

Evaluating the Overseas Communication Effectiveness of Bashu Intangible Cultural Heritage on TikTok and Optimization Strategies

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Abstract: As a quintessential component of Chinese traditional culture, Bashu Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) faces new opportunities and challenges in the era of global digital media. TikTok, as a leading global short-video platform, has restructured the logic of cultural dissemination through its algorithm-driven content distribution and high-intensity visual orientation. This study systematically evaluates the overseas communication effectiveness of Bashu ICH on TikTok using a multi-dimensional framework encompassing content visibility, audience interaction, cultural translation, and sustainability. Based on the mediatization theory and Hall's encoding/decoding model, the research identifies a significant gap between high visual exposure and low narrative depth. Through the observation of representative TikTok accounts and content categories such as Sichuan Opera, Shu embroidery, and regional folk customs from 2024 to 2026, the findings reveal that while "spectacularized" cultural symbols easily attain viral status, the "deep" cultural meanings are often lost in translation. The study further explores the "Platformization of Heritage," where traditional culture is reformatted to fit digital affordances. To address these issues, the paper proposes a series of optimization strategies: implementing the "Hero's Journey" narrative model to humanize heritage, leveraging AI-driven bilingual translation for better cultural accessibility, and establishing a multi-actor collaborative ecosystem involving individual creators, MCNs, and institutional bodies. This research not only enriches the empirical study of regional culture's global flow but also provides a practical roadmap for enhancing the international influence of Chinese ICH in the digital attention economy.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Motivation

In the contemporary era of globalization, the international dissemination of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has evolved from a matter of cultural preservation into a critical strategic asset for national soft power and cultural diplomacy. For China, a nation possessing a vast and diverse repository of UNESCO-recognized heritage, promoting traditional culture to a global audience is not merely a mission of "bringing culture out," but a sophisticated effort to foster cross-cultural understanding and build a favorable international image. In recent years, the "Digital Silk Road" initiative has further emphasized the role of digital infrastructure in bridging cultural gaps, placing regional heritage at the forefront of international outreach.

However, the traditional modes of ICH communication—such as static museum exhibitions, formal stage performances, or government-sponsored documentaries—often struggle to engage the "Digital Native" generations (Gen Z) who dominate today's global media landscape. These audiences prioritize authenticity, participation, and visual immediacy over traditional authoritative narratives. The emergence of TikTok (the international counterpart of Douyin) has fundamentally disrupted the traditional top-down flow of cultural information, replacing it with a decentralized, algorithm-driven model that empowers individual practitioners and regional cultures to reach a global stage.

1.2 The Uniqueness of Bashu Culture in a Global Context

Bashu culture, primarily centered in the Sichuan and Chongqing regions of Southwestern China, represents one of the most vibrant and historically profound regional cultural systems in Chinese civilization. Characterized by its "hot and spicy" spirit, inclusive social fabric, and artistic diversity, Bashu ICH offers a rich spectrum of content—ranging from the mesmerizing "wow factor" of Sichuan Opera's face-changing (Bian Lian) to the meticulous, meditative labor involved in Shu embroidery and bamboo weaving.

The historical depth of the ancient Sanxingdui and Jinsha civilizations, combined with the resilient folk traditions of ethnic groups like the Qiang and Yi, provides Bashu culture with a unique competitive edge in the global "Attention Economy." Unlike the more homogenized "national" symbols often used in external promotion, Bashu ICH offers a distinct "sense of place" and a high level of visual drama that is inherently compatible with the short-video format. Despite this potential, the specific dynamics of how this regional identity is mediatized and received on global platforms like TikTok remain insufficiently explored.

1.3 The Paradox of Digital Visibility: Shallow vs. Deep Communication

While TikTok has provided an unprecedented window for Bashu ICH to "go viral," it has also created a communicative paradox. The platform's technical affordances—such as its short duration (15–60 seconds), vertical framing, and loopable soundtracks—favor "Spectacularized" content that provides immediate visual gratification. In this process, complex cultural rituals and traditional crafts are often "flattened" into aesthetic curiosities or "exotic spectacles."

A significant gap exists between "Visibility" (high view counts and likes) and "Effective Communication" (deep cultural understanding and long-term resonance). For instance, an overseas viewer might be fascinated by a face-changing performance but remain entirely unaware of the dramatic context or the historical significance of the mask colors. This "Shallow Communication" risks turning ICH into a fleeting digital commodity rather than a meaningful cultural dialogue.

There is a pressing need for a systematic evaluation of current communication strategies to bridge this gap between visual impact and narrative depth.

