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## **Empathy as an Aesthetic Infrastructure of Intercultural Communication: China and Post-Yugoslav Digital Narratives in the Age of AI**

**Abstract:** This article examines intercultural communication between China and the post-Yugoslav states in the context of globalization and the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), proposing empathy as a central yet ambivalent aesthetic infrastructure through which cultural difference is mediated. While digital platforms and AI technologies have dramatically increased the intensity and visibility of cross-cultural encounters, they have also transformed the conditions under which cultures are perceived, felt, and understood. Drawing on continental philosophy, moral psychology, and communication theory—particularly the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Zygmunt Bauman, Martin Hoffman, and Jürgen Habermas—this study conceptualizes empathy not merely as a psychological or ethical capacity, but as an aesthetic and communicative form shaped by media technologies. Drawing on a theoretical-comparative and interpretative approach, the article examines Chinese and post-Yugoslav affective and aesthetic regimes as they are represented, circulated, and emotionally experienced within contemporary digital environments. Chinese culture is globally circulated through narratives of harmony, technological progress, and collective futurity, while post-Yugoslav cultures are framed through trauma, nostalgia, and emotional authenticity. These representations invite empathic engagement, yet often at the cost of historical depth, internal plurality, and ethical responsibility. The article argues that AI-driven empathy produces emotional proximity without genuine dialogue, replacing communicative understanding with affective optimization. In response, it proposes a critical aesthetics of empathic communication that preserves distance, opacity, and interpretive labor as necessary conditions for meaningful intercultural dialogue. Such an approach is essential for rethinking cultural exchange between China and the post-Yugoslav space in the age of artificial intelligence.

**Keywords:** empathy; aesthetics; affect; intercultural communication; artificial intelligence; digital media; globalization; China; post-Yugoslav space.

### **Introduction**

Globalization and the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies have profoundly transformed the conditions under which cultures encounter one

another. In the twenty-first century, intercultural exchange is no longer structured primarily through physical proximity, diplomatic channels, or curated artistic mediation, but through algorithmically governed platforms that circulate images, narratives, and affect across national, linguistic, and epistemological boundaries. Artificial intelligence now actively shapes how cultures are seen, felt, and interpreted, functioning not only as a technical infrastructure but as a mediator of meaning, emotion, and recognition. Yet, while the volume and speed of intercultural contact have increased exponentially, the promise of deeper mutual understanding remains deeply ambivalent. More communication does not necessarily produce more comprehension; in many cases, it produces new forms of misrecognition, flattening, and aestheticized difference.

This tension is particularly visible in exchanges between China and the post-Yugoslav space. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, political, economic, and cultural relations between China and several post-Yugoslav states have intensified, generating new forms of media visibility, symbolic exchange, and public imagination. Among these relationships, Serbia occupies a particularly significant position, as political cooperation, infrastructural investments, and public narratives of “ironclad friendship” have made China one of the most visible non-European actors within the Serbian public sphere. At the same time, the broader post-Yugoslav region remains marked by diverse political orientations, historical experiences, and media environments, producing different modes of engagement with China and its global presence.

These encounters rarely unfold through sustained philosophical or historical dialogue. Instead, they are increasingly mediated through digital platforms, audiovisual formats, and algorithmically optimized content, where complex cultural identities are translated into globally legible emotional and aesthetic codes. What circulates is not simply information about the Other, but stylized versions of cultural experience designed to be immediately graspable, affectively resonant, and economically viable within the contemporary media ecology.

Within this context, empathy has emerged as a central but under-theorized force. Contemporary digital culture constantly invokes empathy—through viral storytelling, humanitarian imagery, personalized algorithms, and AI-driven content curation—yet this empathy is rarely examined as a cultural and aesthetic form. It is typically treated either as a moral virtue or as a psychological capacity, rather than as a mode of mediation that shapes how cultures are made visible to one another. This paper proposes that, in AI-mediated intercultural communication, empathy functions as an aesthetic infrastructure: a set of representational and affective conventions through which cultural difference is rendered perceptible, relatable, and narratively consumable.

