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Intercultural Communication Practices and Insights from the Goethe-institut Official Websites

Diandian Liu

Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Diandian Liu, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China.

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the practices and insights of international language and culture promotion organizations in the field of intercultural communication, using the Goethe-Institut as a case study to examine its cultural theme classifications and communication strategies. Data was collected through web crawling technology, automatically extracting thematic classifications and cultural activity information from the cultural sections of the Goethe-Institut's official websites in Germany and 16 other countries worldwide. The analysis reveals that the Goethe-Institut's official websites focus less on high culture ("Big C" culture, referring to academic or intellectual culture) and more on low culture ("small c" culture, referring to popular or communicative culture). Literature, art, and film form the main types of its cultural activities, with attention also given to international trends and avant-garde culture. The Goethe-Institut not only exports its national culture but also emphasizes fostering dialogue, exchange, and collaboration between cultures, bridging spatial and psychological distances to achieve a smooth "soft landing" in intercultural communication. These practices provide valuable insights and references for Chinese language and culture promotion organizations in the realm of intercultural communication.

Keywords

Intercultural communication; Cultural classification; Goethe-Institut; Language and culture promotion organizations

1. Introduction

Many countries around the world regard the dissemination and promotion of their national languages as an important strategic means and measure for economic development and cultural exchange, striving to enhance the international standing of their languages. Western countries started their language promotion efforts earlier, with organizations such as the Alliance Française in France, the Goethe-Institut in Germany, and the Cervantes Institute in Spain. These organizations have made significant contributions to the dissemination of their national languages and cultures, laying a solid foundation for shaping a vibrant and diverse national cultural image. They not only provide learners worldwide with opportunities to deeply understand and experience the charm of these countries' languages and cultural heritage through language courses and cultural exchange activities, but also promote international cooperation and exchange in education, tourism, art, science and technology, and other fields.

Li Yuming et al. (2021) (Li & Tang, 2022) believe that the mission of international language dissemination institutions can be summarized into two major categories and eight aspects: national mission and human mission. The national mission is still its basic mission, and the core task is to "promote the dissemination of its own language and culture." However, it is also establishing a conscious awareness of human mission and taking into account both

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national mission and human mission. Mo Jialin (2009) (Mo, 2009) believes that the experiences of the British Council, Alliance Française, Goethe-Institut and Cervantes Institute in promoting language and culture, which are also international language and culture promotion institutions, are undoubtedly of reference value to the Confucius Institute. Xu Lin et al. (2021) (Xu, 2007) believe that some scholars have clearly proposed that for the future of mankind, culture should be diverse, and in particular, it should draw nourishment from Eastern culture and Chinese culture. Therefore, introducing Chinese culture to people of all countries is an obligation that the Chinese people should fulfill to the world.

With the development of science and technology and the advancement of internet technology, cross-cultural communication has become increasingly convenient and efficient. However, academic research on cross-cultural online communication by language and culture promotion organizations is limited, and there is a lack of studies that categorize and compare cultural themes. Studies of the Goethe-Institut website also focus only on its domestic official website, failing to cover official websites in other countries. Therefore, this study focuses on the Goethe-Institut's official website, analyzing its cultural theme types and cross-cultural communication strategies to provide insights for cross-cultural communication by Chinese language and culture promotion organizations.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Questions

Question 1: How are the cultural themes categorized on the Goethe-Institut website?
Question 2: What is the ratio of Big C culture to Little C culture in the cultural themes of the Goethe-Institut website?
Question 3: What cross-cultural communication strategies are reflected in the cultural activities of the Goethe-Institut?

2.2 Research Subjects

This study selected the official websites of the Goethe-Institut in 16 countries across Europe, Asia , the Americas , Oceania , and Africa. Information on the themes and activities of their cultural sections was collected from these 16 official websites and then statistically analyzed. The European countries included Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Russia. The Asian countries included China, Japan, South Korea, and India. The American countries included the United States, Canada, and Chile. The Oceanian country included Australia. The African countries included Egypt, Ethiopia, and South Africa.

