

Research on the Construction of Chinese Discourse and Chinese Narrative Systems from the Cognitive Contextual Perspective

Xiaohui Zhang

Zhengzhou Sias College, Zhengzhou, 451150, China

Abstract: *Currently, China's international discourse power does not match its international status, and its international communication capabilities are relatively weak. International discourse power has long been dominated by the West. China's discourse and narratives face challenges in terms of being misunderstood, failing to spread effectively, and lacking recognition on a global scale. Western and Chinese civilizations are two extremely important civilizations in the world, but they differ significantly in various aspects. The discourse and narratives accepted by Chinese audiences may not be accepted by Western audiences due to significant differences in cognitive contexts, which are often even contradictory. To construct a discourse and narrative system with Chinese characteristics for Western audiences, it is necessary to build it on a common cognitive context shared by both Western and Chinese audiences. Cognitive context includes vocabulary information, logical information, and encyclopedic knowledge. When initially constructing the Chinese discourse and narrative system, it should fully align with the cognitive context of Western audiences. As Western audiences' understanding of China deepens, Chinese-specific discourse and narratives can gradually be introduced, progressively building a Chinese discourse and narrative system.*

Keywords: *Chinese discourse; Chinese narrative system; cognitive context*

1. Introduction

Since the 18th National Congress, China has achieved remarkable accomplishments. The economy has maintained a high growth rate, reaching 80 trillion yuan and consistently ranking second in the world. People's living standards have continued to improve, with over 60 million impoverished individuals escaping poverty, and income levels gradually rising. Comprehensive national strength has been on the rise, bringing China closer to the great goal of national rejuvenation for the Chinese nation. However, China's international discourse power currently does not match its comprehensive national strength. Western countries still dominate the world's discourse power and possess strong communication capabilities globally. In contrast, China's external communication capabilities are limited, and its attitudes, culture, and policies are challenging to widely disseminate worldwide. Even when faced with deliberate distortions of facts in Western countries, China struggles to effectively communicate its voice, leading to situations where "the truth cannot be spoken, or if spoken, it cannot be disseminated; if heard, it cannot be understood; and if understood, it cannot be accepted." To address this dilemma, the 20th National Congress report clearly stated, "Accelerate the construction of China's discourse and narrative system, tell China's story well, spread China's voice, and present a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China. Strengthen the construction of international communication capabilities and comprehensively enhance international communication effectiveness."

2. Chinese Discourse and Chinese Narrative Systems

Discourse refers to specific verbal behaviors of communication between individuals in a particular socio-cultural context and is a representation of thought and culture in a specific form (Chen Weijun, 2022). Narration originally referred to literary terms and meant telling stories in prose or poetry forms. In common terms, narration means storytelling. Traditional discourse and narrative analysis is often used to analyze the language or structure of literary works. However, storytelling now encompasses various means of communication beyond traditional text or images. With recent technological advancements, many new media narrative methods have emerged, such as microblogs and short videos, making almost anything perceptible by humans a potential narrative tool.

China is one of the four ancient civilizations with a brilliant and longstanding culture. Research on Chinese discourse and narrative has a long history. Over 1300 years ago, during the Tang Dynasty, Liu Zhiji elaborated on the core elements of China's narrative tradition in the "Shi Tong," summarizing it as revering history, seeking truth, valuing simplicity, using obscurity, and avoiding taboos ^[1]. Western narrative leans towards clear Western-style structural views, emphasizing continuous and explicit connections between events, whereas the more obscure Chinese structural view lacks this rigid requirement for continuous connections between events, allowing for more intermittent and discontinuous connections ^[2]. Puan Di also believes that the Chinese narrative model does not resemble the Western logical "three-part deduction" method, but is based on the principle of presenting overlapping dynamic and static alternations, thus eliminating linear development and artistic unity impressions ^[3]. In summary, traditional Chinese narratives emphasize simplicity, value the omission of details, tend to be obscure, and involve various forms of storytelling, while Western narrative structures are almost the opposite of Chinese narrative structures.

