

# Foreign Social Media Influencers and the Reconstruction of China's National Image: A Case Study of "IShowSpeed's China Tour"

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## Abstract

The current landscape of international communication is profoundly influenced by social media. The China Travel journey of internet celebrities from various sectors has also injected vitality into International communication. This study investigates the pivotal role of foreign social media influencers in this process, examining how they reconstruct perceptions of China for international audiences. Through an in-depth qualitative case study of the phenomenon-level event, "IShowSpeed's China Tour", the findings reveal that unscripted, first-person narratives produced by influencers effectively challenge entrenched stereotypes in Western media and generate positive affective responses among global audiences. Moreover, driven by both the visa-free policy and social media communication, China's national image is presented to the world in a clearer manner. However, vigilance should be exercised against the performative or excessively flattering discourse practices of some self-media, and a critical mindset is required when hot events in international communication. Overall, the research contributes to the literature on digital diplomacy and international public opinion by offering new insights into how non-state actors reshape national image construction in the age of social media.

**Keywords:** international communication, national image, social media, internet influencers

## 1. Introduction

In the digital era, social media has deeply integrated into the global communication ecosystem, and the power structure of information dissemination and the pattern of international communication are undergoing profound changes. Tech giants such as TikTok and YouTube not only foster ecosystems that bring together media enterprises, influencers, and audiences[1], but also transform the dynamics of diplomatic interaction and cross-cultural engagement. According to the "2024 Global Digital Marketing Insights Report", the number of global social media users has exceeded five billion mark, with an annual user growth rate still easily surpassing 5%. Among other factors, user-generated content and the rise of Generation Z audience are also gradually changing the landscape of International communication. It can be seen from this that digital technologies and communication subjects are becoming important forces shaping the dissemination of international public opinion. For decades, Western mainstream media has often framed China through selective reporting and stereotypical narratives, constructing a mediated image filtered through political and cultural bias. Therefore, In this context, internet celebrities, also referred to as social media influencers[2], play a significant role in enabling foreign audiences to gain a more authentic understanding of China's development. The information disseminated by such actors on social media platforms can reshape public perceptions, while these platforms themselves are gradually evolving into new arenas for international public opinion contestation.

In this case, "The IShowSpeed's China Tour" was a phenomenon-level social media event in 2025, providing a unique case for studying national image dissemination in the era of social media. IShowSpeed has already broadcast seven sessions in Shanghai, Beijing, the ShaolinMonk, Chengdu, Chongqing, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong. This event not only sparked global discussions about Chinese culture, allowing overseas audiences to see a more authentic image of China, but also exposed the opportunities and challenges brought about by cross-cultural communication.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Decoding China-opinion Leaders as Cultural Intermediaries in the Encoding/Decoding Process

To analytically decipher the phenomenon of foreign influencers reshaping China's image, this study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework combining Stuart Hall's seminal encoding/decoding model, reconceptualized

for the social media age. Hall argued that meaning is not simply transmitted from sender to receiver but is constructed through the processes of encoding and decoding. He also emphasized that culture is diverse and positive, and it can be freely understood, recreated and combined[3]. A message is encoded by its producer with a preferred meaning. The audience, in turn, decodes this message based on their own socio-cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and positional frameworks. Hall identified three hypothetical decoding positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position and the oppositional position. In the traditional context of international communication, the encoding of external publicity discourse has largely followed a one-dimensional model. With limited access to alternative sources of information, global audiences were often confined to passively receiving the narratives presented in international reporting. However, the rise of social media has significantly democratized the encoding process, breaking the monopoly over narrative construction and opening new spaces for both negotiated and oppositional interpretations. Within this environment, foreign influencers emerge as cultural intermediaries who occupy a unique position in China's international communication. By narrating their personal experiences in China, they encode content that resonates with specific audience communities. Audiences, in turn, engage with these narratives through a negotiated mode of interpretation, thereby amplifying the effectiveness of communication. This theoretical framework thus provides a productive basis for analyzing how foreign influencers, exemplified by IShowSpeed, contribute to the reconstruction of China's national image in the age of social media.

