

Mechanisms and Pathways for Digital Technology Empowering the Dissemination of Rural Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Perspective from Symbolic Consumption

Xingyu Lu*

School of Journalism and Communication, Northwest University of Political Science and Law, Xi'an, 710063, China

Corresponding author: Xingyu Lu

Abstract

Digital technology is reshaping the logic of cultural dissemination. As a living carrier of outstanding traditional Chinese culture, rural intangible cultural heritage (ICH) currently faces dilemmas such as generational transmission disruptions, narrow dissemination channels, and insufficient symbolic transformation. This paper employs Baudrillard's theory of symbolic consumption as its theoretical core, integrating multiple research methods to explore the empowerment logic of digital technology. The findings reveal that digital technology activates the dissemination ecosystem through a three-dimensional mechanism of "symbolic reconstruction-immersive scenarios-user participation." Implementation pathways manifest as the instrumentalization of technology, ecologization of platforms, and hybridization of talent. However, challenges persist, including the short-term efficacy of traffic generation, cultural distortion, and the digital divide. Based on these insights, the paper proposes recommendations such as delving deeply into symbolic connotations, constructing a tripartite co-governance model, and cultivating compound talent. These suggestions provide support for the living inheritance of rural ICH and high-quality industrial development, aligning with the requirements of rural revitalization and the construction of a culturally strong nation.

Keywords

digital technology, rural intangible cultural heritage, symbolic consumption, dissemination mechanism

1. Introduction

Digital media such as short videos and social platforms have reshaped the logic of cultural symbol dissemination, propelling local cultures to transcend geographical boundaries. From the 7-second video of Tianshui spicy hot pot garnering 4 billion views to Zibo barbecue crafting a cultural tourism IP through iconic combinations, digital technology has become the core engine of cultural dissemination. Amid this wave, some rural intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has achieved breakthrough popularity via short videos and live streaming, with certain traditional handicrafts and folk performances entering the public eye through digital channels. However, many rural ICH items still rely heavily on the traditional "oral and demonstrative" transmission model, trapped in a triple dilemma of generational inheritance disruptions, narrow dissemination channels, and insufficient symbolic transformation. For instance, Miao embroidery in Shibing County, Guizhou, once teetered on the brink of extinction due to difficulties in manually recording and preserving

patterns, severe aging of inheritors, and their scarcity (Chen and Li, 2025). Similarly, Fengyang phoenix painting in Anhui suffers from limited offline performance scenarios, resulting in extremely low awareness among contemporary youth and constrained cultural influence (Zhan and Dong, 2024). The patterns and techniques of ICH essentially constitute “symbols” that carry consumable connotations of specific regional cultures. In the digital era, how can digital technology convert these traditional symbols into widely disseminable digital assets, thereby breaking through dissemination barriers and inheritance challenges? Based on this, this paper takes typical cases such as Miao embroidery in Shibing County, Guizhou, and Fengyang phoenix painting in Anhui as research objects, systematically analyzing the intrinsic mechanisms and practical pathways through which digital technology empowers the dissemination of rural ICH, providing theoretical references and practical insights for its living inheritance.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Dissemination Mechanism

2.1 Core Theoretical Support

2.1.1 Symbolic Consumption Theory

Baudrillard’s theory of symbolic consumption posits that in consumer societies, the core value of commodities lies not only in their use value but also in the cultural significance, identity markers, and emotional resonances they embody. As a living carrier of outstanding traditional Chinese culture, rural ICH—through every pattern, process, and form of expression—constitutes unique cultural symbols that condense the historical memories and spiritual beliefs of specific regional groups. The core value of digital technology resides in transforming these implicit cultural symbols into visualized, interactive, and shareable digital forms, thereby lowering the perceptual threshold for users to access their connotations and activating their consumption value and dissemination potential.

2.1.2 Cultural Production Theory

Under current social and cultural demands and practical conditions, cultural production theory manifests in the empowerment logic of digital platforms, which revolves around a three-dimensional dissemination triangle of “algorithmic recommendation—user co-creation—traffic conversion.” This logic aligns closely with the core tenet of Jenkins’ convergence culture theory that emphasizes “users’ active participation in cultural production” (Zhang and Li, 2024). Platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou leverage big data algorithms to precisely identify potential audiences interested in traditional culture and handicrafts, directing ICH content to targeted user circles and dismantling the geographical and silo barriers of traditional dissemination. Upon encountering ICH content, users actively engage in dissemination through secondary creations, comment interactions, and sharing forwards. This platform-empowered cultural production mechanism enables rural ICH to break free from dependence on traditional offline channels, achieving dual enhancements in dissemination efficiency and commercial value.