2.3 Research Tools

This study employed web crawling technology as the primary research tool. By writing Python scripts, the thematic categories and cultural event information of the Goethe-Institut's cultural sections were automatically retrieved from its official websites in Germany and 16 other countries worldwide. This tool efficiently and accurately collects large amounts of data, avoiding omissions and errors that might occur with manual searches. The collected data was then organized, categorized, and statistically analyzed using spreadsheet software such as Excel.

2.4 Theoretical Basis

This study categorizes the cultural themes on the Goethe-Institut's official website primarily based on cultural classification theories such as Big C culture and Small C culture, and knowledge culture and communication culture. James Scholars such as Alatis (Alatis, 1996) divide culture into Big C culture and Small C culture. Big C culture refers to academic and knowledge-based culture such as art, literature, politics, and economics; Small C culture refers to daily life, popular culture such as food, festivals, gift-giving, and taboos. The content of Big C culture and Small C culture refers to the content of Big C culture and Small C culture.

In classifying the themes of the Goethe-Institut's cultural sections, this study considers both the categories of "Big C Culture" and "Small C Culture," as well as the categories of knowledge culture and communication culture. Themes such as literature, art, society, politics, education, and economics are classified as "Big C Culture," while entertainment culture such as film, music, and drama, and communication culture such as cultural promotion, residency programs, and libraries are classified as "Small C Culture."

3. Research Results and Discussion

3.1 Research Results

3.1.1 Emphasis on language training and sharing of national culture

Language is the carrier of culture and an important tool for conveying cultural ideas; it is both a form of cultural expression and an important component of culture. Regarding the relationship between language and culture, language educator Kramsh (1998) (Kramsch, 1998) summarized it into three points: First, language expresses cultural reality: people use language to reflect their attitudes and views on the world. Second, language embodies cultural reality: people use language to interpret the meaning of their past experiences. Third, language symbolizes cultural reality: people regard language as a symbolic sign of social identity.

As a cultural institution active in the world, the Goethe-Institut's mission is first to promote German language knowledge outside of Germany, and second to promote international cultural cooperation. It also aims to provide a comprehensive introduction to German culture, society and political life by providing information about Germany. On the homepage of its official website, you can see the slogan "Teaching Language, Sharing Culture". In terms of its work, it takes language training and language testing, and the training of German language teachers as its guide. Based on language, it showcases cultural characteristics on the basis of language promotion. "Since language is the tool for all communication and thinking, and the foundation for the existence of various value norms and behavior patterns, the global dissemination of culture does indeed depend on the overseas promotion of the native language" (Dong, 2011). The Goethe-Institut is based on language teaching, promotes culture with language, and leads cultural dissemination with language teaching. The Goethe-Institut promotes German culture through German language, and also promotes communication, understanding and trust between different cultures in the world. This is an important manifestation of cultural promotion institutions as part of national soft power.

3.1.2 There are fewer large-scale C-culture themes than small-scale C-culture themes, and fewer knowledge-based culture themes than social-based culture themes.

This study conducted a statistical analysis of the themes of the cultural sections on the Goethe-Institut's official websites in 16 countries, based on the categories of "Big C Culture" and "Small C Culture," as shown in Figure 1.

