

The Strategy for “Breaking the Circle” in Intangible Cultural Heritage Programs: A Case Study of “The China within Intangible Cultural Heritage”

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Abstract: *Intangible cultural heritage embodies the profound cultural legacy of the Chinese nation and reflects the ingenuity of the Chinese people. Programs centered on intangible cultural heritage have long sought to transcend their "traditional dissemination circles" and achieve broader outreach. However, most previously aired programs of this genre have demonstrated limited impact and minimal communicative effectiveness. In contrast, "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" garnered widespread acclaim upon its release, successfully "breaking the circle" and reaching a wider audience. This paper examines the program's success through three dimensions: content planning, the role of the host, and the application of digital technology, exploring how these elements enhanced its communication impact.*

Keywords: *"The China within Intangible Cultural Heritage", Intangible Cultural Heritage, Host Role, Communication Impact*

1. Introduction

"Intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) refers to traditional craftsmanship and practices passed down through generations in China. It symbolizes the nation's profound cultural legacy and exemplifies the ingenuity and craftsmanship of the Chinese people. To date, China has successfully registered 43 items as UNESCO-recognized intangible cultural heritage, ranking first globally. However, ICH often carries labels such as "traditional" and "ancient," which risk alienating younger audiences. A common critique of ICH preservation centers on its lack of innovation and the declining interest among younger generations.

In recent years, cultural programs have increasingly transformed from niche productions appealing to insiders to broader phenomena capable of "breaking the circle" and engaging wider audiences. For example, "China in Classics" achieved this by leveraging its rich cultural foundation, innovative narrative structure, dynamic cross-temporal storytelling, and the multidimensional role of its host. This approach not only ignited public interest in traditional culture and revitalized forgotten classical texts but also offered fresh insights into the production and development of cultural programming.

In contrast, most previously aired ICH-focused programs have struggled to gain similar traction, often remaining underwhelming in their reception. However, "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" has emerged as a breakthrough. Since its debut, it has garnered overwhelmingly positive reviews on platforms like Douban, where viewers express their anticipation and praise. The first season concluded successfully, and the second season is currently enjoying high viewership. The program has set a new standard for "creative transformation and innovative development" in ICH programming, establishing itself as a model for reimagining how such content is presented and consumed.

This paper explores the mechanisms through which "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" achieved its success, focusing on three key aspects: content reconstruction, the decentralization of the host's role, and the empowerment of digital technologies.

2. Content Reconstruction: Breaking the Barriers of Dissemination

Traditional intangible cultural heritage (ICH) programs often follow a conventional approach where ICH inheritors leave their transmission sites and enter studios to share stories and promote the culture. In contrast, "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" adopts a more immersive method by

"bringing the audience closer" to ICH. Through the lens of the camera, viewers are taken to the heart of transmission sites and into the lives of ICH inheritors, offering an experiential journey into the preservation and evolution of these heritage projects. The program's guiding principle, encapsulated in the phrase "See the people, see the artifacts, see the way of life", succinctly captures its mission and highlights its strategy for dismantling dissemination barriers.

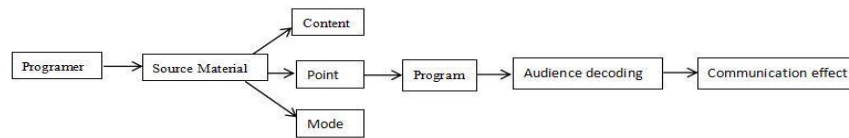


Figure 1: Communication Effect Flowchart

As illustrated in Figure 1, grounded in the theories of "media strong effects" and "active audience," the "image construction" strategy employed by television media continuously shapes and transforms audiences' subjective perceptions, interest preferences, and behavioral attitudes through the creation of "symbolic realities." Both the "magic bullet" theory and cultivation theory further affirm that the series of symbols and codes provided by the media unconsciously influence audiences. A study titled *Research on the Communication Effects and Enhancement Pathways of Cultural TV Programs: Nvivo Analysis of Weibo Data from Everlasting Classics** reveals that the greater the behavioral impact of a TV program on its audience, the stronger its activation effect—defined as the extent to which viewers are stimulated to perform certain actions while watching TV^[1]. The findings indicate that *Everlasting Classics* primarily impacts audiences through behaviors such as sharing, actively learning and reciting poetry, emotional responses like crying, and repetitive listening^[2].

