

# Cultural Narrative Method for Telling Chinese Stories in Foreign Languages

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**Abstract:** In the face of the increasingly complex international public opinion environment under the network environment, China's foreign language education urgently need to explore on the theory and practice of Chinese cultural communication in the context of globalization, so that the world can truly understand China. Based on the anthropological perspective, this paper elaborates on the definition of cultural narrative and describes a specific path to train students to tell Chinese stories well through cultural narrative methods from three aspects, that is the goal of cultural narrative output, the methods, and the cultivation methods of cultural narrative to empower college students to tell Chinese stories well in foreign languages. This paper constructs the cultural narrative path of the interaction of the three elements of "consciousness, deep description and interpretation", enabling college students to tell the Chinese stories well. Finally, based on the practice of foreign language education in China, this paper proposes two ways of training, starting from "writing" and combining with "digital story" teaching, so as to effectively empower college students to tell Chinese stories well in foreign languages.

**Keywords:** telling Chinese stories well; cultural narrative; anthropological perspectives; China's foreign language teaching

## 1. Introduction

Under the increasingly complex international public opinion environment, some countries emphasize the cultural differences between "us" and "others" based on dichotomy thinking, and even emphasize that their own cultures are superior to other cultures, which creates a certain sense of "Clash of Civilization" and is not conducive to cross-cultural communication and integration. Foreign language education in China has always emphasized the cultivation of intercultural competence of college students, but there is a lack of theory and practice on the cultivation of students' ability to tell Chinese stories and to spread Chinese culture. As a result, Chinese college students show more obvious difficulties and problems in telling Chinese stories in foreign languages in the following aspects:

(1) Although college students hold positive feelings about telling Chinese stories, they lack the skills to tell this kind of stories because of a lack of learning about narrative methods(Chang, 2021).

(2) Chinese college students' narrative ability is not strong on the whole, "Even when using their mother tongue, college students still need to improve their narrative articulation and coherence, macro and micro structure" (Yang, 2021: 11).

(3) Foreign language education in China has previously emphasized the input of the target language culture, resulting in a phenomenon of "Chinese cultural aphasia", which means college students are not sufficiently capable of expressing Chinese culture in a foreign language (Yuan & Zhao, 2017; He & Wang, 2021: 3).

Only by cultivating college students' narrative ability of Chinese culture can they be empowered to tell Chinese stories well in foreign languages. This study invokes the anthropological approach of cultural narrative to try to construct a specific method to cultivate college students' ability to narrate Chinese culture, to effectively empower them to tell Chinese stories well in foreign languages and help them better participate in cross-cultural communication and intercultural exchanges in the future[1-4].

## 2. Definition of cultural narrative

Anthropology is a discipline that takes cultural narrative as its object of study, and its thinking and methods about cultural narrative can provide a reference for foreign language education. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a cultural narrative method for Chinese foreign language education based on the anthropological concept of cultural narrative.

First, what is culture? Under the influence of postmodern thinking, modern anthropology has reflected on and doubted whether culture has an objective and real “objective ontological” quality. Interpretive anthropology, represented by Geertz, defines culture as “a web of meaning compiled by man himself” (Geertz, 1973: 5)”. This means that culture is not an object, but ultimately the result of interpretation by human beings. As a result, culture is no longer considered to be something frozen, unchanging, and homogenized, but rather a fluid, constantly emerging assemblage of experiences (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). It is for this reason that anthropology seeks to present and study culture through the interpretation and narration of human “experience”. That is to say, culture is ultimately presented as “a text that can be interpreted” (Wu, 2019: 42), and is the result of “narrative”. Since that, the narrative becomes the inevitable way for anthropology to understand and express culture.

How should we understand narrative? Narrative is the action of creating a link between two (or more) things through clues and then generating a story. However, narrative does not only mean a simple list of events, but also a textual activity that happens under the direction of certain meanings. Some scholars defined narrative as “the action of giving meaning to people through language and the stories that result from it” (Yamada, 2000). That is, the main function of narrative is not only to represent phenomena but also to construct or reconstruct meaning. “Narrative makes the world orderly, comprehensible, and presentational. By describing the orderly progression of time, the openness of the present moment is given meaning” (Li & Cao, 2019: 140). In other words, narrative both constructs the meaning of phenomena and makes it possible to understand them. It is for this reason that postmodern ethnography regards narrative as an inevitable means and method of “writing culture”[5-9].

