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The Value, Current Challenges, and Pathways for Digital Dissemination of Southern Hubei Genealogies in the New Era

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Abstract: *In the context of the new era of digital transformation, the widespread application of digital technologies has opened up novel pathways for the preservation and revitalization of local genealogical documents such as those from southern Hubei. Based on the current state of surviving genealogical records in this region, this paper systematically explores their value, existing challenges, and potential solutions. The study identifies three core values of digital dissemination of southern Hubei genealogies: cultural heritage preservation, long-term conservation, and expanded outreach. However, current efforts still face practical obstacles including weak digital infrastructure, insufficient investment in funding and talent, and limited dissemination effectiveness. Accordingly, the research proposes strategies such as strengthening digital resource foundations, enhancing the efficiency of digital communication, and establishing a collaborative mechanism involving multiple stakeholders, aiming to provide reference for the protection, transmission, and innovative development of regional clan culture in southern Hubei.*

Keywords: *New Era; Southern Hubei Genealogies; Digital Dissemination; Implementation Pathways*

1. Introduction

On June 2, 2023, an important speech delivered at the symposium on cultural heritage and development emphasized that "continuing to promote cultural prosperity, building a strong cultural nation, and advancing modern Chinese civilization from a new starting point constitute our new cultural mission in the new era."[1] This significant statement has provided clear guidance for the protection, inheritance, and dissemination of local traditional cultures in the new era. With social development and changes within families, genealogical record management is facing growing challenges: the shrinking number of inheritors, the vulnerability of paper-based genealogies to damage, difficulties in retrieval and maintenance, among others—these issues have seriously hindered the preservation and study[2] of genealogies in southern Hubei. Applying digital technologies to the conservation and transmission of these genealogies offers multiple benefits. On one hand, by utilizing high-resolution scanning, image restoration, OCR, and other techniques, fragile paper genealogies can be converted into digital copies, enabling the creation of standardized digital resource libraries and reducing the risks of document loss and deterioration. On the other hand, leveraging new media platforms such as websites and short videos helps overcome geographical and generational barriers, vividly disseminating family narratives and family values, thus ensuring effective transmission of genealogical culture.

In recent years, research on the digital dissemination of cultural heritage in China has yielded rich results. For instance, scholars such as Han Shu have examined the current status and development[3] of digital communication for Chongqing's intangible cultural heritage to promote its preservation; Cheng Huawei explored strategies[4] for digitally disseminating excellent traditional Chinese culture; and Liu Li et al. analyzed the practical challenges encountered in the digital dissemination of red culture, proposing innovative[5] approaches to enhance its spread. However, studies specifically targeting genealogies—a particular type of folk document—especially those focusing on the digital dissemination of genealogies in southern Hubei (E'nan), remain relatively scarce. Based on this gap, this article aims to explore, from a communication studies perspective, the value of digital dissemination of E'nan genealogies, analyze their real-world challenges through case studies, and propose corresponding implementation pathways, thereby offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for better promoting, celebrating, and preserving E'nan genealogies.

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2. The Value of Digital Dissemination of Genealogies in Southern Hubei in the New Era

2.1 Cultural Heritage Value

As a carrier of social and collective memory, genealogies preserve family history, strengthen ethnic cohesion, and sustain familial spirit through their ritualistic formats and selectively curated[6] content. The genealogies from southern Hubei encapsulate the operational logic of family organizations, the ethical order of rural society, and the collective memory of local communities over centuries, making them indispensable primary sources for regional studies in social history, demography, folklore, and even dialectology. Digitizing and disseminating these genealogies not only enables researchers, cultural enthusiasts, and descendants to access genealogical information remotely via the internet—greatly lowering barriers to use—but also opens opportunities to develop derivative content such as local education and cultural tourism, thereby building a distinctive digital cultural brand for southern Hubei and enhancing its regional cultural influence.

2.2 Permanent Protection Value

Many genealogical records from southern Hubei are scattered across rural old houses, ancestral halls, and even private households. Lacking professional storage facilities with constant temperature and humidity control, as well as fireproofing and pest prevention measures, these documents commonly suffer from severe issues such as insect damage, mold, brittleness, and fading ink. By employing high-precision scanning, digital image restoration, and artificial intelligence-assisted reconstruction, the original appearance of these genealogies can be fully and faithfully preserved in digital form. Digital information is unaffected by physical factors like temperature, humidity, insects, or mold; as long as the technological storage media continue to evolve and migrate, permanent preservation becomes theoretically possible. As some scholars have pointed out, digitization is not merely a simple process of "photographing and archiving," but rather a fundamental transformation of cultural heritage from "physical existence" to "digital existence." The establishment of the digital repository for southern Hubei genealogies provides a sustainable medium for the long-term preservation of genealogical literature.