In short, there is a huge difference in discourse and narrative structures between China and the West, to the point of being fundamentally different. Currently, Western discourse and narrative systems hold a dominant position, and if China wishes to change this situation, enhance its international discourse power, and improve its communication capabilities, it must consider multiple factors.

Firstly, confidence in China's traditional discourse and narrative system is essential. It is a product of China's thousands of years of historical development and is suitable for this ancient land. However, blind self-confidence should be avoided. Just as the West currently believes its discourse and narrative system is the best and that all other nations should revolve around it, the world is diverse, with multiple cultures, languages, and narrative systems. Therefore, a variety of voices and narratives should be encouraged. Secondly, it should be recognized that constructing China's discourse and narrative system on a global scale is a long and winding process, a gradual process that cannot be rushed or driven by impatience. Otherwise, it may backfire. As China's economic development and reform deepen, its people's understanding of the world far exceeds Westerners' understanding of China. Some Westerners' understanding of China is still stuck in the past, heavily influenced by distorted Western media. In the face of this challenge, the 20th Congress report emphasizes the importance of researching audience psychology and improving discourse and narrative styles ^[4]. This study focuses on the cognitive context of the audience, suggesting that the discourse and narrative intended for Western audiences should be adjusted to align with the cognitive context of Western audiences. When constructing Chinese discourse and narrative systems for Western audiences, the vocabulary information, logical information, and encyclopedic information within the Western audience's context must be considered.

3. Cognitive Context

Cognitive context serves as the foundation for human understanding of the world and plays a fundamental role in comprehending and identifying with discourse and narratives. Different contexts can lead to varying interpretations of language and even misunderstandings. Western civilization and Chinese civilization are two prominent civilizations in the contemporary world, with Western civilization holding a dominant position in recent times. Both civilizations have their roots in the "Axial Age" of human civilization but have evolved in different directions, resulting in markedly distinct systems. These significant differences in cultural systems have given rise to distinct styles of discourse and narrative. In the process of constructing discourse and narrative systems, neglecting the cognitive context of Western audiences can greatly diminish the effectiveness of external communication. Therefore, to tell China's story effectively and enhance international communication, it is essential to consider the cognitive context of foreign audiences.

Cognitive context comprises vocabulary information, logical information, and encyclopedic knowledge ^[5]. Vocabulary information refers to the information conveyed by the vocabulary used by communicators during interaction. Logical information pertains to the logical patterns followed by communicators during the communication process. Different languages convey different forms of logical information. Encyclopedic information includes various experiential knowledge about the world acquired by communicators during their cognitive development. Language and communication can invoke this accumulated knowledge, influencing language perception.

At times, the same vocabulary can evoke different experiences for Chinese and foreign audiences, leading to varying experiential associations. Consequently, identical vocabulary can carry different meanings and result in diverse communication outcomes. Differences between Chinese and Western

logic are substantial, where what is logical in Chinese thought may not align with Western logic. Moreover, disparities exist in the life experiences and encyclopedic knowledge of Chinese and foreign audiences, leading to different associations with the same discourse and narrative. While it is not feasible to change Western discourse and narrative systems during external communication or expect Western audiences to adapt to Chinese systems in the short term, it is a long-term process. To enhance international communication capabilities, the Chinese discourse and narrative systems created for Western audiences should differ from those designed for domestic audiences, as they target different recipients. Currently, when constructing discourse and narrative systems for Western audiences while aiming for their acceptance and highlighting Chinese characteristics, it is necessary to find points of overlap between the cognitive contexts of Western and Chinese audiences. This approach enables Western individuals to be willing to listen, understand, resonate with, and accept the messages while preserving some Chinese elements. As Western audiences become familiar with certain aspects of Chinese discourse and narrative, elements distinct from Western systems can gradually be introduced. This progressive approach allows Chinese discourse and narrative systems to gradually reach a global audience.

