**Promoting Intangible Cultural Heritage through New Media: A Case Study of Nuo Culture Dissemination by a Chinese NGO**

**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) navigate the balance between tradition and innovation in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the rapidly digitalizing world. Focusing on the Anshun Mask and Nuo Sculpture Culture Company’s promotional efforts on new media platforms, this research examines how digital storytelling and visual culture enhance public engagement with Nuo culture, an indigenous ICH facing contemporary challenges. Guided by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework as a sensitizing concept, the study interprets how media-based stimuli evoke internal cognitive and emotional reactions that influence audience engagement with cultural content. Based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork and 13 semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholders involved in ICH transmission and promotion, this study investigates how NGOs utilize digital platforms to communicate cultural value and foster meaningful youth engagement. Findings indicated that visually engaging, context-based communication on new media platforms is particularly effective in capturing the attention of younger audiences and raising cultural consciousness. The study also highlights both the opportunities and tensions that NGOs are struggling with in their efforts to advocate for both intangible and tangible cultural heritage preservation in an increasingly complex media landscape.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, NGOs, Nuo Culture, New Media Platform, Digital Media, Cultural Preservation, Youth Engagement

**INTRODUCTION**

Ever since the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (CSICH) in 2003, indigenous and minority intangible cultural heritage (ICH) have enjoyed increasing recognition (Eichler, 2021). However, with the accelerated progress of globalization, ICH plays a crucial role in the development of cultural identity and diversity (Neyrinck, 2017). To date, thousands of years of civilization, a vast area, and the joint efforts of people of all ethnic groups have created these cultural heritages, which represent the important cultural wealth of human civilization (Joy & Charlotte, 2017). However, the preservation of the ICH has become a big challenge for any country in the world that has the will to safeguard this wealth and to win the battle of cultural safeguarding (Hammou et al., 2020). In this context, social media plays an important role in the protection of cultural identity by offering a platform for individuals to express and protect their cultural heritage (Indah et al., 2024). Research shows that social media allows users to navigate polymedia settings, displaying various aspects of their identity, including national and cosmopolitan expressions (Echesony, 2022). Conversely, the use of social media significantly influences the cultural and behavioral perspectives of young people (Lajnef, 2023). Various oversea studies show that social media channels such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube play an important role in shaping adolescent behavior and building patterns for future generations (Vidal et al., 2020). Compared to the increasing number of international studies on digital heritage practices, Chinese scholarship has paid relatively little attention to the role of new media in promoting intangible cultural heritage. Accordingly, this study examines the dissemination practices of the Anshun Mask and Nuo Carving Art Culture Company on Douyin and Xiaohongshu, aiming to provide actionable recommendations that can guide future communication strategies for the promotion of ICH.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

In recent decades, the preservation and transmission of ICH have become increasingly complex due to the dual forces of globalization and digitalization. Although international frameworks such as the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) have significantly raised awareness of cultural diversity and traditional practices, many local and indigenous forms of ICH continue to face erosion, neglect, or commercial distortion. In China, despite a rich reservoir of ICH practices, there remains a notable disconnect between traditional forms of cultural expression and the media consumption habits of younger generations. Moreover, generational and technological gaps pose challenges for the effective dissemination of ICH in the digital era, especially in attracting youth engagement and fostering cultural identification.

To better understand how digital platforms influence the relationship between traditional culture and contemporary audiences, this study draws upon the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theoretical framework. The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model is a widely recognized theoretical framework originally developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). Originally developed in psychology and later extended to media and consumer behavior studies, the model categorizes the process into three fundamental components. Stimulus (S): the external environment encountered by the individual at a specific moment (Jacoby, 2002).Organism (O): the individual’s internal processing system, including

prior experiences, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, values, and personality traits (Jacoby, 2002); Response (R): the resulting behaviors or reactions, often conceptualized as approach or avoidance actions (Vieira, 2013).

