

Study on the Visual Construction of Intangible Cultural Heritage-Themed Short-Form Videos under Cultural Memory Theory: A Case Study of the “Shanbai” Short-Form Video Series

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Abstract. In the digital media era, short-form videos have emerged as crucial vehicles for disseminating Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and reconstructing cultural memory. Grounded in Jan Assmann’s cultural memory theory, this study systematically investigates the cinematic construction pathways and cultural significance of ICH short-form videos through text analysis, semiotic interpretation, and case study analysis of 57 video works by Shanbai, a leading ICH creator on Douyin. This study reveals how media technologies reconfigure mnemonic landscapes through emotional narratives, symbolic activation of collective memory, immersive strategies, and user-platform synergies to enhance ICH engagement. The study concurrently identifies that while short-form video platforms expand memory dissemination through bullet comment interactions and co-creation mechanisms, they face crises of “memory simulacrum” from excessive aestheticization, potentially leading to oversimplification of technical complexity and cultural profundity. This research addresses theoretical gaps in micro-level cinematic construction within cultural memory studies, provides theoretical frameworks for digital ICH transmission, and recommends future investigations incorporating multi-platform data analytics and audience reception studies to deepen understanding.

Keywords: Cultural Memory Theory, ICH-Themed Short-Form Videos, Shanbai, Visual Construction, Mediated Communication

1. Introduction

The 2023 Notice on Deep Integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage(ICH) and Tourism [1] highlighted ICH’s role as a core element of Chinese cultural heritage, advocating new media for public engagement. The 2025 Economic Policies for High-Quality Cultural Development [2]reinforced systematic ICH preservation. Short-form video platforms, driven by mobile internet growth, now serve as key cultural transmission channels with visual, performative, and social features to rebuild ICH memory, yet face challenges in balancing authenticity, integrity, and rapid “fast-food-style dissemination”.

Drawing on cultural memory theory, this study analyzes how ICH-themed short-form videos (e.g., “Shan Bai,” 16.38M followers/57 videos as of May 6, 2025) construct cultural memory through narrative, symbolism, audiovisual language, and ritual representation. Using textual-semiotic and case study methods, it decodes the cultural logic of ICH video dissemination, proposing short-form videos as “material carriers” for memory preservation, offering theoretical and practical insights for future ICH media practices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Current research status on ICH-themed creative production and dissemination

As a vital repository of Chinese cultural identity, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has transitioned from grassroots transmission to digital innovation through new media evolution. Short-form video platforms now dominate ICH dissemination, with studies [3,4] confirming three primary audiovisual categories: traditional craftsmanship, performing arts, and folk rituals. These platforms employ defamiliarized narratives, accelerated montage techniques, and contextualized scenography to enhance memorability and cultural resonance, though stylistic homogenization threatens sustainability.

Creative agency has shifted from external documentation to participatory co-creation, enabling dynamic cross-temporal preservation through real-time interactions. While algorithmic platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou amplify ICH visibility via condensed knowledge systematization and lifestyle embedding [5], the standardization of craft performances increasingly triggers audience desensitization despite initial engagement advantages.

2.2. Genealogical development of cultural memory theory

Originating from Jan Assmann’s cultural memory theory, cultural memory emerges through socialization—while individually “possessed,” it is collectively shaped [6]. Functioning as a socially mediated system stored via texts, rituals, and images, it encapsulates historical representations, ethnic identity, and cultural values. Within mediatic spheres, it undergoes reinterpretation and re-ritualization of functional/stored memory to reinforce political legitimacy and moral consensus. As [7] asserts, media inherently constitutes memory, with new forms like short-form videos reconfiguring its production through technological mediation and power dynamics, positioning it as a critical focus in contemporary memory studies.

2.3. Current research landscape on the convergence of cultural memory theory and visual communication

Short-form videos now dominate as pivotal mediums for collective memory construction, leveraging semiotic systems to visually encode and reproduce cultural memory. Scholars highlight their multimodal capacity to bridge historical-modern divides [8] and reconfigure “memory loci” [9]. Through affective storytelling, temporal-spatial compression, and ritualized narratives, these platforms dismantle elitist memory monopolies, fostering public cultural engagement. The adaptation of ICH into short-form videos exemplifies memory “reproduction”—transcoding symbols while enabling participatory cultural co-creation.

