

# *Discourse Analysis of College Students' "Telling Chinese Stories" from a Cross-cultural Communication Perspective*

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**Abstract:** Based on Labov's narrative structure theory, this article takes the successful work "Yingge Dance" of college students' "Telling Chinese Stories" as the research object, and adopts the discourse analysis method to analyze and discuss how Yingge Dance narrative constructs shared meaning between "listener" and "narrator" and the specific narrative strategies used. The research results show that the reason why the narrative can successfully build shared meaning between the "listener" and the "narrator" is that it successfully constructs a value system with universal human values. Secondly, clear narrative clues, narrative structure, and clear narrative logic and meaning construction process effectively serve the construction of shared meaning. Lastly, the use of narrative strategies including "evaluation strategies" such as "evaluation sentences", "repeated keywords", "direct quotations" and "involvement strategies" including emotional expression and descriptive sentences effectively support the construction and transmission of narrative value meaning. At the end of the article, the enlightenment of the research results on Chinese foreign language education for college students to tell Chinese stories well is pointed out.

## 1. Introduction

In the current complex international environment, how Chinese university education cultivates college students to tell Chinese stories in foreign languages and performs cross-cultural transmission of Chinese stories is a challenging research topic. Cross-cultural communication, in simple terms, is "interpersonal interaction between people from different cultures" (Yin, 2022:161). Because of the differences in context and symbol system, different information encoding and decoding processes may occur between the communicating parties"(Deng, 2022:79). Therefore, truly effective cross-cultural communication means to create a "shared meaning between communicators from different cultures" (Sun, 2015:14), enabling the communicating parties ("listeners" and "narrators") to transcend a single cultural identity, construct harmonious cross-cultural relationships and cross-cultural identities through gradual negotiations, agreements, and consensus (Dai, 2013:148).

In recent years, Chinese foreign language education has begun to focus on and explore the

cultivation of college students' narrative ability to tell Chinese stories in foreign languages. However, the related research mainly focuses on foreign language teaching practice and the exploration of the ability to "tell Chinese stories" well (Yang, 2021), but has not explored the topic of narrating Chinese stories well from a cross-cultural communication perspective. In contrast, research fields such as cross-cultural communication have begun to focus on the study of narrative strategies for "telling China's story well"[1]. Chen and Song (2019) are representative of these studies. The study proposes specific narrative strategies for "telling China's story well" as comprehensive narrative content, dual narrative discourse, diversified narrative subjects, professional narrative methods, three-dimensional narrative paths, integrated narrative media, and narrative form types." However, these strategies are too abstract for college students to practice in telling Chinese stories in foreign languages, and cannot form an effective reference when specifically telling Chinese stories[2-3].

In this context, it's essential to conduct research on the narrative strategies of college students telling Chinese stories in foreign languages. Taking successful cases of college students telling Chinese stories as the research object, analyzing specifically how they successfully construct meaning, and creating "shared meaning" between the "listener" and the "narrator" to achieve the purpose of effective cross-cultural communication of Chinese stories, is undoubtedly necessary and valuable.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Narrative, precisely what it refers to, is understood and defined differently in various research fields. Linguistic research regards narrative as a form of language expression with a distinctive form and structure. Psychology recognizes narrative to be a discourse structure associated with meaning creation. A Japanese scholar, Morioka (2013: 278), defines narrative as "the form of arranging multiple events into a plot according to a certain temporal order". However, simply arranging multiple events in chronological order does not make a narrative [4]. A narrative is the narration by the narrator through plot-arranging experiences or events in chronological or non-chronological order that each individual event is linked with the whole, imbuing it with a structured order of meaning. Plot (clue) is the key to creating an order of meaning among events. The function of a plot (clue) is to transform a simple timeline or list of events into an orderly whole with a certain theme (a schematic whole) by placing and emphasizing several events constituting the development and conclusion of the story. It is owing to the role of the plot, people can weave various events into a story, making it possible to explain their own or others' actions (Polkinghorne, 1988: 20-21).

