



From Memes to Habitus: The Mechanisms of Cross-Cultural Transmission and Bodily Internalisation in Becoming Chinese

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Abstract. In early 2026, the Internet meme Becoming Chinese spread widely across global social media. The scale of this phenomenon was not merely a chance occurrence of meme propagation, but was further fuelled by participants' transformation of cross-cultural behaviour—cultivated through remote habitus—into a sustainable practice. Therefore, this study wants to investigate how those actual online memes slowly turn from a fragmented and brief trend into a lasting cultural habit. This article puts forward the core concept of the development of remote habitus, and builds a theoretical explanation chain of meme → habitus → identity with the help of meme theory, Bourdieu's habitus theory and cross-cultural academic theory. The so-called remote habit development means that people in the digital age can internalize cross-cultural practice into physical memory without really moving their bodies, which mainly relies on three mechanisms: algorithm recommendation, physical demonstration and community support. By revealing the underlying logic of the transformation of digital memes into lasting cultural practice, this concept effectively expands the connotation of Bourdieu's habit theory in the digital age. This study reveals the basic process of how digital memes are precipitated into long-term cultural practice, and also broadens the boundaries of the application of Bourdieu's habitus theory in the digital age. At the same time, it also provides a new perspective for understanding the cross-cultural identity construction in the context of digital globalization.

Keywords: Remote Habitus, Internet Memes, Cross-Cultural Identity.

1 Introduction

In recent years, Internet memes have become a symbol of the search for cultural meaning, identity and a sense of belonging on social media platforms. Due to their high degree of replicability, adaptability and interactivity, memes enable users to participate in their dissemination through imitation, thereby seeking social recognition and defining their cultural identity. The majority of current studies has concentrated on the viral transmission and dissemination processes of memes, but there is still a dearth of systematic investigation into whether memes have the ability to convert transient trends into long-term cultural practices and enduring influences.

Against this backdrop, the trend of Becoming Chinese has gone viral on global social media platforms. At the beginning of 2026, Becoming Chinese has generated interest on global social media. Foreign netizens have participated in a unique cross-cultural exchange by imitating behaviors such as drinking hot water, practising the Ba Duan Jin, and experiencing Chinese wellness traditions. As a meme phenomenon centred on the narrative of identifying with a particular culture, Becoming Chinese has gradually emerged and spread across social media. This phenomenon has become a widely shared meme thanks to participants' performative replication of the Chinese way of life.

However, it is not sure whether Internet memes will briefly rise and dissipate. Whether they can develop into lasting customs and behaviors. Therefore, what this study wants to find out is that in the process of spreading the digital meme of Becoming Chinese, the physical practices repeatedly done by foreign participants - such as soaking feet, cooking porridge, and practicing Ba Duan Jin - will use the internalization path built by habits to imitate from temporary performance, slowly change into a long-term living habit? In this process, how will the participants' feelings about Chinese culture and their cross-cultural identity change?

Although the research on digital culture, participatory culture and identity performance has provided some theoretical clues to understand this phenomenon, most of these studies are scattered and cannot be explained well: why the meme merely stays at the short-lived performance level? Under what circumstances can they be transformed into persistent practices in daily life? Especially in the context of cross-cultural, decentralized meme dissemination will encounter greater structural restrictions on cultural continuity than the highly institutionalized cultural circulation model. Therefore, this study takes the phenomenon of Becoming Chinese on TikTok as a starting point to explore: how Chinese lifestyle practices can be spread through memes, how to be internalized through the body, and ultimately affect cross-cultural identity. The study will try to clarify the basic mechanism of this process with the help of the three frameworks of meme theory, habit theory and cross-cultural identity theory.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Related Research on Memes

In the article *An Exploration of the Spread of "Meme" Culture on Bilibili from the Perspective of Meme Theory*, the author divides the spread of memes into three stages: imitation, mutation and competition [1].

The initial stage of the spread of memes depends on replication and diffusion, which is related to the characteristics of memes themselves that are easy to imitate and spread. Richard Dawkins first proposed the word meme in *Selfish Genes* published in 1976, defining it as a cultural communication unit that can achieve self-replication through imitation. A successful meme mainly looks at three points: longevity, reproductive success and fidelity [2]. He believes that meme, like human DNA, can be replicated, spread and mutated through imitation. Dawkins further divided the memes into two categories: genotype memes and viral memes. Genotype memes are inherited vertically like biological genes, and the core content is usually relatively stable. In contrast, viral memes

are more fickle and adaptable. Their survival strategy is to spread rapidly in a specific population to achieve self-replication, relying on the ability to be flexible [3].