Drawing on Roland Barthes' classification of texts, supplemented by John Fiske's theories on producerly and authorial texts, traditional intangible cultural heritage (ICH) showcase programs resemble "authorial texts," characterized by limited "blank space for imagination" and a lack of "interactive experiences." Consequently, such programs often create communicative barriers, resonating primarily with niche audiences familiar with the subject matter. In contrast, "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" restructures program content to foster multiple functional connections, transforming it into a "producerly text." This transformation enhances the openness of the content, allowing for greater audience participation in the imaginative construction process, thereby increasing communication effectiveness, attracting younger viewers, breaking down communicative barriers, and expanding the influence of ICH projects. The content reconstruction of this program manifests in three specific aspects:

2.1. Spatial and Regional Selection

The selection of regional locations and the integration of spatial elements constitute the first aspect of the program's content reconstruction. Unlike other cultural variety shows that primarily adopt a "stage + performance + narration" format, "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" embraces a region-centered narrative approach. By featuring iconic cities across the nation and using "travel routes" through local intangible cultural heritage (ICH) streets or towns, the program introduces viewers to regional ICH projects and cultures. This regional and integrative spatial presentation allows the audience to immerse themselves in the exploration of ICH while appreciating the picturesque landscapes of China. The addition of regional cultural ambiance further enhances the presentation of ICH projects, highlighting their intrinsic meanings and the significance of their transmission. This approach effectively overcomes the communication barriers caused by unfamiliarity with cultural contexts.

2.2. The Collision of Tradition and Trend

ICH often evokes impressions of antiquity and traditional craftsmanship, making traditional ICH programs more appealing to older audiences with a sense of nostalgia and cultural memory. This creates inherent communication barriers for younger demographics. In "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage", the content is reimagined by incorporating contemporary elements favored by young audiences into traditional ICH projects, infusing them with renewed vitality.

For instance, Yunnan's tradition of using edible flowers has been revitalized as modern pastry chefs transform traditional floral desserts into vibrant, culturally resonant national-style sweets that attract

visitors with their aesthetic appeal. Similarly, Sichuan's ICH soy sauce brewing techniques have been innovatively applied to new culinary creations, such as soy sauce-flavored coffee and ice cream, earning rave reviews from the hosts. The lively song-and-dance heritage of ethnic minorities has also been reinterpreted by young musicians who adapt or fuse traditional elements to create new art forms. For example, the Yi ethnic group's historical epic Meige has been integrated into international music ensembles, while the Lisu dance "Achimugua" has been combined with modern street dance to form a unique ICH performance style. These innovations not only refresh the expression of ICH, breaking the age-related communication barriers, but also showcase the extraordinary wisdom of traditional and contemporary inheritors. Furthermore, they inject fresh energy into modern cultural life.

2.3. The Construction of "Theatrical Performative Narratives"

In the context of the all-media era, marked by the global dissemination of Western cultural entertainment and the expansion of pan-entertainment, promoting and preserving China's traditional culture has become a primary responsibility for Chinese cultural practitioners. Cultural confidence is the full recognition of and active engagement with the value of one's own culture by a nation, a state, and a political party. The 14th Five-Year Plan for Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection, issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in June 2021, further underscores the importance of safeguarding, inheriting, and promoting ICH as a critical component of China's outstanding traditional culture. It highlights ICH's role in preserving historical continuity, fostering cultural confidence, facilitating civilizational exchange, and building a socialist cultural powerhouse.

A central artistic pursuit for ICH communicators has been to enable audiences to viscerally experience and appreciate the beauty and allure of ICH. "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" achieves this by constructing "theatrical performative narratives" that innovate the staging of ICH projects and offer tangible, immersive scene-based expressions. By transforming ICH artifacts from abstract static displays into dynamic, life-oriented scenarios, the program renders them visible, tangible, and experiential. This performative approach transcends the traditional limitations of narration and static exhibitions. Instead, it brings cultural elements to life through emotionally engaging and captivating performances, embedding them within richer, more profound layers of meaning that resonate with contemporary audiences^[3].