While Hall's model provides a valuable starting point, its application in the current media environment requires further refinement. The growth of social media has created conditions in which foreign influencers increasingly function as para-diplomatic actors, whose activities blur the line between entertainment and international communication. Unlike official publicity, which often suffers from perceptions of bias, influencer-driven narratives rely on authenticity as their central communicative resource. The informality of live streaming, the use of first-person narration, and the emphasis on everyday experiences all contribute to a sense of immediacy and credibility that official channels frequently lack.

### **3. Analysis of the “foreign influencers in external communication” Phenomenon**

Whether through Chinese influencers going abroad or foreign influencers coming into China, “Internet celebrities’ external publicity” has already become a new consensus and platform for strengthening and improving China's international communication efforts[4]. With the rapid development of the internet and the widespread adoption of social media, channels of cultural exchange between nations are becoming increasingly diversified. Against this backdrop, internet celebrities, by virtue of their special identities and unique perspectives, employ social media platforms to produce and share China-related content. A review of the phenomenon reveals that this group can generally be divided into three categories, whose communicative influence and effectiveness often surpass the traditional communication system shaped by governments and mainstream media. The first category consists of key opinion leaders cultivated by central media outlets such as China Global Television Network (CGTN), including prominent anchors and journalists. The second category includes representatives of self-media such as “Li Ziqi”, who gained popularity overseas through cultural tourism-related videos. The third category comprises foreign vloggers who document Chinese stories and livestream their experiences in China. This third group is particularly significant: by leveraging overseas social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, they enable foreign audiences to develop renewed perceptions of Chinese symbols, turning online interactions into offline experiences and cultural exchanges. This process shifts international audiences' understanding of China from a mediated, virtual environment toward tangible experiences of “China Travel.” Consequently, this third category of influencers plays a pivotal role—not only filling the absence of the “Other” in international communication but also helping to overcome the tendency of traditional publicity to become a one-sided, self-referential narrative.

### **4. An Analysis of the Dissemination Practice of “The IshowSpeed's China Tour”**

At present, numerous international celebrities are undertaking varying degrees of exploration in China. Adopting an inclusive and open stance, Chinese stakeholders leverage such “intermediary actors” to propel China-inflected cultural products to go global. In media practice, the American gaming influencer popularly known as “IshowSpeed” and an increasing number of internet personalities have become involved in international communication. As non-state actors, they enact an identity reconfiguration—from first-hand participants to cultural translators—thereby engaging in the entire process of influencer-based public diplomacy. Moreover, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a productive framework for analyzing the communicative logic of IShowSpeed's China Tour, a landmark social media event in 2025 that attracted global attention.

#### *4.1 Subject Identity: The Image Construction of “IshowSpeed” on Social Media*

IshowSpeed (real name Darren Watkins Jr.), a 20-year-old global top-tier influencer with over 42.7 million (data as of July 25, 2025) subscribers on YouTube, has become one of the most recognizable internet celebrities worldwide. As a renowned gaming streamer, he has cultivated a powerful self-symbol through his almost frenetic live broadcasts and exaggerated body language. His barking imitations when losing a game or his exaggerated shock when pranked-behaviors that Chinese fans have dubbed him “Hyperthyroidism Bro”—have been widely circulated via TikTok short videos, quickly evolving into meme-based communication. By breaking down the polished personas typical of conventional influencers, he attracts young audiences with a raw vitality. Although his image is controversial—often criticized as deliberately performative and attention seeking—it nevertheless embodies the communicative logic of “authenticity as traffic.” His unofficial, non-state identity reduces audience resistance, shifting the mode of reception away from adversarial decoding of one-way propaganda, and instead turning him into an inadvertent messenger of China’s national image.

From the perspective of Hall’s encoding and decoding theory, any message must first be “encoded” before entering the sphere of mass communication. As online key opinion leaders, they demonstrate social skills that are both humanized and individualized[5]. In this context, “IshowSpeed” extends the connotations of Chinese culture through a negotiated reading, whereby audiences simultaneously recognize the distinctiveness of Chinese culture while maintaining identification with the influencer as an individual.