In conclusion, the definition of “cultural narrative” can be summarized as the process and result of understanding the “meaning” of a cultural phenomenon through observing and writing about it. Therefore, cultural narrative is both a method and a result. As a method of understanding cultural meaning through narrative, cultural narrative (also known as “ethnography” in anthropology) often refers to the following: the researcher participates in a specific field during a specific period, collects research data through direct observation, recording, and interviewing people in their natural state. By writing field notes and ethnographic texts, the researcher can make sense of people's daily activities and of the meaning of sociality, i.e., of culture. This method is also applicable to the study of the culture in which one is situated and with which one is familiar (Wu, 2019).

## 3. Cultural narrative paths for telling China's stories in foreign languages

### 3.1 “Output” objectives of cultural narrative

In order to train students to tell Chinese stories well in foreign languages through cultural narrative, it should be clear what kind of cultural narrative is the “output” goal, in other words, what is a “good” story about China under the method of cultural narrative?

Ouyang's work in 2004, *Remaking of Face and Community of Practices: An Ethnography of Local and Expatriate English Teachers' Reform Stories in Today's China*, is based on a long-term observation in Chinese education. Taking the real-life experiences of the teachers in the early 1990s in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies's “Middle school teachers' class” in China as the object of the study, the study adopts the narrative technique of in-depth description to recount the pains experienced by the secondary school teachers in the context of reform and opening up of China due to the learning of “advanced” communicative pedagogical methods. This study opens the entrance of empathy for readers through microscopic and delicate narration, and at the same time, it puts the microscopic narration in the context of Chinese society and Chinese traditional culture, which was “turbulent and changing” at the beginning of reform and opening up at that time. What readers read from it is not only the personal stories of several educators but also the ups and downs of the impact, adaptation, and guidance experienced by ordinary people in China under the wave of reform and opening up, as well as the openness, tolerance, and tenacity of China culture. In this work, the author makes extensive use of Chinese cultural symbols instead of English vocabulary, such as “danwei (workplace)” and “ban (class)”, etc., and heavily depicts

the Chinese cultural meanings of these symbols. The Chinese cultural narrative in this study is authentic, vivid, profound, heartfelt, and moving, and has important anthropological significance. The study has been published in internationally renowned journals in the United States and France, and has been evaluated by the editors-in-chief of authoritative international journals as “the top two or three most revealing anthropological works over the years”. This is a good example of the powerful penetrating power of digging out the true meaning of Chinese culture in the real life of Chinese society[10-13].

Telling Chinese stories is not only about recording what happened in Chinese society and life, but also about placing seemingly individual events, people, cultural phenomena, cultural relics, etc. in the context of the Chinese society and culture through the method of cultural narrative, to reflect on, interpret, and narrate them, and to present the cultural significance behind the phenomena. As the socio-cultural school of thought asserts, all “individual” and “single” events are inextricably linked to the social and cultural contexts in which they occur. Therefore, a “good” Chinese story should have the space and open quality for meaning interpretation (Li, 2010), allowing readers to see the “community” from the “individual”, the “complex” from the “simple”, and “culture” from “phenomenon”, communicating China cultural meaning in a multi-dimensional and multi-layered way. The stories of China presented in the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics adopts the narrative approach of intermingling culture and science and technology, tradition and modernity, and nature and society, and conveys to the world the spiritual pursuit of the Chinese people and the significance of Chinese culture from multiple perspectives and angles.

Therefore, a “good” Chinese story does not mean merely pursuing vivid storylines, brilliant expressions in foreign languages, and catering to the narrative preferences of foreign audiences, but also deeply understanding and exploring the social and cultural significance behind the phenomena utilizing cultural narrative, and presenting them through realistic techniques, reasonable narrative structures and plot arrangements, to influence and change people through the power of Chinese culture itself. To train students to tell Chinese stories well in foreign languages means to train them to produce such stories with Chinese cultural connotations and cultural penetration in foreign languages.

### ***3.2 Methods and keys to a good cultural narrative***

To train students to tell “good” Chinese stories, we must first guide them to fully understand the connotations of culture and narrative. On this basis, students should be guided to “pay attention to living people, go into life, and enter the field to collect materials, and at the same time, from these people, they can summon up the cultural lineage of thousands of years” (Wu & Zhang, 2014: 8). In foreign language teaching, students can be guided to carry out cultural narrative according to the following steps: (1) Observing, writing, interviewing and other means of investigation to collect first-hand materials about the “living experiences” that happens in daily living in Chinese society; (2) Analyzing the meaning of materials; (3) establishing the theme and structure of the narrative; (4) Producing a written or oral narrative. In addition, to truly tell a story that touches people's hearts and has cultural penetration, it is also necessary to grasp the three key points below, which are of awareness, deep description and interpretation.