Based on the analysis of authentic folk narratives, Labov (1972) proposed a theoretical framework for analyzing narratives [5]. He posits that once the main elements of the narrative are depicted along the timeline of past events, a narrative characterized by a consistency of clues or content will be formed. The specific elements of the narrative are:

- ①abstract (summary of the narrative)
- ②orientation (explanation of time, place, characters, circumstances, etc.)
- ③complicating action (detailed account of actual happenings)
- ④evaluation (thinking, emotions, attitudes towards the event)
- ⑤result or resolution (what finally happened)
- ⑥coda (transition from the story world back to reality)

Among the above narrative structures, Labov considers "evaluation" as the most important element. This is because the narrator can express their own views, emotions, and attitudes through "evaluation", hinting at the interestingness, importance, the narrator's point of view, etc., of experiences and events, thereby reflecting the explicit or implicit narrative value. Labov subsequently proposed the term "evaluation device", that is, in the narrative, the narrator can express their views, attitudes, etc., through operating devices such as changing volume, tone, mood, repetition, direct quotation, etc.

Based on the above viewpoint, this paper treats the narrative as creating a structural order of meaning through a certain plot (clue), making one or more events into an organized whole. The subsequent analysis in this paper is based on this premise.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1 Research Methodology**

This article adopts the research method of discourse analysis. According to Huang's definition (2001:3), discourse refers to the unit of language use, which is a semantic unit. It can appear in spoken or written form. This semantic unit is embodied by sentences, and its relationship with sentence, phrase, word and other grammatical units is a manifestation relationship, that is, discourse is embodied by sentences, or sentences embody the meaning of discourse. The main purpose of discourse analysis is to evaluate the discourse. Before evaluating the discourse, discourse analysis must examine the discourse in terms of "what meaning is expressed by the discourse," "how does the discourse express meaning," and "why does the discourse express a certain meaning" (Huang, 2001:2). That is to say, discourse analysis is ultimately an "interpretive activity," mainly analyzing how language functions and reflects specific meanings and functions in specific contexts [6-7].

#### **3.2 Research Object**

The research object of this article is the successful case of college students narrating Chinese stories under the guidance of the authors: the micro-video narrative "Yingge Dance." Yingge Dance is a traditional dance in the Chao-shan region of Guangdong, China. In rural areas of the Chao-shan region, Yingge Dance is regarded as the embodiment of heroes, a symbol of auspiciousness, and the magical power of dispelling evil spirits. There is a custom of jumping Yingge Dance during the New Year and festivals in the Chao-shan region [8]. In October 2022, at the "National College 'Telling Chinese Stories Well in Japanese' Micro-video Competition" held at Donghua University in Shanghai, China, the "Yingge Dance" story stood out from more than 70 entries and won the national second prize [9]. The reason why chooses the Yingge Dance narrative as the research object is that the narrative has well-constructed the shared meaning emphasized between the "listener" and the "narrator" from cross-cultural communication perspective, and can be regarded as a successful case of "telling Chinese stories well."

#### **3.3 Research Questions**

In order to investigate whether the "Yingge Dance" micro-video narrative truly builds shared meaning between the "listener" and the "narrator," and how it builds shared meaning, the narrative of the Yingge Dance micro-video is taken as the discourse, and referring to Huang 's (2001:2) three aspects of discourse analysis, "what meaning is expressed by the discourse," "how does the discourse express meaning," and "why does the discourse express a certain meaning" ,this paper mainly study the following questions:

- (1) As a discourse, what narrative meaning is constructed by the award-winning narrative?
- (2) Does the discourse successfully construct the shared meaning between the "listener" and the "narrator" emphasized by intercultural communication?
- (3) How does the discourse construct shared meaning?

## 4. Yingge Dance Narrative as Discourse

The Yingge Dance narrative consists of three parts.

The first part is the introduction, which begins with the "Ying Ge Spirit" milk tea shop as the entry point. The second part briefly introduces the history and movements of the Yingge Dance.

The third part is the inheritance and innovation of Yingge Dance by young people.

