



Decoding Thai Humor in China: A Visual-Semantic Analysis of Cross-Cultural Advertising Reception

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Abstract

Background and Aim: With the development of globalization and digital media, cultural differences have become the main obstacle to the cross-border dissemination of humorous advertisements. Due to its unique cultural connotations and visual narrative techniques, Thai humorous advertisements present a "novelty-empathy-humor" dissemination path in the Chinese market. This study aims to explore how the cultural connotations incorporated into Thai humorous advertisements affect narrative construction and interact with the cultural identity and empathy mechanism of Chinese audiences during the dissemination process.

Materials and Methods: This study adopts a qualitative grounded-theory approach, conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 Chinese participants. Following grounded-theory procedures, the interview guide addressed visual-clue interpretation, cultural-symbol recognition, and humor acceptance. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to systematic Grounded Theory analysis in NVivo 12, encompassing open, axial, and selective coding to generate core categories and clarify the underlying communication mechanisms.

Results: First, in the absence of a language barrier, the audience mainly relies on "visual cues" such as actions, expressions, and symbol placement to complete information transmission, experiencing a cognitive path of "misunderstanding-interpretation-understanding" from confusion to interpretation and then to understanding; secondly, deep cultural metaphors such as Buddhist karma and Sanuk spirit are activated under the framework of Frame Semantics, successfully triggering the cultural empathy of Chinese audiences and establishing a preliminary emotional connection; finally, the differences in the audience's experiences at home and abroad lead to different ways of adjusting their identity boundaries, which in turn affects their preference and acceptance of direct humor and hidden humor.

Conclusion: Thai humorous advertising shows that cross-cultural emotional resonance and identity reconstruction arise when visual narration is foregrounded through exaggerated bodily gestures, distinctive colour palettes, and sequential close-ups, and when multilayered cultural symbols, such as Buddhist karma and Sanuk motifs, are mapped onto frames familiar to Chinese audiences. The study therefore advises international advertisers operating in high-context markets to prioritise rigorous image design (camera rhythm, symbol placement, chromatic contrast) and to curate culturally congruent metaphors that balance novelty with recognisability, thereby strengthening empathy, sustaining attention, and enhancing brand identification across cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Communication; Cultural Empathy; Visual Cues; Frame Semantics

Introduction

Globalisation and digitalisation have intensified the strategic importance of cross-cultural advertising for international brands. Humorous appeals, noted for their strong emotional pull, can capture attention and strengthen memory associations across divergent cultural settings (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990). Within such appeals, visual language—through composition, symbolic coding, and narrative rhythm—conveys layered cultural meanings that guide audiences through a “misunderstanding → interpretation → understanding” sequence and foster cultural empathy (Fillmore, 2006).

Thai humorous advertisements exemplify this mechanism. Infused with the indigenous Sanuk spirit and distinctive cultural metaphors (Jory, 1999), they have gained considerable traction on Chinese short-video platforms in recent years. Nevertheless, existing scholarship has remained largely at the theoretical level of humour studies, offering limited insight into how visual language interacts with cultural meaning during cross-border dissemination.

This study, therefore, asks: How do the cultural connotations embedded in Thai humorous advertisements shape narrative construction, and how do they engage Chinese viewers' cultural identities and empathy mechanisms? By combining qualitative interviews with Chinese audiences and visual case



analysis, the research elucidates the pathways linking cultural empathy, identity negotiation, and humour reception, thereby providing both empirical and theoretical guidance for creative localisation in cross-cultural advertising.

Objectives

The study aims to clarify how Chinese viewers accept and decode the cultural connotations of Thai humorous advertisements, with particular attention to the interplay of cultural empathy, identity construction, and humour reception. To achieve this aim, we conducted semi-structured interviews that elicited viewers' subjective responses to key cultural motifs—Buddhist karma, national symbols, and the Sanuk spirit—and traced their perceptual journey from initial misunderstanding through interpretation to final comprehension, a sequence steered by the ads' visual language. By clarifying this process, the research fills a gap in cross-cultural humour studies within the Chinese–Thai context and offers practical guidance.

Literature review

1. High-Context and Low-Context Communication Theory

In the theory of high-context and low-context cultures, Hall (1976) pointed out that high-context cultures rely more on non-verbal cues and shared background knowledge to convey information, while low-context cultures favor direct verbal expression. Thailand and China are both high-context cultures, and this commonality makes visual symbols (e.g., body movements, facial expressions, and scene atmosphere) play a key role in humorous advertisements, which helps to cross the language barrier and enhance the audience's intuitive understanding of the advertisement's intention (Hall, 1976).