In the digital environment, the way of spreading memes has changed significantly. The short video platform makes the meme spread faster. For example, the template and shoot functions on TikTok make the copying process automated and process-oriented, which greatly reduces the threshold of imitation. Dwivedi pointed out that memes are a good tool for cross-cultural communication because images and videos are easier to remember than words [4]. At the same time, the platform algorithm will give priority to recommend content with high interaction rate, which further promotes the diffusion ability of the meme.

Schiffman defines Internet memes as cultural units created, imitated and transformed by Internet users [5]. They can be transmitted as exact copies or undergo variation and evolution; Their traits—horizontal transmission, quick speed, and high interactivity—are quite similar to those of viral memes. Schiffman highlights that Internet memes are rooted in certain social settings and rely on media platforms; users serve as filters, choosing whether content is shared. These memes might appear naturally or be produced artificially. In order to accomplish replication inside the group, their main goal is to make sure the audience is completely educated.

Users can therefore serve as both recipients and producers. Memes can change and be reconfigured because of this merging of the prosumer function, which causes memes to be continuously rebuilt during the transmission process, resulting in innumerable regional, community-based, and personalized variations.

There are several levels at which memes are selected. At the micro level, Users are more inclined to select content that emotionally connects with them. At the meso level, Matthew effect is produced when platform algorithms search for really interesting material. At the macro level, contents that reflects the prevalent social mood of a particular period is more likely to attract attention. After undergoing replication, dissemination, variation and reconstruction, the selection and consolidation of specific memes is inextricably linked to collective memory. The selection and consolidation of specific practices within Becoming Chinese are underpinned by multiple layers of socio-psychological motivations:

First of all, Chinese wellness practices can help the body relax; this instantaneous positive physical feedback satisfies people's psychological urge to feel in charge of their health. In the post-pandemic period, health anxiety is pervasive worldwide. Secondly, in our fast-paced digital lives, many people resonate with a slower pace of life, and Chinese wellness philosophies align with this mindset. Lifestyle-based memes are also embodied, in contrast to other memes. Participants now choose to engage in these practices rather than just observe them, and these embodied sensations serve as the internal drive for continued participation. Simultaneously, users participating in hashtag challenges join an imagined cultural community. The encouragement, sharing and answers found in the comments section provide the social support necessary for continued practice.

According to Dwivedi, memes have an impact on cultural consciousness because they present not just the content but also the whole set of cultural values behind it.

Participants' cultural perceptions are slightly shaped by memes that get ingrained in collective memory and convey certain cultural values.

2.2 Research on Habitus

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu illustrated the concept of habitus, defining it as embodied history—that is, a system of dispositions ingrained in the body through long-term repetitive practice and developed into a pre-reflective sense of practice [6].

It is not an innate instinct, but rather a form of behaviour that is gradually internalised into the body through the repeated performance of certain practices within a specific field over time. Such behavior is fundamentally different from habit; habitus has a generative element, whereas habit frequently refers to mechanical, repeating patterns of behavior. As Bourdieu emphasised, habitus is not only a product of history but also a capacity for improvisation—it enables individuals, in new situations, to automatically generate practical strategies suited to the context based on bodily-memorised dispositions.

Bodily hexis is the outer manifestation of habitus, which includes posture, locomotion, taste, daily cycles, and preferences for physiological experiences. Therefore, these bodily sensations show how culture changes from an external mimetic phenomenon into an internal bodily memory when foreigners attempt to "Become Chinese" by imitating the daily routines of the Chinese, such as the satisfaction that comes from drinking hot water, the relaxation that follows a foot bath, or the ease that comes from practicing the Ba Duan Jin.

In recent years, the theory of habitus has been increasingly applied to analyse cultural adaptation and identity reconstruction in cross-cultural contexts. Mu & Dooley proposed the idea of university habitus in their study of Sino-foreign cooperative education, examining how international students modify their own habits in unfamiliar learning environments to create adaptable, useful techniques. According to the research, cross-cultural interaction may result in a new, hybrid type of habitus in addition to causing conflicts and discomfort related to habitus [7].