In the 3-minute micro-video narrative, the third part accounts for more than 2 minutes, which shows that the third part is the core of the construction of the narrative meaning of Yingge Dance. Therefore, this article only analyzes the third part of the narrative in "Yingge Dance."

The following is a presentation of the content of the Yingge Dance narrative as a discourse.

**(the third part)**

**(Scene 1)** So, how do modern young people view Yingge Dance? — power, vitality, courage, and unity. The young people, with their brand-new understanding, are injecting fresh vitality into the traditional culture in their way and inheriting this traditional culture.

**(Scene 2)** The student, Lin Wenzhi, from the Guangzhou University College of Fine Arts, created a series of cultural and creative products with Yingge Dance as the theme—bookmarks, pendants, postcards, and web pages—with a desire to let more people know about the traditional dance of her hometown.

**(Scene 3)** From these beautiful works, it is not difficult to feel her efforts to make the traditional dance of Yingge Dance closer to life and known to more people.

**(Scene 4)** She also believes that it is her identity as a young person that gives her more imagination about the inheritance of Yingge Dance.

**(Scene 5)** (Interview): "First of all, I think young people know young people better. Only they know what kind of content and methods young people prefer in presenting traditional culture. Secondly, I think it is precisely because young people can keenly understand cutting-edge technology and know more ways to spread traditional culture. Therefore, they can combine some new elements to make young people like traditional culture more."

**(Scene 6)** Like Lin Wenzhi, there are more and more young people who love traditional culture and shoulder the inheritance of traditional culture. In the hands of young people, tradition and history are no longer rigid and dull but lively and creative. Yingge Dance's hammer is no longer only danced in Chao-shan but can also be danced around everyone, allowing everyone to feel the charm of Yingge Dance. These traditional cultural derivatives created by young people, with the spirit and aesthetic style of the times, are moving towards the public, giving us a new understanding and interpretation of traditional culture.

**(Scene 7)** It is the young people who make traditional culture such as Yingge Dance timeless and enduring [10-11].

## 5. The Discourse Analysis to "Yingge Dance"

### 5.1 What is the Narrative Meaning Constructed in the Discourse?

"Yingge Dance", the third part, begins with an interrogative sentence. From the functional perspective, this sentence not only starts with an introduction and leads to the narrative, it also creates a narrative plot. Firstly, in terms of content, the last sentence introducing the second part of the Yingge Dance reads: "The older generation believed that this traditional dance with a short mallet was a symbol of auspiciousness, capable of dispelling demons and devils, and bringing peace to people." Obviously, the third part corresponds and completes the previous narrative. Through the question "What does Yingge Dance look like in the eyes of modern young people?", it forms a contrast between "Yingge Dance in the eyes of the older generation" and "Yingge Dance in the eyes of young people",

transporting the audience from the familiar "traditional "Yingge Dance"" to an unknown "young people's Yingge Dance, thus creating an "unexpected" narrative plot. Although the voiceover text only uses four words "power, vitality, courage, unity" to answer "Yingge Dance in the eyes of young people," each video image that matches the words shows young people's cultural creations on Yingge Dance. The images are vivid, lively, and creative, forming a completely different visual effect from "traditional Yingge Dance". This makes the following evaluative sentence embodying the narrator's point of view: "Young people are injecting fresh vitality into traditional culture in their own way while inheriting it" extremely persuasive, effectively conveying the narrative theme of "young people inheriting traditional culture in their own way." Therefore, from the perspective of narrative structure, this section of voiceover text is the "abstract" of this narrative.

The voiceover text at the beginning of the second scene is a subject-predicate structure sentence. The subject is "Lin", and the predicate is "created a series of cultural creations on Yingge Dance. At the same time, the video images display Lin's diverse and creative cultural creations for promoting Yingge Dance [12]. Hence, the narrative shifts from the abstract narration in the "abstract" to a more detailed depiction, moving from a collective narrative to an individual one. So, this section of narrative paves the way and introduces the detailed storytelling of Lin's innovative inheritance of Yingge Dance, functioning as an "orientation".

