

# Digital Storytelling as a New Narrative Technique in Short Videos Telling China Stories

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## Abstract

In the digital era, short videos have become an important medium for cultural communication, providing a more effective channel for telling China stories. However, few studies have explored the digital and narrative features of existing short videos introducing Chinese culture. This study develops a new digital storytelling approach combining the concept of intercultural communication in analyzing prize-winning short videos telling China stories produced by Chinese and international netizens. In terms of digital and technological elements in two short video prize winners, abundant digital resources, flexible shooting methods, and video editing techniques are employed. Both short videos construct China stories utilizing elements of traditional narrative competence, such as the point of view of Chinese culture learners and communicators, the content of their Chinese life, intangible cultural heritage and appropriate narrative rhythm. Both two prize-winning short videos demonstrate a balanced Chinese and international cultural awareness, in which they show a deep understanding of Chinese culture and comprehensive view of global cultures.

## Keywords

Digital Storytelling, Narration, Short Videos, Cultural Awareness

## 1. Introduction

As the soul and pillar of a country, culture serves as an important foundation for the cohesion of a nation and a country. First advocated by Joseph Nye in 1990 (Nye, 1990), the concept of soft power has been redefined as cultural soft power in the Chinese context which highlights the distinctive importance of cultural factors in establishing the national image of the country (You, 2018). With the

rapid improvement of the comprehensive national strength of China on the global stage, Chinese people have realized the importance to strengthen China's cultural soft power, improve the country's national image and show the world a more real, multifaceted and comprehensive China. As a modern media form combining modern technology and audiovisual effects, short videos and other new media have a continuous and far-reaching impact on the dissemination of Chinese culture and the shaping of the national image. Short videos are new types of video works that are short, compact and suitable for fragmented time viewing. The platform of short video attracts more people to create new works with Chinese characteristics, thus enabling Chinese culture to be better accepted by other countries. The key characteristics of short videos are that they are short, adaptable, fast and interactive, and they are primarily aimed at young people with a strong sense of purpose, strong hands-on ability, and high information absorption. There has been a controversy over the standard length of a short video. Google defines it as any video over 10 minutes, while HubSpot found that the optimal length is 31 to 60 seconds. However, the average length of videos on popular short video platforms falls between 30 seconds to 3 minutes. Owing to its advantages, short videos have become an important medium for cultural communication. According to the analysis of Zero Power Intelligence Industry Research Report "2020-2025 China Short Video Industry Market Competition Pattern and Development Prospect Forecast Report", as of March 2020, there were 773 million short video users in China, making up 85.6% of all Internet users. This is an increase of 11.5% from 2018. Meanwhile, the total number of online video users reached 850 million, accounting for 94.1% of all Internet users, demonstrating that short video users have become the majority of online video users, accounting for 90.9% of all users.

Digital storytelling (DST) is defined as the telling of stories or personal narratives associated with the use of digital technologies to construct meanings (Lambert, 2013). As the term suggests, DST is distinguished from ordinary storytelling by its defining feature of applying technology to the creation of digital stories. A wide variety of research combines digital storytelling with a nation or a country's cultural beliefs, values, and image through personal narratives, and thus some related narrative frameworks are established. In order to probe into the effect of digital narrative and analyze the intention of the narrator in short videos telling China stories, this study integrates digital storytelling technique to the analysis of two prize-winning short videos selected in "HEP Cup" of "Telling China Stories in English" Short Videos Competition and "Tell China Stories" Contest respectively. Focusing on the role of digital storytelling in the area of cultural transmission, this research reconstructs a digital storytelling framework that integrates digital literacy, digital narrative ability and cross-cultural awareness on the basis of the existing framework theory. The study provides implications on how to better use digital storytelling to improve the quality of short videos telling China stories and better spread China stories through short videos.

This study aims to address the following three research questions.

- 1) What are the narrative structures in the digital representation of prize-winning videos telling China stories?
- 2) What digital elements are employed in these videos and how are they used to tell China stories?
- 3) How are cultural and intercultural awareness conveyed in the digital representation of these videos telling China stories?