3. Case Empirical Analysis

3.1 Symbolic Digital Reconstruction: Activating the Contemporary Value of ICH Industries

Symbolic digital reconstruction serves as the foundation for digital technology’s empowerment of ICH dissemination, providing support for the modern transformation and innovative application of ICH through high-precision digital acquisition and database construction. Miao embroidery in Shibing County, Guizhou, once grappled with dilemmas such as aging inheritors, pattern loss, and narrow markets. Led by the local government, the “Miao Embroidery Digital Revitalization Program” was initiated in collaboration with technical teams, employing 3D scanning technology with 0.01mm precision to capture over 200 traditional patterns and establishing a digital library featuring search, download, and AI-assisted design functions. This library has been accessed over 100,000 times by more than 200 cultural and creative enterprises nationwide (Chen and Li, 2025). Building on this foundation, a promotion model of “pattern stories + production processes

+ live-streaming sales” has been implemented, applying Miao embroidery patterns to diverse cultural and creative products such as apparel, stationery, and home goods. In 2024, the official flagship store achieved sales of 8 million yuan, marking a 1,566.7% increase from pre-transformation levels; the proportion of young consumer groups rose from less than 10% to 45%, the overseas market share exceeded 15%, and it drove employment and income growth for over 6,000 individuals while cultivating 53 young inheritors (Chen and Li, 2025). This transformation pathway of digitizing ICH symbols not only achieves the living preservation of cultural heritage and pioneers new modes of cultural inheritance but also, through the commercialization of symbols, forges an industrial chain linking “protection—innovation—consumption.” It is evident that symbolic reconstruction is the key lever for activating the industrial value of ICH.

3.2 Digital Storage and Immersive Scenarios: Expanding Dissemination Boundaries and Identity Depth

Digital storage offers new pathways for ICH preservation, while immersive scenarios deepen users’ cultural identification; together, they propel ICH dissemination from “mere information transmission” toward “evoking emotional resonance.” Anhui’s Fengyang phoenix painting currently faces issues such as severe damage to paper-based carriers and limited dissemination scope. To address this, local authorities partnered with universities to launch a digitization project, utilizing 1,200 dpi high-resolution scanning and multispectral imaging technology to capture and restore over 150 masterpieces of phoenix painting with 1:1 precision, constructing a digital archive encompassing painting images, process videos, and cultural interpretations, which is open to the public and fosters academic collaborations with universities (Zhan and Dong, 2024). Concurrently, leveraging VR technology, a “Virtual Phoenix Painting Workshop” has been developed, allowing users to simulate core processes such as “outlining, coloring, and gilding” through somatosensory interactions; integrated with digital twin technology, it recreates folk scenes from the Ming and Qing dynasties associated with phoenix painting creation, enabling users to immersively experience the cultural connections between phoenix painting and traditional festivals. Post-digitization transformation, the Fengyang phoenix painting digital archive has surpassed 50,000 annual visits, covering over 20 countries and regions domestically and internationally, with an average annual 30% growth in published academic papers and young group awareness rising from less than 5% to 25% (Zhan and Dong, 2024). This case demonstrates that digital storage ensures the long-term preservation of ICH culture, while immersive scenarios lower the threshold for cultural perception; their synergistic effect not only expands dissemination boundaries but also deepens cultural identification, providing sustainable dissemination pathways for relatively niche ICH projects.

4. Realities and Dilemmas in the Digital Dissemination of Rural ICH

4.1 Short-Term Traffic Efficacy: Content Homogenization and Connotation Deficiency Leading to Unsustainable Dissemination

Currently, short-term traffic efficacy has emerged as a key bottleneck in the digital dissemination of rural ICH. According to the 2024 Report on the Digital Dissemination of ICH, over 60% of rural ICH projects on short video platforms maintain dissemination popularity for no more than three months, with only 12% sustaining stable dissemination for over six months (Yao, 2024). The core reasons for this phenomenon lie in content creation’s “emphasis on form over substance” and homogenized competition. Some ICH disseminators blindly chase so-called “traffic codes,” reducing ICH with profound connotations to mere “visual spectacles,” monotonously focusing on mechanical recordings of handicraft production processes and repetitive displays of ICH product appearances, while evidently lacking excavation and presentation of the deeper values of cultural symbols.