In the context of this study, stimuli may include visual storytelling, livestreamed performances, or interactive features such as bullet comments and hashtag engagement on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu. These external media stimuli trigger internal cognitive and emotional reactions (Organism), such as cultural nostalgia, pride, curiosity, and a renewed sense of identity—particularly among younger audiences encountering traditional practices in digital formats. These internal processes mediate how individuals interpret the meaning and personal relevance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which in turn give rise to observable responses (Response). Based on participant narratives, such responses include engagement (e.g., liking or sharing content), participation (e.g., attending performances or workshops), reinterpretation (e.g., creatively adapting ICH symbols), cultural advocacy (e.g., promoting heritage to others), and interpretive expression (e.g., producing short videos or visual content inspired by ICH). The S-O-R model thus provides a useful lens for understanding how media-based cultural communication stimulates emotional identification, internal meaning-making, and ultimately diverse forms of heritage-related action.

Within this qualitative inquiry, the S-O-R model serves not as a rigid causal schema but as a sensitizing framework that guides the exploration of meaning-making processes among different actors involved in ICH dissemination. Rather than testing fixed hypotheses, the model helps structure observations and interpretations of how new media affordances shape cultural engagement, reinterpretation, and participation. By examining the interplay between mediated stimuli and audience responses, this study aims to reveal how NGOs, cultural practitioners, and digital platforms co-construct new pathways for sustaining intangible heritage in a rapidly evolving media landscape. Therefore, this study aims to explore the communication practices of the Anshun Mask and Nuo Carving Art Culture Company in the context of new media, with the intention of identifying meaningful strategies and insights that could inform and inspire similar efforts by other non-profit organizations engaged in intangible cultural heritage dissemination.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Application of the S-O-R Model in ICH Dissemination (Adapted from Mehrabian & Russell, 1974)

Organism (O)

Response (R)

Stimulus (S)

1. Engagement
2. Participation
3. Reinterpretation
4. Cultural Advocacy
5. Interpretive Expression
6. Cultural identification
7. Cultural pride
8. Cognitive processing
9. Emotional resonance
10. Value judgment
11. Identity negotiation
12. Douyin videos
13. Xiaohongshu text posts
14. Storytelling-based documentary
15. Live-streamed performances with real-time bullet comments

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS**

This study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

i. To explore how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engage with intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through new media platforms in the 21st century.

ii. To examine the perceptions and experiences of ICH practitioners regarding the integration of new media in their cultural practices.

iii. To investigate the strategies and storytelling methods employed by NGOs to disseminate ICH content in the digital media landscape

RQ1: How do NGOs utilize new media platforms to promote and preserve intangible cultural heritage in the digital era?

RQ2: What are the perceptions and lived experiences of ICH practitioners regarding the use of digital tools in their cultural dissemination efforts?

RQ3: What communication strategies and narrative techniques are adopted by NGOs to engage audiences, particularly youth, with ICH content online?

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design**

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork to explore participants’ subjective experiences and interpretations regarding the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through new media platforms. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for in-depth exploration of meaning-making processes, especially in cultural and communicative contexts (Lim, 2024). This method is expected to provide a deep understanding of the relationship between social media use and the maintenance of cultural identity.

**Data Collection**

To elicit rich and context-sensitive narratives, semi-structured interviews were employed. This format allowed for flexibility in probing unanticipated yet relevant themes, while still aligning with the study’s guiding questions (Smith & Osborn, 2015). A total of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in Liu Guan Town, Anshun City, Guizhou Province, a key cultural site associated with Nuo performance and mask carving traditions. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then translated into English by the researchers, with careful attention to preserving linguistic and cultural nuance.

Fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period in Anshun city, Guizhou Province. During this period, the researchers engaged in extended on-site observation, informal conversations, and participation in community-led cultural activities such as mask-making workshops and Nuo performances. These immersive experiences provided contextual depth that enriched the interpretation of the interview data. Focus group discussions were initially considered during the research design phase but were later excluded due to logistical challenges and limitations in participant availability. While the study relied solely on interviews and field engagement, the depth and reflexivity of interaction support the richness and authenticity of the qualitative data.