#### ***3.2.1 Awareness***

Awareness refers to Chinese cultural awareness, which is the premise and core of a good Chinese cultural narrative.

Without awareness of the connotations of the Chinese culture, it is impossible for college students to truly tell Chinese story even if they have a high level of foreign language ability. One of China's famous anthropologists Pro. Fei Xiaotong suggests that, for anthropologists to study their own culture, they need to have self-knowledge of the culture in which they live, that is, “cultural self-awareness”, means “to understand its origin, the process of its formation, the characteristics and the tendency of its development.” (Fei, 2010: 195). In other words, to cultivate college students' ability to tell Chinese stories well in a foreign language is, in a sense, to cultivate students' ability to write ethnographically about the culture in which they live. Ethnographic writing, i.e., cultural narrative, is the process of understanding cultural “meaning” through writing about cultural phenomena. In this regard, without cultural awareness, it is impossible to capture the “cultural symbols” used to present cultural meanings, not even produce stories with cultural implications. We can find that Chinese college students' knowledge and cultural awareness of Chinese culture is even lower than that of a few foreign students studying in China through watching some large-scale foreign language speech contests held in China, and their mastery of foreign language expressions of Chinese culture is also very limited. As a result, the Chinese stories told are lack of depth

and Chinese cultural meaning. This is related to the fact that Chinese foreign language education has been focusing more on the learning of the target language culture. Through a survey of English teachers and students in Chinese universities, Chang (2021) found that foreign language teaching is limited in content about China's traditional culture, and although students have a strong desire to tell Chinese stories, they are unable to do it well. Therefore, strengthening the cultivation of Chinese cultural awareness and related Chinese cultural expressions in foreign language education is one of the keys to training students to tell Chinese stories well in foreign languages[14-18].

### 3.2.2 Deep description

To produce Chinese cultural narratives that are culturally penetrating and infectious, it is crucial to do a good job of describing cultural phenomena in depth based on Chinese cultural awareness.

Deep description is the main method used by ethnography to understand and represent culture, emphasizing the anthropologist's ability to interpret the meaning of culture from the "internal viewpoint of the culture holder" through the in-depth description of the meaning embedded in the "cultural symbols" that embody cultural significance, such as the place where an event took place, the objects placed on the table, and the behavior of the people (Geertz, 1973). Ouyang (2004) has adopted the narrative method of deep description. For example, the "cultural differences" encountered by the teachers when they changed their status from secondary school teachers in the China to "refresher student" in foreign language institutes in the "metropolis of reform and opening up" are portrayed in the description of their "slightly rustic" clothes and dresses. That is to say, in the narrative, the author chooses to deeply describe the teachers' dresses and attire because they are the "cultural symbols" used to express the "cultural differences" experienced by the teachers as a result of their identity change. For another example, "*A Classroom Where Hearts Flow: Narrative Inquiry into the Teacher's Professional Knowledge*" (Li, 2011) describes in detail the movements, language and expressions of students and Ryoko when narrating the "chaotic class" of "Teacher Ryoko". It is because the author wants to explore what kind of educational beliefs of Ryoko as a teacher are hidden behind the "chaotic class". "Therefore, "Chaos" becomes the "cultural symbol" of the exploration theme. In this regard, the main function of deep description is to invite readers to enter the story through the in-depth description of "cultural symbols" (Li, 2019), to experience together with the author, and to understand the narrative meaning that the author wants to convey.

Deep description is not only limited to a long narrative, but also 3-minute micro-video narrative also needs deep description. The author once instructed a student to participate in the micro-video competition "Tell Chinese Stories in Japanese language". The student told the story of a student volunteer from Shenzhen University in China, who was teaching in the mountainous areas. How to do a good job of deep description in a short 3-minute micro-video about this student volunteer? The scenes and symbols that can reflect the theme of the story are deeply narrated - the school in the mountainous, the classroom, the smiling faces of the children receiving help, the handwritten letters from children, the interviews of this volunteer. Such a deep description of details presents the main storyline to impress the audience.