国家	文化板块的主题										
	大C					小c					
德国	文学	艺术资助	视觉艺术	社会和时事	教育和知识	电影	驻地计划	图书馆	音乐	舞蹈和戏剧	
	大C类5种（占该文化主题的50%）					小c类5种（占该文化主题的50%）					
法国	文学与翻译		社会和实事			电影	文化推广和驻场计划	文化和创意产业			
	大C类2种（占该文化主题的40%）					小c类3种（占该文化主题的60%）					
意大利	文学	艺术	社会与时事			电影	生活方式	可持续发展			
	大C类3种（占该文化主题的50%）					小c类3种（占该文化主题的50%）					
英国	文学与翻译	艺术与技术	欧洲	当代			驻地计划	平等文化			
	大C类4种（占该文化主题的66.67%）					小c类2种（占该文化主题的33.33%）					
俄罗斯	文学与翻译	艺术管理				电影	文化推广	线上图书馆		德语戏剧	
	大C类2种（占该文化主题的33.33%）					小c类4种（占该文化主题的66.67%）					
中国							驻地计划	中德美术馆对话	翻译		
	大C类0种（占该文化主题的0%）					小c类3种（占该文化主题的100%）					
日本	笕桥文学奖					电影	驻地计划	线上图书馆	社会翻译		
	大C类1种（占该文化主题的20%）					小c类4种（占该文化主题的80%）					
韩国	文学	艺术	社会与时事新闻				文化项目和资金				
	大C类4种（占该文化主题的80%）					小c类1种（占该文化主题的20%）					
印度	文学与知识	艺术	社会	现代生活	可持续发展	电影			媒体与数字文化		
	大C类5种（占该文化主题的71.43%）					小c类2种（占该文化主题的28.57%）					
美国	文学	艺术	社会			电影	生活方式		媒体与技术		
	大C类4种（占该文化主题的50%）					小c类2种（占该文化主题的50%）					
加拿大	文学	艺术	社会			电影	文化推广		媒体与技术		
	大C类3种（占该文化主题的50%）					小c类3种（占该文化主题的50%）					
智利	文学	艺术	社会			电影	文化推广				
	大C类3种（占该文化主题的60%）					小c类2种（占该文化主题的40%）					
澳大利亚	文学	艺术资助			博客	电影		线上图书馆	歌曲	本地项目	
	大C类3种（占该文化主题的42.86%）					小c类4种（占该文化主题的57.14%）					
埃及	阿拉伯世界的德国文学						翻译	图书馆			
	大C类1种（占该文化主题的33.33%）					小c类2种（占该文化主题的66.67%）					
埃塞俄比亚					非洲漫画		翻译	图书馆		本地项目	
	大C类1种（占该文化主题的25%）					小c类3种（占该文化主题的75%）					
南非	文学	艺术			非洲漫画	电影	驻地计划	媒体与技术	音乐	文化与创意产业	
	大C类3种（占该文化主题的37.5%）					小c类5种（占该文化主题的62.5%）					

Figure 1. Themes of cultural sections of Goethe-Instituts in various countries.

The “Big C” cultural themes include literature, art, society and current affairs, education and knowledge, modern life, sustainable development, and the economy. The “Small C” cultural themes include film, residency programs, libraries, cultural promotion, lifestyle, music, dance, and theater. According to statistics on the cultural themes of 16 countries, four countries have a high proportion of “Big C” culture: the UK, South Korea, India, and Chile. Eight countries have a high proportion of “Small C” culture: France, Russia, China, Japan, Australia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and South Africa. Four countries have the same proportion of both “Big C” and “Small C” culture: Germany, Italy, the US, and Canada.

Based on the above statistics, the ratio of large-scale C culture themes to small-scale C culture themes is 1:2. This significant disparity may be due to two reasons: First, large-scale C culture, functionally speaking, belongs to knowledge culture, leaning towards literature, art, politics, and economics. It is more traditionally academic and professional, making it less easily organized and disseminated in countries with different ideologies, and thus less accessible to promotion than small-scale C culture. Small-scale C culture, on the other hand, is a culture of everyday life and communication, such as film screenings, residency programs, and libraries. Functionally, it belongs to social culture, not limited by ideological factors, and is easier to organize, promote, and interact with. Therefore, there are more small-scale C culture themes. Second, within the structure of cultural promotion institutions like the Goethe-Institut, activities with communicative, interactive, and promotional aspects are more easily designated as specific themes. Small-scale C culture itself belongs to a broader category of everyday life culture, with more subcategories and easier segmentation than large-scale C culture, thus leading to a greater number of themes.

3.1.3 Literature, art, and film are the mainstays

Among the cultural themes listed on the Goethe-Institut’s official website, the “Literature” theme under the “Big C” culture category is the most frequent, followed by “Art.” The “Film” theme under the “Small C” culture category is the most frequent, followed by residency programs. When culture is mentioned, many people first think of literature. Literary works are the most effective cultural carriers reflecting both the spiritual and material aspects of a nation’s culture. They reflect not only the spiritual worldview, values, and outlook on life, but also the material world, including local customs and traditions. Furthermore, literary works are more likely to resonate with people and reach a global audience. Therefore, almost all Goethe-Institut cultural sections include literature. In addition, German literature holds an important position in world literature. Germany has produced many famous writers, the most famous being Goethe, after whom the Goethe-Institut is named. This demonstrates the significance of literature to the Goethe-Institut and to cultural promotion.

