

The Transformation and Cultural Reflection on Short Video Communication of Intangible Cultural Heritage within Spectacle Existence

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Abstract. With the rapid development of short-video platforms, the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has an era characterized by spectacle. By taking Debord's "society of the spectacle" theory as the analytical perspective, and combining the cases of well-known ICH short-video bloggers such as Li Ziqi, Jiang Xunqian, and Nanxiang Bu Ai Chi Fan, this paper analyzes the spectacle characteristics such as symbolization, consumption, and performance presented in the dissemination process of ICH short videos, revealing the transformation of ICH short videos in the survival of the spectacle society. The research finds that the essence of ICH may be at risk of transforming from "practice" to "performance" and eroding the subjectivity of ICH. Although it has enhanced the popularity and dissemination reach of ICH in the short term, it may weaken the authenticity of ICH culture in the long run. Only by adhering to dynamic inheritance and cultural consciousness can the international influence of Chinese ICH culture be effectively enhanced.

Keywords: Spectacle Society, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Short Video Dissemination, Cultural Alienation, Spectacle Existence

1. Introduction

As an important component of human civilization, intangible cultural heritage carries the historical memory of a nation and is a significant symbol of national identity. It is the crystallization of wisdom formed by a nation or group in their long-term life practices, reflecting the production methods, living customs, and spiritual pursuits of a specific society. In recent years, digital media, especially short video platforms, have rapidly emerged, bringing new opportunities and challenges to the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. According to the "2025 Douyin Spring Festival Intangible Cultural Heritage Data Report", during the Spring Festival, the official topic "#Intangible Cultural Heritage Welcomes Spring" was viewed over 2.7 billion times, with nearly 50 million uploads and a total of 167.9 billion views, and the sharing volume increased by 78% year-on-year. The "2025 Douyin Intangible Cultural Heritage Data Report" shows that within a year, more than 200 million videos related to national-level intangible cultural heritage were newly added, with a total of 749.9 billion views. The "2025 Kuaishou Intangible Cultural Heritage Ecosystem Report" indicates that the total views of related videos reached 178 billion, with an average of nearly 10,000

live broadcasts per day. Due to its concise content and rapid dissemination, short videos have become an important platform for the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. More and more inheritors are using this channel to showcase their skills, attracting widespread attention, and presenting a distinct characteristic of "spectacle".

However, this dissemination model driven by visual spectacles and consumption logic has gradually transformed intangible cultural heritage from a "practical culture" of living transmission into a "visual spectacle" for consumption, deviating from its original social functions and cultural connotations. Guy Debord's "The Society of the Spectacle" reveals the problem of "the spectacle of life", where the spectacle is an illusion constructed by the sensuous visibility, supported by appearances, and displayed in various forms of images [1]. "The entire social life appears as a vast accumulation of spectacles" [2](3). Nowadays, digital media compresses the complex craftsmanship and rituals of intangible cultural heritage into short videos of tens of seconds, essentially turning intangible cultural heritage into "consumable image symbols".

Therefore, how to ensure the efficiency and wide reach of the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage in the era of short videos while maintaining its authenticity and deep meaning has become a key issue in the current research on the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. This study takes Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle as the main analytical perspective, using content analysis and case analysis methods, and through well-known intangible cultural heritage accounts on platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, such as Li Ziqi, Shan Bai, Jiang Xunqian, Nanxiang Bu Ai Chi Fan, Peng Chuanming, Peng Nankai, Li Yichun, and Zhu Tixiong, it analyzes the presentation and reconstruction of intangible cultural heritage in short videos and their "spectacle survival" characteristics, explores the challenges of spectacle to the living transmission of intangible cultural heritage, supplements the application of the "society of the spectacle" theory in the field of digital cultural dissemination, and reflects on the impact of intangible cultural heritage short videos on the inheritance and consumption of original culture.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research status of intangible cultural heritage and new media communication