Drawing on continental philosophy, moral psychology, communication theory, and critical media studies, this article conceptualizes empathy not as a bridge that overcomes difference but as a fragile, mediated space in which difference is negotiated, stylized, and often neutralized. The analysis brings into dialogue Jean-Luc Nancy’s

and Maurice Blanchot's reflections on alterity and community, Zygmunt Bauman's critique of liquid modernity, Martin Hoffman's account of empathy as a foundation of moral responsibility, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, and affect theory as developed by Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi. Together, these perspectives make it possible to examine how contemporary digital and AI-mediated environments transform empathy from an ethical relation into an aesthetic and technological form.

Nancy's notion of the "inoperative community" suggests that genuine relationality cannot be grounded in shared identity or emotional fusion, but in the exposure to the irreducible otherness of the Other.<sup>1</sup> Blanchot similarly insists on the impossibility of fully knowing or assimilating the Other, locating ethical relation precisely in this gap.<sup>2</sup> Hoffman,<sup>3</sup> by contrast, emphasizes empathy as the basis of moral responsibility, while Habermas<sup>4</sup> situates understanding within communicative processes oriented toward dialogue rather than strategic advantage. Ahmed<sup>5</sup> and Massumi<sup>6</sup> further demonstrate how emotions circulate through cultural and technological systems, shaping what becomes visible, recognizable, and affectively meaningful. Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity additionally helps explain why empathic engagement in digital culture often becomes fleeting, performative, and detached from sustained ethical commitment.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, contemporary digital and AI-driven systems increasingly attempt to organize these processes through algorithmically tailored experiences of recognition, affective resonance, and emotional mirroring.

From this perspective, AI does not simply translate languages or images between China and Serbia; it translates affect, trauma, nostalgia, and identity into globally recognizable aesthetic forms. Importantly, these forms should not be understood as exhaustive representations of either cultural context. As scholars such as Rey Chow<sup>8</sup> and Yuk Hui<sup>9</sup> have argued, Chinese cultural and media production is marked by internal diversity, tensions, and competing imaginaries that cannot be reduced to a single narrative. Nevertheless, within globally circulating digital environments, certain representations achieve greater visibility than others. Narratives emphasizing social harmony, technological progress, and collective futurity frequently become privileged

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–7.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Station Hill Press, 1988), 3–6.

<sup>3</sup> Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3–10.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1984), 86–101.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 8–12.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002), 25–30.

<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity Press, 2000), 160–165.

<sup>8</sup> Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 1–10.

<sup>9</sup> Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Urbanomic and Sequence Press, 2016), 12–20.

sites of recognition, just as post-Yugoslav narratives of fragmentation, historical trauma, nostalgia, and ironic self-reflection often acquire heightened visibility within international media circulation. Filtered through platforms that privilege emotional immediacy, visual coherence, and narrative simplification, these representations become emotionally legible shorthand for much more complex cultural realities. What emerges is not an encounter between cultures as historically situated and philosophically complex formations, but a circulation of aestheticized emotional signals that simulate understanding while often bypassing their ethical and political depth.

By reframing empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure of intercultural communication, this paper seeks to contribute to contemporary debates in aesthetics, media studies, and communication theory. It argues that the central challenge of globalization today is not merely how cultures represent themselves to one another, but how technological systems shape the very conditions under which feeling, recognition, and meaning become possible—and at times impossible or distorted—across differences.

In the case of China and the post-Yugoslav states, this challenge is particularly acute, as both cultural spaces carry deeply specific historical and symbolic formations that resist easy translation. To engage in meaningful dialogue between them therefore requires not more data, more connectivity, or more algorithmic personalization, but a critical rethinking of the aesthetic forms through which empathy itself is produced.

## Methodological approach

This article adopts a theoretical-comparative and interpretative approach to the study of intercultural communication in the context of globalization and artificial intelligence. Rather than conducting an empirical analysis of specific media datasets, the paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure through which cultural difference is mediated, perceived, and emotionally experienced in contemporary digital environments.

The analysis draws on communication theory, moral psychology, continental philosophy, and media studies to examine how AI-mediated platforms shape the conditions for intercultural visibility and recognition. The comparison between China and the post-Yugoslav space is not intended to suggest that either is internally homogeneous culturally. On the contrary, both contexts are understood as historically complex, heterogeneous, and contested fields characterized by diverse cultural, political, and media practices. The comparative perspective is therefore employed heuristically, as a way to identify dominant affective and aesthetic patterns that emerge in globally circulating digital narratives rather than to describe entire cultures as coherent or unified entities.

