technology, fashion, and interactivity, triggering a global resonance with modern language and avoiding the cognitive conflicts caused by cultural hegemony. On the other hand, this decoding method deconstructs china-chic symbols into transplantable "cultural modules", allowing international students to reinterpret them based on their own cultural backgrounds and breaking cultural stereotypes. This decoding not only retains the cultural uniqueness but also achieves open communication through innovation, establishing an equal dialogue in a cross-cultural context and breaking through the dilemma of traditional conflicts.

5.4 The Authentic Exploration Type

The authentic exploration type of decoding originates from the cognitive schema of "proximal isomorphic + cultural traditionality" of international students. They can accurately capture the deep connotations of cultural symbols, distinguish the similarities and differences by comparing the homologous cultural symbols in their home countries, and conduct a detailed cultural tracing. This intercultural dialogue dispels the sense of strangeness. For example, S2 from Kyrgyzstan found that the names of many china-chic brands are derived from Chinese cultural classics, and she associated it with the fact that *"there are also similar brands in Kyrgyzstan whose names can be traced back to the national epic Manas."* S6 from Japan made an analogy between the china-chic brands of the Palace Museum and the cultural and creative products in Kyoto, and discovered the commonality of the creative expressions of national elements in different cultures. *"Historically, a lot of Japanese culture was absorbed from China. Even now, many cultures first become popular in China and then enter Japan."* This decoding method reflects the charm of traditional Chinese culture. International students regard china-chic brands as the creative carriers of traditional culture, and achieve a deep interpretation of the authenticity of the symbols in a cross-cultural context.

The reason why the authentic exploration type of decoding can break through

cross-cultural conflicts lies in its deep pursuit of cultural authenticity and the construction of cross-cultural resonance. For instance, S19 from Russia envies that china-chic brands can make consumers remember their own historical culture. This respect for cultural subjectivity breaks down the barriers of cultural centralism. *"China-chic brands are different from other Chinese brands because of culture. The former can provide some unique values, which not only make people more interested. For example, I really like the Hanfu elements in china-chic clothing, but also enable consumers to remember their own history and culture. This makes Chinese young people genuinely like these brands. Unfortunately, there are also many national brands in Russia, but they do not implement Russian national culture."* By distinguishing differences in similarities and retaining uniqueness in commonalities, the authentic exploration type of decoding achieves a deep cross-cultural understanding and value recognition, thus effectively breaking through the dilemma of cultural conflicts.

6 The Hierarchy of International Students' Identification with China-chic Brands

Edward Hall's cultural stratification theory divides cultural identity into three levels: "technical cultural identity", "explicit cultural identity" and "implicit cultural identity". Technical culture refers to specific practical norms and technical standards. Explicit culture refers to visible symbols, rituals and surface behaviors. Implicit culture involves deep structures such as values and beliefs.

Specifically, technical cultural identity focuses on the practicality and standardization of the technical attributes of products, and it is the easiest level of identity to achieve in cross-cultural communication. Explicit cultural identity involves a perceivable symbol system, which means that brands construct cultural difference labels through visual symbols, ritual behaviors, etc., and it is a relatively easy level of identity to achieve. Implicit cultural identity points to the spiritual resonance of the value system. It is the ultimate goal of brand culture communication and also the most difficult level of identity to achieve.

As mentioned above, based on the cultural distance dimension of the cognitive schema, the decoding practices of international students in China towards china-chic brands present remarkable typological characteristics: the universal value type and the exotic imagination type under the "distal heteromorphic" schema, as well as the innovative fashion type and the authentic exploration type under the "proximal

isomorphic" schema. Decoders of the universal value type, based on the cognitive framework of instrumental rationality, focus on the product quality and technical functional attributes of the brand. This decoding method corresponds to what Hall called "technical cultural identity", that is, the functional value identity achieved through technical rationality. On the other hand, decoders of the exotic imagination type, driven by the curiosity about cultural symbols, conduct the recoding practice of Chinese cultural elements from a semiotic perspective, transforming the cultural symbols carried by the brand into their own cultural capital and social currency. This value recognition at the aesthetic level echoes the "explicit cultural identity" in Hall's theory.

However, regarding the "implicit cultural identity" in Hall's original theory, the author proposes a dual deconstruction based on the decoding practices of international students towards china-chic brands: that is, the "implicit cultural identity" of china-chic brands can be divided into identity at the emotional level and identity at the conceptual level. Decoders of the innovative fashion type tend to define the essence of china-chic brands as the modern translation of traditional culture, believing that their modern and fashionable expressions dominate over traditional cultural symbols. This decoding method encourages international students to incorporate china-chic brands into an organic part of the global fashion discourse system. By constructing perceivable emotional bonds, it realizes the hierarchical progression from aesthetic resonance to emotional belonging, and finally forms the identity at the emotional level of the brand. Decoders of the authentic exploration type, through the in-depth tracing of cultural genes, identify the intertextual relationship between the brand concept and the subjectivity of Chinese culture in cross-cultural comparison. This cognitive practice not only completes the cognitive leap from cultural consumption to value conversion, but also triggers the generation of identity at the conceptual level of the brand.

