
Trust Reconstruction and Precision Communication: Research on Artificial Intelligence Empowering China's Enhancement of Cultural Soft Power towards ASEAN

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Abstract: China's economic and trade cooperation with ASEAN continues to deepen, but a corresponding depth of cultural identification has yet to emerge at the societal level. The resulting 'proximity without intimacy' trust gap has become a core challenge constraining bilateral people-to-people exchanges. This dilemma is not caused by a lack of information but rather by four kinds of cultural adaptation failures across symbol encoding, communication models, media platforms and affective structures, which prevent traditional communication paths from balancing the depth of cultural translation with the breadth required for mass reach. The distinctive technical properties of artificial intelligence offer a unique opportunity to break through this structural bottleneck. This study conceptualizes AI as a non-human actant in cross-cultural meaning-production networks and proposes that AI bridges symbolic, contextual and affective distances through semantic, contextual and emotional negotiation mechanisms. These mechanisms follow a progressive logic of cognitive trust, affective trust and trust accumulation: AI establishes credibility through cultural accuracy, fosters intimacy through personalized interaction, and deepens trust through sustained presence while shifting trust from the human-machine relationship to the content itself. However, challenges such as model hallucinations and algorithmic bias mean that realising the trust-building potential of AI requires human-machine collaboration. This paper provides a theoretical framework and reference for China's precision communication with ASEAN.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; cultural soft power; ASEAN; precision communication; trust reconstruction.

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1. Introduction

A paradox worthy of scrutiny lies between China and ASEAN: the two sides have forged deep economic ties, yet cultural affinity has not kept pace. Bilateral trade climbed from less than US\$8 billion in 1991 to more than US\$1.05 trillion in 2025, with ASEAN remaining China's largest trading partner for many years; the two sides established a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2021. However, close economic and political interdependence has not translated into deep social and cultural recognition. Enhancing the acceptance, trust and intimacy felt by ASEAN publics toward China remains a challenge.

The phrase 'close but not intimate' has become a common description of bilateral relations. Although ASEAN youth

know much more about China than before, their affection has not grown accordingly, leading to the phenomenon that ‘the more you know, the more doubts you have’^[1].

Existing research offers multiple explanations for this trust gap. Some scholars point to historical grievances such as negative memories after the South China Sea arbitration; others highlight geopolitical interference and great-power rivalry; still others focus on cognitive biases such as the wait-and-see attitude toward the Belt and Road Initiative. While these explanations offer insights, they tend to assume that more accurate information will naturally lead to trust^[2].

Yet trust is fundamentally a matter of relationships rather than information. Luhmann noted that trust serves to simplify social complexity and depends on familiarity and emotional connection rather than information accumulation^[3]. Giddens distinguished between system trust and interpersonal trust: the former relies on credible expert systems, while the latter relies on familiarity built through daily interactions^[4]. In cross-cultural communication, system trust is disadvantaged by cultural distance, and interpersonal trust is difficult to establish across geographical and cultural divides. Thus, the cross-cultural trust gap is not due to the absence of information but to the difficulty of forging relationships: cognition can be reached, emotions often cannot.

Viewed from this perspective, the key issue may not be whether ASEAN publics know about China but whether they feel emotionally close to China. The paradox that ‘the more you know, the more doubts you have’ confirms this: information accumulation alone does not generate trust, and cognition without emotional connection can even intensify suspicion. Bridging the trust gap therefore requires rebuilding relationships rather than simply increasing information, turning communication from a one-way monologue into a dialogue and embedding cultural content into audiences’ everyday worlds.

This paper attempts to answer three interrelated questions: Can the trust gap in China’s cultural outreach to ASEAN be explained by cultural adaptation failure? How does artificial intelligence intervene in cross-cultural meaning production and what is its operating logic? How does AI involvement change the mechanisms of trust generation and open up new reconstruction pathways?

2. Theoretical Examination of the Trust Gap: Four Dimensions of Cultural Adaptation Failure

2.1. Symbolic Encoding Adaptation Failure

Hall’s encoding–decoding theory posits that communicators encode meanings into symbols while audiences decode them^[5]. In cross-cultural contexts, the decoder’s position often diverges from the encoder’s expectations. When Chinese cultural symbols such as the dragon or family travel across cultures, ASEAN audiences may interpret them differently according to their own cultural contexts. In Buddhist or Islamic settings, taboo connotations may be activated, leading to unintended associations^[6]. This misalignment stems from natural cultural differences rather than communicators’ errors, but it results in meaning loss and distortion. Cultural products lauded in China may suffer a cultural discount in ASEAN because their emotional logic, values and motivations have not been translated into a coding system comprehensible to local audiences. Symbolic encoding failure is thus the first dimension of the trust gap^[7].