Scenes three, four, and five all narrate the specific story of Lin. The voiceover text beginning "From these beautiful works, it's not hard to feel" is an emotive statement that has an interpersonal function [13]. The following phrase, "It's precisely because of her 'young people' status, which lends her more imagination to the inheritance of Yingge Dance, emphasizes the keyword "young people" in the narrative. What follows is an interview, which explains the narrative value from the perspective of the person involved. The interview, through phrases such as "Only young people understand young people better" and "Young people are more familiar with cutting-edge technology, hence understand more means of dissemination," further highlights the role and value young people play in the inheritance of traditional culture, forming the "complicating action" of the whole narrative.

Scene six consists of four evaluative sentences, primarily revolving around "young people" and "traditional culture (Yingge Dance)". The first sentence uses an analogy, "Young people like Lin," to establish a meaningful connection between the individual and the overall narrative. Then, through the evaluative representation, "In the hands of young people, tradition, history is no longer ~ but ~," it emphasizes the unique advantage young people possess in inheriting traditional culture. The third evaluative sentence stresses that the innovative Yingge Dance by young people is not just a traditional dance in the Chao-shan area but has become a captivating culture that can be related to everyone. It vividly explains and assigns value and meaning to the young people's innovative behavior in Yingge Dance. The fourth evaluative sentence, echoing the previous one, further emphasizes the value and significance of "young people innovating traditional culture". Simultaneously, the visible repetition of the cultural creations of Yingge Dance— young people clinking their glasses in the Yingge Dance milk tea shop, a young person handing over an Yingge Dance mooncake box to another person, and the radiant smiles on young people's faces - whether in hearing or sight resonates and convinces one of the narrative theme and values the narrator wants to express [14].

The final ending language in Japanese uses an inverted sentence, putting "It's the young people" at the end of the whole narrative, allowing the narrative value to stand out effectively yet abruptly. This stimulates anticipation and imagination in the audience about "young people," who represent the future and hope, inheriting traditional cultures. Therefore, the final evaluative sentence gives the entire narrative value a real-life meaning. It could be said that the last part is both the result and coda of the entire narrative, leading the narrative back from the story world to the real world [15].

Through the analysis above, one can see that the narrative, assisted by the voiceover text and video images, builds a very clear narrative meaning: the role and hope of young people in inheriting

traditional culture.

## 5.2 Has the Discourse Successfully Constructed a Shared Meaning between "Listeners" and "Narrators"?

In order to evaluate whether the discourse has successfully constructed the shared meaning emphasized in cross-cultural communication, this paper analyzes from two aspects: the construction of narrative meaning and narrative strategies.

### 5.2.1 Construction of Narrative Meaning

Firstly, the narrative constructs a common human value system. As can be seen from the discourse analysis, "Yingge Dance" constructs a positive value system of "Because of young people, cultural inheritance is full of hope". Clearly, the inheritance of traditional culture is a common task for humanity. Although the narrative of "Yingge Dance" tells a story from China, what it conveys is that with the development of human civilization and science and technology, the younger generation is promoting and inheriting human traditional culture in their own innovative ways. This value system, obviously transcends culture and geography, and is a common value system of humanity. It is critical to good cross-cultural communication to construct a value system commonly recognized by "listeners" and "narrators" (Dai, 2013). Therefore, "Yingge Dance", by constructing a value system of "innovation and inheritance of traditional culture by young people", provides a premise and foundation for the construction of shared meaning.

Secondly, the narrative has clear clues and narrative structure. From the discourse analysis, we can see that the "Yingge Dance" is closely centered on the theme of "young people's innovation and inheritance of Yingge Dance(traditional culture)", forming the chain of meaning from "abstract" → "orientation" → "complicating action" → "evaluation" → "result (coda)". The narrative revolves around the simple and clear clue of "young people's innovation", and through examples and evaluations, it forms a structured order of meaning, which effectively ensures the transmission of meaning to the "listener".