The significance of this stratification of "implicit cultural identity" lies in the fact that it not only responds to the communication characteristics of the coexistence of "high-context hints and low-context interpretations" of cultural symbols in the digital age, but also provides an operational framework for china-chic brands for the "active expression of cultural genes", that is, reducing the perceived risk of cultural distance through the emotional level and completing the cross-context translation of values with the help of the conceptual level, thus helping china-chic brands to shift from "symbol-based" overseas expansion to "value-based" overseas expansion.

In conclusion, the four decoding types of china-chic brands by international students give rise to four levels of cross-cultural identity paradigms (as shown in Figure 2): (1)**Brand Function Level**, which focuses on the practical recognition of the technical attributes of products; (2)**Brand Aesthetic Level**, which emphasizes the aesthetic value resonance carried by cultural symbols; (3)**Brand Emotional Level**, which reflects the psychological belonging of cultural emotional connection; (4)**Brand Conceptual Level**, which reflects the deep fit of the brand's value concepts.



Figure 2. The Hierarchy of Cross-cultural Identification of China-chic Brands by International Students

6.1 Brand Function Level: Product Technology Identity

Function is the fundamental attribute of a product. The stability and innovation of product functions, the leading production methods, and the discourse power in technical standards will directly affect the formation of consumers' brand identity. Almost all the interviewed international students have an identity with the product technology of china-chic brands. With the improvement of China's social production level, the technical quality of Chinese brands represented by china-chic brands is becoming more and more stringent, and the product categories are becoming more and more abundant. S10 from Indonesia frankly said, "*Compared with different brands from all over the world, the quality of china-chic brands is really good.*"

International students are willing to identify with china-chic brands precisely because these brands can meet their specific functional needs and even exceed their expectations. S12 from the United States said, "*I bought a pair of Li-Ning shoes five years ago. The quality is very good and they are very durable. They haven't deformed after all these years. The functions of Li-Ning shoes are the best among the shoes I have ever worn.*" Product technology identity is the most basic level of cross-cultural identity. Nowadays, the challenges that china-chic brands face in obtaining

cross-cultural identity are no longer limited to improving product quality and functions, but rather lie in how to obtain a deeper level of brand identity from consumers.

6.2 Brand Aesthetic Level: Identity of Cultural Load

The so-called cultural load means that china-chic brands imitate classic shapes and traditional patterns in their images, or use elements of national culture for the design of appearance and packaging, or select special raw materials such as Chinese bamboo, wood, jade, purple sand ceramics, etc. during the processing, so as to showcase the perceptual beauty of Chinese culture. (Xiang & Bai, 2017). For example, Tea Baidao integrates design elements such as Chinese paintings and calligraphy into its milk tea cups, and the hand-painted models of Warrior shoes feature patterns like Chinese dragons and phoenixes. These cultural loads jointly contribute to the enhancement of the aesthetic value of china-chic brands.

Most of the interviewed international students hold a positive attitude towards the cultural loads of china-chic brands. This is because when international students use the decoding method of the exotic imagination type to conduct an interactive interpretation of china-chic brands, they find that these brands not only meet their imagination of the exoticism of the East, but also conform to the contemporary interpretation of the aesthetics of traditional Chinese utensils. For instance, S1 from South Korea believes that compared with the "minimalist style" beauty brands abroad, the prominent feature of Florasis is its extreme "exquisiteness". *"There are a great many exquisite artworks in the Palace Museum, and those designs really strike a chord with my aesthetics. Then Florasis launched the heart-shaped lock lipstick and the Palace Museum eyeshadow palette... In my eyes, Florasis' cosmetics are something extremely beautiful. I think even if I don't have an understanding of Chinese culture, I will still be attracted by them anyway."*

Overall, the identity of international students with the cultural loads of china-chic brands is essentially a differential appropriation of aesthetic symbols. However, the identity at the aesthetic level often can only be achieved on the basis of the functional level. A common phenomenon is that few international students will pay attention to and consume china-chic brands simply because they like the cultural loads of the brands. For the majority of international students, their functional needs for brand products come before their cultural and aesthetic needs.