Methodologically, the article combines theoretical interpretation with illustrative examples drawn from contemporary media and cultural circulation, including narratives surrounding China–Serbia relations, digital representations of technological progress, and post-Yugoslav memory cultures. These examples do not constitute

a systematic empirical corpus but serve as indicative cases that illuminate broader communicative and aesthetic tendencies. The purpose of these examples is not to provide generalizable empirical findings, but to demonstrate how particular affective and aesthetic narratives become visible, recognizable, and emotionally meaningful within contemporary digital environments.

For the purposes of this article, the term artificial intelligence is used in a broad socio-technical sense. It encompasses recommendation algorithms, automated content curation systems, generative AI tools, and platform infrastructures that shape the production, circulation, and visibility of digital content. The focus is therefore not on artificial intelligence as an autonomous technological agent, but on AI-enabled communicative environments that influence how cultural narratives become visible, emotionally resonant, and socially meaningful. Consequently, references to AI-mediated empathy throughout the article denote forms of empathic engagement conditioned, amplified, or structured by algorithmic systems and digital platform logics, rather than emerging solely from direct interpersonal interaction.

The article therefore positions itself as a conceptual intervention within contemporary debates on intercultural communication, artificial intelligence, and aesthetics. Its primary objective is not to empirically measure audience effects or platform dynamics, but to provide a critical framework for understanding how empathy is increasingly produced, organized, and circulated through algorithmically mediated forms of communication.

As a conceptual and interpretative study, the article does not seek to provide empirically generalizable conclusions. Rather, it aims to offer a theoretical framework that may inform future empirical research on AI-mediated intercultural communication and digital cultures.

### **Theoretical framework: empathy, aesthetics, and AI-mediated communication**

To conceptualize empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure of intercultural communication, it is necessary to move beyond its conventional understanding as an individual psychological capacity and situate it within broader philosophical, ethical, and media-theoretical frameworks. In contemporary digital environments, empathy is no longer only something that occurs between subjects; it is increasingly designed, formatted, and circulated through technological systems. AI-mediated platforms shape not only what we see of other cultures, but how we are invited to feel about them. Empathy thus becomes a cultural and technologically mediated form of perception.

From the perspective of moral psychology, Martin Hoffman's theory of empathy provides an important foundation. In *Empathy and Moral Development*, Hoffman defines empathy as the capacity to be affectively attuned to another's experience, a capacity that grounds both caring and justice.<sup>10</sup> Empathy, in this sense, is not merely

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<sup>10</sup> Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 29–35.

emotional contagion, but a complex process through which one recognizes the other as a moral subject. However, Hoffman's model presupposes relatively direct interpersonal or narrative encounters. In digital and AI-driven environments, this process is profoundly transformed: we do not encounter the Other directly, but through representations that have already been filtered, stylized, and optimized for affective impact. What appears as empathy is often a technologically produced emotional alignment, detached from the ethical responsibility that Hoffman associates with genuine moral recognition.

This tension becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of critical social theory. Jürgen Habermas's concept of communicative rationality rests on the possibility of mutual understanding achieved through undistorted communication.<sup>11</sup> In an ideal communicative situation, participants engage as equals, oriented toward reaching understanding rather than strategic advantage. Yet contemporary digital communication is rarely organized around such ideals. Algorithmic platforms prioritize engagement, emotional intensity, and visibility over dialogue, argumentation, or reflexivity. In this context, empathy becomes less a medium of communicative understanding and more a resource within an attention economy, where emotional resonance is engineered to maximize circulation and influence.

Continental philosophy further complicates the notion that empathy can provide transparent access to the Other. Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the inoperative community challenges the idea that community—or by extension, intercultural understanding—can be grounded in shared identity or emotional fusion.<sup>12</sup> For Nancy, community emerges not from sameness but from exposure to difference, from being-with others whose alterity can never be fully absorbed. Maurice Blanchot similarly insists that the relation to the Other is marked by irreducible distance; any attempt to fully know, appropriate, or emotionally synchronize with the Other risks erasing their singularity.<sup>13</sup> These insights are crucial for understanding the limits of digitally mediated empathy, which often presents itself as immediate, intimate, and emotionally transparent, while in fact operating through standardized aesthetic forms.

Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity provides another key dimension. In a world characterized by fluid identities, unstable attachments, and rapidly shifting social bonds, emotional experiences are increasingly short-lived, commodified, and easily replaceable.<sup>14</sup> Empathy, under such conditions, becomes fleeting and performative: one feels with others momentarily, often through mediated images or narratives, but without sustained ethical or political commitment. Digital platforms intensify this logic by transforming suffering, differences, and cultural specificity into consumable emotional spectacles.

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<sup>11</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 285–295.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 11–15.

<sup>13</sup> Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 1–8.

<sup>14</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 82–92.

When artificial intelligence enters this landscape, the transformation becomes even more profound. AI systems do not merely transmit cultural representations; they actively learn which emotional cues generate engagement and adjust their output accordingly. As a result, empathy is no longer simply something humans bring to intercultural encounters; it is increasingly scripted by platforms and algorithms. The “empathic” experience of another culture—whether Chinese or post-Yugoslav—is shaped by aesthetic patterns that prioritize clarity, emotional immediacy, and narrative coherence over historical depth, contradiction, or ambivalence.

This theoretical framework allows us to understand empathy as an aesthetic and technological form rather than a purely psychological or moral one. Empathy becomes a mode of perception structured by media formats, visual regimes, narrative conventions, and algorithmic logics. It is within this mediated space that contemporary intercultural encounters between China and the post-Yugoslav world take place. What is at stake is not whether empathy exists, but which forms of empathy are cultivated and whose cultural realities it allows to appear.

### China and post-Yugoslav space as affective and aesthetic universes

To analyze empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure of intercultural communication, China and the post-Yugoslav space must be approached not simply as geopolitical regions, but as historically formed affective and aesthetic regimes. These affective and aesthetic regimes are not merely abstract formations but are historically mediated through concrete cultural circulations. The enduring popularity of *Valter brani Sarajevo*<sup>15</sup> in China, for instance, illustrates how Yugoslav cultural narratives became embedded within Chinese political and affective imaginaries. More than a successful foreign film, *Valter* functioned as a symbolic narrative of anti-fascist resistance, collective solidarity, and popular heroism that resonated with broader Chinese understandings of national struggle and social cohesion. Its continued cultural visibility demonstrates that intercultural communication often unfolds not through direct dialogue, but through the circulation and reinterpretation of emotionally charged symbols that acquire new meanings in different historical and political contexts. Cultures do not encounter one another through abstract information, but through sensibilities—ways of feeling, remembering, and relating—that become stabilized in visual, narrative, and symbolic forms. As Sara Ahmed has argued, emotions do not reside within subjects but circulate between bodies, texts, and images, shaping what becomes recognizable, desirable, or distant in the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, intercultural communication is always already an affective and aesthetic process.

In the contemporary Chinese culture, dominant aesthetic and affective patterns have been shaped by a long philosophical tradition emphasizing relational harmony and collective coherence, combined with modern narratives of technological and

<sup>15</sup> *Valter brani Sarajevo*, directed by Hajrudin Krvavac (Yugoslavia, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 45–48.

national progress. Scholars such as Rey Chow<sup>17</sup> and Zhang Zhen<sup>18</sup> have shown that Chinese visual and media culture tends to privilege symbolic integration, emotional moderation, and narrative resolution, even when addressing historical trauma or social tension. More recently, thinkers such as Yuk Hui<sup>19</sup> have argued that Chinese engagements with digital technology are grounded in distinct cosmotechnical imaginaries, in which technology is not understood as a neutral or universal system, but as embedded within specific cultural, moral, and ontological frameworks. From this perspective, digital infrastructures in China cannot be fully interpreted through Western models of technological rationality, as they are shaped by alternative conceptions of order, relationality, and governance. This has significant implications for the aesthetics of digital culture, where technological mediation appears not as a disruption but as a continuity with broader visions of social harmony and collective organization. Within this framework, digital and AI-driven cultural production frequently presents a smooth, future-oriented aesthetic in which individual emotions are embedded within collective narratives of continuity and stability.