Thirdly, the narrative has a clear logic and meaning construction process. Through the discourse analysis of the Yingge Dance narrative, we can see that the narrative constructs meaning under clear logic. In order to construct the narrative theme of "young people's innovation and inheritance of Yingge Dance(traditional culture)", "Yingge Dance" shows what young people have specifically done to "inherit traditional culture" by telling Lin's personal narrative; then, through the form of interviewing Lin, it explains "what role young people play" in inheriting traditional culture. Then, through four evaluation sentences such as "More and more young people are inheriting traditional culture." and "In young people's hands, tradition and history are no longer rigid and dull, but lively and creative," it powerfully explains where the "value and significance of young people's innovation and inheritance of traditional culture lies". All of these serve the value expression that "It is young people who can make traditional culture last forever and go far", and make sufficient preparations in logic and meaning level. This clarity in constructing meaning is both clear and highly persuasive, making it possible to construct a shared meaning between the "narrator" and the "listener".

### 5.2.2 Narrative Strategy

#### 5.2.2.1 Evaluation Strategy

Within the framework of narrative structure, Labov attaches the most importance to "evaluation". Narrators often emphasize their views, emotions, attitudes, values, etc., by using "evaluation devices" including language and non-verbal expressions. Non-verbal means include: adjusting the volume,

changing the tone, changing the intonation, etc.; language devices include: emphasizing words, repeating words, direct quotes, using the present tense of historical events, etc. (Labov, 1972). Polanyi (1985) saw narrative evaluation devices as a kind of narrative strategy. By using these, a narrator can emphasize the main points more effectively, give more meaning to the narrative, and convey the value of the narrative to the audience better. In the process of building shared meaning, the narrative of "English Dance and Song" uses the "evaluation strategy" more frequently. Specifically, it: (1) Uses more evaluation sentences. In the third part of "English Dance and Song", there are 5 evaluation sentences in total. They appear in the "abstract", "evaluation", and "result and coda". Also, although it hasn't used evaluation sentences directly, in the interview with Lin, by using the main sentence of "think", it also vividly expresses the narrative point of view through the mouth of Lin. It can thus be said that the use of evaluation sentences effectively builds a bridge for shared narrative values between the "narrator" and the "listener". (2) Repeatedly uses keywords. In the accompanying text of the third part, three high-frequency words are repeated, namely: young people (13 times), traditional culture (9 times), and inheritance (including: innovation) (3 times). These three words are indeed key to conveying the values of the Yingge Dance narrative. Therefore, this strategy of frequent and repetitive use of keywords enables the narrative to revolve closely around the narrative theme, forming clear and simple narrative clues, and effectively conveying narrative values to the audience. (3) Uses direct quotes strategy. As seen through discourse analysis of the third part's narrative, the most time is spent on the interview part for Lin's personal narrative. The "direct quotes" in the interview focus on the advantages and significance of "young people's innovation and inheritance of traditional culture" and powerfully convey the core values of the narrative to the audience through the voice of the person involved.

### 5.2.2.2 Involvement Strategy

Existing research has shown that, typically, in order for a narrator to effectively convey meaning, they often adopt an involvement strategy in addition to an "evaluation strategy" (Tannen, 1989; Norrick, 2000). As an observable phenomenon in language, the association strategy intuitively reflects the "connection" generated between the "speaker" and the "listener". Sacks (1995) found that narrators often use descriptive statements (descriptors) in order to help the audience better understand the narrative. Descriptive statements are often used to describe the time, place, characters and background of the narrative. For instance, rather than saying "four years ago", the narrator chooses to use "during my freshman year of college" to describe the time, believing that "during my freshman year of college" can better connect with the "listener". Therefore, the use of descriptive sentences can more effectively enable the "listener" to understand and participate in the story.