The introduction of the concept of hybrid habitus is worthy of attention. Researchers have discovered that individuals who spend extended periods in cross-cultural contexts do not simply switch from one habitus to another, but rather achieve a creative fusion by engaging with new cultural practices whilst building upon their existing habitus [8]. This hybrid habitus allows one to easily navigate both cultural environments while preserving the fundamental traits of the original culture while absorbing aspects of the new culture, creating a feeling of practice that is neither wholly one nor the other.

Therefore, Becoming Chinese may refer to the development, through continuous practice, of a hybrid cross-cultural habitus—one that draws from Chinese ways of life while retaining one's original lifestyle habits, the two merging to form a unique pattern of habitus—rather than actually becoming Chinese or totally giving up one's original cultural habits.

2.3 Cross-cultural Studies

Early cross-cultural research focused primarily on the issue of acculturation. Berry's classic model distinguishes four adaptation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. The core concern of this framework is how individuals adjust

their behaviour in response to new cultural environments during cross-cultural encounters. However, this presupposes a logic of unidirectional adaptation, whereby individuals move from their culture of origin to the target culture, whilst paying little attention to the potential emergence of new identities following exposure to a new culture.

Consequently, Kim proposed the Cross-Cultural Identity Theory. He argued that prolonged cross-cultural contact may give rise to a third-space identity that transcends the dichotomy between the culture of origin and the target culture. This identity is neither a rigid adherence to the culture of origin nor a wholesale acceptance of the target culture, but rather a new, generative and open form of identity that emerges from the tension between the two [9].

In recent years, interdisciplinary research on the intersection of memes and cross-cultural communication has also attracted attention. In his research, Dwivedi points out that memes can effectively overcome numerous barriers in cross-cultural communication, including differences in semantics, accents, gestures, body language and regional variations. This is because memes are composed of a combination of text, images, audio and video; According to human psychology, images and videos are easier to remember than text, enabling them to be understood and shared by users from different cultural backgrounds. More importantly, as a form of mass creativity that employs images to convey cultural practices, memes serve an identity-defining function within participatory media culture—by creating, sharing and adapting memes, users not only transmit cultural elements but also construct and express their own identities in the process. Thus within the context of cross-cultural communication, people engage in further identity negotiation through the dissemination of the ‘Becoming Chinese’ meme.

The aforementioned literature reviews the dissemination mechanisms of memetic theory, the intersections between habitus theory and cross-cultural theory, and the intersections between cross-cultural theory and memetic theory. The internalization processes by which the Becoming Chinese meme phenomenon has developed into a continuous practice will be further examined in the upcoming chapters.

3 The Mechanism of Imitation and Internalisation in Bodily Habitus

Meme theory provides a solid theoretical foundation for explaining how Becoming Chinese became an Internet meme and spread widely; at the same time, the three stages of transmission explain how this cultural phenomenon spreads among groups. However, a key issue in Bourdieu's theory of habitus is how this cultural phenomenon changes from conscious imitation to unconscious bodily habit.

According to Bourdieu's theory of habitus, the existence of physical fields—that is, the actual locations where people participate in bodily practices, such as schools, families, and communities—and the continuous repetition of practices are the two main prerequisites for the development of habitus.

The Becoming Chinese phenomena, however, offers a different setting in which people attain remote spatial co-presence through social media platforms rather than physically migrating into locations infused with Chinese culture. Although most individuals

have not made large-scale migrations to China, they continue to be exposed to and mimic Chinese lifestyle norms by watching short videos on a regular basis, taking part in hashtag challenges, and interacting in comment sections on digital media platforms. This formation of habitus within a digital environment constitutes the generation of remote habitus.

The term remote habitus describes the process by which people internalize foreign cultural practices as bodily memory without having to physically relocate. This happens through the constant replication and spread of memes on social media, as well as through imitation and performance.

The formation of this habitus relies on three mutually reinforcing mechanisms:

First of all, the formation of this habitus cannot be separated from the continuous presence of the algorithm. Habitus itself are highly dependent on algorithms. Algorithms are a product of digital capital and social activities, and the two are inseparable [10]. Platforms like YouTube and TikTok analyze user behavior through algorithms and constantly push video content related to Becoming Chinese. Driven by algorithms, an information environment surrounded by such stalks is cultivated, which not only maintains the motivation of users to imitate, but also lengthens their time window to contact these practices. When users come into contact with the content that shows Chinese life practices every day, such as cooking porridge, eight sections of brocade, and soaking feet, the time and conditions required for the development of habits are in full. These practices have gradually become a routine part of users' daily information flow from occasional encounters.