In recent years, research on intangible cultural heritage and new media communication has achieved rich results. Existing studies mainly focus on the improvement of the communication effect of intangible cultural heritage by new media technology. For instance, Luo Yang found in his research on the current situation of short video dissemination of Meishan Nuo Opera that the content of short videos can be roughly divided into performances by the inheritors themselves and creations by enthusiasts and researchers [3]. At the same time, by associating intangible cultural heritage inheritance and Nuo Opera-related topics, and through precise audience positioning, users are guided to participate in discussions and interactions. On the "Kuaishou" platform, the playback volume of #Intangible Cultural Heritage reached 11.7 billion times, and that of #Nuo Opera reached 5.433 million times; on the "Douyin" platform, the playback volumes of #Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance, #Nuo Opera, #Meishan Culture, and #Nuo Opera Inheritance reached 8.69 billion, 44.231 million, 29.029 million, and 1.332 million times respectively. Chen Xiaojuan believes that intangible cultural heritage documentaries "have played an important role in the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage for a period of time due to their irreplaceable documentary and artistic nature" [4]. Intangible cultural heritage micro-documentaries, with their short length, micro perspective, single appeal, and documentary style, precisely meet the information consumption habits of contemporary audiences, transforming cultural genes into

"cultural fast food" that conforms to the aesthetic preferences of the digital age [4]. However, most studies still focus on the application of media technology and the evaluation of communication effects, and few conduct in-depth analyses of the cultural alienation problems in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage short videos.

2.2. Relevant research on the theory of the society of the spectacle

Fellner and Best define "spectacle" as "a performance for a few, watched silently by the many". Debord believes that "the fundamental reason for the social spectacle is that the spectacle presents an ideal 'good life' in the form of a utopian illusion, constructing a virtual world different from the real world" [5]. Social life is gradually replaced by visual images and symbols, forming a "representation-dominated" state of existence. This theory is widely applied in the field of media studies, especially in analyzing cultural consumption and the visual society. For example, Nie Yanmei and Wu Chenyue believe that the meticulous design by the planning team behind the spectacle and the investment of commercial capital make the audience unconsciously fall into the web of desires woven by capital [5]. People lose their desire and demand for a genuine life due to their fascination with the spectacle, while capitalists manipulate the entire social life by controlling the generation and transformation of the spectacle [1]. Visual culture is a cultural form that uses images as symbolic expressions, and the meaning of image symbols depends on image consciousness [6]. Scholars have explored the cultural production and consumption patterns in the society of the spectacle in a simple and clear manner, generally believing that this pattern promotes the commercialization and visualization of culture, weakening the authenticity and deep experience of culture.

In summary, there are currently few studies that systematically apply the theory of the society of the spectacle to the field of intangible cultural heritage short video dissemination, especially lacking in-depth analysis from the perspectives of cultural alienation and cultural criticism. This paper takes Debord's "society of the spectacle" theory as the main theoretical support, supplemented by Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, and attempts to propose new theoretical thinking for the cultural protection of intangible cultural heritage dissemination in the digital age.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Analysis of the spectacle characteristics of intangible cultural heritage short videos

3.1.1. Symbolization: intangible cultural heritage skills are visually spectacularized, detached from the actual production and living context

"People never consume the object itself (use value); they always use the object as a symbol to highlight themselves." [7] In a consumer society, the essence of "consumption" is no longer the use of items but the pursuit of symbolic meaning. As shown in Figure 1, the blogger "Zhu Tixiong" tells the story of the "ten years of hard work behind the scenes" of intangible cultural heritage performers through plot reenactment, changing costumes during the high-difficulty movements of lion dance and Peking Opera, and magnifying the visual impact of traditional Chinese clothing. The blogger "Parkour Ramen" combines 1600°C iron flower with parkour, performing somersaults on molten iron while surrounded by iron flowers, and the single video received over 12 million likes, being reposted by People's Daily and CCTV News, bringing the scene of "fire trees and silver flowers,

iron chains unlocked" from ancient poetry to life. The blogger "Li Yichun" made a 2-meter-tall rolling lantern, bringing the one-meter-tall lanterns in the "Upward Lantern Festival Picture" out of the ancient painting. These symbolized expressions of intangible cultural heritage have become the most "popular" existence on short video platforms, striking the public's senses with highly impactful visual language.



Figure 1. Screenshot of popular intangible cultural heritage short videos on Douyin

However, it is worth noting that many ICH skills are deliberately presented in a spectacular way in short videos, overly emphasizing visual impact and detaching from the actual production and living context. This may turn them into "rootless" symbols in the eyes of the audience. ICH is rooted in specific life practices, and its true value should come from interaction with social culture.