Despite scholarly focus on macro-analyses (e.g., visual grammar), micro-level investigations into ICH short-form videos’ memory-constructive mechanisms remain underdeveloped. This study

addresses this gap by decoding how their audiovisual strategies enhance ICH transmission, solidify collective identity, and advance memory theory through empirically grounded pathways.

3. Analysis and findings

3.1. Research on narrative strategies in the “Shanbai” ICH-themed short-form video series

3.1.1. ICH theme selection: balancing practicality and defamiliarization

The “Shanbai” series exemplifies ICH short-form videos that synthesize classical craftsmanship’s practicality and aesthetics, integrating utilitarian, cultural, and artistic values through materialized representations. Its thematic framework is categorized into six functional groups (Table 1): daily essentials, calligraphic tools, textiles, cosmetic artifacts, decorative crafts, and dietary practices. The "calligraphic tools" category (encompassing writing, painting, and printing traditions) dominates in quantity due to its cultural recognizability, visual immediacy, and commercialization viability. Meanwhile, “decorative crafts” with intricate techniques and recreational appeal achieve the highest average engagement, capitalizing on novelty-seeking and stress-relief narratives.

By anchoring content selection in fundamental human needs, “Shanbai” revitalizes familiar objects (e.g., scholar’s studio tools, woven textiles) through experiential resonance while subverting modernity via historical nomenclature, generating defamiliarized allure. Notably, it extends beyond mainstream ICH by spotlighting overlooked vernacular practices (e.g., Camellia seed soap, pine-soot ink, orange-brewed kudzu powder), strategically stimulating cultural curiosity through underdocumented heritage rediscovery.

Table 1. Content categorization and statistical analysis of the “Shanbai” ICH-themed short-form video series (as of May 6, 2025)

Catego- ry	Daily Necessities	Calligraphy & Painting Tools	Textiles & Apparel	Beauty & Cosmetics	Entertainment & Decoration	Dietary Wellness
Subcat- egories	Bamboo pot brush, Horse-shaped stool, Traditional wooden tub with hoops, Traditional bamboo chopsticks, Tea seed soap, Oil-paper umbrella, Black-paper fan	Bamboo paper-making screen, Eight-treasure inkpadd, Hemp paper, Han-style paper, White cotton paper, Calligraphy brushes, Bamboo paper, Longquan inkpadd, Lianshi paper, Clay movable-type printing, Woodblock New Year paintings, Xuan paper, Chengni inkstone, Pine-soot ink, Movable-type printing, Huizhou ink	Grass cloth, Handwoven cotton cloth, Multi-layered cloth shoes, Batik, Xiangyunsha silk, Plain silk gauze, Tujia brocade (Xilankapu)	Safflower rouge, Jade Maiden peach blossom powder, Rosewater perfume, Floral dew rouge, Jiajian lip balm, Cinnabar lip balm, Qingdai (indigo powder), Fragrant face powder	Bamboo-backed mahjong tiles, Buffalo-hide drum, Mother-of-pearl inlaid chess, Enamel suona, Guqin “Nine-Sky Jade Pendant”, Silk guqin strings, Bone-wood inlay art, Ru-style porcelain replicas, Longquan celadon, Jian ware tea bowls	Tangerine-fermented kudzu powder, Ejiao (donkey-hide gelatin), Aged sorghum vinegar, Guzhang Maojian tea
Numb- er of Entries	7	16	7	8	10	4
Propor- tion	13.46%	30.77%	13.46%	15.38%	19.23%	7.69%
Averag- e Likes (10k)	780,000	2,051,000	2,984,000	140,000	4895000	1640000

3.1.2. Narrative structural features: “linear + concise + negative space”

The “Shanbai” ICH short-form videos (5–10 minutes) employ linear chronological progression to document craftsmanship processes through meticulous yet restrained storytelling. While ICH

practices are inherently time-intensive, their condensed representation balances comprehensive documentation with narrative conciseness. Strategic use of empty frames and static intervals—encoded as contemplative pauses—facilitates emotional resonance by granting audiences interpretive agency.

Exemplified by the top-engaged work *Huizhou Inkstick* (5’58”), 17 procedures are streamlined into a meditative narrative (Table 2). Temporal ellipsis is achieved through time-lapse cinematography (e.g., “clouds drifting” symbolizing yearlong drying) and frame-intensive depictions of repetitive labor (e.g., artisans’ nocturnal hammering). By prioritizing visual economy over verbal exposition, the video constructs pastoral serenity through rhythmic editing, while purposeful omissions foster implicit understanding of artisan ethos and cultural values, deepening audience identification.