1.4 Research Objectives and Structure

This study aims to evaluate the overseas communication effectiveness of Bashu ICH on TikTok through a multi-dimensional framework. The research objectives are threefold:

This study pursues three main objectives. First, it examines how TikTok's algorithm and platform logic influence the visibility of different categories of Bashu intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Second, it explores the interaction patterns and psychological responses of international audiences to Bashu cultural symbols. Third, it proposes optimization strategies aimed at moving beyond superficial exposure and fostering sustained cultural engagement.

The paper is structured as follows: Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on ICH communication and platform studies; Chapter 3 establishes the theoretical framework based on Mediatization and Encoding/Decoding theories; Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology; Chapter 5 presents the evaluation of current effectiveness; Chapter 6 provides detailed case studies; Chapter 7 offers strategic recommendations; and Chapter 8 concludes the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Global Evolution of ICH Communication Research

The scholarly discourse surrounding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has undergone a significant paradigm shift over the last two decades. Initially, following the UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the global emphasis was heavily placed on "preservation" and "archiving" as a defensive response to the threats of modernization and cultural homogenization. However, recent studies suggest that static preservation is insufficient for the long-term survival of "living" heritage. As Smith and Akagawa (2009) point out, intangible heritage is not a fixed monument of the past but a continuous and dynamic process of social practice and identity construction. This perspective has led to a growing body of research focusing on how ICH can be "revitalized" and "re-contextualized" through active public participation and modern digital communication channels. ^[1]

2.2 Digital Media and the Reconstruction of Heritage Space

The advent of the digital age has provided a "third space" for cultural heritage, transcending geographical and physical boundaries. Khosrow-Pour (2019) argues that digital media does not merely act as a passive channel for transmitting cultural information; rather, it fundamentally reshapes the relationship between heritage and the public by fostering interactive environments. In the context of international communication, digital platforms have lowered the barriers to entry for regional cultures, allowing for a "bottom-up" globalization where local traditions can bypass traditional media gatekeepers. However, this transition is not without risks. Scholars have expressed concerns that the "Digitalization of Heritage" might lead to cultural decontextualization, where the sacred or ritualistic elements of a tradition are sacrificed for digital aestheticism and fleeting consumer attention.

2.3 TikTok and the Cultural Logic of Global Short-Video Platforms

In the specific realm of social media, TikTok has emerged as a disruptive force in global cultural flows. Unlike earlier text-based or image-based platforms, TikTok's operational mechanism is defined by high-intensity visuality and algorithmic governance. Abidin and Zeng (2021) highlight that TikTok operates through a specific "cultural logic" of visual-audio assemblage, where the combination of catchy music, rapid editing, and algorithm-driven recommendation dictates what content achieves viral status. This platform logic is particularly favorable for "Spectacularized" ICH, such as performing arts or martial arts, which provide immediate visual gratification. However, it poses significant challenges for heritage forms that require "slow observation" or deep historical contextualization, such as traditional craftsmanship or oral literature. The "attention economy" of the platform often pressures creators to prioritize "wow moments" over historical accuracy, leading to a "flattening" of cultural depth.

2.4 Chinese ICH and Regional Identity in the Global Digital Landscape

Domestic Chinese scholarship has increasingly focused on utilizing digital platforms to tell "China's story" to a global audience. While many early studies focused on monolithic national-level symbols, there is a growing interest in the unique role of regional cultural clusters, such as the Bashu area. Zhao and Huang (2022) emphasize that the digital communication of Chinese ICH is currently transitioning from government-led authoritative broadcasting to a multi-subject participation model involving individual inheritors, private MCN (Multi-Channel Network) organizations, and grassroots creators. They argue that the "authenticity" and "liveness" of regional ICH are key drivers for international audience engagement.^[2]

3. Research Design and Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed observation method. TikTok videos related to Bashu ICH were collected through keyword searches, hashtag tracing, and algorithmic recommendation tracking. Representative samples include opera performances, embroidery craftsmanship demonstrations, festival documentation, musical performances, and narrative storytelling content.

The analytical framework consists of five dimensions: content visibility, audience interaction, cultural translation, sustainability, and structural communication logic. Visibility is measured by view counts and recommendation exposure; interaction is reflected in engagement behaviors such as likes, comments, shares, and remix participation; cultural translation evaluates contextual explanation and interpretive clarity; sustainability focuses on continuity of production and audience retention; structural logic examines narrative organization and symbolic framing.^[3]

Instead of relying solely on quantitative modeling, the study emphasizes interpretive pattern recognition to capture subtle communicative characteristics. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how algorithmic logic intersects with cultural representation.