Besides literature, art is the second most prevalent theme in Goethe-Institut culture. Goethe-Instituts around the world have conducted numerous art-themed events. The Goethe-Institut USA’s official website features the ARTBITS event, which collects street art photographs from Germany and North America. “Monuments” of the “The Monument of the Future” is a project by the Goethe-Institut (USA) in collaboration with the Cologne Academy of Media Arts, the Harvard University History and Design Studio, and the Ontario University of Art and Design, exploring the artistic design of monuments within public landscapes. The Goethe-Institut (UK) official website’s “Practicing” section... “Freedom” is a cross-cultural research and art project exploring the concept of return through dialogue regarding the afterlife of decolonial and cultural heritage objects. The Goethe-Institut (China) official website features projects such as “Sino-German Art Museum Dialogue,” “Sino-German Curator Dialogue,” and “Collection, Digitization, and Cultural Identity,” creating a platform for discussing practical cooperation issues related to contemporary art, design, and cross-cultural co-curation. This platform is geared towards young curators and museum directors interested in bilateral collaborations to jointly launch cultural projects. In addition to organizing art events, seminars, and workshops, the Goethe-Institut provides art funding to support professional, emerging, and amateur artists in carrying out projects in Germany and abroad. Besides funding projects and translations, the Goethe-Institut also awards scholarships, prizes, and research grants.

Within Little C Culture, the most prevalent theme is “film.” Film plays a significant role not only in the culture section but also in the activities section. The Goethe-Institut’s film culture activities primarily introduce German filmmakers and their works, exploring the characteristics of film creation in different historical contexts and highlighting outstanding filmmakers and films from various periods. Through film, language skills are improved, and national culture is understood. Film is a visually-based and direct form of communication with broad reach and acceptance. Good films can resonate with people from different countries and cultural backgrounds, sparking interest in and enhancing positive feelings towards a nation’s culture. Therefore, using film screenings to disseminate national culture is an excellent approach.

3.1.4 Contemporary culture is reflected in the context of the times.

The cultural activities on the Goethe-Institut's official website reflect the contemporary context and address international hot topics. Against the backdrop of a multicultural and contemporary international society, the Goethe-Institut (Germany) website hosts a Feminist Festival, focusing on women's talents and rights and opposing gender-based discrimination. The Goethe-Institut (UK) website raises the topic of "Living in a Quantum State"—art and technology—using an artistic perspective to promote dialogue on the application of quantum technology in contemporary society and to raise important ethical and ecological issues related to quantum computing. These themes are rooted in the contemporary social context, focus on globally significant issues, and profoundly reflect Germany's forward-thinking and innovative achievements in these fields.

Cross-cultural communication is directed towards the world, and its audience is not only learners in language classrooms, but more importantly, ordinary people in the receiving countries, and among ordinary people, the largest group is young people. Contemporary culture is closer to today's life than traditional culture and can resonate more with young people (Li, 2015). Attention to avant-garde culture and current hot topics is conducive to the Goethe-Institut establishing an open image of communication with the world, and is conducive to dialogue, understanding and trust between different cultures and civilizations.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 From unipolar to multipolar, from cultural export to dialogue and exchange