2. Frame Semantics

Fillmore (2006) suggests that verbal and visual messages guide the construction of meaning by activating the corresponding “frames”. Specifically, the elements of Buddhist karma and traditional folklore symbols implanted in Thai humorous advertisements can quickly evoke the existing cultural knowledge base of Chinese viewers, so that they can naturally complete the process of “misunderstanding-interpretation-understanding” when decoding the advertisements, thus realizing the effective transmission of humorous messages (Fillmore, 2006). Thus, the message of humor is effectively delivered.

3. Cultural empathy and identity construction

Cultural empathy and identity construction are regarded as the core mechanisms of cross-cultural communication. Studies have shown that when audiences are confronted with unfamiliar cultural symbols, they are able to adjust their identity boundaries at the psychological level through emotional resonance and familiar visual cues, thus generating empathetic experiences and accepting foreign humor (Hasan et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2024). The interviews in this study found that Chinese viewers, even if they did not know Thai, could understand the advertisement humor with exaggerated body language and plot reversal, and this process was the result of the joint action of cultural empathy and identity reconstruction (Yan et al., 2024).

4. Chinese and Thai cultural commonalities

Thailand and China share three prominent cultural motifs—Buddhist karma, family-centred morality, and the Sanuk ethos of everyday joy (Huang et al., 2022; Wangsomchok, 2016)—and these commonalities were woven into every stage of the grounded-theory procedure. Ads were chosen only when they featured at least one of the shared motifs; during open coding, interview excerpts invoking familiar moral or family frames were flagged; axial coding merged those flags into the “Shared Moral Frame” category and connected it with humour responses; and selective coding ultimately confirmed cultural commonality as the bridging condition that shortens viewers' journey from misunderstanding to comprehension.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualises cross-cultural humour advertising as a sequential flow from visual cues to cognitive reconstruction and finally to identity-and-emotion response. The entry point is the advert's visual



language: shot composition, chromatic rhythm, and precise symbol placement pre-activate viewers' background knowledge in a high-context setting (Hall, 1976). Visual elements are not just decoration, but also a "cultural framework" that silently guides the audience's interpretation before any lines appear.

Once that frame is in place, viewers engage in what this study terms frame-semantic reconstruction. Drawing on Fillmore's frame semantics, the scattered pictorial clues are aligned with entrenched cultural schemas—Buddhist karma, folk motifs, familial hierarchy—allowing the audience to move from initial misreading through reinterpretation to coherent comprehension (Fillmore, 2006). Successful reconstruction then triggers emotional internalisation: the resolved joke elicits empathy, prompts a momentary realignment of self–other boundaries and deposits the brand message as a positive, self-relevant memory (CHEN, 2018; Huang et al., 2022). By tracing the passage from silent symbol to felt identification, the framework explains how visual language not only carries information but actively builds the cultural scaffolding that enables humorous meaning to travel across Thai-Chinese boundaries.