4. Constructing Chinese Discourse and Narrative Systems from a Cognitive Context Perspective

To effectively tell compelling stories about China and enhance national communication capabilities within Chinese discourse and narrative systems, it is crucial that these systems align with the context of foreign audiences, ensuring that they are not only understandable but also resonate with their hearts and minds.

First and foremost, it is essential to consider the vocabulary context of Western audiences. Language serves as the fundamental tool for human communication and is constructed primarily through vocabulary. China and the Western world belong to different cultural spheres with distinct historical traditions, and their languages stem from different language families. Western languages such as English, French, German, and Greek fall under the Indo-European language family, while Chinese is part of the Sino-Tibetan language family. These languages and their cultural foundations differ significantly, resulting in many unique Chinese vocabulary terms.

So, what kind of vocabulary is more likely to be understood and accepted by Western audiences? Despite the significant differences in historical, cultural, and geographical aspects among nations, human sensory experiences and physiological structures are similar. Initial human experiences with the world are comparable, and the most basic sensory perceptions are universal. For instance, everyone, regardless of their culture, experiences hunger when not eating, feels pain when injured, finds bright light glaring, and is discomforted by foul odors. Additionally, basic human needs such as clothing, food, and healthcare are consistent. Vocabulary related to these fundamental human experiences and activities constitutes the core vocabulary shared across languages, making it the most important and effective in triggering strong sensory experiences, life experiences, and audience identification and resonance.

To avoid distortions in vocabulary-related information and enhance communication effectiveness, it is advisable to use fewer unique Chinese vocabulary terms, abstract vocabulary, and infrequently used vocabulary. Instead, use common words, concrete words and words close to the lives of western audiences. For example, the phrase "Whether the shoes fit or not, only the person wearing them knows" employs vocabulary that is internationally recognized, simple, concrete, and relatable to daily life, making it highly effective in communication. After Western audiences comprehend and identify with Chinese discourse, Chinese-specific vocabulary can gradually be introduced to construct a discourse system with distinctive Chinese linguistic features.

"It is generally believed that logic has three major origins, including Western logic that originated in ancient Greece, with Aristotle's syllogistic logic as its representative, and Chinese logic from the pre-Qin period, focusing on names, terms, speech, and debate, with 'Mo Jing' (The Mohist Logic) as its main representative.^[6] Traditional Chinese logic has not received sufficient attention, development, or mainstream recognition, whereas Western logic has been continuously passed down, boasting a robust logical tradition, and has become the mainstream in the contemporary development of logic worldwide. In some Western countries, logic courses are offered in high schools, allowing students to get exposed to basic logical concepts, and universities typically provide logic courses. In contrast, China has not placed enough emphasis on logic education. Logic courses are rare in high schools, only a few universities offer logic courses in specific majors, and those offering logic as a general education

course are scarce. Western logic emphasizes drawing necessary conclusions and focuses primarily on formal structure, while English-speaking individuals and Chinese-speaking individuals show significant differences in their acceptance of reasoning based on counterfactual conditionals. Researchers used the following question for testing: 'If all circles are large, and this small triangle is a circle, is this small triangle large?' Among 115 native English speakers, 83% answered 'yes,' indicating they considered the reasoning to be correct. In stark contrast, among 176 Chinese-speaking participants, only 25% answered 'yes,' while the rest answered 'no' or 'uncertain.'^[7]

The core content of modern logic is first-order logic, primarily comprising propositional calculus and predicate calculus. This is also the most mature aspect of modern logic. In recent decades, it has seen significant development, especially in its integration with fields such as linguistics and computer science, leading to widespread applications. Logic is binary, with propositions being either true or false, and there is no middle ground. This contrasts with China's thinking tradition, influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes the doctrine of the mean and avoiding extremes. The Chinese approach tends to be more indirect when expressing attitudes. In Western contexts, such expressions may be perceived as lacking a clear stance and hence unacceptable. To enhance China's ability to communicate with the outside world and construct its discourse and narrative systems, consideration of the logical information conveyed by the corresponding languages is crucial."