Thirteen participants were recruited through purposive sampling, a non-probability method appropriate for selecting individuals with specific knowledge or experience related to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015). Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved—that is, when no new significant themes emerged from the interviews (Guest et al., 2020). The final sample included a diverse mix of stakeholders:

Table 1. List of Participants in the Research Interview

Number of Position in the Whether working

Participants dissemination of ICH for a NGO

2 Participants 1 Manager and 1 Staff from local Yes, both of

 Non-Governmental Organization them

3 Participants 2 drama performers from Yes, they’re

local community partnership

2 Participants 2 Mask Craftsman from Yes, both of

 Non-Governmental Organization them

4 Participants 3 Audiences in the 16-60 age ranges No, they are

 from the local community villagers

2 Participants 1 Master’s student from Spain No, they are

 who is interested in Nuo culture students

 1 Bachelor’s student from China

 who did fieldwork in that village

Total 13

This diversity ensured a range of perspectives across creators, mediators, and recipients of ICH communication.

**Table 2.** Interview Schedule and Affiliation Structures

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**Data Analysis**

Thematic Analysis (TA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), was used to identify and interpret recurrent patterns in participants’ narratives. The six-phase process included: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Mandarin and subsequently translated into English by the lead researcher. Special attention was paid to preserving the original meaning and cultural context during translation. To enhance analytic transparency and rigor, NVivo 14 software was used to organize, code, and retrieve the translated data, following best practices for qualitative analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Original Mandarin transcripts were retained to facilitate back-checking and support the accuracy of cross-linguistic interpretations.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to explore the interplay between non-governmental organizations (NGOs), intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and new media in the context of Anshun, China. Through thematic analysis of 13 in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, craftspeople, performers, NGO staff, audience members, and students, three major themes emerged, aligning with the research objectives.

1. **Interconnected roles of NGOs, ICH and New Media**

The first objective focused on understanding the evolving relationships among NGOs, ICH, and new media. Participants consistently described NGOs as critical vehicles for the transmission and preservation of ICH. In this regard, NGOs were not merely support systems but cultural agents whose planning and operations revolved around heritage advocacy.

As illustrated by one craftsman:

“*Every day I see him in the office editing videos or live-streaming. Most of the time, I hear him talking about Nuo culture.*” — Mr. Gong, mask craftsman

This exemplifies how NGO leaders integrate digital tools into their daily cultural routines, using media to sustain visibility and engagement.

New media platforms were widely recognized as playing an amplifying and bridging role. Several interviewees pointed out that social media enhances accessibility and helps bridge generational gaps in cultural communication. Participants saw these platforms as creating broader access and audience interaction, especially among youth.

“*He filmed our performances during COVID-19 and uploaded them to Douyin. That attracted attention from outside the province.*” — Mr. Lei, Nuo drama performer

This suggests that digital media enables localized ICH practices to gain national and even international visibility, thereby reinforcing the significance of NGOs in using media affordances to support cultural revitalization.

1. **Current Media Practices among ICH Practitioners**

The second objective examined how ICH practitioners currently use different types of new media in their cultural activities. Most participants actively used platforms like **Douyin (TikTok)** and **Xiaohongshu (RED)**. Douyin was praised for its immediacy and wide reach, while Xiaohongshu was preferred by those targeting younger, urban audiences due to its visual and narrative appeal.

“*I often record our theatre performances and post them on Douyin. The feedback motivates our team to keep performing.*” — Mr. Sun, theatre team leader

“*I prefer Xiaohongshu because it attracts young people. More students are now visiting our organization*.” — Mr. Qin, NGO manager

These insights reflect a growing digital literacy among ICH practitioners and a pragmatic approach to platform selection based on audience engagement and strategic cultural positioning.

Interestingly, several young interviewees stated that they discovered Nuo culture through social media, often before visiting the site physically. This indicates the strong influence of online platforms on offline cultural tourism and academic interest.

*“I found Mr. Qin’s Xiaohongshu account, which led me to visit Liu Guan Town and study Nuo culture for my documentary production.*” — Miss Li, student, Yibin College

Such cases underscore the persuasive impact of well-managed cultural social media presences in attracting public and scholarly attention.