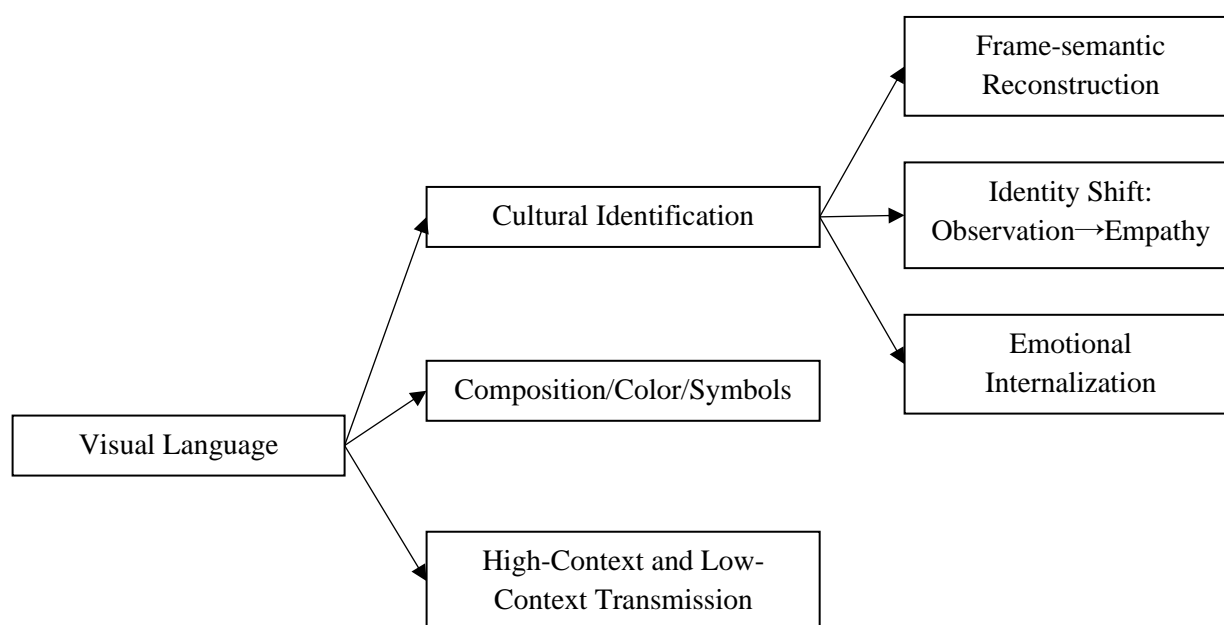


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative design centred on semi-structured interviews. In the Sampling Methods section, the study limits the sample to Bilibili and searches from December 2014 to December 2024, with a total of 1,218 related videos. Figure 2 Screenshot of searching "Thai advertisements" on Bilibili & 2014-2024 Bilibili video site on "Thai advertisements" video type, and finally selects eight humorous style advertisements with a length of less than one minute and a viewership of more than one million for in-depth analysis (hereafter "stimulus materials").

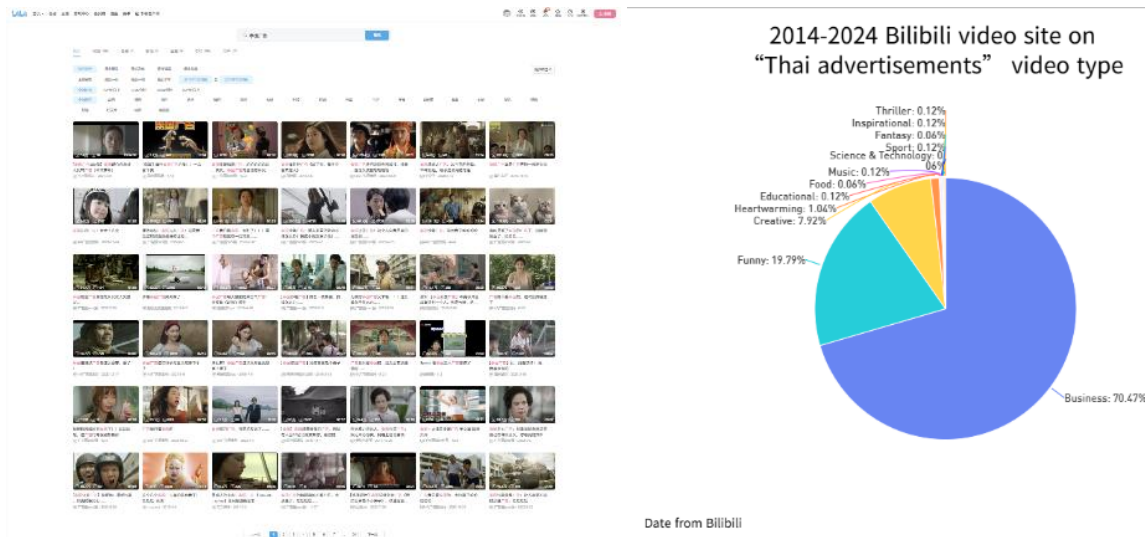


Figure 2 Screenshot of searching "Thai advertisements" on Bilibili & 2014-2024 Bilibili video site on "Thai advertisements" video type

Each clip had attracted at least one million public views—a threshold chosen to ensure that the material reflected advertisements with demonstrably broad exposure. The resulting focus on highly viewed clips may exclude niche content; this limitation is acknowledged in the Discussion.