2.3 Communication and Expansion Value

The traditional genealogical culture of southern Hubei has long relied on oral transmission, family record-keeping, and ancestral temple rituals for dissemination. However, population mobility and low youth engagement have led to an intergenerational gap in preserving this heritage. Relying solely on paper records and elders' memories risks the eventual decline of this cultural tradition. Digital dissemination offers a promising solution. First, new media platforms boast large user bases, rapid information spread, and precise algorithmic recommendations. By transforming compelling content from southern Hubei genealogies into audiovisual and narrative formats—such as creating a series of short videos titled "Stories of Southern Hubei Surname Migrations"—we can attract younger audiences through formats they enjoy, effectively bridging the generational divide. Second, technologies like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) enable immersive experiences. For instance, users could scan ancestral portraits in their family records with a smartphone's AR function to view 3D animated biographies, or wear VR headsets to virtually enter an ancestral hall and experience the solemn atmosphere of ancestral worship. Such sensory immersion significantly enhances cultural resonance. Third, digital dissemination strengthens local cultural identity and supports rural revitalization. Many traditional villages in southern Hubei are now promoting cultural tourism integration. Leveraging digitized genealogical resources, initiatives such as installing QR code signs at village entrances that allow visitors to listen to "family stories," hosting digital genealogy exhibitions, and organizing family values festivals can not only increase the visibility and influence of genealogical culture but also inject cultural momentum into local socioeconomic development.

3. The Practical Challenges of Digital Dissemination of Southern Hubei Genealogies in the New Era

3.1 Weak Digital Foundation

The prerequisite for digital dissemination is the development of high-quality digital resources, yet the digitization of genealogies in southern Hubei remains relatively weak at this foundational stage. First,

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some of these genealogies are extremely ancient and in poor condition, posing serious technical challenges for digital collection. Many extant genealogies in southern Hubei show signs of deteriorated paper, smudged ink, insect damage, missing characters, or pages stuck together. Conventional flatbed scanners cannot perform non-invasive scanning effectively, requiring instead non-contact ancient book scanners or multispectral imaging technology for page-by-page capture—methods that involve high equipment costs and long operational cycles. Second, there is a lack of unified digital standards and guidelines. Currently, digitization efforts in southern Hubei are mostly initiated independently by family associations, local archives, or cultural enthusiasts, resulting in fragmented operations. Differences exist across institutions in aspects such as scanning resolution, storage formats, metadata recording rules, and naming conventions. This not only hinders resource integration and sharing but also impedes future cross-database retrieval, knowledge linking, and data mining.

3.2 Insufficient investment in funds and talent

Digital dissemination is a capital- and technology-intensive endeavor, requiring continuous investment in equipment procurement, system development, and long-term operation and maintenance. However, digitalization of genealogical records in southern Hubei faces evident funding shortages. On one hand, local government budgets for cultural heritage preservation are inherently limited, with funds typically prioritized toward visible projects such as the restoration of protected sites or archaeological excavations, leaving insufficient support for digitizing folk documents like genealogies. On the other hand, genealogy digitization rarely generates direct economic returns in the short term, discouraging private investors and market forces from participating. As a result, many digitization projects rely solely on scattered research grants or self-raised family funds, leading to small-scale initiatives with poor sustainability. Alongside financial constraints comes a shortage of multidisciplinary talent. Genealogy digitization involves more than mere scanning and archiving; it demands professionals who possess not only expertise in philology, history, and folklore related to genealogical texts but also cross-disciplinary technical skills in digital collection, image processing, and database construction. Currently, in southern Hubei, there are very few individuals who are both familiar with local family records and proficient in digital technologies. This structural talent gap severely hinders the professionalization and sustainability of digital dissemination efforts.

3.3 Limited Communication Effect

The goal of digital dissemination is to widely circulate and deeply embed the genealogies of southern Hubei (E'nan) into public consciousness, yet current practices in their dissemination remain weak. In terms of content production, most existing digital outputs are still at a rudimentary stage—primarily involving digitized scans or PDFs of original documents. Many local cultural websites or digital family tree platforms rely heavily on scanned images or PDF files, generally lacking essential introductions and annotations. As a result, non-specialist audiences often find the materials difficult to understand and thus reluctant to engage. Regarding distribution channels, digital outreach for E'nan genealogies still mainly relies on traditional websites and academic databases, while mainstream social media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Bilibili have not been fully utilized. Although some official accounts or video channels have been established, they suffer from low update frequency and monotonous content formats. From the perspective of audience research, the digital dissemination of E'nan genealogies lacks precision in understanding user needs. Researchers require high-resolution full-text versions and searchable content; descendants are more interested in ancestral stories and family lineages; whereas general visitors prefer concise narratives and visually engaging experiences. However, current dissemination efforts mostly adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, resulting in poor alignment between content and audience, and notably insufficient user engagement and interactive experience. As scholars like Tan Guoxin have pointed out, existing methods of cultural heritage digital communication tend toward a "one-size-fits-all" model, lacking diversity[7] and variety in dissemination formats.