In 1970, sociologist Ralph Dahrendorf, then serving as Parliamentary State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, published his famous guiding principles, establishing cultural policy as the "third pillar of foreign policy." Dahrendorf not only aimed to elevate the status of cultural policy but also to change prevailing ways of thinking. He stated, "What we give is only valuable if people are willing to accept it," and "Openness to others is the commandment of our foreign cultural policy." Dahrendorf called for a shift in cultural export... culture) and adopt exchange, dialogue, and cooperation. and (cooperation), which is exactly the approach that the Goethe-Institut takes today when cooperating with partners around the world. Culture is never a one-way street. As Ackermann, the director of the Goethe-Institut (China), said, "Currently, only 20% of the Goethe-Institut's annual projects are purely about introducing German culture, while 80% are about Sino-German cultural exchange and cooperation projects." Cultural activities on the official website of the German Academy (China), such as the Sino-German Art Museum Dialogue, the Sino-German Curator Dialogue, and the workshop series "Collection, Digitalization and Cultural Identity," all invite German cultural workers to engage in dialogue with Chinese cultural workers, and to explore or find answers to certain questions through listening and dialogue. From the initial cultural plunder and infiltration to the one-way propaganda of talking to oneself, and then to the formation of the "listening-dialogue-cooperation" concept represented by the Goethe-Institut (Wang, 2014), this cultural communication strategy has achieved great success and is worth studying and learning.

3.2.2 From self to other, bridging spatial and psychological distances.

With locations around the world, the Goethe-Institut, in promoting German culture, needs to consider the national conditions and culture of the recipient countries. The Goethe-Institut's official website serves as an important medium for promoting its cultural activities. The cultural projects and events it publishes are tailored to the cultural and artistic characteristics, national conditions, and current events of the host country. For example, in Africa, the Goethe-Institut (Ethiopia) official website features a cultural project titled "Water in Ethiopia." Because water is a scarce resource in Ethiopia and holds immense social significance, the Goethe-Institut (Ethiopia) official website uses visual storytelling to highlight Ethiopia's story surrounding water, promoting the importance of this theme.

In Europe, the Goethe-Institut (UK) official website features a dedicated section on Europe, going beyond simply introducing German culture. It integrates with local politics, economics, society, and culture to offer thematic activities relevant to the local people, delving into national and local current events. The relationship between Germany and Europe has evolved from adversarial to close partnership, stemming from Germany's honest approach to history and its open attitude towards cultural exchange. It's not merely about promoting German culture, but about creating a space of community where the cultures of different host countries blend with German culture, bridging geographical and psychological distances through a soft landing.

The core of the Goethe-Institut's cultural dissemination strategy is the smooth transition and integration between cultures, breaking down the shackles of prejudice and ideology, bridging the distance of time and space and the psychological distance of the people of the target country, and achieving dialogue and exchange on an equal footing.

3.2.3 From culture to language, simplify complexity

As early as the 18th century, philosopher Humboldt discovered that every language contains a unique worldview and cultural perspective. Sapir and Wolf proposed that language determines people's way of thinking. Learning another language is learning another way of thinking. In today's ever-changing world, political restrictions and ideological constraints are becoming more and more apparent, and the spread of culture should be more subtly integrated into language. After all, language is the basic element and important carrier of culture, and learning another language is the only way to come into contact with another culture. Language "shapes our way of thinking about the world and ourselves... In the process of learning a language, we also learn the beliefs, values and norms in the culture (Julia, 2008).

4. Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the cultural theme categories and activities on the Goethe-Institut's official websites in 16 countries worldwide. The analysis reveals that the cultural theme categories on the Goethe-Institut's official websites reflect the breadth, inclusiveness, communicative nature, and contemporary relevance of its cultural dissemination. Therefore, promoting Chinese language and culture requires a gradual and proactive approach, adapting to changing circumstances, simplifying complex issues, and avoiding cultural conflict or culture shock, ensuring that audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds readily accept the message. In this era of unprecedented global change, China needs to innovate its methods of cultural dissemination, understand its environment, and clearly define boundaries to achieve a soft landing in cross-cultural communication, engaging in dialogue between civilizations based on mutual respect, openness, and trust.

The limitations of this study are twofold: firstly, the sample size and scope are limited, focusing only on the Goethe-Institut's official websites in 16 countries, failing to adequately cover the global scope; secondly, the research scope is relatively narrow, limited to data collection from official websites and not encompassing mainstream domestic and international social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Weibo, and WeChat, which to some extent restricts the breadth and depth of the research. Therefore, future research should expand the sample size and include the aforementioned online platforms in the research scope to obtain more complete and multi-dimensional analytical results.

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