

The Empathetic Communication of the Panda Symbol on the National Image and its Triggering Mechanism

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Abstract: In recent years, as China's influence continues to grow, more and more cultural symbols have begun to attract the attention of audiences at home and abroad, the most typical of which is the "panda". This article takes the dissemination of the national image by the "panda" symbol as the starting point, and analyzes the basis behind it - empathy communication and its generation mechanism. At the same time, it summarizes the main means by which contemporary empathy communication promotes the "panda" symbol to express the national image, in order to promote better cross-cultural expression of the "panda" symbol in the future.

Keywords: Empathy Communication; Panda Symbol; Cultural Identity.

1. Introduction

In recent years, giant pandas have become more and more popular among audiences at home and abroad. Based on their biological properties, why have giant pandas become an important symbol that represents the image of China, demonstrates the aesthetic taste of the Chinese people, and contains the national spirit? This is a question worth pondering.

Combined with the core theme of "Giant Panda Media Communication", we can learn from the analysis of the literature. At present, there are few studies directly targeting the theme of "Giant Panda Media Communication" in China, and few foreign studies focus on "Panda Symbols". Previous studies on "Giant Pandas" and "Media Communication" have mostly studied "Pandas as Media Symbols" and "Panda Case Phenomena in Media Communication" separately. However, it is undeniable that the theory of empathy communication, cultural identity and semiotics theory have laid a good foundation for the research of this topic. At present, there is a gap in the research on "Why Panda Symbols Can Spread the National Image" and "How Panda Symbols Spread the National Image" in this field. This article will explore this issue from the perspective of empathy communication, the root of why panda symbols spread the national image, which has important theoretical significance and practical value.

Based on the logic and philosophy of the social research process, this paper conducts on-site observations of the currently popular "Panda Live" and "Panda Short Video" through literature research content analysis, and combines case investigations to conduct research. It strives to focus on the study of the panda communication phenomenon and deepen public cognition. At the same time, it analyzes the value path of panda communication and triggers social thinking.

2. The Basis for the Panda Symbol to Spread the National Image

"Empathy" in the psychological sense refers to the emotional feedback of one individual to the emotional state of another individual, and this emotional feedback has a

certain degree of similarity. The process of forming this emotional feedback is inseparable from the communication and exchange between the two individuals. Without communication and exchange, it is difficult for the emotions between the two individuals to reach an understanding. In this sense, empathy and communication have a natural connection. The concept of "empathetic communication" also reflects the echo between psychological research and communication practice. The reason why the panda symbol has an impact on the dissemination of the national image is due to the psychological basis of "empathy".

2.1. Theoretical Basis of Empathy Communication

From the perspective of communication, scholars Liu Haiming and Song Ting define empathy communication as "the process of individuals participating in the acceptance, transmission and re-creation of emotional information when facing group situations." [1] Based on this research result, we can conclude that empathy communication is the process of forming common or similar emotions between two reference objects and the process of receiving and transmitting corresponding emotional information. In this process, the two reference objects can be individuals and individuals, groups and groups, or individuals and groups, and the effect of transmitting emotions is a collection of various emotions. In the news and public opinion field caused by the giant panda "Ya Ya" incident, the power of empathy communication is reflected.

The effect of empathy communication is specifically manifested in three aspects: cognitive understanding, emotional attitude, and behavioral activities. These three aspects influence each other. If communication affects people's cognition, their emotional attitude will also be newly recognized, and then the degree of cognitive recognition will be higher, thus ultimately achieving a guiding role in the public's social activities and behaviors.

Empathy communication is characterized by great cohesion, large scale, and strong appeal. Once the emotional basis of empathy is formed, it will generate powerful kinetic energy. This kinetic energy does not require special social experience and theoretical basis, and it is easy to generate

appeal between people. Once the scene of empathy communication is formed, it is difficult for a few "rational" groups that are not easily infected during the communication process, or even the leaders of the communication, to control the progress of the communication. As a result, reports on some events are also very prone to bias and imbalance. For example, after the statement about "electric shock extraction of semen" in the research and breeding of giant pandas in China fermented to a certain extent on the Internet, most netizens easily ignored the research background, age, and regional factors, and thus fell into indiscriminate attacks on the panda breeding research base.

2.2. Conditions for Empathy Communication: Group Identity

How can many different reference objects produce similar emotional cognition? This is inseparable from the influence of situational conditions. Scholars Chen Wuying and Liu Lianqi believe that: "The situation directly affects the emotional state of the empathizer, making him closer to empathy." [2] From the perspective of the spread of the panda symbol, we can see that whether it is mainstream media reports or the virtual interactive scenes provided by new media for netizens, they are inseparable from the big situation of "Chinese national identity".