## **2. Digital Storytelling (DST)**

### **2.1. The Definition of Digital Storytelling**

The notion of digital storytelling was first proposed in 1980s. A digital storytelling movement was created by Joe Lambert and assisted by Dana Atchley who are considered as co-founders of the Center of Digital Storytelling known as CDS where people are trained to share their interested stories through personal narration. The concept of digital storytelling was first introduced in 1997 by Joe Lambert and his colleagues, who renamed the San Francisco Digital Media Center as the Center for Digital Storytelling in California. DST is defined as a 2 to 5 minute audio-visual clip combining photographs, voice-over narration, and other audio (Lambert, 2013). Meadows (2003: p. 192) argues that Digital Storytelling (DST) is a revolution which means that it can not only be utilized by media but also can be made by individuals, and that it is the social practice of telling stories that makes use of low-cost digital cameras, non-linear authoring tools and computers to create short multimedia stories.

Research on digital narrative theory began as early as the 1990s. DST has been integrated in education, preservation of cultural heritage, knowledge translation, and community development (de Jager, 2017). At present, academic research on digital storytelling is mainly focused on the field of education and teaching practice. Digital storytelling has become a powerful instructional tool for both students and educators (Robin, 2006, 2016). Digital storytelling is a new type of pedagogical expression used in education and teaching practice, with a visual and logical plot, a vivid story context and a rich combination of media elements and means of expression (Tiba et al., 2015). Some studies have shown that people engaged in digital storytelling can enhance their technical skills and emotional learning outcomes, such as motivation, learning autonomy, and teamwork involvement and interpersonal communication, which particularly contribute significantly to the growth of higher-order thinking skills including creative problem solving and critical thinking (Ahmed, 2020; Wu & Chen, 2020).

### **2.2. Digital Storytelling and Cultural Transmission**

More recently, numerous scholars have combined digital storytelling with other research areas such as education, sociology, and cultural transmission (Barrett & Cocq, 2019; Shan et al., 2022). On the educational front, it is suggested that DST can be a powerful tool to assist new generations of students and educators for

many years to come.

Meanwhile, a wide variety of research combines digital storytelling with a nation or a country's cultural beliefs, values, and image through personal narratives, and thus some related narrative frameworks are established. In order to better study the effect of digital narrative and analyze the intention of the narrator, many scholars dissect the narrative process and form a narrative theory framework. There have been many attempts by Chinese scholars to study how digital narratives can be used to tell China story well. Yang (2021) conducted a study with 26 cases of college students using short videos to tell real-life stories in English, establishing a framework of foreign language digital narrative competence of college students in China. She proposed that the digital narrative competence of college students in foreign languages refers to the ability of college students to use foreign languages appropriately to tell real life stories to foreign audiences through the form of short videos to achieve cross-cultural communication of China stories. In practice, only by comprehensively examining the five major narrative propositions of narrative dimension, narrative object, narrative logic, narrative perspective, and narrative strategy, can we fully and systematically construct a digital narrative system that tells the China story well.

Our study focuses on the role of digital storytelling in the area of cultural transmission. It is found that current research on narrative competence is limited to single analyses of audio and text content, and few studies have combined narrative competence, digital literacy and cross-cultural awareness to construct a narrative framework for analyzing narrative works. Therefore, this research reconstructs a digital framework that integrates digital literacy, digital narrative ability and cross-cultural awareness on the basis of the existing framework theory. Moreover, the study does not limit itself to traditional narrative types such as books and films, but instead starts to analyze short videos.

### 3. A Digital Storytelling Framework of Cultural Transmission

#### 3.1. Existing Digital Narrative Frameworks

To establish a comprehensive framework to analyze short videos for cultural transmission, this study conducted an analysis of Labov's traditional narrative theory, traditional division of digital storytelling elements (see **Table 1**). At first, we learn and investigate Labov's traditional narrative theory. Labov (1972, 1997) proposed that a complete narration contains abstract, orientation, complicating action, result or resolution and coda.

The Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) was known for his development and dissemination of the Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling (**Table 2**). They are 1) Point of view; 2) A dramatic question; 3) Emotional content; 4) The gift of your voice; 5) The power of the soundtrack; 6) Economy; 7) Pacing. Two years later, Sadik (2008) designed and revealed pedagogical and technical attributes of digital stories and their influence on student learning based on the

**Table 1.** Labov's traditional narrative theory.

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Abstract             | Conclusion of the whole story and summary of the main points  |
| Orientation          | A description of the time, place, character, etc., providing background information.                                |
| Complicating action  | A series of narratives connected by temporal connectives designed to describe to the audience the course of events. |
| Evaluation           | The manner in which a narrator reveals the main points of a narrative.  |
| Result or resolution | Show the end of the event and the final outcome.  |
| Coda                 | Responding to narrative theme.  |