#### *4.2 Narratives of the Other: “De-filtered” Communication Breaking Western Stereotypes of China*

Western media outlets such as CNN and BBC, through selective reporting, specific narrative framings, and deliberate differentiation, have long constructed a simulacrum of China as underdeveloped. In this mediated environment, foreign audiences, through a gradual process of implicit influence, have come to internalize stereotypical perceptions of China’s national image. Moreover, public opinion surveys conducted by certain well-known companies have increasingly aligned with the diplomatic needs of Western governments. As a prominent foreign influencer, “IshowSpeed” occupies a distinctive cultural position and an unofficially empowered intermediary role in the “other-construction” of Chinese stories. In this process, he emerges as a new opinion leader, producing original high-quality content that resonates with overseas audiences and thereby exerts measurable influence[6]. During his recent tour of China, the author conducted a detailed observation of related YouTube videos and the interactive messages therein. It was found that in cities visited during this trip—including Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, Chengdu, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong—the total number of comments on long-form videos exceeded 120,000. This figure accounts only for comments recorded beneath long-form videos, while the volume of interactive engagement during live streams was far greater and difficult to quantify precisely.

Moreover, the powerful communicative effect generated by “de-filtered,” unedited, one-take narratives is self-evident. Such forms not only circumvent the filters of differentiated reporting employed by Western media institutions, but also inject a sense of ease and informality into the grand narratives of international communication—for instance, through scenes of singing in the streets, practicing martial arts at the Shaolin Temple, or cars driving across water, it was everyday-oriented: rather than highlighting political or economic achievements, his narratives focused on ordinary interactions with people and places, thereby rendering China visible in intimate, relatable ways. These performances reconstruct foreign audiences’ “exotic imagination” of China. On YouTube, overseas users left comments such as: “Chinese people are very polite and friendly, truly a civilized nation—may God bless the Chinese people.” Such statements constitute secondary interpretations of the video content. The topic of “Real China” thus once again sparked heated online debate. Some viewers noted that “IshowSpeed shattered, with his livestream camera, the billions of dollars of smear propaganda the United States has waged against China for decades,” while others asserted that his trip was “perhaps the most effective publicity campaign in China’s history—China has truly been underestimated, which is incredible.” Another user replied, “In fact, China has always been like this, only most people did not know.” These audience comments clearly highlight problems that have long existed in China’s external communication—namely, messages that are “spoken but not heard” or “circulated but not amplified.” Such dilemmas have only begun to be gradually overcome in recent years.

#### *4.3 Underlying Logic: The Implementation of the Visa-Free Transit Policy*

Guided by Chinese government top-level design, China has continuously optimized its 72/144-hour visa-free transit policy, which has become a critical factor in the evolving landscape of international communication. With further policy relaxation, a new 244-hour visa-free transit arrangement has been introduced, leading to a significant increase in inbound foreign visitors. According to the National Immigration Administration, in the first half of 2024, the number of foreign entries reached 14.635 million, a year-on-year increase of 152.7 percent, with visa-free entries accounting for 58 percent. China’s circle of “visa-free friends” continues to expand, as more countries

formally enter the “visa-free era.” During their stays in China, many of these foreign tourists spontaneously create, share, and livestream content via platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, thereby facilitating the global circulation of cultural products rich in Chinese characteristics. Thus, China’s image is re-articulated through affective and embodied narratives that challenge dominant Western framings, the immediate feedback and emotional exchanges embedded in this communication process imbue otherwise abstract messages with greater appeal and resonance. According to TikTok statistics for 2024, the hashtag “China Travel” has accumulated more than 700 million views. It is evident that the synergy between the visa-free policy and social media dissemination has substantially unleashed the vitality of grassroots influencer communication. Leveraging the viral, fission-like nature of social media, the process shifts from passive to active communication. This dynamic is not only a key measure for enhancing national soft power but also opens new avenues for constructing a more authentic, multidimensional, and comprehensive national image. In conclusion, the underlying logic of IShowSpeed’s China Tour lies not only in favorable visa policies, but also in the interplay of algorithmic amplification, audience demand for authenticity, and market-driven incentives. Together, these factors constitute a multilayered mechanism that explains why influencer-based communication has become a powerful supplement to traditional state-led publicity.

Beyond the institutional support provided by visa facilitation, the communication dynamics surrounding IShowSpeed’s China Tour also rested on a set of deeper structural conditions. One of the most decisive is the algorithmic environment of platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Their recommendation systems are designed to reward content that generates strong interaction and cross-cultural curiosity, which meant that livestreams and short videos featuring a foreign celebrity in China were systematically amplified and pushed toward wider global audiences.