The cultural identity of the Chinese nation is formed by the mutual integration of various cultural forms such as various ethnic groups, geographical conditions, and language arts during a long period of history. The reason why the panda symbol can stimulate the cultural identity of the Chinese nation as a factor in promoting empathy is due to the indication of the panda in contemporary Chinese culture. People are the subject of cultural identity, and cultural symbols are the visual form of Chinese cultural identity, and are also the first level of cultural identity. In this sense, the panda symbol is what scholar Ma Xiaoling refers to as: "a symbol with some special connotation or special meaning." [3] The deeper level of cultural identity refers to the identity of the Chinese nation. The fundamental reason why the giant panda "Ya Ya"'s "encounter" at the Memphis Zoo easily aroused the attention of Chinese people at home and abroad is that the Chinese nation has tied the cultural image of "panda" to the identity of the Chinese nation. Through the venting of dissatisfaction with "Ya Ya"'s encounter, it is also a resistance to the Western misunderstanding of Chinese identity. Through functional identity, cultural identity may also rise to the level of values. In recent years, the ways and channels of using the panda symbol to spread China's national image have become increasingly diverse, which is actually a fission-like expansion of value recognition. It can be seen that the process of cultural identity generation also follows the generation mechanism of empathy, which goes through a cycle of cognition, emotion, and then emotion.

In order to exert the influence of "cultural identity" and achieve the best effect of empathy communication, we must first further strengthen the common cultural symbol identity of the Chinese nation. Use symbolic identity to awaken the deep memory of the nation, and use the mechanism of empathy communication to generate emotional identity. Finally, in the value concept of the Chinese nation's "community of shared destiny", we can achieve national behavioral identity.

Research from the perspective of cross-cultural communication focuses on the strategies and paths of national

image building. [4] At present, the "panda symbol" is a new strategy for national image building. Based on the influence of Chinese national cultural identity at home and abroad and the inherent mechanism of empathy communication, Chinese stories represented by "pandas" also have new possibilities in future international expressions.

2.3. Empathy Communication and National Image

From the perspective of "cultural identity", we can know that the national image itself contains emotional components, which are mainly constructed by the observation of "others" in the international community. The image is more of a mixture of emotions and thoughts. [5] The emotional factors in national image constitute the basis of empathy communication. However, considering the differences in empathy under different cultural backgrounds, we should look at the relationship between empathy communication and the national image to be shaped dialectically.

On the one hand, the image of a country can promote empathy communication. After the panda "Ya Ya"'s experience at the Memphis Zoo attracted attention, some overseas Chinese went to the zoo to live broadcast and publish updates to speak for the panda "Ya Ya", and even the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated in the discussion of this topic. It can be seen that the improvement of the country's image can quickly improve the cohesion of empathy communication and expand the dimension of empathy communication. On the other hand, empathy communication also strengthens the image of the country. On the basis of the same cultural background, empathy communication is more likely to gather the national consensus of the Chinese nation and arouse the community feelings of Chinese at home and abroad, so that everyone can empathize with the experience of "Ya Ya".

But at the same time, the rapid spread of empathy can easily become "extreme", thus damaging the originally humble and generous national image. Excessive empathy has led to the image of the country becoming more entertainment-oriented or even consumerist. The extreme consequence of the "Ya Ya" incident was the emergence of remarks to "eliminate panda diplomacy", as well as some "anti-empathy" remarks that run counter to social empathy, such as "it's just a panda", which have led to the alienation of the national image.

3. The Mechanism of the Panda Symbol in Spreading the National Image

Since cultural identity is the psychological basis for empathetic communication to work, and cultural symbols constitute the primary level of cultural identity, then the panda symbol, as a model of the cultural symbol of the Chinese nation, must have rich meanings. Its rich symbolic connotations shape the national image that can represent the Chinese nation through various communication methods and media. In this activity of imparting meaning and communication, the panda symbol is externalized as a medium, shaping the national image in its unique way.

3.1. Panda Symbol and Panda Vector

Recognizing the connection between the image of the panda and the national image is the first step for the panda symbol to spread the national image, and this depends on the

media's understanding of the image of the panda.