**Table 2.** Seven elements of digital storytelling (CDS, 2005).

| Center for Digital Storytelling's Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling |   |
|--|---|
| Point of view  | What is the main point of the story and what is the perspective of the author?                        |
| A dramatic question  | A key question that keeps the viewer's attention and will be answered by the end of the story.        |
| Emotional content  | Serious issues that come alive in a personal and powerful way and connects the story to the audience. |
| The gift of your voice   | A way to personalize the story to help the audience understand the context.                           |
| The power of the soundtrack  | Music or other sounds that support and embellish the storyline.                                       |
| Economy  | Using just enough content to tell the story without overloading the viewer.                           |
| Pacing   | The rhythm of the story and how slowly or quickly it progresses.                                      |

objectives of his study and Mertler's framework in the article Digital storytelling: a meaningful technology-integrated approach for engaged student learning. These attributes are 1) Point of view; 2) Content; 3) Resources; 4) Curriculum alignment; 5) Organization; 6) Student cooperation; 7) Camera and images; (8) Titles and credits; 9) Sound; 10) Language; 11) Pacing and narrative; 12) Transitions and effects.

Robin (2016) conducted a study of digital storytelling, in which three learning outcomes were put forward when students shared digital stories they had created, 1) Empathy and perspective-taking; 2) Self-understanding; 3) Community-building. From the perspective of the cross-cultural communication of digital narrative, Yang (2021) established a narrative structure that integrates narrative discourse, narrative structure, and cross-cultural awareness, which provides correct guidance for improving narrative ability.

### 3.2. A Digital Storytelling Framework for Cultural Transmission

The framework listed above laid a foundation for the development of a digital storytelling framework for cultural transmission, in which narrator's digital lite-

racy, narrative competence and cultural awareness should be taken into consideration. Combining Labov's traditional narrative theory and above elements of digital storytelling, this study proposed the following nine elements of digital storytelling, in which the first five elements focus on the analysis of the content of the video (see **Table 3**), while the other four elements focus on the digital technology or literacy capabilities contained in the video (see **Table 4**).

Based on **Table 3** and **Table 4**, digital storytelling elements proposed in this study not only involve narrator's narrative competence, but also their digital literacy. In addition, the concept of cultural awareness, which is indispensable for successful cultural transmission should also be taken into consideration (see **Table 5**). In this study, digital storytelling framework of cultural transmission consists of these three components, as shown in **Figure 1**.

## 4. Method

Adopting the new DST framework proposed in this study, we analyzed two prize-winning short videos to reveal their use of digital storytelling to tell China stories well through short videos in English.

### 4.1. Research Materials

This study applied digital storytelling technique to the analysis of two prize-winning short videos selected in "HEP Cup" of "Telling China Stories in English" Short Videos Competition and "Tell China Stories" Short Video Competition respectively

**Table 3.** Narrative elements of digital storytelling.

---

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Point of view-----             | The authors' opinion and the theme of the story. |
| Content-----                   | What the story is about?                         |
| Emotional expression-----      | The attitude or feeling of the narrator.         |
| Narrative rhythm (Pacing)----- | The process and pace of story development.       |
| Lead-in-----                   | How stories are introduced into themes?          |

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**Table 4.** Digital elements of digital storytelling.

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|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Transition-----       | How are scenes switched and connected between scenes?           |
| Background music----- | Music or other sounds that support and embellish the storyline. |
| Voice-over-----       | How does the narration aid the plot direction of the story?     |
| Shooting place-----   | The kind of scene in the video                                  |

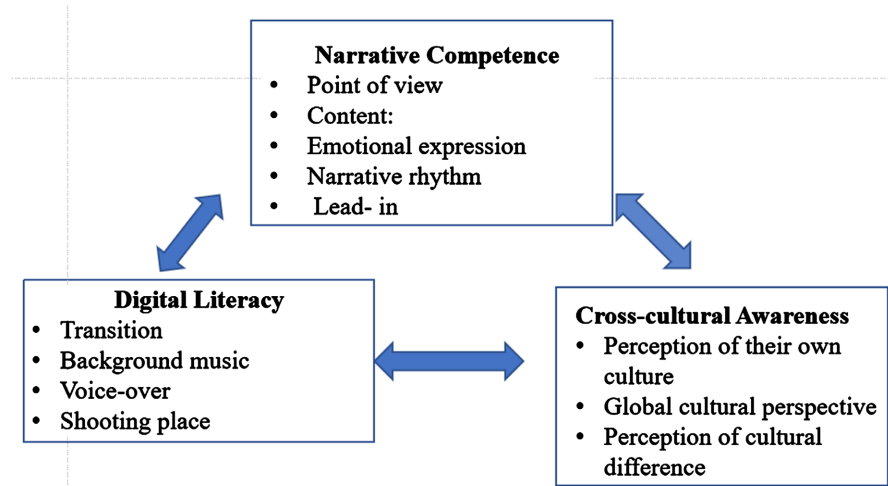
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**Table 5.** Cultural awareness elements of digital storytelling.