6.3 Brand Emotional Level: Identity of Emotional Belonging

In the contemporary consumption landscape where globalization and localization are

intertwined, emotional identity has become the core bond for brands to establish deep-value connections. Some scholars have pointed out that most china-chic brands integrate traditional Chinese cultural elements into modern products. By awakening the national cultural complex of local consumers, they transform consumers' cultural confidence and patriotic enthusiasm into positive emotions towards the brand (Yuan, 2024). However, when china-chic brands cross geographical boundaries, relying solely on the narrative of national emotions is no longer sufficient to penetrate the barriers of heterogeneous cultures. Due to the existence of the "country of brand origin" effect, there is even a possibility that the audience's prejudice or discrimination against certain regions may lead to negative associations with the brand (Chen, Yu & Xue, 2019).

The interviews found that only international students who use the decoding methods of the innovative fashion type or the authentic exploration type for china-chic brands can develop an identity of emotional belonging to these brands. S9 from Thailand likes Florasis very much. She believes that *"It looks very nice, so I feel a little better when I use it for makeup."* Conversely, S8 from Turkey believes that *"It is only useful when the brand uses Chinese cultural elements that I am familiar with. If I see a china-chic brand using a Chinese ancient poem that I am not familiar with for marketing, I don't think it will affect my attitude towards the brand."*

For individuals in cross-cultural interactions, the role of emotional identity lies in triggering their deep resonance with the culture. To a certain extent, it can avoid confrontations in ideology and political stance and build a bridge for cultural communication. As S13 from Afghanistan said, *"Some Western countries will boycott some Chinese brands, but if I think it's illogical, it won't affect me."* S12 from the United States even stated, *"My ideological composition is already different from that of many other Americans. Some Americans will be suspicious of Chinese brands because of media reports."*

6.4 Brand Conceptual Level: Identity of Value Concepts

Value concepts are an important yardstick for people to measure good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and brands are the materialized expressions of value concepts. Taking Florasis' "Oriental cosmetics, nourishing the skin with flowers", Meijian's "Chinese delicacies, paired with good Meijian plum wine", and Warrior's "People-oriented, advocating sports, and promoting health" as examples, china-chic brands integrate tradition and modernity, innovatively interpreting cultural genes with modern values. They not only retain the cultural character, life attitude, and life interest of the

Chinese people but also showcase modern aesthetic connotations, ultimately forming a value core interwoven with tradition and modernity. For contemporary Chinese youth, china-chic is not just a consumption craze but also a way of life, becoming an important carrier for contemporary youth to express their individuality and cultural identity (Xing, 2021).

The highest level of international students' identification with china-chic brands is the identity of value concepts at the conceptual level. Similar to the "identity of emotional belonging", only international students who use the decoding methods of the authentic exploration type and the innovative fashion type for china-chic brands can form an identity of value concepts with these brands. Some international students highly appreciate the lifestyle reflected by china-chic brands. S5 from Vietnam said, *"I have bought china-chic incense and many similar things. I particularly like such romantic and beautiful things."*

However, only a few international students can achieve cultural identity at the conceptual level, mainly for three reasons. First, few china-chic brands pay attention to the construction of value concepts, which limits the communication foundation of identity at the conceptual level. Second, most international students are affected by cultural distance and differences in cognitive schemas, making it difficult for them to penetrate the surface of symbols and decode the cultural core of brand concepts. Third, the accumulation of cultural symbols by many international students has not reached the threshold, which hinders the qualitative change from "symbolic cognition" to "value internalization", further increasing the difficulty of achieving identity at the conceptual level.

7 Conclusions and Discussions

7.1 The Reconstruction of International Students' Cognition of China-chic Brands

The process of international students' cognitive construction of china-chic brands presents a differential decoding practice based on a two-dimensional cognitive schema (external cultural distance \times internal cultural orientation). Specifically, those with the "distal heteromorphic" cognitive schema exhibit the decoding characteristics of the universal value type under the modernity value orientation. For example, they recognize the "good quality and low price" of Luckin Coffee through technical rationality. Under the traditional value orientation, they form the exotic imagination

type of decoding. For example, they regard the cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum as "royal supplies" to show off to their friends. In contrast, those with the "proximal isomorphic" cognitive schema develop the innovative fashion type of decoding under the modernity orientation. For example, they appreciate the modern and fashionable expression of traditional Chinese culture by china-chic brands. Under the traditional orientation, they form the authentic exploration type of decoding. For example, they deeply ponder the cultural core behind china-chic brands.

This decoding practice is not a static type classification but a dynamic evolution process rooted in the cognitive schema. Those with the distal heteromorphic cognitive schema may experience a cognitive upgrade from the universal value type to the exotic imagination type, while those with the proximal isomorphic cognitive schema form a dynamic switch between the innovative fashion type and the authentic exploration type. In essence, this evolution trajectory not only includes the breakthrough of the existing cognitive schema but also involves the creative construction of a new cognitive framework. The decoding of china-chic brands by international students is not unique but can be composite. That is, they can both regard china-chic brands as a curiosity about oriental cultural symbols and interpret them as modern popular culture of local innovation in China.