Secondly, the formation of remote habitus also requires concrete physical demonstration. The strong visual characteristics of the short video provide a body template that can be accurately imitated. Compared with the oral description, the video can point out the rhythm, strength, body position and other details of the action, so that the viewer can get an almost immersive step-by-step guidance. Chinese blogger Zhu Xirui's *Become Chinese* series, as well as the *Ba Duan Jin* video taken by ordinary bloggers, inadvertently provide overseas users with replicable body scripts, so that they can really implement those practices.

In addition, the development of remote habitus also requires feedback and confirmation from a supportive community. For instance, the discussion area of related topics and the comment area of the tag challenge, such as the #hot water challenge#, which all form a community atmosphere characterized by remote companionship.

After the participants uploaded their own practice videos, they received likes, encouraging comments and shared common experiences, forming a social support network that encourages them to persist. This community-based feedback partially replaces the function of others present in traditional habitus formation. At the same time, this community environment also provides a psychological basis for the transformation of memes into living habits: in digital intimacy, meme can become a tool to maintain emotional intimacy and deal with interpersonal relationships in the digital media environment [11].

Based on the above analysis, this article takes the participants in the meme of Becoming Chinese drinking apple water as an example to describe the possible development path of remote habitus: in the initial stage, participants browse the video imitating

the apple water memes, and try to imitate and participate in the dissemination out of curiosity or health motivation; in the trial stage, participate Follow the video tutorial to make apple water, and the positive effect achieved promotes further internalization of behavior; in the continuous stage, participants join the tags such as #Apple Water Challenge # to share their experiences and get encouragement in the comment area; the algorithm pushes more relevant content accordingly to further strengthen the users' willingness to participate. At the consolidation stage, making apple water is slowly integrated into daily life and becomes a fixed habit. At this time, the meaning of this behavior has been reconstructed - it is no longer to imitate others or "Become Chinese", but a personalized way of self-care.

According to Bourdieu, practices such as washing feet, drinking hot water, and doing Ba Duan Jin can evolve from conscious imitation to a way of life. And this leads to another question: when these physical daily operations last long enough to truly become a part of life, will the participants notice the subtle changes in self-identification?

Continuing to participate in Chinese-style life practices may further reshape participants' perception of Chinese culture: Chinese culture has changed from abstract and grand cultural symbols to tangible and concrete daily practices, and at the same time extends a set of operable life philosophy, such as health maintenance and balance.

At the same time, the participants integrated these Chinese-style practices into their personal narratives, forming what Kim called the third space identity. When they face problems related to their original cultural background, they will adopt interpretation strategies such as pragmatic interpretation and personalization. The final result is a hybrid practice, which not only retains the underlying characteristics of the original culture, but also absorbs new elements, and can naturally switch between the two cultures.

4 Conclusion

This study combines meme theory, habitus theory and cross-cultural theory to form an explanatory chain of meme → habitus → identity, and at the same time illustrates the possibility of evolution of meme from phenomenon to sustainable habit. Whether a meme can last depends not only on whether it can be replicated visually, but more importantly, whether it can trigger a positive physiological reaction. When foreign participants feel relaxation and physical comfort by drinking hot water or practising Ba Duan Jin, this meme completes the transformation from virtual symbols to physical practice.

In addition, this article puts forward the concept of remote habitus formation, which provides a new perspective for the continuous practice of cross-cultural activities in the digital age. Follow-up research can also make a systematic comparison with the Korean Wave (K-pop Wave). It should be noted that this study is mainly a theoretical discussion at present. The three mechanisms of remote habitus formation proposed in the article, the judgement indicators of the degree of internalisation, and the inference of paradigm shift are all to be verified by subsequent empirical research.

In conclusion, the study starting from the phenomenon of Becoming Chinese, this study explores step by step how cross-cultural meme develops from a popular phenomenon into a lasting and useful habit in the digital age with the help of meme theory,

Bourdieu's habit theory and cross-cultural identity theory. Participants developed remote habitus, converting external imitation into bodily memory, under the impact of algorithmic recommendations, embodied demonstration, and community support. A hybrid cross-cultural identity that preserves the original cultural essence while absorbing new features emerges as a result of ongoing practice, which also changed participants' impressions of Chinese culture.

Becoming Chinese is not merely the dissemination of an online meme; it also heralds new possibilities for the construction of cross-cultural identity in the digital age.

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