

Research on China's Overseas Cultural Communication: Status, Hot Topics, and Trends from 2009 to 2024

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Abstract

Due to globalization, the international dissemination of Chinese culture has become a crucial issue for studying cultural communication. This study employs 282 journal articles indexed in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) from 2009 to 2024, utilizing bibliometrics and CiteSpace. The research findings reveal that first, the collaborative network among authors in this field remains loose, rather than a cohesive academic community. Second, keyword clustering analysis shows the shifts from static cultural symbols to dynamic cultural experience, from government-led unidirectional dissemination to multi-stakeholder interaction, and from macro national strategies to micro practical pathways. Third, it reveals shift phases in research topics: early focus on cultural essence and overseas Chinese communities, mid-phase emphasis on Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road Initiative, and then the latest prominence of diverse subjects and digital communication scenarios such as Chinese cinema, national image, and Li Ziqi. It suggests that research should integrate content, strategy and effect from content delivery to value recognition.

Keywords: China's overseas cultural communication; CiteSpace; Research shift

1. Introduction

Since 2010 the Chinese government and relevant departments have issued multiple policy documents, charting the course for Chinese culture to go global. The 2011 Outline of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development explicitly set the development goal of actively exploring international cultural markets, innovating models for cultural going global, enhancing the international competitiveness and influence of Chinese culture, and elevating national soft power. In 2011, the Ministry of Culture promulgated the 2011-2015 Master Plan for Promoting the Going Global of Cultural Products and Services. In 2012, the Several Opinions on Accelerating the Going Global of China's Press and Publishing Industry further detailed the implementation pathways for cultural going global (Wu, 2017). In 2014, the State Council issued the Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Foreign Cultural Trade (China Culture Daily, 2014). In 2016, the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms adopted the Guiding Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving the Work of Chinese Culture Going Global (People's Daily, 2016). The 2016 Ministry of Culture's "Belt and Road" Cultural Development Action Plan (2016–2020) deeply integrated cultural dissemination with national strategy (China Culture Daily, 2017). The 2024 report From Initiative to Practice: 2024 China-Foreign Cultural Exchange Report further noted that current China-foreign cultural exchanges have formed a multidimensional, three-dimensional development pattern characterized by mechanism-led, multi-faceted integration, path innovation, technology-driven, and nationwide participation.

However, it indicates that a gap exists between the scale and effectiveness of China's cultural outreach. Despite continuous expansion in government-led initiatives, such as building external discourse frameworks, literary translation, film and television exports, and intangible cultural heritage promotion. Nevertheless, the core challenge remains: how to ensure global audiences understand its essence and develop a sense of identification. This shows that existing studies predominantly focus on Confucius Institutes, Chinese cinema, translation strategies or narrative techniques, but lacking a systematic knowledge structure, trajectory, and trends. Thus, this paper employs 282 core literatures published between 2009 and 2024 as its data foundation, utilizing CiteSpace for in-depth analysis to address three core questions:

- 1 What are the research status in this field?
- 2 What are the research hot topics?
- 3 How have research trends shifted from 2009-2024?

2. Literature Review: Research Status

Via publication data from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) (See Fig. 1), it reveals a distinct three-phase growth curve in China's research on overseas cultural dissemination from 2009 to 2024. Phase one (2009–2013) represented the exploratory inception period, with an average annual output of 4.2 papers, indicating sporadic research efforts. Phase two (2014–2018) marked rapid development, with publications steadily climbing from 11 in 2014 to 26 in 2017, achieving an average annual growth rate of 35.7%. This turning point closely coincided with the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, signifying the deep integration of cultural communication research with major national strategies. Phase three (2019–2024) represented an explosive stabilization period, with annual publications surging to over 30 and peaking at 35 in 2020–2021. This sustained high level of interest reflects the dual drivers of increasingly complex international dynamics and the digital technology revolution.



Research phases have represented diverse research topics. Zhang Yan et al. in 2017, as the leading figure, pioneer a data-driven empirical research paradigm through studies on Chinese children's books on Amazon (Zhang et al. 2017a), the overseas dissemination of China-themed books (Zhang et al.