The Yingge Dance narrative also adopts the involvement strategy primarily using descriptive sentences in the process of constructing shared values. For instance, at the beginning of the narration, accompanied by the vibrant colors and attractive patterns of the "Yingge Milk Tea Shop" in the video image, the annotation used the descriptive sentence "based on the color red..." This effectively shared the information of "Yingge Dance" with the "listener" and introduced the narrative. In addition, the seemingly "self-questioning and answering" statement, " Meanwhile, the sentence of " So, what does Yingge Dance look like in the eyes of modern young people? —Power, vitality, courage, unity", also used the involvement strategy. For example, "From these beautiful works, it is not hard to feel her efforts to make Yingge Dance, a traditional dance, closer to life and to be known by more people.", this sentence uses the expression "it is not hard to feel...", which has the function of association, integrating the perspectives of "listener" and narrator, serving the purpose of sharing confidence and conveying the value of meaning. At the same time, "it is not hard to feel..." can also be interpreted as an emotionally expressive sentence, which gives the narrative an interpersonal function (Huang, 2001), and enhances the degree of association between the narrator and the "listener".

## 6. Discussion

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, the implication of college students telling Chinese stories well means successfully building shared meaning between the "listener" and "narrator". Through the discourse analysis of the Yingge Dance narrative, it can be concluded that the Yingge Dance narrative, as a discourse, builds shared meaning between the "listener" and "narrator" successfully. This is mainly reflected in: (1) As a cross-cultural communication narrative, "Yingge Dance" successfully constructs a value system with universal human values. To achieve cross-cultural propagation of Chinese stories, the construction of cross-cultural identity is indispensable (Dai, 2013). To build cross-cultural identity, common value recognition is the foundation (Jia and Feng, 2020: 40). Although Yingge Dance narrative tells the traditional dance of Chao-shan region in Guangdong, China, what it transmits and constructs is the value recognition with universal human significance – the role that young people can play in inheriting traditional culture and the hope this brings to humanity. This makes Yingge Dance not just a traditional dance in Chao-shan region, but a cultural symbol with universal human significance. As the narrative caption says: "(Yingge Dance) no longer only dances in Chao-shan, but can also dance around everyone....; (Yingge Dance) allows us to have a new interpretation and understanding of traditional culture". From this perspective, Yingge Dance narrative possesses the value of effective cross-cultural communication. (2) As a cross-cultural communication narrative, "Yingge Dance" has successfully adopted diverse narrative strategies, effectively serving the construction of shared meaning between "listener" and "narrator". This is mainly reflected in the narrative meaning construction strategy of the narrative itself, including the use of "evaluation sentences", "repeated keywords", "direct quotations" in "evaluation strategy" and including emotional expression, descriptive sentences in "association strategy" etc., all effectively support the construction and conveyance of shared meaning. From this perspective, the Yingge Dance narrative demonstrates a high level of narrative ability of the narrator. The main problem faced by Chinese language education in training college students to tell Chinese stories well is that although college students have positive emotions towards telling Chinese stories, they lack narrative techniques (Chang, 2021) due to lack of narrative method learning, and their narrative abilities are insufficient (Yang, 2021). Therefore, the Yingge Dance narrative shows us the importance of mastering the construction strategy of narrative meaning and narrative strategy in order to do a good job in cross-cultural communication narrative. These have some enlightening significance for Chinese foreign language education.

## 7. Conclusion

This study takes the successful case of college students telling Chinese stories – the work "Yingge Dance", which won a second prize in the "National Universities' 'Telling Chinese Stories Well in Japanese' Micro-video Competition", as the research object, adopts the discourse analysis method, and analyzes and discusses what is the narrative meaning constructed by the Yingge Dance narrative and how it builds shared meaning between the "listener" and the "narrator".

Through analysis, it was found that the reason why this work can successfully build shared meaning between "listener" and "narrator" is because as a cross-cultural communication narrative, "Yingge Dance" successfully constructs a value outlook with universal human values. This is the key to achieving effective cross-cultural communication. Secondly, the simple narrative thread, clear narrative structure and logical, layered narrative expression effectively serve the construction of narrative meaning. Finally, the narrative strategies used in the Yingge Dance narrative effectively support the construction and conveyance of shared meaning. Therefore, Chinese foreign language education should guide students to understand and express the universal values contained in Chinese stories when training college students to tell Chinese stories well. Secondly, we should vigorously



develop students' narrative capabilities including narrative strategies.

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