3. Content Reconstruction: Breaking the Barriers of Dissemination

In the era of intelligent media, the diversification of communication agents has blurred the traditional roles of hosts. With the proliferation of AI hosts and the concept that "everyone has a microphone" and "everyone can be a host," the identity, role, and functional scope of traditional hosts must adapt and evolve in response to the changing times. The transformation of the communication landscape demands that hosts in cultural programs assume new roles, aligning with emerging trends and audience expectations.

For example, in *The China in Ancient Texts*, the roles of the male and female hosts are designed with multi-dimensional identities and perspectives. The male host, Sa Beining, acts as a "contemporary reader," participating in historical reenactments and providing a subjective narrative thread that connects the ancient texts. Meanwhile, the female host, Wang Jianing, collaborates with three experts in an interview format to interpret and summarize the texts, offering an objective lens to deepen the audience's understanding. This dual-role setup, with its varied perspectives, becomes a distinctive feature of the program.

Similarly, in the ICH cultural program "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage", the role of the host is redefined, breaking away from the conventional identity constraints and outcome-focused presentation of ICH projects. The hosts' identities are downplayed, emphasizing interactive participation. The program shifts its focus from merely showcasing the results of ICH projects to exploring their production processes, immersing the audience in the allure of traditional craftsmanship and the seamless fusion of ancient techniques with modern technology.

In stark contrast, traditional ICH showcase programs typically feature hosts with clearly defined roles: the "guide of program progression," the "controller of on-site rhythm," and the "conveyor of informational content." These roles are often isolated within the program's structure, leading to a generalized and rigid characterization of the host. However, in "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage", a dynamic exploration team is formed, comprising professional hosts, experts with extensive

knowledge, and seasoned performers. This setup transcends traditional role boundaries, transforming these individuals into "appreciators," "experiencers," "communicators," and "inheritors" of ICH projects. This reconfiguration diversifies the interpretation and expression of ICH, providing multi-dimensional and multi-layered perspectives that resonate emotionally and create value-based connections with audiences across different age groups and professions.

Through the decentralization of the host's role and the redefinition of their identity, the program establishes a coherent narrative logic: appreciation → experience → communication → inheritance. This structural transformation enriches the storytelling and expands the cultural appeal of ICH projects, fostering broader emotional engagement and cultural recognition among diverse audiences.

3.1. Appreciators of Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects

In this program, the "host team" transcends traditional functional roles and adopts the perspective of the audience, positioning themselves as "appreciators" of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects. Through seeking understanding, pausing to observe, reflecting, and marveling, the hosts express their thoughts and emotions from a first-person viewpoint, effectively reducing the "discount" in content transmission. By adopting the perspective of an appreciator, the program reshapes its communication pathways, fostering a closer connection with its audience.

For instance, during the segment on the Hulunbuir Grassland in Inner Mongolia, the stunning natural scenery combined with the unique performances of the cultural inheritors captivates the host team. Immersed in the experience, they convey their awe and admiration without the use of verbal narration. In a ten-minute showcase, the hosts refrain entirely from spoken output, instead relying on nonverbal cues to express emotions and connect with the audience. This approach emphasizes their role as appreciators, allowing the beauty and essence of the ICH project to resonate directly and authentically with viewers.

3.2. Experiencers of Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects

After appreciating the ICH projects, the "host team" transitions into the role of hands-on experiencers, providing audiences with an authentic sense of the tactile and sensory aspects of ICH traditions conveyed through "oral transmission and mental teaching." For example, in the silk production process, the hosts engage their visual, olfactory, and tactile senses to experience the intricate stages of silkworm cultivation, silk extraction, and reuse. This "behind-the-scenes" immersion highlights the arduous journey behind the "on-stage" presentation, satisfying the audience's curiosity and desire for an insider's perspective. By sharing their experiences as novices, the hosts articulate the inherent charm and learning enjoyment of ICH projects. This approach deepens the audience's understanding of the distinction between "knowing" and "experiencing," enhances program interactivity, and bolsters its credibility.