Table 1 Basic information about the interviewee

Respondent ID	Gender	Age	Overseas Experience	Exposure to Foreign Advertisements
1	Male	28	Yes (Studying in Spain)	Frequently exposed to foreign ads
2	Male	34	Yes (Travel to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand)	Often sees foreign ads
3	Female	29	No	Rarely exposed to foreign ads
4	Male	28	Yes (Travel to Japan)	Has barely seen foreign ads
5	Male	30	No	Encounters pop-up ads while playing foreign games
6	Male	22	No	Occasionally sees foreign ads on Bilibili
7	Male	34	No	Occasionally sees foreign ads on social media
8	Male	42	Yes (Travel to Chiang Mai, Thailand)	Frequently sees Thai ads
9	Female	29	No	Frequently exposed to Korean, Thai, and Japanese ads
10	Female	29	No	Occasionally sees foreign ads during video pauses

For the semi-structured interviews, 10 Chinese viewers were recruited through Tencent Meeting Table 1 Basic information about the interviewee, an online video platform, covering a wide range of genders, ages, educational backgrounds, and overseas experience to ensure the representativeness and diversity of the sample. Interviewing ceased when no new themes emerged in two consecutive sessions, indicating data saturation and supporting the adequacy of the sample size. During each session, participants watched the stimulus materials and then responded to a 13-item interview guide covering first impressions,



humour preference, recognition of visual cues, perceived cultural meanings, and emotional reaction. All interviews were held via Tencent Meeting, transcribed verbatim, and proofread before analysis.

Table 2 Open Coding Tag Summary

ID	Label Name	Description
1	Plot Twist	The ad creates surprise through contrast or unexpected developments
2	Humorous Expression	Uses funny, absurd, or nonsensical elements to evoke laughter
3	Emotional Elements	Includes touching content like family or romantic themes to evoke empathy
4	Language Comprehension	Whether understanding Thai affects ad comprehension
5	Color Design	Use of warm tones, tropical feel, or bright colors to build a visual style
6	Costume Elements	Expression of character clothing linked to ethnic or cultural themes
7	Character Setting	Construction of characters' identity, behavior, and personality
8	Facial Expressions	Support for the ad's meaning through the characters' facial expressions
9	Body Language	Role of physical actions and movement in conveying information
10	Unexpected Content	An ad develops in an illogical or surprising way to create impact
11	Direct Expression	Information is conveyed clearly and in a straightforward manner
12	Metaphor/Indirect Expression	Requires viewer inference or interpretation of implicit meaning
13	Local Cultural Adaptation	Whether the ad considers Chinese cultural preferences
14	Cultural Differences	Differences in style and thinking between Chinese and Thai ads
15	Everyday Scenes	Familiar scenes related to daily life
16	Environmental Setup	Whether the ad setting reflects cultural or regional characteristics
17	Situational Resonance	Whether viewers can empathize with or relate to the situation
18	Product Presentation	Whether the product's function is demonstrated
19	Audience Acceptance	Whether the ad is liked or accepted by the audience
20	Other	Miscellaneous meaningful content not easily categorized

In the data analysis stage, this study used NVivo 12 software, and based on the classic grounded theory process, three rounds of coding were carried out: open coding extracted 20 labels (Table 2 Open Coding Tag Summary).

Table 3 Axial Coding categories and corresponding labels

Main Category	Example Tags	Description
Narrative Structure & Expression Methods	Plot Twist, Exaggeration, Metaphor, Direct Expression	Strategies and techniques used to convey information in the advertisement
Humor & Emotional Response	Humorous Expression, Emotional Elements, Situational Resonance	Mechanisms that trigger emotional arousal and willingness to accept the ad
Cultural & Language Barriers	Language Comprehension, Cultural Differences, Local Cultural Adaptation	Barriers to understanding and challenges in cultural alignment
Visual & Symbolic Elements	Color Design, Costume Elements, Everyday Scenes	Using visual grammar to convey a sense of cultural belonging
Character & Role Construction	Character Setting, Body Language, Facial Expressions	Characters as carriers of cultural values
Advertisement Intent Recognition	Product Presentation, Audience Acceptance	Clarity and effectiveness of the advertising message transmission
Cultural Resonance & Association	Situational Resonance, Everyday Scenes, Cultural Differences	Whether the ad evokes cultural and emotional resonance in the audience
Media Influence	Subtitle Support, Platform Placement, Viewing Habits	How do different media impact advertisement reception

Axial coding summarized these labels into a single label; and axial coding summarized these labels into a single label (Table 3 Axial Coding categories and corresponding labels). Coding grouped these labels into eight major categories.

Table 4 Selective coding of core categories

ID	Core Category Name	Core Functional Description
C1	Reversed Narrative & Emotion-Driven Memory Mechanism	Contrasting plot enhances memory retention and viewing motivation
C2	Cultural Element Recognition & Meaning Construction	Cultural visuals and language serve as both cues and barriers to ad comprehension
C3	Reception Mediation by Language & Media	External communication conditions influence the path of understanding
C4	Emotional Resonance via Character & Local Context	Relatable characters and stories trigger audience empathy and identification
C5	Alignment Logic of Ad Intent & Cultural Context	Ad intent must be embedded in cultural experience to enhance effectiveness.

