



Ritual and Empathy: On Cross-border Spring Festival Galas Jointly Held by China and Southeast Asian Countries——Taking 2023 China-Vietnam Cross-border Spring Festival Gala themed “Establishing A Deep Friendship and Working Together for Common Development” as an Example

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Abstract: Consensus is the foundation for a cooperative development between countries. The cross-border Spring Festival gala, as a grand-scale cultural communication ritual, can foster understanding and consensus between countries. The China-Vietnam Cross-border Spring Festival Gala is a classic example of how China and Southeast Asian countries cooperate to hold cross-border Spring Festival galas. It performs the function of ritualization by delivering the spirit of the times of mutual integration and communication around the world through ritual summoning, co-building China-Vietnam cultural memories through ritual gathering and co-constructing the awareness of community of shared future through ritual sharing. The cross-border Spring Festival gala has become an important means for China to strengthen cultural exchanges with Southeast Asian countries.

Keywords: ritual summoning; ritual gathering; ritual sharing; empathic communication

I. Introduction:

Since the first-ever “China-Vietnam Cross-border Live Broadcast Spring Festival Gala” was held in 2007, China, along with numerous other Southeast Asian countries, have jointly organized multiple cross-border Spring Festival galas. These events have given China more knowledge about the rising Southeast Asian region while also telling Southeast Asian countries about China’s reputation as a dependable, stunning, and dignified country, which turns out to be a cultural ritual of epochal worth for Chinese media to embed into the establishment of connections between China and Southeast Asia. Thanks to advancements in media technology, the cross-border Spring Festival galas jointly held by China and Southeast Asian countries has transcended time and place, and this has called upon Chinese and Southeast Asian people to take part in the communication ritual in a variety of ways through immersive communication. Along with innovations in means of cultural communication and memories, the empathic effect deepens relationships between Chinese and Southeast Asian people and fosters the awareness of community of shared destiny. Therefore, in order to increase China’s effectiveness in international communication, it is of extremely important practical significance to analyze the roles played by the cross-border Spring Festival galas jointly held by China and Southeast Asian countries from the perspectives of ritual and empathy.

II. Definitions of ritual and empathy

1. Ritual and a ritual view of communication

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In Wang Jianmin's introduction to the Chinese translation of Turner's *Forest of Symbols*, ritual is defined as follows: the term "ritual" is used in anthropology to refer to any activity that is formalized but not inherently instrumental, including festivals, celebrations, birth ceremonies, initiation rites, marriages, funerals, games and more, and it is not limited to religious ceremonies. Ritual encompasses, even in its broadest meaning, the ideographic aspects of all human activities^[1]. Two points in this definition bear mentioning, which together lead to the conclusion that ritual, as a significant behavioral pattern in human society, has particular qualities specific to various social and cultural contexts. First of all, ritual is an activity associated with a formal, non-utilitarian status. This is also how ritual is generally understood, and Wang Jianmin expands on the concept by including "secular" rituals in addition to religious rituals. Secondly, the final sentence in the definition broadens the meaning of ritual by stating that "ritual encompasses the ideographic aspects of all human activities." That is to say, every part of human activity that is ideographic has an underlying ritual connotation. This is more appropriately classified as "ritualization"^[2].

According to American scholar James Carey, a ritual view of communication emphasizes the representation of shared beliefs, seeing communication as a sacred ritual that draws individuals together as a group or community^[3], and its function to call forth and assemble groups of people can unite those who have similar values and viewpoints. The significance of symbols will be continuously enhanced in ritual activities and form the cultural foundation for fostering the consciousness of community for shared future^[4].

2. Empathy

A psychologist defined empathy as "the inclination of individuals to share and comprehend the emotional states of others in their interactions^[5]." More in-depth explanations of empathy were attempted by a few other psychologists as well: when a person experiences (or imagines) the emotional circumstances of one or more individuals, he or she first shares emotions with others, and then evaluates the overall circumstances cognitively on the premise of recognizing that himself/herself is different from others, this recognition generates an emotional response, accompanied by associated behaviors (either implicit or explicit), and empathy refers to the psychological process by which the subject directs such emotional feelings and actions towards the object^[6]. As the introduction above makes clear, the emotional sharing is at the core of empathy, and the emotional sharing between an individual and others is the foundation of empathy. Furthermore, it is evident that empathy mostly involves people sharing their emotions with one another^[7]. When we establish an emotional connection with others, we can achieve "empathy" by self-projecting into their circumstances, experiencing their feelings, and then striking a chord.