Table 2. Craft stage analysis in *Hui Ink*: top-performing episode of the *Shanbai ICH* short-form video series

No.	Procedure	Supplementary Notes	Timestamp
1	Resin Harvesting	—	0:09
2	Tung Oil Preparation	—	0:41
3	Lard Incorporation	Enhances smoke yield	0:44
4	Raw Lacquer Addition	Improves soot blackness	0:47
5	Soot Refinement	—	1:08
6	Soot Collection	Superior light soot without agglomeration preferred; 50-100g yield per 500g oil	1:12
7	Soot Purification	Static settling overnight followed by year-long shade drying. Annual aging eliminates “fire essence” before equal-weight bovine glue addition	2:03
8	Glue Mixing	—	2:50
9	Gold Powder Integration	—	2:52
10	Cinnabar Incorporation	—	2:54
11	Borneol Addition	—	2:55
12	Pearl Powder Blending	—	2:56
13	Musk Infusion	—	3:03
14	Ink Pounding	Facilitates colloidal integration through repetitive pounding to prevent solidification and enhance soot amalgamation. Termination criterion: glossy surface with minimized particulates	3:26
15	Ink Bar Molding	—	4:41
16	Plant Ash Curing	15-day moisture absorption and 6-month air curing	5:05
17	Gold Inlay & Waxing	Final desiccation prerequisite. Technical specifications: permanent jet-black pigmentation, anti-adhesive texture, refined surface morphology	5:34

3.2. A study on the symbolic representation in the “Shanbai” ICH-themed short-form video series

3.2.1. Invocation of instrumental rationality semiotic signs in the technological dimension

ICH audiovisual texts inherently transmit cultural meanings through visual semiotics. The “Shanbai” series exemplifies this by synthesizing symbolic codes of instrumental rationality (technical precision) and value rationality (cultural ethos), achieving dual-layered cultural expression.

Instrumental rationality is revitalized via technological mediation—high-definition cinematography, slow motion, and close-ups amplify intricate craft details (Table 3), transforming tools like foot-operated pestles and stone mortars into “visual gateways” for ICH comprehension. These techniques hypervisualize specialized processes (e.g., typographic carving, wax-resist dyeing), embedding technological symbolism within collective memory frameworks to externalize individual experiential knowledge. [10]

Simultaneously, the exclusion of modern digital elements crafts a cyber-pastoral aesthetic imbued with rustic “aura,” evoking primordial affective responses. Instrumental imagery—such as earthen kilns and brick furnaces—metaphorizes historical craftsmanship’s refinement and innovation, while clustered technical scenes (e.g., clay stoves, chimney stacks) collectively evoke an earthy materiality rICH in cultural resonance. This strategic semiotic interplay bridges ancestral technical perseverance with contemporary sensory engagement.

Table 3. Inventory of tool imagery in the top 10 most-liked “Shanbai” ICH-themed short-form videos series (as of 6 May 2025)

N o.	ICH Content	Likes ($\times 10^4$)	Tool Inventory
1	Huizhou Inkstick	1151.5	Lacquer knives, clam shells, brushes, bamboo tubes, gold basins, iron ladles, bowls and chopsticks, rush stems, tweezers, ceramic jars, scoops, gauze, wooden sticks, axes, steelyard balances, wooden ink molds, foot-operated mortars, wooden boxes, writing brushes, porcelain basins, etc.
2	Longquan Celadon	957.1	Ceramic jars, foot-operated mortars, iron ladles, draining baskets, gold basins, bamboo rods, bamboo crates, millstones, gauze, wooden sticks, potter's wheels, files, brick kilns, steelyard balances, pestles and mortars, rags, writing brushes, glaze tongs, glaze-blowing pots, brushes, carving knives, stone hammers, etc.
3	Grass Cloth	750.4	Wooden sticks, buckets, hemp-scraping knives, scoops, porcelain basins, bamboo tubes, rotating wheels, iron ladles, scissors, spinning reels, spinning wheels, waist looms, etc.
4	Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Chess Sets	726.4	Draining devices, saws, grinding tools, scissors, axes, planes, foot-operated mortars, calipers, carving knives, files, wooden barrels, sharp needles, rotating wheels, drills, writing brushes, chisels, powder brushes, iron tongs, soldering irons, scissors, hammers, scrapers, gauze, etc.
5	Bone and Wood Inlay Art	659.1	Shovels, straw brushes, draining baskets, saws, axes, planes, files, painting brushes, scissors, drills, brushes, tweezers, carving knives, chisels, trowels, hammers, etc.
6	Ru-style Porcelain Imitation	671.3	Draining baskets, stone containers, limestone, bellows, fire tongs, foot-operated mortars, gold spoons, porcelain bowls, pestles and mortars, axes, draining baskets, ceramic jars, gold basins, gauze, wooden sticks, potter's wheels, files, brick kilns, steelyard balances, gauze, painting brushes, glaze tongs, millstones, axes, etc.
7	Bone Mahjong Tiles	528.1	Saws, draining baskets, ceramic jars, wooden barrels, scrapers, axes, grindstones, gauze, painting brushes, chisels, rotating wheels, drills, etc.
8	Cowhide Drums	481.7	Scrapers, wooden basins, spoons, measuring tools, saws, painting brushes, planes, pencils, drills, hammers, ropes, axes, gauze, etc.
9	Oil-paper Umbrellas	423.2	Wooden chisels, stone tools, scoops, draining devices, gauze, scrapers, planes, drills, scissors, needles and threads, calipers, thread-winding frames, ceramic jars, brushes, etc.
10	Handwoven Cotton Textiles	415.9	Cotton bows, wooden mallets, bamboo sticks, iron cores, rotating wheels, thread-guiding devices, wooden beaters, draining devices, wooden basins, spinning reels, spinning wheels, waist looms, scissors, etc.