Finally, five core categories were generated through selective coding to construct a model of Chinese audiences' acceptance mechanism of Thai humorous advertisements (Table 4 Selective coding of core categories). In the Methodology section, the article rigorously describes the research design, sample



selection, data collection, and analysis processes, which provides a solid guarantee for the reliability and validity of the subsequent results.

Results

Through semi-structured interviews with 10 Chinese viewers and NVivo coding analysis, the study identified the following three major themes: the bridging role of cultural empathy, differences in identity construction, and the mechanism of humor reception and cultural adaptation.

1. The bridging role of cultural empathy

Most participants lacked Thai-language competence yet described a direct passage from initial confusion to comprehension by attending to exaggerated gestures, facial play, and culturally marked props. Such cues activated latent frames and enabled a shared affective understanding that bypassed verbal decoding.

2 Differences in identity construction

Respondents' cultural backgrounds and overseas experiences significantly influenced their paths of interpreting symbols in advertisements. Those who have studied abroad or worked in foreign companies for a long time are more likely to appreciate and interpret cultural symbols from another perspective, while those with less local experience often have initial resistance due to the disconnect between cultural logic and the need to rely on more symbolic cues to form an identity. For example, Participant 9 was “puzzled” the first time he watched the scene containing the “bubble bath in the noodle soup”, but after repeated viewings and combining the narration with the subtitles, he understood it as a “humorous reversal of an everyday image”.

3. Humor Reception Mechanisms and Cultural Adaptation

Respondents' acceptance of Thai humorous advertisements relied on both cultural familiarity and the perception of “novelty-reasonable” differences. Viewers who can quickly recognize cultural metaphors in visual cues (e.g., Buddhist karma, family ethics) show a higher appreciation for “hidden humor”, while viewers who prefer “direct reversal” rely more on the conflict between the images and the sudden change in plot to experience humor. The audience who preferred “direct reversal” relied more on the conflict brought by the sudden change of images and plot to experience humor. Overall, the effective reception of cross-cultural humor needs to take into account the dimensions of “difference-driven” and “symbolic interpretability”.

The above results reveal the core operation mechanism of Thai humor advertisements in China: using visual language as the carrier, guiding the audience to cross the language and cultural barriers through cultural empathy, and completing the construction of humorous meanings in the dynamic adjustment of identity.

4. Perception Model of Thai Humour Advertisement

The reception pathway distilled from the grounded-theory analysis is organised into five analytically derived stages, each anchored in a designated core category from the selective-coding phase and supported by its respective axial and open codes. Visual Cues correspond to C1 and encompass plot twists, colour design, bodily gesture, and facial play that secure the audience's initial attention. Frame Activation aligns with C2, capturing the moment in which culturally marked symbols—such as Buddhist notions of karma or the Sanuk motif—are matched with viewers' pre-existing schematic knowledge. The ensuing Cultural Empathy Bridge reflects C4 and denotes the emergence of a shared affective understanding that transcends linguistic barriers. Identity Realignment, rooted in C5, traces the shift from detached observation to participatory engagement as audiences reconcile the advertisement's intent with their cultural frame of reference. Finally, Humour Reception synthesises outcome processes documented in C1 together with the media-related dynamics of C3, signalled by overt laughter, amused surprise, and brand recall.



Figure 3 Thai Advertisement Perception Model

Figure 3 visualises this sequence and highlights its recursive character. Visual cues initiate a forward movement through frame activation, empathy formation, and identity realignment to humour reception, while a feedback loop from the final stage to the frame-activation stage indicates that successful humour reception shortens subsequent decoding by reinforcing culturally situated expectations.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that Thai humorous commercials reduce interpretive barriers for Chinese audiences by foregrounding visual codes—exaggerated gesture, high-contrast colour, and situational mise-en-scène—thereby activating culturally shared frames and enabling humour without verbal comprehension. This finding converges with Huang et al.’s semiotic analysis of Thai public-service spots, which likewise attributes persuasive force to “character, scene, and action symbols” rather than dialogue (Huang et al., 2024). It also echoes the cross-cultural survey of high-context humour by Bergkvist and Ross (2016), who report that non-verbal cues become primary when a foreign language is involved (Gustafsson et al., 2016).