By contrast, the post-Yugoslav cultural space is structured by historical rupture, political disintegration, and unresolved collective memory. Maria Todorova's concept of the Balkans as a symbolic and cultural "in-between" space,<sup>20</sup> together with Svetlana Boym's analysis of nostalgia<sup>21</sup> and Boris Buden's critique of post-socialist cultural identity,<sup>22</sup> have demonstrated how the collapse of Yugoslavia produced not only new political entities but deeply fractured affective worlds. Post-Yugoslav cultural production is therefore often characterized by melancholic attachment to lost common futures, ironic distance from grand narratives, and an intense engagement with trauma, displacement, and identity. Rather than harmony, its dominant aesthetic mode is one of exposure: fragmented storytelling, ambivalent characters, and unresolved endings that reflect a society still negotiating the meaning of its past and present. At the same time, these aesthetic forms cannot be separated from broader regimes of representation and power. As Milica Bakić-Hayden's concept of "nesting orientalism" suggests,<sup>23</sup> the Balkans have historically been situated within layered hierarchies of otherness, in which each region constructs its own "East" in relation to a perceived "West". Similarly, China has long been subject to orientalist framings that oscillate between fascination, exoticization, and ideological projection. In contemporary digital environments, these representational logics are not eliminated but reconfigured, intersecting with algorithmic visibility and affective circulation. As a result, both China and the

<sup>17</sup> Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations*, 12–18.

<sup>18</sup> Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1–10.

<sup>19</sup> Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, 35–42.

<sup>20</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–20.

<sup>21</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), 41–55.

<sup>22</sup> Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Suhrkamp, 2009), 15–25.

<sup>23</sup> Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917–931.

post-Yugoslav space are encountered not only through their own aesthetic productions, but through globally mediated imaginaries that shape how they can be seen, felt, and understood. Viewed from this perspective, intercultural communication is shaped not only by cultural difference itself, but also by historically sedimented regimes of representation. Both China and the post-Yugoslav space occupy ambivalent positions within global symbolic hierarchies: China is frequently represented through competing narratives of technological modernity, political opacity, and civilizational otherness, while the Balkans have long been positioned as Europe's internal "other". These representational frameworks influence not only how cultures are interpreted, but also how empathy becomes distributed across global media environments. Digital platforms do not eliminate such asymmetries; rather, they often reproduce them through algorithmic forms of visibility that privilege familiar narratives and recognizable emotional frames. As a result, intercultural empathy frequently operates within pre-existing structures of representation, where some forms of difference become emotionally accessible while others remain distant, unintelligible, or invisible.

These divergent affective regimes profoundly shape how China and the post-Yugoslav space become visible within global media. Chinese digital narratives tend to aestheticize coherence, progress, and technological optimism, inviting admiration and affective alignment with a vision of collective futurity. Post-Yugoslav narratives, in contrast, are frequently framed through emotional intensity, authenticity, and historical depth, inviting compassion, fascination, or melancholic intimacy. As Zizi Papacharissi has shown in her work on affective publics, digital platforms organize these emotional orientations into communicable and shareable forms, transforming cultural difference into emotionally legible content.<sup>24</sup>

However, this process also involves significant reduction and distortion. As emotions circulate through global platforms, they are filtered through algorithmic logics that privilege immediacy, recognizability, and emotional impact. Complex cultural histories become condensed into aestheticized affective signals: Chinese culture appears as a smooth surface of technological modernity and social harmony, while post-Yugoslav culture appears as a landscape of perpetual trauma, irony, or raw authenticity. In both cases, what is amplified are those elements that can be most easily felt, shared, and consumed.

This is where empathy operates as an aesthetic infrastructure. It does not simply connect viewers to distant others; it structures how those others are allowed to appear. The global audience is invited to feel with China through admiration and aspirational identification, and to feel with the post-Yugoslav space through compassion, nostalgia, or emotional intimacy. Yet, as Ahmed and Nancy would suggest, such aestheticized empathy risks erasing the irreducible alterity of the Other, replacing genuine relational exposure with emotionally satisfying but politically shallow forms of recognition.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 3–10.

<sup>25</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10–12; Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 34–40.

Understanding China and the post-Yugoslav space as distinct affective and aesthetic universes thus reveals the limits of contemporary intercultural communication. What appears as mutual understanding is often a carefully formatted emotional encounter, designed to circulate within a global digital economy rather than to sustain ethical and historical depth. In the age of AI, this formatting becomes increasingly automated, raising urgent questions about whose emotional realities are made visible and whose are rendered invisible in the global circulation of culture.