3.1.2. Commodification: ICH becomes a "commodity" driven by clicks, traffic, and tips economy

ICH, which originally carried profound cultural heritage, has gradually been incorporated into the logic of commodity systems and become a consumption object catering to market demands. "The spectacle presents a world that is both present and absent, a world of commodities that rules over all experiences." [2](19) The exchange value of commodities has replaced the use value and intrinsic meaning of things, and all experiences are governed by the rules of consumption.

In recent years, Jiangxi Wunu Zhou Resort has gained popularity on social media and short video platforms as a "must-visit spot" thanks to its high-quality ICH performances. Programs such as daytime parades and shadow puppetry, and nighttime fire pot and iron flower shows, with actors wearing conical hats and capes and performing with fire knives and pots, create a full atmosphere in front of the "Embracing Jade Tower," attracting a large number of tourists to visit and consume. Commodification also profoundly affects the development and dissemination of ICH cultural and creative products. The cultural and creative "Peach Bottle" fridge magnet launched by the Shanghai Museum sparked heated discussions due to its "glowing function" and "bottom hole" design. The public's controversy is not only about the product itself but also about the historical memory of the peach bottle being lost overseas, being transformed into a lamp base, and even being defiled. This case warns us that if we ignore the cultural connotations and historical memories behind "commodities" and simply commodify them, we are undoubtedly eroding the uniqueness and dignity of culture.

From the market operation of ICH performances to the commercial development of cultural and creative products, "commodification" has profoundly influenced the existence form of ICH. Driven by the traffic economy, ICH short videos have gradually become a "commodity" centered on clicks, traffic, and tip economy. The dissemination of ICH culture no longer focuses on the deep value of

cultural inheritance but is oriented towards market demands and caters to audience preferences to obtain higher traffic and economic benefits.

3.1.3. Performance: ICH inheritors become performers, and ICH skills degenerate into spectacular experiences

In the context of contemporary cultural dissemination, "performance" has increasingly become one of the core characteristics of ICH short video dissemination. ICH inheritors gradually shed their traditional identity as "inheritors" on digital platforms and transform into "performers" facing the public. The skills that originally carried cultural cores are more often transformed into spectacular experiences for people to watch. "By concentrating the image of a possible role on themselves, that is, the spectacle of the living person, the star concentrates this banality." [2](33) The "banality" of a star is a symbol performed, and the "skills" of an inheritor are a spectacle displayed. When inheritors become performers, skills descend from the "essence of practice" to "spectacles for viewing," and skills no longer focus on "cultural inheritance" but aim at "satisfying viewing demands."

This phenomenon is particularly prominent on short video platforms. For example, the blogger "Shan Bai" makes "One Two Gold, One Two Ink" ancient Huizhou ink, condensing the nearly 500-day traditional ink-making process into a 5-minute and 58-second short film, meticulously presenting every step from material selection, smoke refining, glue mixing, mold making to drying, ultimately constructing a refined and easily consumable visual spectacle. For instance, Jiang Xunqian carved a 30-meter-long dragon at the Changchun Ice and Snow New World. As one of the most popular videos about intangible cultural heritage, it simplified the lengthy production process into a result presentation, allowing the audience to enjoy a magnificent intangible cultural heritage ice sculpture performance. Later, due to netizens' suspicion of "falsification", he started live-streaming the re-carving process, but still prioritized the viewing experience over the craftsmanship itself.

The transformation of "inheritors" into "performers" has led the skills increasingly focus on the "viewing experience". The "performance-oriented" feature has been deeply integrated into the current intangible cultural heritage dissemination. If this continues, the social functions and cultural values of intangible cultural heritage will inevitably face continuous erosion and dilution.

3.2. Narrative logic and spectacle presentation of intangible cultural heritage short videos

3.2.1. Fragmented narration: decontextualized rapid consumption

In the context of short videos, the narrative structure of intangible cultural heritage skills shows a clear trend of fragmentation. Many short videos about intangible cultural heritage skills break down the originally complete and complex production processes into a series of short and concise segments. For instance, the blogger "Peng Nankai" spent three years to present the production of summer cloth in a complete manner; when making Miao silver necklaces, he worked for two consecutive nights. However, in the short video about ancient Huizhou ink by the blogger "Shan Bai", the "drying" process alone takes a whole year, but it can only be briefly shown in a few shots. Such decontextualized narration only selects key points for presentation, forming a fragmented collage [8].