3. Relationship between ritual and empathy

In the field of communication, the word "empathy" is developed into the concept of "empathic communication", and empathy is a two-way process of expression, acceptance, and feedback between the sender and the recipient^[8], while ritual transmits information through words, deeds, and symbols and creates bonds between participants. In human society, ritual and empathy are both vital; they reinforce and depend on one another. Ritual uses symbols and behaviors to convey relevant information in a particular context, creates social order, and serves as a vehicle for emotional expression. Empathy, on the other hand, enables us to feel and comprehend the feelings and experiences of others, creating a sense of shared experience and emotional resonance. With the rapid development of network technology, the media has gradually turned out to be a primary carrier of empathic communication, while the cross-border Spring Festival gala, as a media ritual, have evolved into a sacred and solemn cross-cultural communication activity with significant impact and cohesion after being organized, aired, and witnessed by the public via television.

III. Cross-border Spring Festival galas jointly held by China and Southeast Asian countries as a ritual

1. History and development of cross-border Spring Festival galas jointly held by China and Southeast Asian countries

With culture as a unifying factor, cross-border Spring Festival galas facilitate communication between China and a growing number of Southeast Asian countries. It also makes it possible for more and more countries and regions to become family members of the cross-border Spring Festival gala and work together to produce a cultural feast that is uniquely their own. Currently, TV stations and government departments from over ten countries are actively involved, including Philippines Chinatown TV, the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism, Kah Lai Toi in Malaysia, TCITV in Thailand, etc. All countries and regions participated in the cross-border Spring Festival galas, showcasing their exceptional performances that reflect their unique national or regional features one after another. These countries deepen their friendships with consensus and synergy to foster mutual understanding and development.

To briefly summarizing the history of cross-border Spring Festival galas jointly held by China and Southeast Asian countries through the lens of the evolution of media form, it can be clearly divided into the following two stages: During the first stage, which spanned from 2007 to 2014, cross-border Spring Festival galas used the Internet as the channel to conduct international communication practices, putting the alliance of local TV stations and Southeast Asian TV stations in the foremost position. For the first time, Guangxi Nanning TV Station and Vietnam National Digital Technology TV Station, the country's second-biggest TV station, collaborated in 2007 to hold a cross-border Spring Festival gala through synchronous broadcasting and cross-border connection. Since 2007, Nanning TV Station has successfully organized the

cross-border Spring Festival gala “The Melody of Spring” through joint efforts with media from Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and other countries, eliciting positive emotions in China and many Southeast Asian countries. This opened up a new channel of cross-cultural communication between China and Southeast Asia, enhanced mutual trust and emotional interactions between the people of the two regions and positively impacted cross-cultural exchanges between the two regions^[9]. The online live broadcasting of cross-border Spring Festival galas, as a media ritual, is initiating in step with the global Internet communication tide and it helps lift people’s communication efficiency to a higher level.

The second stage, which lasted from 2015 to the present, saw the rapid development of the international Internet platform and the elimination of the mobile Internet traffic bottleneck. The Internet platform not only makes the Internet industry in the economic sense become a phenomenal focus all around the world^[10], but also creates more favorable conditions for cross-cultural interactions and attracts a larger pool of participants for the ritual. In 2019, in order to promote cultural and artistic exchanges and cooperation between China and Myanmar, to deepen the friendship between the Chinese and Burmese people, and to enhance exchanges and cooperation between the two countries and promote mutual development, 2019 China-Myanmar Spring Festival Gala themed “China-Myanmar Love: A Happy Family Reunion” was held in Myanmar, carried out by Yunnan TV station, jointly held by China’s State Council Information Office, the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar, the People’s Government of Yunnan Province, the Publicity Department of Myanmar, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture of Myanmar. This activity is also the centerpiece of China and Myanmar’s “1+X” series of cultural exchange events. This cross-border Spring Festival gala was carried on Skynet TV station, which is owned by Rui Dan Lun Group, a partner in Myanmar, and Myanmar National TV station, and moreover, it was streamed live online and concurrently on social media platforms such as WeChat Official Account, Weibo, Bilibili and the APP of “Qi Cai Yun Duan”. The headline of the Burmese Chinese-language newspaper Golden Phoenix reads, “People Say It’s The Best Gala Burmese People Have Ever Seen,” while Mizzima, the country’s most dynamic online news outlet, carried several reports on this subject^[11]. Social media and convergence media communication have greatly increased the penetration of the gala and its degree of involvement, emerging as a cutting-edge cross-cultural communication tool in the present day. Simultaneously, the vast user base of the TikTok (Douyin Overseas Edition) short video platform both domestically and internationally attracts users from other countries to engage in the cross-border Spring Festival gala by means of creative shooting techniques like co-shooting so as to co-build cultural memories.