3.2.2. Invocation of value-rational semiotic signs in the cultural dimension

The “Shanbai” ICH short-form videos reconstruct “mnemonic landscapes” through culturally resonant imagery—bamboo groves, ancient kilns, and gray-tiled architecture—whICH encode regional identity and historical continuity. These symbols transcend aesthetic mundanity, embedding cultural values into shared memory to delineate collective identity and evoke affective belonging.

Animal symbolism (Table 4)—domesticated species (chickens, horses) and literati-associated fauna (dragonflies, egrets)—operationalizes human-nature interplay. Their performative integration dramatizes agrarian metaphors and literati aesthetics, subtly articulating traditional ecological harmony (“human-nature unity”) through narrative choreography.

Table 4. Frequency distribution of animal symbol occurrence in “Shanbai” ICH documentary short-form video series (as of 6 May 2025)

Category	Featuring Animals	Without Animals
Number	40	12
Proportion (%)	76.92	23.08

Cultural codification via classical references (e.g., Shuowen Jiezi) and Xiangxi’s rustic landscapes (Table 5) anchors ICH practices within civilizational historicity. Bamboo courtyards and terraced fields materialize a “simplicity-oriented” ethos, reinforcing place-based authenticity while bridging daily labor with heritage profundity.

Table 5. Statistical analysis of documented landscape imagery in the Shanbai ICH series short-form videos (2023-04-09–2023-05-15)

No	ICH Content	Release Date	Landscape Imagery
1	Bamboo Pot Scrub Brush	2023-04-09	Bamboo grove, Courtyard
2	Wooden Horse Bench	2023-04-12	Woodland, Bamboo grove, Courtyard, Farmland
3	Traditional Wooden Tub Hooping	2023-04-16	Woodland, Courtyard
4	Traditional Bamboo Chopsticks	2023-04-20	Bamboo grove, Courtyard
5	Safflower Rouge	2023-04-28	Courtyard
6	Jade Maiden Peach Blossom Powder	2023-05-04	Courtyard, Mudflat, Farmland
7	Rose Water Distillation	2023-05-06	Flowerbed, Courtyard
8	Floral Blush	2023-05-09	Courtyard
9	Clove-based Lip Gloss	2023-05-12	Farmland, Courtyard, River marsh
10	Cinnabar Lip Balm	2023-05-15	Courtyard, Pond, Paddy field

3.3. Research on the audiovisual language in the “Shanbai” ICH series short-form videos

3.3.1. Shot language: “close-up + establishing shot”

The “Shan Bai” series extensively employs close-up shots to showcase intricate details of ICH craftsmanship. This highly dynamic visual strategy effectively engages viewers’ sensory participation by enabling proximity to artisanal textures. For instance, during the documentation of Longquan Celadon firing techniques, the lens closely follows the craftsman’s manual manipulations, where the tactile quality of clay formation through palmar kneading becomes visually manifest. Significantly, Shan Bai’s own robust, calloused hands with erythematous mottling emerge as potent visual semiotics of craftsmanship ethos (see Figure 1).