Content homogenization further intensifies the fierceness of traffic competition. Searching the keyword “rural ICH” on major short video platforms reveals that nearly 70% of the content centers on demonstrations of handicraft production processes, with almost half of the videos employing a uniform template of “fixed shots + fast-forward editing + traditional music,” making it difficult for audiences to perceive the unique values of different ICH items amid the sea of content (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, 2024). This dissemination mode, lacking differentiation and depth, may capture users’ short-term attention but fails

to foster sustained emotional connections and cultural identification, ultimately resulting in dissemination popularity that “blossoms and withers like an epiphyllum,” unable to support the long-term inheritance and industrial development of ICH symbols.

4.2 Risks of Cultural Distortion: Symbolic Alienation and Connotation Twisting under Traffic-Oriented Guidance

Under the short, flat, and fast dissemination logic pursued by short video platforms and their traffic-supreme value orientation, certain rural ICH disseminations exhibit “symbolic alienation” phenomena involving deliberate simplification of production processes and distortion of cultural connotations, rendering the issue of cultural distortion increasingly prominent (Wang and Liu, 2023). The core manifestations of cultural distortion can be categorized into three dimensions:

First, “simplification distortion” in production processes. To adapt to the time constraints and visual impact demands of short videos, some ICH projects deliberately compress core procedures or even substitute traditional techniques with modern technologies.

Second, “misinterpretation distortion” in cultural connotations. Some disseminators, to cater to young users’ aesthetics and popular cultural trends, arbitrarily alter the cultural implications and historical origins of ICH. For instance, a certain wax printing ICH, in a live stream aimed at attracting traffic, misconstrued the folk implications of traditional indigo dyeing as a “viral check-in color,” overlooking the cultural core of totem worship and reverence for nature embedded in wax printing patterns, thereby trapping young users in a misconception of ICH as “knowing the form but not the essence.”

Third, “utilitarian distortion” in dissemination orientation. Certain ICH disseminations excessively focus on commercial monetization, reducing cultural symbols to mere “sales tools” and neglecting the core goal of cultural inheritance. In a live stream by a shadow puppetry ICH account, the emphasis was solely on selling peripheral shadow puppet products, with scant mention of the historical origins, script connotations, and performance techniques of shadow puppetry, leading users to equate shadow puppetry with “cultural and creative merchandise” rather than a living traditional art form. Cultural distortion not only misleads public perceptions of ICH but also damages its cultural value and brand image, eroding the foundation of its living inheritance. In the long term, this is detrimental to the sustainable development of ICH culture (Zhao and Wu, 2024).

4.3 Digital Divide: Inheritors’ Technical Barriers and Uneven Resource Allocation

The dual digital divide formed by the application thresholds of digital technology and uneven regional resource allocation has become a critical bottleneck constraining the comprehensive advancement of rural ICH digital dissemination. From the perspective of inheritors, insufficient technical literacy renders digital dissemination “well-intentioned but powerless.” According to the Survey Report on the Digital Capabilities of Rural ICH Inheritors, 60% of rural ICH inheritors possess only basic smartphone usage skills, capable merely of simple photography and videography, and are unfamiliar with professional tools such as 3D scanning and digital modeling; 30% of inheritors, despite being equipped with digital devices, leave them idle due to a lack of systematic training (Yao, 2024). In Shibing County, Guizhou, some Miao embroidery inheritors participated in digital pattern capture projects but, due to inability to use 3D modeling software like Blender or Cinema 4D, could not perform secondary editing and innovative design on scanned patterns. As a result, the initiative in ICH digital dissemination has shifted to technical teams or cultural and creative enterprises, reducing inheritors to mere “cultural material providers” and hindering their deep involvement in the digital innovation process (Chen and Li, 2025). The lack of self-media platform operation skills also plagues many inheritors: A certain bamboo weaving ICH inheritor, despite establishing a short video account, abandoned digital dissemination attempts due to unfamiliarity with video editing, scriptwriting, and account management techniques, resulting in rough video quality, fragmented narratives, and failure to secure platform traffic support.