### 3.2.3 Interpretation

To do a good job of cultural narrative, besides a deep description based on Chinese cultural awareness, analyzing and interpreting the meaning of experience is another key issue. When university students tell Chinese stories in foreign languages, they often do not know how to express the meaning of Chinese culture through narrative and are unable to tell stories that touch foreign people's hearts with cultural meaning. The main reason is that they are lacking of the ability of explaining the meaning of their experience well.

As mentioned earlier, narrative is "the action and result of human beings giving meaning through language", which means that narrative itself is a process of creating meaning. The essence of "meaning" (at the non-linguistic level) lies in interpretation. The interpretation emphasized by anthropology mainly focuses on and restore the deep cultural meanings behind the symbols of human behaviors, values, beliefs, and cultural rituals. The logic is that culture, in an invisible and intangible but omnipresent form, plays a role in influencing human behaviors, concepts, values, and so on. Anthropologists need to adopt a participatory observation approach, and through the deep depiction of the cultural symbols of human behavior, etc., interpret the cultural meanings hidden under the phenomena, and then present them in the form of narrative.

So how do we interpret meaning? For example, in 2021, the Chinese media followed up on the herd of wandering elephants in China's Yunnan province. The story was ostensibly about "Where did the elephants come from? Where are they going to?" Through the news report, both domestic and foreign

audiences saw the efforts made by the local government to ensure the safety of people and elephants, as well as the tolerance and love of Chinese urban and rural residents for wild animals. The report was well received by the foreign mainstream media and the public. Hu(2021:30), a journalist who participated in the report, writes reflectively when discussing why the herd of wandering elephants story has become a successful, he said: "In addition to focusing on the event itself and the reasons behind it, in the process of pursuing the elephant, we also repeatedly asked ourselves: 'What exactly is it that we are writing about when we write about the elephants?' The "What is it really about?" is the interpretive questioning of the cultural significance of the phenomenon. Therefore, the natural scenery, the conversations of the local government officials, the helpless yet tolerant expressions of the people, and the relaxed and contented appearance of the elephants all become the symbols used to illustrate the meaning of the narrative, through which the organizational ability of the Chinese government, the warmth and simplicity of the Chinese people, and the "harmony of humanity and nature" in Chinese culture are shown.

Therefore, to address the problem of students not knowing how to interpret and present cultural meaning through narrative, teachers can guide students to repeatedly ask themselves during the narrative process, about "What is this narrative about?", and "What do I want the audience know into it?", "Why am I focus on this?", "What is the connection between the cultural phenomenon I am focusing on and its cultural meaning?", "How can I narrate to better invites the audience to experience real, nuanced experiences with me and to understand the cultural meanings of what I am experiencing?" and so on.

In conclusion, awareness, deep description, and interpretation have been discussed separately above. Chinese cultural awareness, deep description, and interpretation are inextricably linked throughout the whole process of cultural narrative. Only based on certain awareness can we do a good job of deep description and interpretation, and deep description and interpretation also reflect awareness; at the same time, the choice of cultural symbols for deep description cannot be separated from interpretation, which in turn has to be embodied through deep description.

#### **4. Methods of Cultivating Cultural Narrative Ability**

As for how to cultivate students' ability to tell Chinese stories well in foreign language teaching, two ways below are put forward. .

##### ***4.1 Writing Chinese stories through cultural narrative method***

To make students learn about a good Chinese storytelling through cultural narrative, the first thing is to start from writing a story about Chinese culture. The advantages of starting from writing are: firstly, it is conducive to the cultivation of students from the beginner to intermediate levels, when their oral expression is limited, to lay a foundation for orally telling Chinese stories in foreign languages at the advanced level. Secondly, cultural narrative can be integrated as "writing tasks" in reading, writing and speaking courses, which makes it easier for teachers to handle.

Teachers can guide students by presenting good examples of cultural narrative in the following steps: (1) let students recognize the importance of telling a Chinese story from a cultural perspective; (2) teach students to think about the cultural significance of experiences in daily life and understand the basic concepts of cultural narrative; (3) show students the methods and steps of cultural narratives; (4) encourage students to write relevant cultural narratives; (5) evaluating students' cultural narratives through a multifaceted method that combines teacher evaluation, peer evaluation, and self-assessment, to promote students' understanding and mastery of the methods of cultural narratives.