### **Digital narratives, AI, and aesthetics of empathy**

The transformation of intercultural communication in the twenty-first century cannot be understood without examining the role of digital platforms and artificial intelligence in shaping how cultural narratives are produced, circulated, and emotionally experienced. Unlike earlier forms of cross-cultural exchange—such as literature, cinema, or diplomacy—contemporary encounters between China and Serbia increasingly unfold through algorithmically curated environments where visibility, affect, and narrative coherence are optimized for engagement rather than understanding, but also for economic extraction and geopolitical positioning within the global platform economy, where visibility itself becomes a strategic resource. Within these environments, empathy does not arise organically from dialogue or shared experience; it is actively designed as an aesthetic effect.

Digital platforms operate through what Brian Massumi describes as affective modulation: they do not merely represent emotions but preemptively organize how users are likely to feel.<sup>26</sup> Recommendation systems, engagement metrics, and AI-driven content generation privilege emotional cues that can be rapidly recognized and circulated—hope, fear, admiration, nostalgia, outrage—while filtering out ambivalence, contradiction, and historical complexity. As a result, cultural difference becomes legible primarily through simplified affective frames. China and the post-Yugoslav space appear not as internally plural and contested formations, but as emotionally coherent brands, each associated with a limited set of recognizable feelings.

In the case of China, digital narratives circulated globally through platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and state-supported media ecosystems often emphasize visual smoothness, technological sophistication, and scenes of collective coordination. A particularly visible example can be found in short-form video platforms such as TikTok, where widely circulated videos frequently present Chinese urban infrastructures, high-speed rail networks, automated services, and technologically advanced cityscapes through visually compelling and emotionally engaging formats. Such content often invites admiration and curiosity, encouraging audiences to relate to China through narratives of innovation, efficiency, and futurity rather than through the social, political, or historical complexities that underpin these developments. These images and stories produce what Han Byung-Chul has described as a “positive” aesthetic

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<sup>26</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 25–30.

regime—one that minimizes friction, negativity, and contradiction in favor of emotional fluency and visual harmony.<sup>27</sup> AI systems trained on such content reinforce these patterns by learning which representations generate admiration, curiosity, or aspirational identification. Empathy, here, is aligned with fascination and respect: global audiences are invited to feel with China as a technologically advanced and socially cohesive future.

Post-Yugoslav digital narratives, by contrast, circulate through a different affective economy. Social media, documentary platforms, and global news outlets often frame the region through emotionally charged stories of historical trauma, cultural authenticity, political volatility, or ironic self-awareness. These narratives resonate within what Papacharissi has described as affective publics—networked spaces where emotion becomes a primary mode of political and cultural engagement.<sup>28</sup> AI-driven systems learn to amplify those elements that provoke emotional intensity: stories of suffering, resilience, or exoticized differences. Empathy, in this context, becomes linked to compassion, melancholy, or intimate identification with perceived vulnerability.

In both cases, AI functions as a powerful aesthetic filter. It does not simply distribute content; it reorganizes cultural visibility according to affective profitability. As algorithms learn which emotional tones maximize attention and sharing, they begin to privilege certain versions of cultural identity over others. Complex social realities—internal dissent in China, or everyday normality in post-Yugoslav societies—are overshadowed by those representations that fit the dominant affective templates. What remains visible is what can be easily felt.

This process profoundly alters the nature of intercultural empathy. Rather than emerging from sustained engagement with difference, empathy is produced as a momentary emotional alignment with preformatted narratives. From the perspective of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, such algorithmic proximity undermines the very conditions of ethical relation: instead of being exposed to the irreducible alterity of the Other, the subject encounters an emotionally pleasing simulation of closeness that erases distance.<sup>29</sup> Empathy becomes less a space of being-with and more a mechanism of emotional consumption.

This shift also entails a significant moral transformation. While Martin Hoffman's theory of empathy situates affective attunement as the foundation of responsibility toward others, AI-driven empathy produces resonance without obligation. One may feel with distant cultures, but without the ethical demand that follows from genuine recognition. Emotional alignment becomes detached from moral accountability.<sup>30</sup>

From a Habermasian perspective, this represents a further distortion of communicative rationality. Instead of dialogue oriented toward mutual understanding,

<sup>27</sup> Han Byung-Chul, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), 1–10.

<sup>28</sup> Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 5–12.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 34–40; Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 9–12.