2.2. Communication Mode Adaptation Failure

Information consumption in ASEAN countries is highly circle-based: youth rely heavily on social media, and different interest groups have their own information sources and opinion leaders. Grand narratives and official discourse are often invisible within these circles; what circulates is personalized, emotional and participatory content. Traditional international communication remains centered on state-led, policy-oriented narratives. While necessary in official settings, such narratives fail to penetrate social media circles. To enhance effectiveness, China’s international communication must shift from communicator-centric logic to audience-centered, locally effective frameworks^[8]. A narrative gap arises between what the state wishes to say and what publics wish to hear, reflecting a lack of participatory relationship. When audiences

cannot participate in meaning production and do not see their concerns and emotions addressed, trust cannot grow.

2.3. Media Platform Adaptation Failure

Different media technologies shape distinct communication possibilities and habits, and the media ecology in ASEAN countries is heterogeneous. A one-size-fits-all platform strategy—placing the same content on all channels—may achieve channel reach but fails to embed content in audiences’ daily information flows. Entering a platform is not the same as embedding into life; the latter requires deep adaptation to local media ecologies^[9]. When content appears as an outsider rather than an organic part of daily consumption, trust cannot develop. Familiarity, which is essential for trust, stems from continuous, embedded contact.

2.4. Affective Structure Adaptation Failure

Emotion is culturally specific. What evokes joy, anger or intimacy differs across cultures. The concept of affective structures refers to the informal social experiences and values circulating within a community^[10]. Thai friendliness, Japanese politeness, Chinese filial piety and Indonesian family each have distinct emotional connotations. When communicators fail to adapt to the target culture’s affective structure, emotional misalignment occurs: stories intended to be touching may leave audiences unmoved, and achievements intended to inspire may trigger suspicion. Audiences may cognitively receive information without emotional resonance and may even interpret it defensively. The four adaptation failures reinforce each other, showing that neither mass media nor social media can simultaneously achieve deep cultural translation and broad reach under traditional models.

3. Artificial Intelligence as the “Third Pole” of Communication

3.1. Semantic Negotiation: AI as Cultural Translator

The primary barrier to cross-cultural communication is symbolic distance: the same symbol may have different or even opposite meanings in different cultures. Traditionally, overcoming this barrier depended on translators’ and localization teams’ cross-cultural skills, but their work is one-off and limited in scale. AI, driven by large language models, can learn semantic associations, contextual usage and implicit cultural meanings from massive corpora^[11]. Applied to ASEAN languages, AI learns not only lexical correspondences but also how words are used in Buddhist, Islamic and local contexts. This corpus-driven learning enables AI to translate not just literally but also culturally, making it an effective cultural translator.

Meaning production is a negotiation between encoders and decoders. In traditional models this negotiation occurs after content dissemination, when feedback leads to adjustments. AI allows negotiation to occur during interaction: as an interface it engages audiences in dialogue and adjusts its responses dynamically based on real-time feedback. Each interaction becomes training data, turning translation from a one-off task into an ongoing process of semantic negotiation.

3.2. Contextual Negotiation: AI as Life-World Embedder

Reaching audiences is not the same as embedding content into their life worlds. Traditional communication excels at the former but struggles with the latter because embedding requires deep understanding and dynamic adaptation to user contexts. In the algorithm-driven environment of social media, visibility depends on recommendation systems. AI can learn platform algorithms and design content with algorithm-friendliness in mind, shifting dissemination from simply placing content to embedding it within platform ecologies.

AI’s contextual negotiation is also reflected in its ability to recognize and respond to user states. Based on location, time and past behaviors, AI can infer the user’s context and tailor content accordingly. Instead of uniform push messages, AI delivers context-aware content, making it a natural extension of daily life rather than an intrusive outsider.

3.3. Emotional Negotiation: AI as Quasi-Social Relationship Carrier

The hardest barrier in cross-cultural communication is emotional distance. Symbols can be translated and contexts embedded, but emotional resonance depends on the audience's perception of approachability. Traditional models rely on interpersonal interactions that involve face-to-face contact and shared experiences, which are difficult to achieve in international communication. AI acts as a quasi-social relationship carrier through its ability to recognize emotions. Advances in natural language processing enable AI to perceive emotions such as joy, anger, anticipation and disappointment. In cross-cultural communication, AI can detect audiences' emotional feedback and adjust responses accordingly, turning one-way storytelling into emotional interaction.