Yet our data diverge from Huang Yan et al.’s study of Thai ads on multiple Chinese platforms, where subtitling and narrative “re-invention” were deemed essential for uptake (Yan et al., 2024). The present respondents—viewing highly circulated Bilibili clips—described subtitles as helpful but not indispensable once visual frames were recognised. One plausible reason is platform culture: the Bilibili clips analysed here condense narrative into sub-minute, visually driven punch-lines, whereas longer public-service formats leave more room for verbal play. Methodologically, three constraints should temper generalisation. First, platform exclusivity may have amplified the dominance of visual codes; replicating the study across TikTok, WeChat Channels, or television could reveal different weightings of verbal support. Second, although interviews reached saturation after ten participants, the small, self-selected sample limits subgroup comparisons—future work might employ stratified focus groups or incorporate behavioural measures such as eye-tracking to triangulate self-reports. Third, all stimulus ads exceeded one million views, potentially biasing the corpus toward highly polished material; including lower-view clips would test whether the same reception pathway holds for less curated content. Despite these caveats, the five-stage perception model proposed here—visual cue, frame activation, cultural empathy, identity realignment, humour reception—offers a transferable template. In other high-context dyads (e.g., Japanese–Chinese or Korean–Thai), similar image-first tactics should function, although modest verbal anchors may be needed where the cultural frames overlap less. In low-context markets such as Germany or the United States, however, explicit narrative scaffolding will likely have to be reinstated while retaining vivid Thai visuals as an attention hook. By situating its results within prior cross-cultural humour research, acknowledging methodological limits and outlining conditions for broader application, the study extends understanding of how visual language and cultural metaphor cooperate in high-context advertising and provides practical cues for international campaign design.

Conclusion

Thai humorous commercials enable Chinese audiences to progress swiftly from novelty, through empathy, to humour by coupling image-led storytelling with culturally resonant metaphors. In a high-context environment, visually salient cues carry narrative weight and minimise language barriers, while motifs such as Buddhist karma, Sanuk, and family ethics supply familiar cognitive frames that viewers can



decode and internalise. During this process, audiences renegotiate their identity position from detached observer to cultural participant, complete the humour-reception cycle, and strengthen brand affinity.

The study advances cross-cultural advertising theory by foregrounding the joint roles of cultural empathy and identity adjustment in a non-English, intra-Asian setting, and it offers actionable guidance for international brands: prioritise easily legible visual cues and embed multilayered metaphors that balance Thai distinctiveness with Chinese recognisability.

Several limitations must be noted. Findings rest on a modest interview sample (n=10), a single distribution platform (Bilibili), and a corpus restricted to highly viewed clips; results may therefore over-represent visually condensed formats and digitally savvy viewers. Moreover, the focus on the Thai–Chinese dyad leaves linguistic and cultural diversity beyond this pairing unexplored.

Future work should enlarge the sample, incorporate multiple platforms and audience strata, and employ experimental or eye-tracking methods to triangulate self-reported pathways. Comparative studies across other high-context pairings—for example, Japanese–Korean or Thai–Vietnamese—as well as low-context markets such as Germany or the United States would clarify how far the proposed five-stage sequence of visual cue, frame activation, empathy, identity realignment, and humour can be generalised, and where additional verbal or contextual scaffolding becomes necessary.

Recommendation

To translate these findings into practice, Thai agencies and their Chinese localisation partners should embed small-scale pre-tests at the storyboard stage, using segmented viewer groups to calibrate the proportion of direct visual punch-lines versus metaphor-based humour. Art-direction ought to intensify non-verbal signals—salient symbol placement, high-contrast palettes, and choreographed gestures—so that the narrative remains intelligible even when subtitles are ignored. Copy strategy, meanwhile, can draw on Frame Semantics to weave Buddhist-karma, *sanuk*, and family-ethics motifs into a multi-layered metaphor system that preserves Thai distinctiveness yet offers Chinese viewers readily recognisable interpretive anchors.

From a scholarly perspective, the qualitative model proposed here should be tested and refined, the qualitative model proposed here should be tested and refined through complementary quantitative work. Large-sample surveys could measure the relative persuasiveness of direct versus hidden humour across demographic strata; eye-tracking or controlled-experiment designs would capture real-time attention to visual cues; and cross-platform analyses (Bilibili, Douyin, television) could reveal how distribution contexts moderate joke reception. Such mixed-method extensions will verify the generalisability of the five-stage perception pathway and identify boundary conditions in other cultural pairings.

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