The form of the media is ever-changing, and the cross-border Spring Festival gala is attracting an increasing number of participants and its influence is growing. All cross-border Spring Festival galas, however, share the common trait of being a co-construction of emotions and a strengthening of friendship.

2. Ritual elements in cross-border Spring Festival galas jointly held by China and Southeast Asian countries

Ritual offers a way for people to express and let go of their emotions while also conveying meaning through symbols, which can be either visual or auditory and include things like language, clothes, music, dance, artifacts, etc. In a similar vein, symbols serve as representations of culture and meaning, and ritual has symbolic significance because it conveys abstract ideas in a way that is tangible^[12]. The essence of ritual expression form is the interaction of symbols, through which cultural meaning and value are conveyed in the construction of symbolic systems at all levels^[13]. The cross-border Spring Festival gala is based on a multi-cultural foundation and presents a cultural exchange event made up of a set of flowing communication symbols through targeted communication of audience segmentation based on the settings and cultures of different countries, while the construction of each symbol carrier revolves around the thematic meaning of showcasing the artistic achievements, both traditional and modern, of each county. This signifies that the cross-border Spring Festival gala is a cultural performance that primarily employs multiple symbol systems for presentation.

3. The emotional impact of ritual on audiences in China and Southeast Asia

First of all, the cross-border Spring Festival gala, as a ritual, assembles performers and performances from different countries and regions, creating a platform for cultural exchange with unique significance. Audiences can often elicit memories and resonance through the flow of visual or auditory elements on the platform. Such emotional resonance makes it easier for audiences to establish emotional connections with both the performers and other audiences and deepens their emotional involvement in the cross-border Spring Festival gala. Secondly, the cross-border Spring Festival gala links audiences from home and abroad because of its wide content. The audience will feel a great sense of pride and belonging when they witness performers from their own country or region giving exceptional performances on a regional stage, which will increase their emotional recognition and affection for the cross-border Spring Festival gala. Simultaneously, the cross-border Spring Festival gala typically incorporates interactive elements, like audience voting or social media interactions with the performers, which can further stimulate the audience’s emotional interaction and engagement. This transforms the audience from being passive recipients into active participants.

IV. Case analysis: the empathic effect of China-Vietnam cross-border Spring Festival gala as a ritual

In Hekou County of Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China and Lao Cai City, Lao Cai Province, Vietnam, the China-Vietnam Cross-border Spring Festival Gala and Border Citizens’ Grand Gala themed “Establishing A Deep Friendship and Working Together for Common Development” was successfully held from January 18 to January 19, 2023. This is the first cross-border Spring Festival gala following the complete reinstatement of customs clearance and the fifth

one that Hekou County, China and Lao Cai City, Vietnam have jointly held. This event is also a significant practice in fostering friendly cooperation and bilateral cultural exchanges as it fully implements the Joint Declaration on Further Strengthening and Deepening China-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership signed by the two countries in 2022 and the outcomes of the top leaders' meeting in November 2022 between China and Vietnam. This cross-border Spring Festival gala actively opens up the three-dimensional channels of communication, with synchronous broadcasting on platforms including Yunnan Satellite, the APP of "Qi Cai Yun Duan", CCTV, Yunnan News, Yunnan.cn, Yunnan Honghe News, Honghe.cn, convergence medias in 13 counties and cities of Honghe Prefecture. The audience covers people of all ages, reaching an audience ratings of 210 million people. Meanwhile, the Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, China News, Yunnan News Broadcast, the APP of "Qi Cai Yun Duan" and multiple mainstream media outlets publicized and reported this cross-border Spring Festival gala as well, Baidu, Sohu, and other search engines gathered more than 100 related reports, the number of entire network users reached 1000W+. More than 20 cooperation agreements covering industrial parks, cross-border tourism, news media, enterprise cooperation, exchanges between sister cities, friendly villages were signed between Yunnan and Vietnam during the event. These agreements set a strong foundation for future improvements in mutual understanding and trust as well as the expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation following the resumption of customs clearance at ports. Moreover, ten pairs of Chinese and Vietnamese businesses have signed contracts en masse offline, totaling 437 million US dollars; twelve pairs of Chinese and Vietnamese businesses have signed contracts online, totaling 593 million US dollars. This cross-border Spring Festival gala co-builds the deep relationship between China and Vietnam at least from the following three aspects.