2017b), and systematic examination of dissemination volume, geographic distribution, and thematic characteristics (Zhang et al. 2017c) provides robust quantitative support for evaluating cultural dissemination effectiveness. Zhang Chunyan (2014) proposes the selection principles to drive cultural dissemination from sender-oriented to receiver-oriented approaches. Ren Zeyu (2022) focuses on the localized dissemination of Chinese calligraphy and painting art under the Belt and Road Initiative. Zhang and Xie (2024) innovatively treat ancient style music as a cultural transmission medium, expanding research dimensions. Zhang Hengjun et al. (2016) construct a systematic theoretical framework of fundamental consensus in value, content, method consent. Research in this field has formed a multidimensional, synergistic development pattern. At the strategic vision level, Fan (2023) proposes three dimensions of cultural interests, studying cultural transmission at a national strategic level. With the cross-cultural perspective, Chang (2020) examines the ways to tell Chinese stories. Furthermore, the approach about bridging community is investigated by Chang and Tian (2020) and Chen (2021) explores sinology pathways and provides innovative theoretical frameworks for cross-cultural communication. It illustrates three major characteristics. First, research is mainly on traditional cultural pathways. Chinese porcelain, tea culture, martial arts culture, and Confucian institute have been investigated. Second, research focuses on emerging communication media. New media platforms like overseas gaming, social media, and short videos have emerged as new research focal points. Third, strategic research on topics such as traditional Chinese medicine culture, and ethnic cultural dissemination has gradually increased.

Analysis of author collaboration networks across 282 publications identified 273 authors forming 85 collaborative links, with a loosed network density. This exceptionally low density indicates that collaboration among authors in this field remains generally loose, with research activities exhibiting atomized characteristics. A tightly knit, efficient academic community has yet to emerge.

3. Methodology

This study adopts Bibliometrics and mapping knowledge domain as effective methods for macro level examinations. CiteSpace can reveal the knowledge about current research, hot topics, and future trends within disciplinary domains through visualization methods. However, existing visualization

studies on China's overseas cultural communication have limited analytical dimensions, making it challenging to comprehensively reflect the dynamic landscape of the research disciplines.

The research data were gathered from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) full-text academic journal database. The retrieval strategy focuses on China's Overseas Cultural Communication, time span from January 1, 2009, to December 31, 2024, and document type restricted to academic journals. The initial search yielded 312 documents, subsequently, excluding conference proceedings, book reviews and non-research articles, and a final valid research sample was 282 articles. This study employs bibliometrics and mapping knowledge domain. The core analytical tool is CiteSpace 6.2.R4 software. This software utilizes functions, such as clustering analysis and burst detection, to transform literature data into mapping knowledge domain, thereby revealing the structural characteristics and dynamic evolution of disciplinary fields.

4. Research Hot Topics

It illustrates the keyword co-occurrence network for China's overseas cultural communication. This network comprises 263 nodes and 358 connections, with a network density of 0.0104. This relatively low value indicates that despite the richness of research topics, theoretical dialogue and practical integration among focal points remain insufficient, failing to form a highly cohesive knowledge system.

It shows that research hot topics with high frequency include overseas communication, cultural communication, Chinese culture, Chinese civilization, Confucius Institutes, communication strategies, national image, Chinese cinema, communication, communication effectiveness, external communication, international communication, translation, strategy, and Chinese stories. The top 15 keywords ranked by centrality are Chinese culture, cultural communication, overseas communication, strategy, Chinese civilization, communication strategy, Chinese cinema, Confucius Institutes, Chinese stories, communication pathways, big data, external communication, cultural identity, cultural differences, and martial arts culture (See Table 1).

High-frequency keywords illustrate three core dimensions, including overseas communication, cultural communication, and Chinese culture. The presence of terms, Chinese culture, Confucius

Institutes, and Chinese cinema, further indicate the multidimensional coverage. For example, Confucius Institutes and Chinese cinema disseminate cultural symbol. Chinese stories communicate as narrative contents. The impact assessment can be seen via communication effectiveness, national image.

Centrality metrics reveal the pivotal role of keywords in network connection. Chinese culture emerges with the highest centrality, serving both as the core subject of research and as a bridge linking other themes, such as cultural dissemination and overseas communication, highlighting its overarching significance at both theoretical and practical levels. Cultural communication and overseas communication follow closely, indicating that the action logic of cultural communication and the spatial dimensions of overseas contexts serve as key intermediaries linking other concepts such as strategies, media, and effects in the research. Meanwhile, Chinese cinema and communication strategies demonstrate the connecting role of media carriers and methodological pathways within the co-occurrence network, reflecting the study's emphasis on media innovation and strategic optimization in cultural communication.