<sup>30</sup> Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 55–60.

algorithmic mediation privileges affective optimization and strategic engagement. Intercultural communication becomes less a space for reciprocal interpretation and more a competitive arena in which emotionally effective narratives dominate visibility.<sup>31</sup>

In this sense, AI-mediated digital narratives do not merely connect China and the post-Yugoslav space; they configure the very conditions under which this connection becomes imaginable. Empathy, as an aesthetic infrastructure, enables cultural visibility while simultaneously delimiting what kinds of difference can be perceived. The challenge for contemporary intercultural communication is therefore not only how to circulate more diverse images, but how to resist the reduction of cultural worlds to emotionally optimized surfaces.

### **Aestheticized empathy and the loss of otherness**

The expansion of AI-mediated communication has produced a paradox at the heart of contemporary intercultural exchange. Never before have distant cultures been so emotionally present to one another, yet never has their radical difference been so thoroughly neutralized. This paradox emerges from the transformation of empathy into an aestheticized and algorithmically managed experience. While empathy promises proximity, recognition, and care, its contemporary digital forms increasingly operate as mechanisms of simplification that render cultural otherness emotionally accessible but epistemologically shallow.

From the perspective of Jean-Luc Nancy's inoperative community, this transformation is deeply problematic. For Nancy, being with others does not consist in sharing emotions, identities, or narratives, but in being exposed to the irreducible alterity of those with whom we coexist. Community arises not through fusion but through the acknowledgment of distance. Aestheticized empathy, however, collapses this distance by offering emotionally gratifying simulations of closeness. When China and the post-Yugoslav space are encountered primarily through emotionally optimized digital narratives, their cultures appear less as autonomous worlds and more as affective experiences designed for consumption.<sup>32</sup>

Maurice Blanchot's insistence on the opacity of the Other further sharpens this critique. Genuine ethical relation depends on accepting that the Other can never be fully known, represented, or emotionally synchronized with. AI-driven empathy undermines this ethical opacity by producing the illusion of transparent access: it suggests that by watching, liking, or emotionally reacting to a narrative, one has entered into a meaningful relation with distant cultures. In reality, this relation remains mediated by aesthetic conventions that filter out ambiguity, conflict, and historical depth.<sup>33</sup>

This process also erodes the moral foundations of empathy as theorized by

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<sup>31</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 310–320.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 25–30.

<sup>33</sup> Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 12–18.

Martin Hoffman. In Hoffman's model, empathy is inseparable from responsibility: to feel with another is to be called into a relation of care and moral consideration.<sup>34</sup> In digital environments, however, empathy becomes detached from action. One may feel sorrow for post-Yugoslav suffering or admiration for Chinese technological achievement, yet such feelings rarely translate into sustained ethical engagement. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, media narratives surrounding Chinese medical assistance to Serbia were frequently framed through emotionally charged imagery of solidarity, friendship, and mutual support. Public discourse was saturated with symbolic gestures, visual representations, and narratives of gratitude that generated strong affective responses and reinforced perceptions of exceptional closeness between the two countries. While such representations successfully mobilized empathy and emotional identification, they often simplified the broader political, economic, and diplomatic complexities that structured these relations. The result was not necessarily deeper intercultural understanding, but a form of affective proximity organized through highly visible and emotionally resonant narratives. Empathy becomes episodic, momentary, and ultimately disposable, reinforcing what Bauman describes as the liquidity of contemporary moral life.<sup>35</sup>

The consequences for intercultural communication are profound. When empathy is aestheticized, cultural differences are no longer encountered as challenges that demand interpretation, negotiation, and ethical reflexivity. Instead, it is packaged into emotionally legible forms that allow the global audience to feel connected without confronting the historical and political realities that structure those cultures. China becomes a spectacle of harmony and progress; the post-Yugoslav space becomes a theater of trauma and authenticity. Both are reduced to affective identities that circulate easily but obscure the lived complexity.

From a Habermasian standpoint, this reduction represents a further colonization of communicative space by strategic and technological rationalities. Rather than fostering conditions for mutual understanding, digital platforms engineer emotional engagement in ways that prioritize visibility and circulation over dialogue. Intercultural communication is thus reorganized around what can be felt quickly and shared widely, rather than what can be understood deeply.<sup>36</sup>

In this context, the loss of otherness is not accidental but structural. AI-mediated empathy produces a world in which difference is tolerated only insofar as it can be aesthetically framed and emotionally consumed. What resists such framing—internal conflict, historical contradiction, ethical ambiguity—is pushed to the margins of visibility. The challenge for China–post-Yugoslav dialogue, and for a global intercultural communication more broadly, is therefore not to generate more empathetic images, but to cultivate forms of engagement that preserve the opacity, difficulty, and irreducibility of the Other.