**3. Sustainable Dissemination Strategies of NGOs in the New Media Era**

The third objective addressed the sustainability of cultural dissemination strategies. Interview data revealed four main mechanisms: academic collaboration, media coverage, livestreaming, and continuous content production.

“*He partners with universities and invites students for fieldwork. It’s a great model for cultural exchange*.” — Anonymous participant

*“I saw his interview on Douyin. That’s how I got to know his organization and visited during the Spring Festival.*” — Miss He, postgraduate student in Spain

These strategies reflect a multilateral approach to public engagement that combines traditional outreach (e.g., university partnerships) with contemporary digital tools. Such integration contributes to the long-term visibility and viability of ICH practices.

**4.Cognitive and Emotional Resonance among Younger Audiences**

While this study primarily investigated the relationship between digital stimuli (e.g., video content, livestreams, interactive posts) and user responses (e.g., engagement, visits, content sharing), it also uncovered important insights into the organism-level processes—the internal emotional and cognitive responses that mediate user engagement with ICH. Several participants articulated how their emotional connection to cultural content influenced their motivation to engage further. For example, younger interviewees described feelings of nostalgia or cultural curiosity when encountering Nuo performances or mask-carving documentaries online, despite having no prior exposure to such traditions.

*“When I watched the livestream for the first time, I felt like it belonged to another world—but it was also part of mine. I don’t know why, but it made me proud.”*— Miss He, postgraduate student from Spain

This quote reflects a sense of cultural re-identification, where the participant experiences emotional resonance even across geographic distance. Such reactions illustrate how new media do more than transmit information, they evoke meaning, triggering interpretive and affective processes that reshape how audiences see themselves in relation to heritage.

Other participants discussed their sense of responsibility or cultural loss, particularly when comparing local traditions to fast-paced commercial content.

*“I realized we’re losing something important. So I decided to help out the NGO.”*— Miss. Li, Yibin College.

Here, emotional concern becomes the stimulus that reactivates engagement, transforming viewers into participants. These examples underscore the importance of the “Organism” as a mediating space—where prior knowledge, emotional investment, values, and identity-related interpretations shape the trajectory from stimulus to response. By acknowledging this interpretive middle ground, the study enhances the explanatory power of the S-O-R framework and provides a more holistic understanding of how ICH is received and reimagined in digital environments.

**5. Synthesis and Implications**

The findings reveal that NGOs serve as both cultural custodians and digital communicators. They simultaneously preserve heritage and innovate in its dissemination through new media. This dual function not only strengthens community ties but also attracts attention from younger demographics, scholars, and tourists. Moreover, platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu are more than distribution channels. They are spaces where cultural narratives are negotiated and reimagined. NGO leaders, especially those like Mr.Qin, play pivotal roles in mediating these narratives and ensuring their resonance across diverse publics.These insights support prior literature on the role of digital media in heritage communication (e.g., Giaccardi, 2012; Knudsen & Waade, 2010) and offer a grounded example of how grassroots NGOs can achieve sustainable cultural dissemination in a rapidly evolving media ecosystem.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the current status, advantages, challenges, and strategic approaches adopted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the new media era. Using the case of the Anshun Mask and Nuo Sculpture Culture Company, it highlights how digital platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu have been effectively leveraged to promote ICH. By showcasing the craftsmanship, cultural narratives, and symbolic meanings of Nuo sculpture and drama in engaging and visually appealing ways, the organization has succeeded in reaching wider audiences and generating positive public response. Nevertheless, despite these achievements, the sustainable development of cultural dissemination remains a pressing concern. Based on empirical findings and insights derived from interview data, this study has proposed a series of practical strategies intended to inform both theory and practice in the field of ICH preservation. These recommendations are grounded in real-world challenges and possess meaningful applicability to similar heritage-related efforts elsewhere, thereby contributing to the continued inheritance and development of traditional culture.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Drawing on the perspectives of interviewees, this study underscores the importance of integrating textual and visual elements in the dissemination of ICH through digital media. While many NGOs acknowledge the value of this integrated communication approach, they often encounter challenges due to limited professional expertise and financial constraints. To address these issues, several recommendations are proposed. First, continued and stable financial support from local authorities is crucial, especially for smaller NGOs with constrained resources. Second, capacity-building initiatives and media training, such as regular workshops and knowledge-sharing sessions, are needed to enhance the media literacy and digital production skills of NGO staff. Lastly, collaboration with professional short video production or digital storytelling teams can significantly improve the quality, appeal, and reach of heritage-related content, thereby supporting the long-term sustainability of ICH dissemination in the digital age.