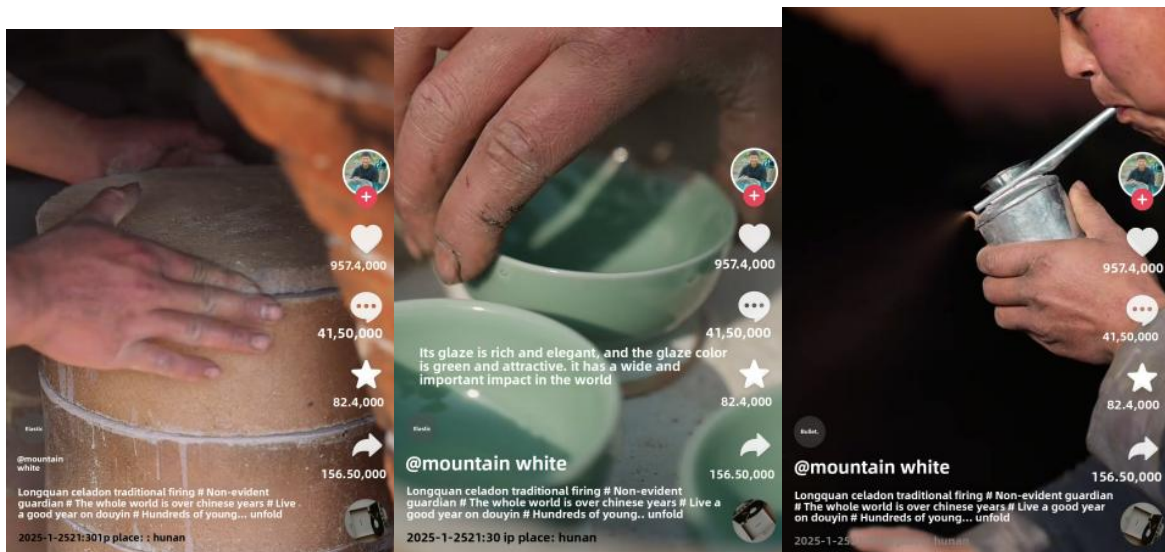


Figure 1. Representative screenshots highlighting key audiovisual features in the “longquan celadon” episode of the “Shanbai” ICH short-form video series

In short-form videos, non-narrative shots and wide compositions are frequently employed to capture natural environments, workspaces, or unfinished craft states, constructing a serene, restrained, and poetic visual style. These shots devoid of human subjects emphasize natural/cultural landscapes, intensifying atmospheric immersion while creating spaces for “memory blankness.” The color palette predominantly features low-saturation tones complemented by soft lighting and naturalistic light transitions, approximating cinematic visual language. The editing utilizes fast-cut techniques to deconstruct static shots, enhancing viewing gratification through streamlined action montages.

3.3.2. Sonic architecture: ambient sound + diegetic sound effects + non-diegetic music

The sound design in “Shanbai” employs a multi-channel composite structure integrating environmental sounds, action noises, and non-lyrical instrumental music to reconcile authenticity with emotional resonance. Short-form videos strategically synchronize natural soundscapes (bird calls, flowing water) with visual landscapes, reinforcing ICH techniques’ ecological connections. Action sounds (water pouring, wood carving, boiling liquids) are amplified and sequenced to create rhythmic textures, thereby highlighting craftsmanship textures while serving as acoustic mnemonic devices. Background scores predominantly feature subdued ethnic instrumental arrangements that minimize linguistic interference, enabling viewers’ visual-aural immersion and transforming ICH processes into culturally infused, meditative experiences through atmospheric auditory layering.

3.4. Study on ritual representation in the “Shanbai” ICH-themed short-form video series

3.4.1. The essential attribute of rituals: repetitive protocols

Under cultural memory theory, rituals operate as symbolic systems for constructing social order and values, with repetitive operations reinforcing collective memory and fostering identity formation. [6]

(88) Shanbai’s ICH-themed short-form videos employ formulaic structures: fixed opening shots with action/sound close-ups signal ritual initiation, while the protagonist’s monochromatic attire

ensures visual continuity. Adhering to a “production-presentation-validation” template, these videos standardize craft demonstration through hand close-ups, static product displays, and user feedback verification, creating replicable behavioral “habitus” Fragmentary ritualized practices in short-form video platforms transform individuals’ repetitive engagements into collective memory transmission [11], constituting aesthetic ICH choreography that establishes rhythmic “viewing logics” beyond mechanical replication.