This narrative choice is not accidental. Short videos are characterized by high information density and fast pace. If they were to stick to presenting the full picture of each process, it would be difficult to attract users to watch continuously and express the delicacy of the skills within the limited time.

Therefore, content creators often cut and collage the production processes of intangible cultural heritage, focusing on the most interesting details. The "decontextualized" fragmented narration, on the one hand, enhances the efficiency of dissemination and the appeal, but on the other hand, it sacrifices the integrity and depth of the intangible cultural heritage skills.

3.2.2. Spectacular narration: highlighting "Cool Skills" and "Visual Stimulation"

Spectacular narration is another expression logic widely adopted in short videos about intangible cultural heritage. This narrative approach seizes the audience's curiosity for novel and exquisite craftsmanship, creating a highly impactful viewing experience through difficult operations, extreme craftsmanship, and strong visual effects. "Memory of Coolness" essentially focuses on the high-difficulty and high-precision operations in intangible cultural heritage skills, breaking the public's stereotype of traditional skills being mundane and allowing people to see the ingenuity and craftsmanship behind the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. For example, the blogger "Shan Bai" in his short videos about ancient wood inlay and mother-of-pearl chess, meticulously carves mother-of-pearl and ox bone. Through the lens, viewers can see operations that are difficult for ordinary people to complete. Spectacular narration magnifies the operation details through slow-motion shots and close-ups, allowing viewers to perceive the depth of the "skill".

"Visual Stimulation" focuses on capturing the audience's attention in a short time through the tension and rhythm changes in the picture, triggering a strong sensory experience. The blogger "Jiang Xunqian" omits the six-year learning process and only retains the most impactful moments, highlighting the final performance in traditional Peking Opera costumes; the blogger "Zhu Tixiong" rapidly switches between modern and ancient-style settings in his videos, with strong visual contrasts and light and shadow changes, greatly enhancing the video's appeal and dissemination power. This type of narrative approach aligns with the aesthetic preferences and information acquisition habits of young people, stimulating their curiosity about intangible cultural heritage and providing possibilities for the integration of intangible cultural heritage skills with modern communication technologies and popular cultural elements.

3.2.3. Reenactment narration: detaching from the original context and rebuilding the scene

"Intangible cultural heritage is different from material cultural heritage. Through the records in literature and the reference of related materials, it can be restored and has a certain regenerative nature." [9] The reenactment narration of intangible cultural heritage in short videos is to "detach from the original context" and "rebuild the scene". Short video platforms provide highly free expression spaces for intangible cultural heritage, enabling creators to break through geographical and temporal limitations to realize the reenactment and reconstruction of culture.

The blogger "Tudou" combines intangible cultural heritage with beauty through personification, such as paper-cutting and blue and white porcelain, presenting intangible cultural heritage through different makeup and hairstyles, entering people's vision; Li Ziqi, on the other hand, uses the idyllic rural scenes of Taohua Village in Longquanyi District, Chengdu as the background, through self-cultivation, self-harvesting, self-production, and self-use, truly reenacting intangible cultural heritage such as indigo dyeing, handmade soy sauce, and wool pens. Another example is the participation of "Nanxiang Bu Ai Chi Fan" (literally means Nanxiang doesn't like eating) in the Gutan Dragon, where each family forms a group to be responsible for the production of one section of the dragon's body. A complete dragon requires at least 120 sections and the joint effort of over 2,000 people to lift it. Such collective life scenes, rather than isolated performances, are integrated

into daily cultural practices, making intangible cultural heritage more than just isolated skills or symbols. Intangible cultural heritage stems from the production and living practices of traditional agrarian societies. Short videos, by recreating or visiting similar scenes and restoring the usage context, provide a more vivid and lively interpretation of intangible cultural heritage.