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|  |   |
|--|---|
| Perception of Chinese culture-----     | The narrator's level of understanding of his or her own culture between scenes? |
| Global cultural perspective-----       | Whether it promotes the global spread of culture.                               |
| Perception of cultural difference----- | Perception of cultural difference   |

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**Figure 1.** Digital storytelling framework of cultural transmission (proposed by this study).

**Table 6.** Two prize-winning short videos in our study.

| Titles of prize-winning short videos                        | Year and prize  | Video cover   |
|---|---|---|
| Black and White:<br>Chinese Calligraphy<br>and Ink Painting | First prize, 2022<br>“HEP Cup” of “Telling<br>China Stories in English”<br>Short Videos Competition |   |
| Holiday in Rui’an:<br>A Contemporary<br>Female Marco Polo   | Grand prize, 2021<br>“Tell China Stories” Short<br>Video Competition                                |  |

(see **Table 6**). China’s first “HEP Cup” of “Telling China Stories in English” Short Videos Competition was held in 2022 by the National Institute of College Foreign Language Teaching, with the theme of “Me and Intangible Cultural Heritage in My Eyes”. Among the eight first prize winners of short videos in this activity, we selected “*Black and White: Chinese Calligraphy and Ink Painting*”, which introduced Chinese calligraphy, one of the most famous intangible cultural heritages in China. This video was produced by Chinese university student group and conveyed Chinese culture from the perspective of Chinese people. “Tell China Stories” Short Video Competition has been held by China Foreign Language Administrations since 2019. The competition is open to all nationalities and many prize winners are international netizens who like to make videos telling China stories. Among all the grand prize winners, we selected “*Holiday in Rui’an: A Contemporary Female Marco Polo*”, which introduces the diversified intangible cultural heritage in Rui’an city and expresses the author’s hope for promoting cultural exchanges between China and Italy.

## 4.2. Analysis of Prize-Winning Videos Using DST Framework of Cultural Transmission

### 4.2.1. An Analysis of Black and White: Chinese Calligraphy and Ink Painting

To uncover how Chinese university students narrate China's intangible cultural heritage through short videos in English, we adopted DST framework of cultural transmission to analyze the three aspects of the video "*Black and White: Chinese Calligraphy and Ink Painting*". The findings are shown in **Table 7** and **Table 8**.

It can be observed that the video is very rich in content, presenting a lot of content about Chinese calligraphy and ink painting in a limited time. The video

**Table 7.** Narrative and digital elements in "Black and White: Chinese Calligraphy and Ink Painting".

1. Point of view—Chinese calligraphy and ink painting can be the typical representative of Chinese art.
2. Content—The storyteller spends the most time and content on the introduction of Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, namely the second and fourth parts, to convey information and emphasis, followed by the exhibition, explanation and analysis of some Chinese calligraphy and ink painting works.
3. Emotional conveyance—There are many positive words used in the video, such as "unique art treasure", "artistic embodiment", "elegant", "mellow", "wise layout" and so on. All these expressions reflect the narrator's love, awe and pride in Chinese calligraphy and ink painting.
4. Narrative Rhythm (Pacing)—The video is compact, logical and fast-paced because it has to explain and clarify various information about the history, categories and styles of Chinese calligraphy, and the themes and techniques of Chinese ink painting, as well as present, introduce Chinese calligraphers and ink painters, and analyze their works in just eight minutes.
5. Lead-in—The speaker started the topic of black and white with babies' first perception of the world. Then she naturally lead the discussion to black and white in other areas, such as artistic creation. This lays a foundation for the use of black and white in Chinese calligraphy and ink painting.
6. Sound—The speaker's voice in the video is gentle, emotional and undulating, and the background music is a piece of pure music composed by an ensemble of wind instruments Xiao, plucked instruments zither, etc., which fits the theme of the video, Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, a classical art.
7. Video shooting methods—The video was shot in the form of an online course with a green screen set up.
8. Subtitles—With subtitles in English and Chinese, the video helps domestic and foreign learners to know China more objectively and accurately, laying a good foundation for intercultural communication and cooperation.
9. Editing technique—Because the video was shot in a green screen environment, all the materials presented in the video need to be added, edited and spliced in the late production, for example, the material appears or transitions with fading transitions, circular forms or water ripple type unfolding, panning in from the left or right, etc., and the position of the speaker moving from side to side.