A second layer of logic lies in the appeal of authenticity. Viewers tend to respond more readily to unscripted encounters—street conversations, casual performances, or improvised reactions—than to official statements or statistical achievements. These everyday scenes do not present China as an abstract political or economic entity but as a lived environment, accessible and relatable. In doing so, they help offset the “propaganda fatigue” often associated with traditional publicity.

## 5. Discussion

In the context of increasingly frequent cross-cultural exchanges, numerous foreign bloggers have expressed on Chinese online platforms their high praise for China, often describing it as “perfect” and “fulfilling”. However, for those who live on this land, their recognition of the nation’s prosperity and strength does not arise from such mirrored perspectives of the Other, but from embodied experiences within their lived environment. For this reason, such statements alone are insufficient to reflect the true effectiveness of international communication. By contrast, when foreign bloggers communicate on overseas platforms to foreign audiences, conveying the message that “China is perfect and desirable”, this constitutes an exceptionally effective mode of exogenous-to-endogenous image construction of China. It breaks through traditional paradigms of international communication, moving away from grand policy-driven narratives and abstract statistical enumerations. Instead, it offers a more objective, third-party perspective that presents an attractive image of China to global audiences, thereby transcending the domestically oriented mindset that has often shaped China’s external communication efforts.

Although China’s international communication has achieved visible progress in recent years, with many foreign influencers engaging with China and helping Chinese stories reach global audiences, some problems still deserve careful consideration. A notable issue is the phenomenon often described as the “Flattery trap” in Western self-media coverage of the so-called “China fever”. On the surface, these platforms appear to celebrate China’s economic achievements, cultural attractiveness, and technological progress. Yet, behind this flattering discourse there may exist less benign intentions, seeking to cast doubt on China’s development path, national image, and international position. For this reason, the public should maintain a balanced attitude: while appreciating positive attention from foreign influencers, it is also important to remain cautious about excessive flattery and avoid developing a sense of complacency or superiority[7]. Therefore, critical awareness and clear boundaries are necessary in order to strengthen China’s international communication capacity while resisting potentially harmful narratives.

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

In contrast to the negative framings and selective filters frequently employed by Western mainstream media, the narratives disseminated by foreign influencers tend to construct an “idealized” vision of China. This representation spans diverse dimensions, including the efficiency of infrastructure development, the orderly functioning of social life, the abundance of cultural experiences, and the dynamism of commercial activity. Collectively, these depictions contribute to reshaping the global audience’s cognitive framework of China.

By placing Hall's theory in dialogue with contemporary scholarship on digital diplomacy and online authenticity, this study proposes a framework that better reflects the communicative logic of the current era. It highlights how foreign influencers, exemplified by IShowSpeed, can generate negotiated readings that are amplified through participatory and affective practices, thereby altering the international visibility and credibility of China's image in ways. This event, transcending mere entertainment, evolved into a significant socio-cultural moment that sparked global conversations about modern China. The case of IShowSpeed's China Tour illustrates the relative effectiveness of such "third-party mediated communication" when compared with traditional, state-driven, one-way external propaganda. Rather than a self-referential narrative, these influencers embody what Chinese communication scholars term "borrowing boats to go abroad", leveraging unofficial voices to enhance the credibility and authenticity of China's global image. Empirical evidence reinforces this observation. According to Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2024[8], China has surpassed both Japan and Germany to rank third worldwide, behind only the United States and the United Kingdom. This shift underscores a potential "overtaking on the curve" moment in China's international communication trajectory.

Against this backdrop, favorable policy reforms, sustained economic growth, and a more inclusive cultural environment are creating conditions that attract an increasing number of foreign influencers to document and disseminate their lived experiences in China. The unique identity of "foreign internet celebrities" as "overseas propagandists"[9], through a combination of embodied immersion and digitally mediated amplification, they can facilitate the gradual dismantling of entrenched stereotypes.

Ultimately, this case illustrates the evolving dynamics of international communication in the social media era. This study regards foreign influencers as para-diplomatic actors who re-encode national image through affective authenticity rather than state-driven messaging. In doing so, such practices pave the way for constructing a national image that is more credible, attractive, and respectable in the eyes of global audiences.

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