4. Discussion

4.1. The essence of the shift in Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) dissemination: from "lived practice" to "performance spectacle"

As the saying goes, "Primitive society had masks, bourgeois society had mirrors, and we have images" [10]. When the "hyperreality" constructed by images becomes the norm of cognition, people unknowingly indulge in this numbed fictional world. The real world becomes an image, while the image is elevated to a seemingly real existence [2].(Preface 18)With the continuous innovation of communication technologies, ICH gradually loses its original social functions in life, and symbolic consumption replaces the deep experience of cultural inheritance.

Traditional society was solid, and ICH was the bond that maintained the community of a group. For instance, the Yingge dance originated from the ban on martial arts in the early Qing Dynasty. The people used the name of Yingge to practice martial arts, which was a manifestation of social cohesion. However, in modern society, "the fundamental meaning of fluidity precisely refers to a nature that is constantly changing at any time and place" [11]. The continuous flow of modern society liberates individuals from fixed identities, and the solid traditional society disintegrates. Many social functions and original contexts of ICH have weakened significantly, and the trend of spectacle has become increasingly obvious.

4.2. The spectacle will erode the subjectivity of ICH

Intangible cultural heritage "exists and is passed down attached to individuals, groups, or specific regional spaces, and is a living culture" [12]. The existence and inheritance of ICH cannot be separated from the inheritors and real-life practices. However, in the spectacle-like dissemination of short videos, the inheritors are transformed into "performance tools" to meet commercial demands, and they display their skills within prescribed spaces and standards. The production space surrounded and recreated by numerous technical devices and audiences disciplines the form of "ICH", making them "people to be watched".

Furthermore, the subjectivity of ICH communities and cultural fields is also weakened. Take the Dong Grand Song as an example. It was often used in important village ceremonies such as sacrifices and blessings. Nowadays, its role has shifted from existing for its own survival and development to existing for external viewing and consumption. Even when the "Blossoming Lotus Lantern" segment in the Chinese animated film "Ne Zha: The Mischievous Boy" borrowed from the Dong Grand Song, it also invisibly dissolved its original context rooted in the village land, turning it into a cultural symbol for entertainment consumption.

4.3. Cultural reflection and criticism on the development of ICH short videos

Short videos provide an unprecedented dissemination space for ICH, allowing more people to "experience" the charm of ICH skills. However, wide dissemination does not equal true cultural inheritance. The popularization of ICH knowledge and shallow experience cannot replace the living inheritance closely combined with life and communities. To achieve the living inheritance of ICH, it

is necessary to closely connect with the masses, grasp the themes of the times, and actively break regional restrictions. For example, the Guizhou Provincial Opera Theatre has actively stepped out of urban theaters and brought culture to grassroots communities, taking on the responsibility of promoting the excellent culture of Guizhou.

It is undeniable that the development of ICH short videos has, to a certain extent, directed the knowledgeability, authenticity, and vitality of ICH itself towards capitalization, stagecraft, and entertainment [13]. Capital covets the traffic that ICH inherently brings and rashly packages a fan with colors printed from ink-dropped water as a "ICH lacquer fan". As a result, commercial projects "manufactured" under the guise of "ICH" abound [14].

Just as Fei Xiaotong proposed "cultural self-awareness", "people living in a certain culture have a 'self-awareness' of their culture" [15]. Only by truly achieving cultural self-awareness can the protection and inheritance of ICH gain continuous vitality in the consumption era and avoid falling into the quagmire of superficiality and commercialization.

5. Conclusion

Under the high-traffic orientation, short videos of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tend to cater to market demands and audience tastes, forming a consumption-driven dissemination model. Although this approach boosts the exposure of ICH in the short term, it may erode the authenticity and subjectivity of ICH in the long run. Therefore, future research should further explore how to balance the spectacle-oriented dissemination and the protection of cultural authenticity in the digital age, and find an innovative path that can effectively disseminate while remaining true to the original culture. This study still has limitations in aspects such as case selection and audience research. Future research can conduct in-depth comparisons by integrating multiple platforms, regions, and types of ICH content. "Cultural self-awareness is the recognition of one's own culture and the mutual recognition among different cultures, ultimately leading to the recognition and pursuit of the overall human culture." [16] Understanding the spiritual core of one's own culture is the foundation for promoting the international dissemination of excellent Chinese ICH short videos and expanding the influence of Chinese culture overseas.

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