**Table 8.** Cultural awareness in “Black and White: Chinese Calligraphy and Ink Painting”.

## Cultural Awareness Elements of Digital Storytelling

1. Perception of Chinese culture—This video expresses that Chinese calligraphy and ink painting with black and white as a primary color is the typical representative art treasure unique to China.
2. Global Cultural Perspective—The international recognition of the value and status of Chinese calligraphy is illustrated by the words of the world-famous artist Picasso.
3. Perception of Cultural Differences—Chinese traditional paintings are not as realistic as western traditional paintings, for example, Chinese painting is often not only a presentation of specific time and space, but a free combination of space to convey the artist’s subjective intention.

is fast-paced, logical and well organized. The digital resources in the video are diverse, with pictures and videos appearing in abundance to match the speaker’s explanation, and relying primarily on post-processing and editing of all the material to present Chinese culture. Finally, cultural awareness conveyed narrator’s attitude towards Chinese and international cultures. The video shows a contrastive analysis between Chinese and western painting, which manifests narrator’s good sense of Chinese and global cultural perspectives.

#### 4.2.2. An Analysis of “Holiday in Rui’an: A Contemporary Female Marco Polo”

To reveal how this Italian narrator introduced China’s city of Rui’an through short videos in English, we used DST framework of cultural transmission to analyze the three aspects of the video “*Holiday In Rui’an: A Contemporary Female Marco Polo*”. The findings are shown in **Table 9** and **Table 10**.

From this video, we can see that Ms. Tang Yun has a good knowledge of Chinese traditional culture, especially the intangible culture of Rui’an. The video focuses on the expression of content and is supplemented by certain digital tools, which reflects the video creator’s good narrative ability and digital literacy. In terms of content, the author begins by showing that the development of the story centers on the city of Rui’an, and then slowly shows the architecture and intangible cultural heritage of Rui’an, so that the audience can walk into Rui’an and understand its culture. Secondly, from the perspective of emotion, the author’s expression is quite emotional, subjective and positive, which is reflected in the specific words listed in the table. Finally, from the perspective of cross-cultural awareness, the author has a rich understanding of Chinese culture and western culture, and is eager to become a bridge of Sino-Italian cultural exchange. Her cultural awareness of different cultures is clearly shown in the short video. Our analysis of this aspect is presented in **Table 10**.

## 5. Conclusion

New media represented by short videos serve as a good channel of information dissemination and provide opportunities for cultural dissemination and exchange.