1. Ritual summoning to convey the spirit of the times

The spirit of the times is the spiritual reflection of the sophisticated social form and its development tendency from different historical time frames, and it is the most dynamic, active and powerful inner spiritual force that people possess in their actual practices. However, the spirit of the times is a concentrated reflection of the most exquisite, priceless, and unseen thinking quintessence of the people living in this age, rather than a "reverie outside the world". Not only does the spirit of the times mirror the theme of the times, it also has plays an important role in guiding and driving the development of the times^[14]. It reflects the main issues and universal emotional demands of the society at the time and is a result of both social context and cultural inheritance. As a grand-scale variety show, China-Vietnam Cross-border Spring Festival Gala embraces the spirit of the times, keeps up with the times and sets "Establishing A Deep Friendship and Working Together for Common Development" as its theme, it also blends mainstream values into art performances for communication and education through entertainment activities, subtly guiding the audience toward the right values in order to further foster friendly cooperation and bilateral cultural exchanges, explore and open up the trend of the times and deliver the the spirit of the times of mutual integration and communication around the world. The spirit of the times provides people with a common language and emotional basis so that they can resonate with each other based on shared values and similar experiences.

2. Ritual gathering to co-build cultural memories

Two-way flow of information is the foundation of mutual cognition, understanding and cooperation. Chinese and Vietnamese people can achieve emotional resonance with each other and co-build cultural memories through narrative music and dance performances on the ritualized Spring Festival gala stage. The event began with a song called "Honghe Welcomes the Guests", 105 performers, each wearing a different ethnic costume from Yunnan, performed a dance that reflected the friendly, gregarious nature and open mind of Yunnan people, amid a joyful and upbeat musical score, and peach blossoms, which symbolize the Vietnamese New Year ritual, blossomed on the stage along with the upbeat music. Chinese and Vietnamese artists, art troupes, and border citizens offered New Year greetings by singing and dancing during the song. The performances such as "Festival Floating in the Clouds", "The Call for Spring", "The Hmong Lusheng" and "The Sun Beside the Spinning Wheel" introduces the audience the scenery, culture, and ethnic customs of Vietnam, fostering a sense of familiarity and camaraderie between the Miao people of China and the Hmong people of Vietnam. The performances such as "Millennial Purple Pottery", "Gu Yu" and "Good Day Today" from Yunnan showcase the traditional Chinese culture and customs, the beautiful life of Yunnan people following the strategy of rural vitalization in the new era as well as China's best wishes for a happy new year to the people of Vietnam. China-Vietnam cross-border Spring Festival gala brings together Chinese and Vietnamese artists and high-quality performances through thoughtful theme planning. It allows Chinese and Vietnamese audiences to come together on a stage both online and offline via multimedia technology to collaboratively create beautiful cultural memories.

3. Ritual sharing to co-construct the awareness of community of shared future

The cross-border Spring Festival gala, a "regional ritual" created to mobilize social emotions through experience sharing, is the best way to bring disparate interest groups into the envisioning of "the community of shared future" and becomes a novel means of raising awareness of the global community of shared future. 2023 China-Vietnam Cross-border Spring Festival Gala offers a carnival for the Spring Festival, a traditional festival shared by China and Vietnam, in the form of media ritual, thanks to the combination of TV media and Internet media. The Spring Festival gala has consistently featured the ritual themes of "Community of Shared Future", "Friendly Neighbors" and "China and Vietnam Work Together to Develop", which forms the central part of the narrative scripts in cross-border Spring Festival galas. The final song of the

evening, “Soar Together with True Feelings” was jointly performed by Chinese vocalist Cai Guoqing and Vietnamese performer Do Thi Thanh Hoa together. The respective Chinese and Vietnamese zodiac mascots, “Auspicious Rabbit” and “Auspicious Cat”, hugged and clasped hands in the song, representing a sense of similarity and creating a feeling of shared identity that goes beyond geographical boundaries. Roland Barthes’ “mythological” narration conveys the beautiful vision of China and Vietnam working together for common development, chasing dreams with one heart and one mind and co-constructing the awareness of community of shared future.

V. Inspiration from cross-border Spring Festival galas jointly held by China and Southeast Asian countries

Adhering to the guiding principle of “adopting targeted communication methods that are close to different regions, different countries and different groups of audiences to promote the global expression, regional expression and diversified expression of Chinese stories and Chinese voices”^[15], and in keeping with the motto of “Content is King, Emotional Sharing”, efforts are made to delve deeply into the shared cultural experiences with other countries, close the emotional distance with people in other countries and co-build cultural memories. In addition, cross-border Spring Festival galas assist China in broadening its worldwide communication network, which in turn facilitates the spreading of Chinese culture abroad with the aid of outside forces. This can help China become increasingly influential and educated about the outside world.

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