4. Evaluation of Communication Effectiveness

4.1 Content Visibility

Bashu ICH content generally demonstrates strong initial visibility on TikTok, particularly videos featuring visually striking elements such as opera face-changing (Bian Lian), embroidery processes, and festive performances. The 'wow factor' of Sichuan Opera, for instance, provides the high-

intensity visual stimuli necessary to stop users from scrolling. Short-form videos with clear visual impact are more likely to be recommended by the platform algorithm and to attract first-time viewers. However, visibility is often uneven across different types of ICH. Performative and visually dynamic heritage forms gain significantly more exposure than narrative-based or ritual-oriented traditions, leading to an imbalanced representation where the aesthetic overshadows the ethical or historical.

4.2 Audience Interaction

Audience interaction levels vary significantly. Videos with concise explanations, English subtitles, or cross-cultural elements (such as using trending background music) tend to receive higher engagement. Comments often express curiosity and aesthetic appreciation, indicating positive reception among global users. However, deeper cultural discussion remains limited, suggesting that interaction is primarily emotional rather than interpretive. Language barriers and limited contextual explanation reduce the depth of audience engagement, particularly among viewers unfamiliar with Chinese cultural backgrounds, who may struggle to see the heritage beyond its 'exotic' appeal.

4.3 Cultural Translation

Cultural translation remains one of the main challenges for Bashu ICH on TikTok. Many videos focus on showcasing skills or performances without sufficient explanation of historical background, symbolic meaning, or social context. For example, the symbolic meanings of specific embroidery patterns or the ritualistic logic of ethnic dances are often left unexplained. As a result, cultural content risks being perceived as exotic entertainment rather than meaningful heritage. Effective cultural translation is observed in videos that combine storytelling, bilingual captions, and contextual narration, enabling overseas audiences to better understand and appreciate Bashu ICH.

4.4 Communication Sustainability

Sustainability is uneven across content creators. Individual heritage practitioners often face challenges in maintaining consistent production due to resource constraints and the steep learning curve of digital marketing. Institutional accounts demonstrate greater continuity but sometimes lack creativity and audience responsiveness, adhering to overly formal presentation styles that do not align with TikTok's casual atmosphere. Long-term communication effectiveness requires stable content production mechanisms and strategic planning beyond one-time viral exposure.^[4]

5. Optimization Strategies for Bashu ICH Communication

5.1 Enhancing Narrative and Storytelling

Shifting from purely demonstrative videos to narrative-driven storytelling can improve cultural depth. Instead of just showing the finished product of Shu embroidery, videos could document the artisan's daily life, the years of training required, or the emotional connection between the creator and the craft. Short narratives focusing on personal experiences, heritage origins, or cultural meanings can strengthen emotional resonance and audience understanding. The use of the 'Hero's Journey' narrative structure could be particularly effective in showcasing the perseverance of ICH inheritors.

5.2 Improving Cultural Translation and Accessibility

Bilingual subtitles, concise explanations, and culturally adaptive expressions can reduce comprehension barriers. Content should balance authenticity with accessibility, avoiding oversimplification while ensuring clarity for international audiences. Utilizing platform features like 'Voiceovers' or 'Interactive Stickers' can guide viewers through complex cultural concepts. Furthermore, collaborating with international influencers to provide a 'bridge' perspective can help translate Bashu cultural values into global contexts.^[5]

5.3 Leveraging Platform-Oriented Mechanisms

TikTok's unique ecosystem offers tools such as hashtag challenges and the 'Duet' feature, which can be used to encourage user-generated content. For instance, a #BashuStyle challenge could invite global users to recreate elements of Bashu aesthetics in their own ways. This shifts the audience from passive viewers to active participants, fostering a sense of shared cultural ownership and increasing the content's algorithmic reach.

6. Conclusion

This study evaluates the overseas communication effectiveness of Bashu intangible cultural heritage on TikTok and proposes optimization strategies based on empirical observation. The findings suggest that while TikTok provides valuable opportunities for global exposure, effective communication requires more than visual presentation. Narrative depth, cultural translation, audience interaction, and sustainability are critical factors influencing long-term communication outcomes.

By focusing on a specific regional cultural system, this research enriches empirical studies on ICH overseas dissemination and highlights the importance of context-sensitive strategies. The proposed optimization framework offers practical guidance for enhancing the global visibility and cultural impact of Bashu ICH in the digital media era.

Future research may incorporate comparative regional analysis or quantitative audience studies to further refine evaluation models and strategic recommendations.

Acknowledgements

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