7.2 The Multilayered Identification of China-chic Brands by International Students

The typological differences and dynamic changes in the cross-cultural decoding of china-chic brands by international students have driven the formation of four levels of cross-cultural identification with china-chic brands: functional, aesthetic, emotional, and conceptual. As the material foundation, functional level identification establishes initial trust through the objective verification of the technical attributes of products. Aesthetic level identification emphasizes the resonance of the aesthetic value carried by cultural symbols, and completes the initial accumulation of cultural capital through symbolic display. Emotional level identification is precipitated in innovative practices, dispels cultural barriers through fashion narratives, and constructs an emotional safety space. Conceptual level identification is ultimately achieved through value resonance, confirming the subjectivity of Chinese culture in cross-cultural comparison.

The above four levels of identification exhibit the characteristic of non-exclusivity and superposition. This phenomenon of the coexistence of multiple identifications confirms the cultural interaction theory proposed by Shan (2011): When china-chic brands discard the labels of cultural essentialism and achieve a

creative mutual construction between traditional elements and modernity, international students are able to realize the iterative update of their cognitive schemas in the cycle of "contact-decoding-reconstruction". The evolution of the levels of their cross-cultural brand identification is essentially a four-fold symphony of laying the foundation with technical rationality, reproducing symbolic meanings, accumulating emotional energy, and confirming cultural subjectivity. It not only breaks through the stereotypical cognition of "Orientalism" (Dirlik, 1996) but also avoids falling into cultural conservatism, and ultimately forms the coexistence of multiple identifications at the technical, aesthetic, emotional, and conceptual levels.

7.3 Hierarchical Strategies for the External Communication of China-chic Brands

The external communication of china-chic brands needs to implement hierarchical strategies based on the cultural distance theory and differences in cognitive schemas. For the distal heteromorphic group, it is necessary to complete the cultural ice-breaking with the technical narrative at the functional level, and then adopt flexible coding at the aesthetic level, strengthen the traditional narrative, and enhance cultural attractiveness. In particular, transform the symbols of Oriental aesthetics into cultural spectacles with strong visual impact, thereby triggering the cultural curiosity of this part of the group. For example, Bosideng collaborated with French designers to integrate Suzhou embroidery techniques into down jackets, achieving a global expression of traditional craftsmanship. In terms of communication channel strategies, it is possible to strengthen in-depth cooperation with local KOLs and showcase the symbols of Oriental aesthetics through forms such as unboxing and trial videos.

For the proximal isomorphic group, since this part of the group already has a strong cultural affinity, it is necessary to weaken the symbol curiosity, focus on the modernity narrative, and strengthen the emotional connection to break through the shallow resonance with conceptual identity. On the one hand, china-chic brands can deeply explore the shared cultural genes, activate traditional symbols through modern design language, and convey modern aesthetics while activating collective memories. On the other hand, china-chic brands can also combine regional cultural elements with china-chic genes, not only retaining their own cultural core but also integrating local cultural characteristics. For example, when the Chinese beauty brand Florasis entered the Japanese market, it designed promotional posters and brochures that conformed to Japanese aesthetics, enabling Japanese consumers to better understand Florasis' product features and brand culture. In terms of communication channel

strategies, challenge activities can be launched on social media platforms to expand the reach through the fission of UGC content. At the same time, attach importance to the role of KOCs, establish brand private domain communities locally.

In the communication ecosystem interwoven with the tensions of globalization and localization, china-chic brands are not only rooted in the genes of excellent traditional Chinese culture but also integrate the codes of modern popular culture. They are both the cultural products of the glocalization process and the practical tools for deconstructing the discourse of Western modernity. They not only carry the collective appeal for the revival of traditional culture but also contain the possibility of generating new cultural forms. They not only break through the cultural spectacle narrative under the gaze of "Orientalism" but also realize the concrete dissemination of national soft power through commodities as the medium.

In conclusion, the combination of "tradition" and "modernity" in china-chic brands is not a simple collage of elements. Instead, it constructs a participatory Oriental aesthetic system through technical intermediaries and reconstructs modern consumption. The essence of their cultural innovation is the construction practice of the "third space". As Homi K. Bhabha said, in the cultural contact zone, a hybrid form that is neither traditional nor Western is generated (Bhabha, 2012). With the unique cultural representation of the interembeddedness of "tradition-modernity", china-chic brands interact with the cognitive schemas of international students and construct a new paradigm of cross-cultural identification for the group of international students.

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