4. Pathways to Digital Dissemination of Southern Hubei Genealogies in the New Era

4.1 Strengthen the foundation of digital resources

Resource development is the foundation of digital dissemination, and it is essential to ensure the quality and sustainability of digital outcomes from the outset. First, establish unified digital technology standards and specifications. It is recommended to refer to industry standards such as the "Technical

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Specifications for Digitalization of Ancient Texts," and develop a consistent standard tailored to the unique characteristics of E'nan genealogical records, laying the groundwork for future resource integration, cross-database retrieval, and data mining. Second, focus on digitizing and restoring high-challenge genealogies. For poorly preserved genealogies, “researchers and conservators” use professional equipment such as non-contact scanners to capture each page individually, minimizing secondary damage. For severely damaged or incomplete pages with missing characters, they employ digital image restoration techniques supplemented by manual verification by expert conservators. Third, build a digital resource repository for E'nan genealogies. The E'nan Cultural Research Center has already established an integrated "E'nan Genealogy Digital Resource Repository" that supports storage, management, retrieval, and presentation. The repository should also feature tiered access controls: making genealogy catalogs, prefaces, and selected family precepts publicly accessible; providing researchers with high-resolution full-text images and structured data; and offering descendants dedicated lineage search tools and personalized family spaces.

4.2 Enhancing the Effectiveness of Digital Communication

To enhance the digital dissemination efficiency of E'nan genealogical records, it is essential to shift the communication logic—from a resource-centered, top-down approach to a user-demand-driven, precision-based model. First, transform content into lightweight, narrative-rich, and context-specific formats. We extract culturally valuable materials from E'nan genealogical documents—such as clan migration histories, ancestral achievements, family precepts, and anecdotal stories of familial interactions—and convert them into short videos and illustrated posts. Second, we establish a diversified and sustained multimedia dissemination network. We develop tiered operational strategies tailored to different platforms: WeChat official accounts can feature dedicated cultural columns that regularly share E'nan clan stories, family values, and lineage-tracing information, cultivating a stable audience; video platforms like Douyin and Bilibili can focus on youth-oriented storytelling through cultural short videos and digital work documentaries, resonating with younger audiences’ aesthetic preferences. Third, we develop immersive and participatory digital products. Targeting young audiences and cultural tourism contexts, we integrate digital technologies such as VR and AR to expand communication formats and create interactive, experiential digital spaces for E'nan clan culture. Through products like VR-reconstructed ancestral halls, AR animated character stories, and online virtual clan hall mini-programs, break the limitations of traditional one-way viewing of E'nan genealogies, enabling audiences to actively engage in constructing cultural scenarios and thereby strengthening their cultural identity and emotional connection.

4.3 Establishing a Collaborative Mechanism among Multiple Stakeholders

The core challenge in the digital dissemination of E'nan genealogical records lies in the lack of stable collaboration among resources, stakeholders, and distribution platforms. Genealogical documents are scattered across private collections, archives, libraries, and research institutions, with digitization efforts carried out independently, resulting in inconsistent processing standards and fragmented platforms that hinder long-term dissemination effectiveness. To address this, a diversified collaborative system should be established along the entire communication process. First, stakeholder collaboration is essential. Local cultural authorities should take the lead in coordinating with local chronicle institutions, archives, universities, ancestral associations, and new media platforms to clarify roles and responsibilities. Archives would manage document preservation and metadata cataloging; universities would handle textual interpretation and content review; ancestral organizations would collect private genealogies, oral histories, and audiovisual materials; while media outlets would focus on content transformation and operation, integrating resource collection, digital processing, content production, and platform publishing into a seamless chain. Second, content and channel coordination must be strengthened. A unified resource directory and tiered processing standards should be established, producing three types of outputs—academic, family-oriented, and public editions—while sharing foundational resources and preserving the authenticity of original documents. Based on thematic databases, official accounts can deliver regular content updates, short-video platforms can create youth-oriented material, and integration with ancestral halls and cultural tourism festivals can achieve online-offline synergy. Unified materials and cross-platform traffic sharing will help establish sustainable operational mechanisms. Third, coordinated support mechanisms are required. Public cultural projects should ensure stable funding, joint training programs should cultivate interdisciplinary talent in genealogy, digital technology, and communication, and multi-dimensional evaluation indicators should assess outcomes in terms of resource accessibility, academic utilization, public engagement, and cultural tourism conversion. This

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integrated mechanism can transform scattered genealogies into shared regional cultural assets, shifting the dissemination model from single-institution dominance to multi-party collaboration and from resource-driven to user-centered approaches, thereby promoting the sustainable transmission of E'nan genealogical culture.

5. Conclusion

The genealogies of southern Hubei carry unique regional cultural information and serve as valuable folk documents for studying the social history and folk culture of the region. Traditional paper-based genealogies, preserved privately by families, face sustainability challenges such as paper degradation, document loss, and a generational gap in cultural understanding among younger generations. Promoting their digital preservation and dissemination is thus an urgent need for safeguarding local cultural heritage. This article systematically examines the value, current challenges, and implementation pathways of digitizing and disseminating southern Hubei genealogies. Research shows that digitization can transform genealogies from private family collections into public resources, ensure long-term preservation of documents, overcome spatial and temporal limitations, and help bridge intergenerational gaps in clan cultural transmission. However, this study has limitations, including a limited research scope and lack of quantitative assessment on dissemination effectiveness. Future work could leverage knowledge graph technologies to conduct cross-regional comparative studies, explore integration paths between digital genealogies and cultural tourism, and promote the dynamic inheritance of local traditional cultures.

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