5. Optimization Pathways and Practical Recommendations

5.1 Delving Deep into Symbolic Connotations: Constructing Immersive Experience Scenarios

This pathway centers on the deep connotations of ICH cultural symbols, leveraging technologies such as XR, digital twins, and somatosensory interactions to build “sensible, playable, and learnable” immersive experience scenarios (Zhan and Dong, 2024), facilitating a transition from “traffic attraction” to “value identification.” Establish an “ICH Symbol Knowledge Base” to convert the historical origins, folk connotations, and process principles of ICH into diverse formats embedded within experience scenarios, enabling users to learn through engagement and foster identification through learning.

5.2 Collaborative Governance: Building a Tripartite Co-Governance Ecosystem

Construct a tripartite linkage system among “universities—enterprises—inheritors” to cultivate compound talent proficient in both ICH culture and digital technology (Zhao and Wu, 2024). Incorporate digital technology courses into ICH inheritance training, jointly establish “Digital ICH Studios,” allowing inheritors to enhance their digital skills and modern design concepts through practical application; implement a “Digital ICH Talent Return-to-Root Program,” attracting graduates from relevant university majors back to their hometowns via policy support to form innovative partnerships with inheritors and inject fresh vitality. Through this model, Anhui’s Fengyang phoenix painting, in 2024, successfully trained 50 compound inheritors through collaborations, driving a 150% growth in digital orders for phoenix painting and developing multiple innovative products (Zhan and Dong, 2024).

5.3 Talent Cultivation: University-Enterprise Collaboration to Overcome Technical Bottlenecks

Break down the barriers between inheritors and digital technology by promoting the cultivation model of Southwest Minzu University’s “Thangka Advanced Training Class.” Integrate digital technology courses into ICH inheritance training, inviting university faculty and tech enterprise personnel to deliver instruction on skills such as 3D scanning, digital modeling, short video planning and editing, and e-commerce operations, while organizing inheritors for on-site learning at cultural and creative enterprises and tech companies to enhance practical capabilities. Promote joint “Digital ICH Studios” between ICH projects, cultural and creative enterprises, and tech companies, enabling inheritors to deeply engage in digital design, online dissemination, and other aspects of cultural and creative products, thereby acquiring digital skills and modern design concepts in practice. Through this model, Anhui’s Fengyang phoenix painting, in 2024, trained 50 compound inheritors via collaborations, successfully boosting digital orders by 150% and developing over 10 innovative products such as digital phoenix painting collectibles and virtual avatars, providing replicable practical experience for similar projects (Zhan and Dong, 2024). Additionally, implement the “Digital ICH Talent Return-to-Root Program,” attracting graduates from university programs in digital media and cultural industries back to rural areas through subsidies and entrepreneurial support to form innovative partnerships with inheritors, infusing fresh blood into the digital dissemination of rural ICH.

6. Conclusion

Digital technology, through the three-dimensional mechanism of “symbolic reconstruction—immersive scenarios—user participation,” breaks the spatiotemporal constraints and channel barriers of traditional rural ICH dissemination, forging a closed-loop ecosystem of “technology—symbols—consumption—inheritance” and providing new pathways for the living inheritance of rural ICH and high-quality industrial development. Practice demonstrates that symbolic reconstruction is the core lever for activating ICH dissemination value, immersive scenarios serve as the key carrier for deepening users’ cultural identification, and user participation acts as a vital driver for expanding dissemination boundaries. However, the digital dissemination of rural ICH still confronts prominent issues such as short-term traffic efficacy, cultural distortion, and the digital divide, necessitating resolution through pathways like delving deep into symbolic connotations, constructing a

tripartite co-governance ecosystem, and cultivating compound talent.

Looking ahead, the digital dissemination of rural ICH can further explore application scenarios for emerging technologies like the metaverse and AIGC, creating innovative carriers such as “virtual ICH workshops” and “digital ICH museums” to achieve immersive, interactive, and personalized upgrades in ICH dissemination. At the same time, dissemination strategies should be customized to regional characteristics: ICH items like Miao embroidery in Shibing County, Guizhou, and phoenix painting in Fengyang, Anhui, can emphasize cultural and creative product development and digital archive construction, while northern paper-cutting and shadow puppetry can strengthen interactive experiences and offline cultural tourism integration, realizing a “one place, one strategy; one item, one pathway” approach. By striking a balance between digital technology and cultural authenticity—harnessing digital dividends to amplify ICH’s dissemination reach and influence while safeguarding its cultural core and spiritual value—rural ICH can truly “come alive” and “be passed down,” injecting cultural momentum into rural revitalization and laying a solid foundation for building a culturally strong nation.

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