**Table 9.** Narrative and digital elements in “Holiday in Rui’an: A Contemporary Female Marco Polo”.

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Point of view</b>        | “I hope to introduce my second hometown to the Italians through the book “Discovering Rui’an Non-Foreign Heritage”, which shows the strong folklore and classical aesthetics of Chinese traditional culture, such as national literature, literature, customs and architecture. I hope that through the book “ <i>Discovering Rui’an Intangible Cultural Heritage</i> ”, I can introduce my second hometown to Italians and promote further expansion of Sino-Italian cultural tourism through this folk diplomacy.”   |
| <b>Content</b>              | Most of the video is devoted to Rui’an’s intangible cultural heritage and many of the area’s characteristic ancient buildings. Among them, the ancient buildings include Yuhai Tower, Xinlan Bookstore, and intangible cultural heritage items include family tree, wooden movable type printing, drum lyrics, tengpai dance, high cavity, etc. The narrator expresses his love for Rui’an by narrating and presenting the corresponding scenes, and is eager to promote cultural exchanges between China and Italy.   |
| <b>Emotional expression</b> | In the video, the Italian Tang Yun expresses his love for the culture and architecture of the city of Rui an. This sentiment can be reflected in the following sentences.<br>“I also particularly like to go to the rural fields of China. Compared to the relaxing scenery of Italy, the beauty of the Chinese countryside lies in human interaction, simplicity and purity.”<br>“Wenzhou Rui’an is a good place, and I am very willing to stay and settle here if I have the conditions.”  |
| <b>Narrative rhythm</b>     | Most of the video is devoted to the intangible cultural heritage and ancient architecture of Rui’an. The ancient buildings are mainly introduced to the Yuhai Building and the Xinlan Book Club; the intangible heritage items are mainly introduced to the development of wood printing and genealogy and family trees and their historical significance. The rhythm develops slowly and the narrative content unfolds slowly, as if the historical scroll of Rui’an City is spread out before the eyes. The narrative is therefore smoothly paced, but with its own focus.   |
| <b>Lead-in</b>              | The video is based on the question “她眼中的瑞安是什么样的？” (“What does she see in Rui’an?”) as an introduction.   |
| <b>Transition</b>           | The video utilizes numerous fade-in and fade-out transitions. The video starts with a transition from the old city look to a modern scene of Rui’an’s flourishing development; the transitions are mostly from streets and alleys, country homes, etc. to more grand scenes such as a large river.   |
| <b>Background music</b>     | The background music is soothing and magnificent, which is apt to the content of the video. Along with the music, the city architecture and intangible cultural heritage items leap onto the paper, making people feel as if they have experienced the passage of years and changes together with the city of Rui’an.  |
| <b>Voice-over</b>           | The first narration introduces the narrator, Tang Yun, as an Italian sinologist who has lived in Rui’an for many years and has a good understanding of traditional Chinese culture; the second one describes how Tang Yun often wanders at ancient buildings in Rui’an to experience the historical heritage; the third one introduces the next introduction to woodblock printing by describing the picturesque landscape of the village; the fourth paragraph outlines the attraction of intangible cultural heritage to Tang Yun and sets the scene for the following introduction of Discovering The fourth paragraph outlines the attraction of intangible cultural heritage to Tang Yun, setting the stage for the following book, Discovering Rui’an’s Intangible Heritage. The narration is interspersed with the main character’s narration, allowing the audience to better understand what the video is trying to convey. |
| <b>Shooting place</b>       | The shooting scenes are all on-site materials, mainly including the specific structure of ancient buildings, large rivers, streets and alleys, movable type printing technology exhibition hall, genealogy display and other intangible cultural heritage displays.  |

By establishing a digital storytelling theoretical framework for cultural transmission, this study examines two prize-winning short videos telling China stories created by Chinese and international narrators respectively. Thus, we adopt DST as a technique to explore the narrative and digital features in their digital storytelling and cultural awareness conveyed in the narrators’ understanding of Chinese and other cultures.

**Table 10.** Cross-cultural awareness of holiday in Rui’An: A Contemporary Female Marco Polo.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Perception of Chinese culture</b>     | The narrator is a well-known sinologist who has studied traditional Chinese culture and has written the book <i>Discovering Intangible Cultural Heritage of Rui’an</i> . She is very interested in Chinese national languages, literature, customs, and architecture.                 |
| <b>Global cultural perspective</b>       | Wenzhou and Turin are international friendship cities. I hope to introduce my second hometown to Italians through the book “Discovering Rui’an Intangible Cultural Heritage”. Through this civil diplomacy, I hope to promote the further expansion of Sino-Italian cultural tourism. |
| <b>Perception of cultural difference</b> | As she felt the difference between Chinese and Italian culture, she emphasizes in the video the need to promote cultural exchange between China and Italy and to introduce her second home to Italians.   |

Our analysis demonstrates that the narrators of the two videos have good narrative competence. The points of view in two videos are clearly captured. The content are well organized and it develops at an appropriate narrative pace. Secondly, the two videos rationalize their narrative content and supplement it with appropriate use of digital technology to tell China stories well. Each video uses abundant digital resources, appropriate transitions, encouraging background music, various filming locations, and flexible editing techniques. The emotions expressed in the videos are not only reflected in the text, but also in the music, pictures and other video elements. Lastly, these two prize-winning short videos demonstrate a balanced Chinese and international cultural awareness, in which they show a deep understanding of Chinese culture and comprehensive view of global cultures.

The findings in this study reveal the reasons why these videos have won the popularity of the public. The two samples provide implications for narrators to better use narrative, digital and cultural elements in digital storytelling of short videos telling China stories in the future. Narrators should make full use of the Internet and various elements of digital storytelling, integrate digital information technology and resources, such as all kinds of videos, animations, pictures, music, editing software, digital devices, etc. They should also incorporate a deep understanding of both Chinese and other cultures to improve the quality of short videos telling China stories and promote successful cultural exchanges between China and other countries.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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