AI can generate personalized content and construct quasi-social relationships. The notion of parasocial relationships describes emotional bonds between audiences and media personae, such as the familiarity viewers feel toward TV hosts or fans toward celebrities^[12]. AI makes it possible to design such relationships intentionally. Virtual AI influencers narrate in first person, wear local costumes and speak local languages, making audiences feel that 'she is one of us'. This personification allows AI to transcend its role as a tool and become a relationship carrier capable of emotional connection. Nevertheless, AI's ability to carry parasocial relationships is not without boundaries: hallucinations, model inconsistencies and algorithmic biases can undermine trust. Ethical issues may arise if AI-generated content is not clearly labeled. Therefore, AI's trust-building potential in cross-cultural communication depends on improving technical reliability, establishing transparency and developing human-machine collaborative governance^[13].

4. Internal Logic of AI-Driven Trust Reconstruction

4.1. From Information Accuracy to Cognitive Credibility

Cognitive trust is the first stage of trust formation and is based on judgments about the credibility of information sources. In cross-cultural communication this judgment faces a high threshold: audiences distrust foreign sources and unfamiliar cultural contexts. AI as a 'trusted knowledge mediator' relies on cultural accuracy. By learning target cultural corpora, AI understands the appropriate meanings, contexts and sensitivities of symbols. Its translations avoid cultural taboos and misinterpretations, thereby establishing initial credibility. AI's algorithmic consistency—producing the same output for the same input—provides a reliability akin to 'saying what you mean', enabling audiences to anticipate accurate and friendly responses and fostering cognitive trust^[14]. Over time, audiences may transfer their trust from the AI interface to the content it conveys, effectively shifting the trust pathway from direct culture-audience interactions to a mediated culture-AI-audience relationship^[15].

4.2. From Personification to Affective Intimacy

Affective trust addresses the question of approachability. While cognitive trust is built on accuracy and reliability, affective trust arises from familiarity and resonance, which are difficult across cultural divides. AI acts as a relationship carrier by cultivating familiarity through personification. Virtual AI presenters engage audiences with natural language and culturally adapted expressions, using local languages, attire and stories to be perceived as insiders. Emotional resonance deepens as AI recognizes and responds to audience emotions, continuing relevant discussions, mirroring preferred styles and showing concern when negative emotions arise. Such reciprocal interactions transform the relationship from a utilitarian user-tool connection to a dialogical, emotional bond^[16].

4.3. From Momentary Connection to Sustained Presence

Trust accumulates through sustained interaction. One challenge of international communication is maintaining continuous presence. Unlike human communicators, AI is always online and ready to respond, allowing audiences to engage anytime and anywhere. AI's memory of previous interactions creates a sense of relationship continuity: it can resume earlier topics, recall interests and respond to past feedback. Each interaction becomes training data, enabling AI to refine its responses

and better match audience preferences over time. This iterative optimisation strengthens trust, guiding it from shallow to deeper levels^[17]. Thus, AI-driven trust reconstruction follows a progression from cognitive trust to affective trust to cumulative trust.

5. Conclusion

In the context of global digitalisation and rapid advances in artificial intelligence, the forms and logics of cultural communication are undergoing profound change. As friendly neighbours connected by mountains and rivers, deepening cultural exchanges between China and ASEAN is essential for building an even closer China–ASEAN community with a shared future. The dynamic practice of AI-empowered cultural communication illustrates new momentum created at the intersection of smart technologies and cross-cultural communication, and showcases the appeal of Chinese culture to ASEAN audiences.

The AI-empowered approach places trust reconstruction at its core and precision communication as its practice orientation. Through semantic, contextual and emotional negotiation, it overcomes the failures of cultural adaptation and enables deep sharing of meaning. The progressive model of cognitive trust, affective trust and trust accumulation not only resolves the dilemma between cultural translation and large-scale reach under traditional models but also provides a new theoretical perspective on AI's role in cross-cultural communication.

Future efforts should further integrate AI with cultural innovation, shifting focus from technology empowerment to human–machine collaboration. Comparative case studies across ASEAN countries could examine the relative weight of adaptation failures under different cultural contexts and develop more explanatory and operational communication models. In building a more effective international communication system, AI should become a bridge for enhancing understanding and deepening trust, enabling Chinese culture to move from ‘going out’ to ‘going in’, from ‘informing’ to ‘dialoguing’, from ‘cognition’ to ‘trust’, and demonstrating unique cultural charm and influence in the deepening of the China–ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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