3.3. Communicators of Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects

During the experiential process, the hosts leverage their natural communication and stage management skills to guide ICH inheritors in sharing their stories and aspirations within a relaxed, conversational atmosphere. This interaction facilitates the dissemination of ICH values and ensures the continuity of cultural heritage, enriching the program with emotional resonance and fostering empathy among the audience.

3.4. Custodians of Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects

As the showcase concludes, the program integrates ICH elements with modern art and technology to create innovative performances and displays. This approach enables the audience to fully appreciate the Oriental aesthetic embedded in ICH, immersing them in the extraordinary craftsmanship and dynamic vitality of these traditions. At this stage, the hosts transform into cultural ambassadors, guardians, and inheritors of ICH, embodying its preservation and renewal. They lend their voices to the "silent relics of time," infusing ICH projects with contemporary artistic features that allow them to shine anew in the modern era. This reimagining breathes fresh life into ICH, ensuring its relevance and brilliance for future generations.

4. Technological Empowerment: Enhancing Communication Effectiveness

As intelligent technologies mature and find applications across various domains, modern technology has become a crucial tool for cultural programs to expand spatial and temporal perceptions. Each heritage project encompasses a rich narrative of "past and present," offering multiple layers of interpretation. By employing cross-temporal, multisensory, and interactive technological methods, heritage can be reimagined to extend public cognition and invite deeper exploration^[4].

In "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage", digital technologies significantly enhance communication effectiveness. Immersive audiovisual techniques such as giant light-and-shadow displays and fog-screen projections transform the program into a visual and auditory feast. These technologies illuminate ICH projects with the aesthetic brilliance of the modern era, allowing audiences to feel the "timeless vitality" of intangible cultural heritage in the contemporary world. They awaken unique cultural memories and celebrate the "highlight moments" of ICH.

For instance, silk-based innovations such as "silk bone screws" in medical technology, "silk hard drives" capable of storing biological and digital data, and "silk brain-computer interfaces" integrate traditional craftsmanship with cutting-edge advancements. The fusion of traditional Suzhou embroidery (Suxiu) with digital and human-computer interaction technologies results in creations like interactive "flower-and-butterfly magic," where a simple touch animates embroidered flowers to bloom and butterflies to dance. Similarly, during the demonstration of Yixing clay teapot crafting, AI performance animation and real-time rendering technologies showcase the intricate techniques that give rise to an infinite variety of forms, embodying the Chinese aesthetic spirit of functionality and harmony in diversity.

Performances like Embroidered Jiangnan vividly illustrate the evolution of Suzhou embroidery over millennia, from the dense stitches of the Song Dynasty to the elegant refinement of the Ming Dynasty and the lifelike artistry of the Qing Dynasty. Using 5G, 4K/8K, and AI technologies, the dance performance replaces needles and thread with the human body, bringing the beauty of "embroidered Jiangnan" to life. Similarly, Azure Resonance employs XR technology to dissolve spatial constraints, allowing dancers and celadon pottery to interact dynamically across imaginative settings, creating a visually stunning cross-dimensional experience.

By integrating diverse technological innovations, "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" amplifies the expressive power of ICH projects. Through digital empowerment, the program underscores the seamless connections between ICH and art, technology, and everyday life. It highlights the enduring legacy and infinite applications of ICH, enhancing the program's communication effectiveness and broadening the influence of ICH culture.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the success of "The China Within Intangible Cultural Heritage" lies in its deep roots in China's rich traditional culture and its focus on innovative contemporary expression. This foundation enables cross-boundary communication, transforming ICH projects from "nouns" into "verbs." Through its masterful content reconstruction, immersive interactive experiences, and dazzling technological empowerment, the program transforms passive spectators into active participants, vividly illustrating the dynamic dissemination and inheritance of ICH. Furthermore, it establishes a new cultural preservation model aligned with the process of Chinese-style modernization, paving the way for the sustainable development of ICH in the contemporary era.

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