In addition to its ecological protection value, the rare giant panda is also a reflection of China, which has a long history. The giant panda has a cute appearance and a round body, which has all the elements to be loved by people. But at the same time, it has sharp claws, amazing running speed, strong body and strong bite force. Pandas never attack the weak, choose bamboo as food, live in harmony with many creatures, and live a peaceful life. It is in line with the Taoist concept of "Tao follows nature and tolerates everything", the Confucian concept of "rule by benevolence", and echoes the ruling philosophy of contemporary China. In addition, in addition to the rich meanings and symbols of animals themselves, animals often play an important role in cross-cultural exchanges. In the ancient Ming Dynasty of China, giraffes carried out the so-called "unicorn diplomacy" as a need for "material spirit politics". While demonstrating to other countries, it also attracted more countries to pay tribute to the Ming Dynasty. [6]

From the perspective of the mediatization of the panda symbol, Marshall McLuhan once said in his book *Understanding Media* that "media is an extension of man, and media is the message." From this we can infer that although pandas, as animals, cannot produce human "language information," they can naturally transmit information to the outside world through their biological attributes and the social and cultural background they represent. In the process of information diffusion, the panda symbol itself is gradually "mediatized."

The "panda symbol" uses the panda as a carrier to break cultural and language barriers, and establishes a good image of China with the "cuteness" of the animal. The "panda medium" has broadened the scope of international communication. Through pictures, texts, videos, and online communication, it has not only strengthened people's understanding of pandas, but also deepened China's influence.

3.2. Evolution of the Dissemination Mechanism of the Panda Symbol

The dissemination of the panda symbol to China's national image has gone through a path from text to image to video to network. With the evolution of the dissemination process of the panda symbol, the panda symbol has gradually moved towards the direction of media. This process is accompanied by the development of media technology and the preference needs of human sensory adaptability.

In the early days of writing, there were large errors in the interpretation and dissemination of information. The reason why the species name "panda" today is called panda is because of the name given to this animal by the French National Museum. Since the spoken rule of Chinese in the 1930s was from right to left, "cat panda" was misread as "panda" and has been used to this day. With the advent of photography technology, the image of the panda began to attract attention in paper media. At the same time, with the development of China's "panda diplomacy", the image of the panda has won people's love and also gained a meaning beyond the animal itself. In the West, the popular image of the panda has set off a "panda fever", and the advent of the "Kung Fu Panda" series of movies has also made Chinese culture widely recognized internationally.

In the era of Internet-based integrated media, cross-media communication platforms of social media and mainstream media have provided new channels for people to receive

information. The iPanda Panda Channel, jointly created by CCTV and Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, has received widespread attention. At the same time, a large number of co-created short video content has become a new front for creating topics and spreading the image of the country. With the popularity of Chengdu panda "Hehua", zoos around the country have started the "panda family" style of fission communication under the influence of China's "family" cultural background. In an instant, "Hehua"'s half-brother "Menglan" in Beijing, her biological brother "Hefeng" in Shanghai, her niece "Xiangguo" in Hangzhou, her best friend "Xiangxiang" who returned from Japan, and "Fubao" who returned from South Korea all appeared on the short video stage, setting off another wave of panda fever at home and abroad after "Panda Diplomacy" and the movie "Kung Fu Panda". This has undoubtedly created a new economic situation and enhanced the influence of pandas at home and abroad. In the future, with the further maturity of technologies such as virtual reality, panda media will present the image of the country in a more vivid and immersive way. China's international communication activities will surely be boosted by technological empowerment.

3.3. The Media Characteristics of the Panda Symbol

The giant panda's media image has shown distinct media characteristics in the process of its symbolic communication mechanism evolution. This is the change and significance of the contemporary panda symbol in communicating the national image.

First, in the process of mediatization, the communication mode of the panda symbol changed from passive to active. The early dissemination of the panda symbol was mainly carried out through "panda diplomacy". In this process, pandas were presented as state gifts to countries that had good relations with China. As the rarity of giant pandas gradually became apparent, countries began to carry out extensive cooperation, research and protection work on giant pandas from the perspective of ecological protection value. During this period, the significance and initiative of the panda symbol increased.

Secondly, in the process of mediatization, the communication process of the panda symbol has changed from one-way communication to two-way and even multi-way communication. After the 1990s, with the increase of China's home diplomatic activities, the panda has also been given more cultural colors, which has opened a window for the world to understand China. Among them, the advent of the "Kung Fu Panda" movie is the best evidence of the two-way communication of the panda symbol.