No.	Frequency	Keyword	No.	Centrality	Keyword
1	89	Overseas Communication	1	0.65	Chinese Culture
2	47	Cultural Communication	2	0.5	Cultural Communication
3	27	Chinese Culture	3	0.41	Overseas Communication
4	23	Chinese Culture	4	0.39	Strategy

No.	Frequency	Keyword	No.	Centrality	Keyword
5	18	Confucius Institute	5	0.3	Chinese Culture
6	10	Communication Strategy	6	0.19	Communication Strategy
7	8	National Image	7	0.17	Chinese Cinema
8	8	Chinese Cinema	8	0.1	Confucius Institute
9	7	Communication	9	0.11	Chinese Stories
10	6	Communication Effectiveness	10	0.11	Transmission Pathways
11	6	Outbound Communication	11	0.11	Big Data
12	5	International Communication	12	0.08	Outbound Communication
13	5	Translation	13	0.08	Cultural Identity
14	5	Strategy	14	0.08	Cultural Differences

No.	Frequency	Keyword	No.	Centrality	Keyword
15	5	Chinese Stories	15	0.08	Martial Arts Culture

Table 1: *Co-occurrence Frequency and Centrality of Keywords*
 in China's Overseas Cultural Communication

5. Research Trends

The cluster analysis summarizes five thematic dimensions. First, cultural transmission focuses on cultural pathways, such as sports management, overseas Chinese, Chinese porcelain, and tea culture, reflecting the research's deep engagement with cultural content vehicles. Second, overseas dissemination places emphasis on visual culture, cultural influence, and cultural soft power, demonstrating research evolution from cultural symbols to cultural impact. Third, Chinese culture concentrates on cross-cultural communication, Chinese cinema, national soft power, and cultural promotion, reflecting systematic analysis of cultural dissemination content. Fourth, communication strategies highlight methodological innovations like gaming globalization, and social media dissemination. Fifth, external communication focuses on cross-cultural communication, overseas audiences, and cultural identity, integrating strategic research with practical application.

Research trends have been shifted from cultural symbols to cultural experience, from unidirectional dissemination to bidirectional interaction, and from macro strategy to micro practice. As for research shifting from cultural symbols to cultural experience, early studies focused on Chinese cinema and Chinese porcelain for disseminating cultural symbol. Then research shifted to tea culture studies (Cai 2017) disseminating specific cultural experience. The recent phase emphasizes deeper cultural experiences like overseas ethnography and cultural identity research (Ho 2023). This marks a shift from examining cultural symbols to cultural experience.

Then the research has shifted from unidirectional dissemination to bidirectional interaction. The perspectives transitioned from one-way transmission to interactive dynamics, extensively applied to

studies of overseas Chinese communities, international students, and other communication subjects, emphasizing the interactive relationship between communicators and audiences.

Finally, research has shifted from macro strategy to micro practice. The transition from national soft power to Tea culture and then to gaming globalization (Zhang 2020; Lin2019). Research has refined from macro strategies to specific cultural pathways and dissemination practices.

6. Conclusion

Through CiteSpace visualization analysis of 282 literatures from 2009 to 2024, this study reveals that the field remains loosely connected in terms of author collaboration networks, institutional cooperation, and regional distribution, it has achieved transitioning from theoretical exploration to practical application. Research has formed a three-dimensional structure, cultural communication, Chinese culture and overseas communication. This structure has achieved transformations in research perspectives, such as shifting from symbols to experience, from unidirectional to interactive, and from macro to micro.

It reveals that research on China's overseas cultural dissemination can be divided into the following three phases.

First, early cultural transmission and group studies (2009–2012). Chinese culture and overseas Chinese were high-frequency keywords in this phase, reflecting academic focus on cultural essence and the transmission practices of Chinese communities. Cui (2022) reveals the communication trajectory from acceptance to recognition, and from recognition to empathy. This phase emphasized theoretical frameworks centered on cultural essence and group communication.

Second, communication and international strategy synergy (2013–2016). The emergence of Confucius Institutes for cultural dissemination. Subsequently, overseas markets and Belt and Road reflecting a shift from inward-focused cultural studies toward integrating international communication with national strategies between geopolitics and cultural transmission.

Third, diverse communication scenarios and national image shaping (2017–2024). In 2017, Chinese cinema, national image, and communication pathways simultaneously gained prominence, signifying the establishment of film and television for national image construction. Since 2020,

cultural phenomena such as Li Ziqi emerged as new focal points. Research perspectives further shifted toward grassroots communicators, corroborating the global success of cultural Ips Black Myth: Wukong.

This demonstrates the deepening research trajectory: from cultural core analysis to communication construction, national strategy linkage, and then to multi-subject practice. Its core concern has consistently been how to shape a positive national image and enhance international communication effectiveness through cultural dissemination.

Nevertheless, it is suggested that further study may deepen theoretical integration to strengthen academic foundations and strengthen impact assessment through scientific metrics.

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