Cultural narrative writing task was conducted in the comprehensive Japanese course teaching in one of China's university by authors. For example, in the text teaching on "Chinese and Japanese Food Culture" in Unit 5 of Basic Japanese Comprehensive Course 2 (Higher Education Press), teacher first let students watch the documentary of Chinese and Japanese food culture, and guide students to think about the following questions, that is what culture is? Why can food express culture? What kind of culture do Chinese and Japanese food embody? Then learn the Japanese expression of Chinese and Japanese food culture in the text. Next, students are asked to carry out a narrative writing activity about local Chinese food culture. In this teaching process, the guidance of the deep description and explanation which are difficult for students to understand are mainly focused on.

In order to show a good job of deep description, we selected the deep description fragments in Japanese anthropological writings and guided the students to conduct discourse analysis. Firstly, we asked students to find out the scene descriptions, character descriptions, emotion descriptions, and

psychological activity descriptions, etc. Secondly, we organized students to have a group discussion on the function of deep description in highlighting the theme of the narrative and portraying the characters. To deepen the impression, we let students try to delete the descriptions in the original text and re-narrative, and then compare the deleted narrative with the original narrative, to let the students realize the important role of deep descriptions in highlighting the theme of the narrative and expressing the significance of the narrative.

As to how to do a good job of interpretation, we selected the cultural narratives about the campus of Tazura University in *The Classroom Where Hearts Flow* (Li, 2011) and organized students to discuss what kind of cultural significance can be read from these narratives. Students are guided to think about how a tree, a building, or a piece of clothing becomes a cultural symbol and what kind of cultural significance it carries. To enhance students' understanding and use of interpretation, we conduct group activities that students read each other's cultural narratives, give feedback to the narrator on the cultural meanings and emotional experiences they read from the reader's point of view, and try to re-interpret the material, re-contextualize the narrative and arrange the narrative structure together with the narrator. Through such peer negotiation and peer feedback, students deepen their experience of interpretation and develop their interpretive skills.

The practice shows that starting from writing a story, through the process of teacher's guidance, peer discussion, students' revision, and re-writing, most of the students can better understand and master the methods of deep description and interpretation, and can complete the narration of Chinese stories with certain cultural connotations through a more reasonable narrative structure.

#### **4.2 Combining with the teaching of digital story**

After students have mastered the methodology of cultural narrative through story-writing, it is recommended that they carry out cultural narrative practice activities with multimodal at intermediate and advanced levels of foreign language learning. In today's digital age, to improve the international dissemination of Chinese stories, it is especially important to improve students' ability to produce digital narrative output. For this, teachers can adopt a form of foreign language teaching that combines cultural narrative methods with a digital story (Li & Ou, 2021). "Digital story" is a new method that combines multimedia technology (e.g., subtitles, pictures, audio, video, etc.) with narrative and tells stories through visual means such as presentations, videos, animations, and so on. "Digital storytelling" can present cultural narratives through visual means, which not only has the significance of showing the real China, but also can cultivate students' digital narrative output ability.

The specific steps are: (1) divide the group; (2) collect materials according to the method of cultural narratives; (3) analyze the significance of the materials in the group and establish the main points of the digital stories; (4) select the supporting materials that need to be deeply described; (5) organize the digital stories, edit and revise the narrative script; (6) construct the digital stories musically or orally; (7) present the digital story. Because the theme, clues, and meaning of the story have to be presented to the audience in a short time (usually 2-5 minutes) and need to impress the audience, a digital story requires a series of narrative activities, such as selecting the topic of the cultural narrative, materials collection, deep description, interpretation, and presentation of the story.

For evaluation, a combination of teacher evaluation, group evaluation, and self-evaluation can be used. The evaluation includes: (1) whether the narrative presents the living experience realistically and delicately; (2) whether describes cultural symbols in depth that can reflect the cultural significance is; (3) whether there is space for interpretation from multiple perspectives; (4) whether the narrative is vivid and conveys the Chinese cultural significance or socialist core values subtly.

### **5. Conclusion**

Above all, based on the anthropological concept and method of cultural narrative, this paper discusses the path of cultural narrative that empowers college students to tell Chinese stories well in foreign languages from the perspective of the definition of cultural narrative, the methodology, and the specific steps of cultivation. From the perspective of cultural narrative, it answers the key questions of "what to tell", "how to tell", and "how to cultivate" in telling Chinese stories well in foreign languages. Telling Chinese stories well from the perspective of cultural narrative requires students to do a good job of deeply describing and interpreting the living experience of Chinese society based on a certain degree of Chinese cultural awareness, and to produce Chinese stories with cultural meaning. To this end, foreign language

education in China should increase Chinese cultural awareness among college students through curriculum (Wen, 2021) or textbook content reorganization (Xu, 2021).

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