<sup>34</sup> Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 68–75.

<sup>35</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 160–165.

<sup>36</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 385–395.

## **Conclusion: toward critical aesthetics of empathic communication**

This article has been set out to examine intercultural communication between China and the post-Yugoslav space in the context of globalization and artificial intelligence, proposing empathy as a central yet ambivalent aesthetic infrastructure through which cultural difference is mediated. While contemporary digital technologies have dramatically expanded the reach and intensity of cross-cultural contact, they have not necessarily deepened mutual understanding. On the contrary, AI-mediated environments increasingly translate cultural complexity into emotionally legible but simplified forms, reshaping how cultures are perceived, felt, and valued. This transformation raises broader questions about the future of intercultural communication in digitally mediated societies. If cultural encounters are increasingly organized through systems designed to optimize attention, visibility, and emotional engagement, then the challenge is no longer merely how cultures communicate, but how communicative environments themselves shape the possibilities of recognition and understanding. The question is not whether empathy remains important, but what forms of empathy become possible under conditions of algorithmic mediation. In this sense, the future of intercultural dialogue may depend less on technological connectivity and more on the capacity to preserve interpretative openness, critical reflexivity, and sensitivity to cultural complexity within increasingly automated communication systems. In this process, cultures are not only represented but pre-structured as affective experiences, where recognition depends less on knowledge and more on immediate emotional intelligibility. As a result, intercultural understanding is increasingly replaced by affective familiarity, which creates the impression of closeness while leaving underlying differences insufficiently examined. This shift raises the question of whether contemporary intercultural communication still operates as a space of interpretation, or whether it is increasingly reduced to the circulation of emotionally optimized images.

Within this landscape, dialogue can no longer be understood as a transparent exchange of meanings between stable cultural subjects. In the age of AI, dialogue is structurally mediated by platforms that preconfigure visibility, affect, and narrative coherence. What appears as intercultural dialogue is often an encounter between algorithmically formatted representations rather than between historically situated cultures. The case of China and the post-Yugoslav space illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity: distinct affective and aesthetic universes are rendered globally intelligible through empathic narratives that privilege harmony, trauma, progress, or authenticity, while marginalizing internal plurality and contradiction.

This transformation demands a rethinking of empathy itself. Rather than treating empathy as an unqualified good or as a simple moral capacity, this article has argued for understanding empathy as an aesthetic and communicative form—one that can either open or foreclose genuine engagement with otherness. When empathy is reduced to emotional alignment without ethical responsibility, it risks becoming a technology of proximity that erases distance, difference, and historical depth. Such

empathy may generate feelings of closeness, but it does so at the cost of critical understanding.

Critical aesthetics of empathic communication, therefore, does not aim to abolish empathy, but to reclaim its ethical and epistemological potential. Drawing on Nancy and Blanchot, it insists on preserving the distance and opacity that make ethical relation possible. From Hoffman's perspective, it reanchors empathy in responsibility rather than momentary affect. From a Habermasian standpoint, it resists the reduction of communication to affective optimization and reasserts the importance of dialogue oriented toward understanding rather than engagement metrics.<sup>37</sup>

In practical terms, this means acknowledging that genuine intercultural dialogue cannot be fully automated, optimized, or aesthetically smoothed. Dialogue between China and the post-Yugoslav states—and between cultures more broadly—requires spaces in which discomfort, misunderstanding, and interpretive labor are not eliminated but sustained. It requires communicative practices that allow cultures to appear not only as emotionally resonant images, but as historically complex, internally diverse, and ethically demanding worlds.

In the context of globalization and AI, the question is no longer whether cultures are connected, but how they are allowed to be encountered. Empathy remains indispensable to intercultural communication, but only when it is practiced critically—when it resists aesthetic reduction and remains open to the irreducible otherness of the Other. Such critical empathy does not promise immediate understanding, but it offers the possibility of a dialogue that is both ethically grounded and aesthetically attentive to difference. In an age increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, the task of intercultural communication may therefore not be to eliminate distance, but to cultivate forms of empathy capable of engaging with difference without reducing it to familiarity.

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<sup>37</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 30–35; Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 15–18; Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 75–80; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 390–400.

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