**LIMITATION**

This study employed semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork as primary data collection methods, which inherently carry certain limitations. Firstly, the findings may not be generalizable to broader contexts beyond the cultural and geographic setting of Liu Guan Town, Anshun City, as the sample was limited to a specific region in southwestern China. Secondly, while every effort was made to design clear and culturally appropriate interview questions, some participants—especially those from rural or marginalized communities—may have interpreted the questions through their own socio-cultural lens. This introduces the possibility of response bias. To mitigate this, all interviews were conducted in the participants’ native language (Mandarin), and confidentiality was assured to encourage open and honest responses. In select cases, participants requested their names be disclosed to acknowledge their roles as cultural advocates; however, this may have also influenced the degree of candor in their responses.Third, the fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period during the 2024 Chinese New Year period. While this timeframe allowed for rich engagement with cultural events and practices, it may not reflect the full cyclical or seasonal variation in ICH-related activities. Lastly, due to financial and technical constraints, only a single 30-minute documentary film was produced as part of the research dissemination efforts. While it serves as a useful supplement to the academic findings, the film offers only a partial representation of the complex cultural and social dynamics surrounding NGOs and intangible heritage in the digital era.

**Ethical Approval and Consent:**

This study was conducted in alignment with the ethical guidelines of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), although formal institutional ethics approval was not obtained due to the non-clinical, community-based nature of the research and minimal risk to participants. Prior to participation, all interviewees were clearly informed of the study’s purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Informed consent, either written or verbal, was obtained from all participants. In most cases, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms. However, some participants, particularly NGO leaders and cultural practitioners, explicitly requested that their real names be included in the reporting, as they wished to be publicly acknowledged for their contributions. These names were disclosed with verbal consent. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Special attention was paid to cultural sensitivity and respectful engagement throughout the fieldwork process, especially when interacting with marginalized communities and traditional knowledge holders.

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**Appendix A: Thematic Analysis Coding Table**

| **Initial Code** | **Focused Code** | **Theme** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Video editing, livestreaming | Use of visual media | New Media as Catalyst for Dissemination |
| Comments and reactions on Douyin | Audience feedback | Community Engagement via Douyin |
| Free performances in museum | Cultural outreach | NGOs as Agents of ICH Promotion |
| Student found NGO via Xiaohongshu | Youth discovery through visuals | Xiaohongshu for Youth Engagement |
| University collaboration | Strategic outreach | Sustainable NGO Promotion |
| Participation in academic conferences | Institutional presence | Visibility through Academia |

**Appendix B: Selected Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

Section 1: Background and Role

*Can you briefly introduce yourself and your role in the organization or community?*

*How long have you been involved with Nuo cultural activities or promotion?*

Section 2: Organizational Activities

*What kinds of activities does your organization carry out related to the preservation of Nuo culture?*

*How do you use digital platforms (e.g., WeChat, Douyin, Xiaohongshu) to promote these activities?*

Section 3: Challenges and Tensions

*What challenges have you encountered in balancing tradition and innovation?*

*Are there any conflicts between community expectations and digital marketing strategies?*

Section 4: Perception and Impact

*How do you think audiences—especially younger people—respond to your digital content?*

*In your view, what is the most effective way to engage people in intangible heritage through digital media?*

Section 5: Reflection

*What do you hope to achieve in the next few years?*

*Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experiences?*