In addition to vocabulary and logical information, encyclopedic information is crucial. Everything in the world is interconnected, and discourse and narratives are embedded in vast historical, real-world, and cultural contexts. Tracing the history of a discourse may require delving into events spanning centuries, and explaining the background of a narrative may involve seemingly unrelated elements. Nevertheless, understanding and interpreting a discourse or narrative often relies on having relevant encyclopedic knowledge. Without this knowledge, comprehension may be hampered or even lead to misunderstandings. When targeting Western audiences, it is essential to acknowledge the significant differences in encyclopedic information between Chinese and Western audiences. Concepts and narratives easily understood by Chinese audiences may be incomprehensible or misinterpreted by Western audiences due to their unfamiliarity with the relevant encyclopedic information. To achieve effective communication, it is necessary to compensate for the lack of encyclopedic information. Traditional media can use text or images to supplement missing encyclopedic information for Western audiences, while new media can adopt more immersive approaches. New media can leverage images, music, videos, and other vivid and interactive means to fill gaps in encyclopedic information. This approach is particularly effective since, at times, words alone may fail to adequately convey described elements, and using images or videos offers a more intuitive and dynamic method. For instance, Li Ziqi's YouTube videos promoting Chinese culture have garnered a record number of subscribers worldwide. This success is attributed to her videos using various methods to supplement contextual information effectively. The aesthetic visuals in her videos also contribute to cultural dissemination.

By addressing the differences in vocabulary, logic, and encyclopedic information between Chinese and Western audiences, Chinese discourse and narrative systems can be constructed more effectively to resonate with and be understood by Western audiences, ultimately enhancing international communication capabilities."

5. Conclusion

Western civilization and Chinese civilization have deep and distinct roots, with significant differences between them. To construct a Chinese discourse and narrative system and enhance China's international communication capabilities, it is essential to ensure that Western audiences can understand and identify with Chinese discourse and narratives. To achieve this, the constructed Chinese discourse and narrative system must align with the cognitive context of Western audiences. Audiences interpret discourse and narratives based on their existing experiences, drawing upon and connecting past experiences to understand relevant discourse and narratives. If audiences lack relevant context, they cannot comprehend the discourse and narratives. Moreover, if the contextual associations made by audiences differ from those of the discourse and narrative creators, it can lead to misunderstandings and hinder effective communication. To create a Chinese discourse and narrative system that possesses Chinese characteristics while being accepted by Western audiences, it is necessary to establish a foundation based on the shared context of both Chinese and Western audiences. When initially constructing the Chinese discourse and narrative system, it is advisable to use fewer uniquely Chinese terms, abstract vocabulary, etc., and instead employ common, concrete, and contextually relevant terminology. Avoid using vague language and adopt Western narrative logic.

Consider the encyclopedic information from the audience's perspective and supplement any missing encyclopedic information using various means such as text, images, videos, music, and more. Once Western audiences have adapted to and become familiar with the Chinese discourse and narrative system, gradually introduce unique Chinese elements. This approach will allow the formation of a discourse and narrative system with Chinese characteristics that also holds influence internationally.

Acknowledgment

Fund Project: The 20th and Top Ten Spiritual Special Research Projects of Zhengzhou Sias University in 2023 (2023-XDJ-67).

References

- [1] Dong Naibin. *Chinese narratology research sails ahead* [N]. *Chinese Journal of Social Sciences*, 2023-1-19 (006).
- [2] Fu Xiuyan. (2017)*The Comparison of Chinese and Western Traditional Narratives* [J]. *Academic Forum*, (2), 1-6.
- [3] Pu-Andy. (1995)*Chinese Narratives* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [4] Chen Weijun. (2023) *The path to improve the international communication power of Chinese discourse and Chinese narrative system* [J]. *Southern Media Research*, (1), 24-29.
- [5] Sperber, D. & D.Wilson. (2001) *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [6] Cai Shushan, Zou Chongli. (2010)*Theoretical study of natural language forms* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- [7] Wang Lu. (2019)*Logic basis* [M]. Beijing: Higher Education Press.