Finally, in the process of mediatization, the panda has gradually transformed from a physical image concept to a "media" concept at the ideological level. The panda has gradually become a mascot, a symbol of regional culture, and a cultural and creative product with its rich semiotic meaning, transcending its original physical meaning. The panda has created a new economic ecological chain of the "cute" economy, and has begun to be closely related to urban propaganda, becoming an important role in the dissemination of Chinese culture. At the same time, the panda symbol also conveys China's governance and diplomatic concepts and the ecological values of "a community with a shared future for mankind."

4. The Role of Empathy Communication in the Communication of Panda Symbols

As mentioned above, empathy communication is the inherent basis for the panda symbol to spread the national image. At the same time, it also has an inherent logic and evolution process for the spread of the national image. So, in the contemporary context, how to give full play to the advantages of empathy communication, promote the media evolution of the panda symbol, and establish a better national image? This is a question worth pondering.

4.1. Telling Chinese Stories

The key to bringing into play the role of empathy communication lies in the selection of materials that are common to the Chinese nation or different cultures. The beginning of cultural communication should be the inheritance of traditional culture. The vast majority of international audiences' understanding of Chinese culture is more limited to visible and ornamental cultural activities such as martial arts, porcelain, and Peking Opera. In major international exchange activities such as the Beijing Olympics, the Winter Olympics, and the Hangzhou Asian Games, cultural and creative products of "costume" pandas have appeared and sold well. It can be seen that in order to bring into play the mechanism of empathy communication in international communication and bring rich cultural aesthetic values to foreign friends, we must start with the inheritance of our own national culture.

4.2. Choose the Core Person

A leading communicator who exerts credibility in the process of transmission and reception is of great significance to empathetic communication. In any country, credibility is composed of two aspects: influence and affinity. The reason why the panda "Hehua" at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding became popular is closely related to its keeper Tan Jintao. The identity of a panda keeper is a very professional identity in the protection of giant pandas. Tan Jintao's career is also a key component of his influence. On the other hand, keepers are friendly grassroots jobs. They deal with animals every day and convey to the audience a peaceful and non-competitive attitude towards life. Because of this connection between the keeper "Grandpa Tan" and "Huahua", this combination has been able to go viral and even become the IP of Chengdu's cultural tourism.

4.3. Compatible Audience Identity

Cultural diversity and individual complexity will affect the effectiveness of empathetic communication. In international communication, only by recognizing the cultural identities of different audiences can cultural barriers be broken. The recognition of cultural identity is a dynamic process. In a series of new media activities related to the giant panda "Fubao" in South Korea, audiences from both China and South Korea were able to find multiple empathy points such as "the relationship between Grandpa Jiang and Fubao", "Fubao's family", and "Fubao's whereabouts after returning home", and thus showed more mutual respect, understanding and recognition in online communication. It can be said that interactive communication with overseas peers on new media platforms is a communication process of understanding the identity of the audience.

4.4. Use the Communication Context

The communication context determines when, where and in what form empathy communication is achieved. The current context of the panda symbol spreading the national image mainly includes movies and Internet self-media. Different cultural backgrounds lead to the use of other people's culture as a metaphor. Take the movie "Kung Fu Panda" as an example. The film created multiple images based on Chinese native animals and permeated the philosophical concepts of Chinese Confucianism, Taoism and Zen. This is undoubtedly the core of American Hollywood wrapped in a Chinese coat. This mutual transformation and reconstruction have found a balance between respecting Chinese cultural identity and attracting domestic audiences, and maximized the communication effect.

4.5. Build an Emotional Connection

International communication in the era of integrated media often puts Chinese culture in the situation of "information cocoon". In order to achieve "empathy" without racial or national cultural differences, we must grasp the common emotions of all ethnic groups. In the field of self-media, the creation of "family-oriented" matrix short videos and panda-themed short videos such as "Bear News News" in recent years have well responded to the characteristics of "co-creation" and "interaction" of new media, and captured the attention of audiences of all ages. At the same time, China's big family culture and the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind have also been strengthened in this kind of short video "co-creation". Only in a common emotional atmosphere can the image of a country be truly understood by audiences from different backgrounds, and then recognized.

5. Conclusion

On the psychological basis of cultural identity, the theory of empathy communication, as the internal driving force of the panda symbol in spreading the national image, reflects the mechanism of its value in the process of communication. At the same time, the panda symbol has also shown new characteristics in the context of cross-era communication by virtue of its own continuous "mediatization" process. In contemporary times, empathy communication still has important reference significance for the panda symbol in spreading the national image. The key to reducing alienation and misunderstanding in communication lies in "empathy". However, how to find the combination point of Chinese and foreign cultures is an issue that current research should pay urgent attention to.

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