3.4.2. Ritual culture: aesthetic logics and value integration

Shanbai’s ICH-themed short-form videos reconceptualize ritual-music culture through aesthetic unification of truth, goodness, and beauty. They materialize “ritual” norms through standardized ICH practices (suona performance, ink grinding) while dissolving formality via rhythmic “musicality” transforming craft documentation into cultural memory. Ritualized aesthetics merge functional and visual dimensions – exemplified by the “Ancient Zhang Maojian” episode’s poetic labor narratives that encode rural revitalization for cultural-tourism integration. Technical processes (porcelain temperature control, textile weaving) undergo demystification-reenchantment dynamics: visualizing tacit knowledge while celebrating artisans’ empirical wisdom, thereby reconstructing cognitive frameworks. This cinematographic ritualization positions aesthetic mediation as an epistemic-ethical conduit, facilitating individual-to-collective memory transmission while empowering ICH’s meaning-making capacity across short-form video platforms.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Short-form videos serve as material carriers enabling the reconstruction and reconfiguration of ICH cultural memory

Within digital media contexts, short-form videos act as cultural memory carriers, demonstrating ICH preservation potential through audiovisual reconstruction and narrative innovation. Shanbai achieves historical-cultural modernity via symbolic encoding of ICH techniques, employing multimodal anchors (material/textual/contextual signs) for memory activation. Cross-media textual integration bridges epistemic gaps, while instrumental rationality (tool imagery/technical scenarios) and value rationality (animal motifs/local landscapes) translate intangible craftsmanship and cultural values into visual languages that dissolve temporal-spatial barriers, constructing immersive fields. Strategic storytelling guides personalized mnemonic experiences through narrative ellipsis-precision dynamics, activating affective resonance while reconfiguring meaning chains via ritual intertextuality.

4.2. “participatory memory co-creation” enhances the expansive potential of ICH cultural memory construction through short-form video platforms

The co-creation ecosystem enabled by short-form video platforms has transformed ICH cultural memory transmission by breaking traditional memory boundaries through digital carriers, elevating local ICH practices to national/global consciousness. Exemplified by the viral “Shanbai” series (120M+ likes), such platforms implement “user-platform co-creation” mechanisms that convert personal memories into public discourse through interactive features. Bullet-screen comments particularly manifest youth subcultural engagement, with memetic phrases like “Gu qilai!” (Get ancient) humorously reinventing ICH narratives, while open comment areas facilitate cross-subject knowledge exchange and conservation proposals. Platforms like Douyin further institutionalize this

through initiatives (ICH Co-creation Campaign) that stimulate collective cultural translation. Unlike traditional media's passive reception model, short-form videos leverage engagement tools (likes/comments/shares) to dynamically reconstruct cultural memory through social consensus, polysemic interpretations, and emotional renegotiation.

4.3. Cultural reflection: issues of “simulation” and “reconstruction” in cultural memory

The “Shanbai” ICH short-form videos, despite their aesthetic innovation, expose inherent contradictions in cultural memory between simulation and reconstruction. Excessive aestheticization detaches ICH craftsmanship from authentic sociocultural contexts, transforming practices into consumable spectacles that obscure genuine labor through filtered representations—a visual misdirection masking survival realities. Temporal constraints further reduce years of artisanal dedication to fragmented clips, fostering superficial engagement that erodes technical complexity and artisan ethos, perpetuating cultural distortion. Stylistic homogenization among creators like “Li Ziqi” and “Peng Nanke” results in generic representations, marked by repetitive themes and inadequate differentiation of ICH specificities. Breaking this paradigm requires excavating multidimensional cultural narratives, transcending formulaic aesthetics, and cultivating individualized interpretive frameworks to authentically convey ICH's sociohistorical depth—an urgent imperative for sustainable cultural transmission.

5. Conclusion and prospects

This study analyzes “Shanbai” ICH short-form videos through a cultural memory framework, revealing their digital memory reconstruction via emotional narratives, semiotic systems, and immersive aesthetics amplified by user co-creation and platform mechanisms. Limitations include limited sample scope and cross-platform comparisons, with user reception requiring empirical validation. Future research should employ mixed-method analyses of multi-agent practices (creators/audiences) across heterogeneous short-form video platforms, systematically mapping ICH's creative adaptation and dissemination patterns to advance its sustainable reinterpretation in algorithmic ecosystems.

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