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How to "Understand" After "Seeing": A Study on ASEAN Youth's Cultural Cognition of Digital Communication Content of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: The international dissemination of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has shifted from "cultural export" to meaning negotiation centered on audience understanding; being seen does not equate to being understood. This paper takes the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces and the Yi ethnic group's Haicaiqiang opera in Yunnan, China, as examples to examine ASEAN youth's perception of digital content related to Honghe ICH from a decoding perspective. It constructs a chain of "contact—attention—understanding—explanation—identification—sharing," comparing the effects of encyclopedic, story-based, and character-narrative styles. The results show that initial attention is focused on the landscape and performance, with significant loss of deeper meaning, resulting in two typical decoding phenomena: "landscape-based understanding" and "performance-based understanding." Character-narrative style shows significantly higher willingness to understand and share than encyclopedic style, while story-based style retains the best memory. The study argues that the barrier to dissemination lies not in language conversion but in the loss during the encoding and decoding of cultural meaning; cultural proximity does not necessarily lead to complete understanding. The dissemination of Honghe ICH should shift from "showing what the culture is" to "explaining why the culture is the way it is," and establish a "middle layer" of cross-cultural understanding through narrators with cultural mediation functions and contextualized expressions.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage; ASEAN youth; Intercultural communication

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1. Research background

In recent years, digital media has become an important channel for intangible cultural heritage to reach an international audience. Traditional dissemination of intangible cultural heritage relies heavily on on-site demonstrations, festivals, museums, and oral transmission. Short videos, digital images, and social media,

however, allow intangible cultural heritage to transcend its original geographical boundaries, enabling it to be viewed, shared, and reinterpreted on a larger scale. Related research shows that digital technology can expand the visibility of intangible cultural heritage, but the relationship between "visibility" and "understandability" is not simply a causal one. This issue is particularly prominent in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage with strong local and ethnic characteristics. The Honghe Hani Rice Terraces in Yunnan, China, are a typical example. UNESCO has listed them as a World Heritage Site, emphasizing that they are not merely an agricultural landscape, but a complex cultural landscape composed of forests, water sources, terraces, villages, and socio-economic and religious systems. Their value also lies in the long-established agricultural, water resource management, and community organization systems. However, if the Hani Rice Terraces were made into a one-minute international dissemination video, overseas audiences would often first see the layers upon layers of terraces, mountain villages, and spectacular natural scenery. At this point, a question worth pursuing arises: when the audience says "beautiful rice terraces at that time," how much of the "Hani Rice Terraces" did he actually understand? Similar questions exist regarding the dissemination of Haicaiqiang opera. For Chinese audiences, Haicaiqiang might be associated with ethnic musical traditions, ethnic history, local life, and cultural heritage; but for overseas youth lacking relevant cultural background, it might first be understood as a "Chinese folk song" with a unique timbre. Therefore, this study does not aim to examine "whether ASEAN youth like Honghe intangible cultural heritage," but rather to further explore three deeper questions: First, what did they first notice? Second, what did they understand? Third, what did they omit, transform, or even misinterpret during the process of understanding?

2. Literature review

2.1. Digital dissemination of intangible cultural heritage: From "protection" to "being seen"

Research on the digitalization of intangible cultural heritage has been accumulated in China for a long time. Huang Yonglin and Tan Guoxin proposed a technical framework for digital protection and development earlier [1]; Ma Xiaona et al. systematically sorted out the application of digitalization in recording, display, and dissemination [2]; Cui Hong pointed out in her investigation of the intangible cultural heritage of the Hani ethnic group in Yunnan that the traditional "father-to-son" and "oral and physical teaching" inheritance chain is loosening, and digitalization has become a remedial means [3]. At the international level, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 puts living heritage at the core of protection [4]; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminded that heritageification itself is a kind of "meta-cultural production," and the list, performance, and dissemination will transform living practices into objects that can be displayed [5]. After the rise of short videos, research has shifted to platform content: Chai Yue and Wang Yiting found that visual spectacle-type intangible cultural heritage content spreads the most widely on TikTok [6]; Zhou Xuan and Wang Wenbin discussed narrative mode and discourse system [7]; Zhang Wenyuan and Luo Zheng's analysis of Douyin comments showed that user participation is mainly based on shallow interactions such as likes and collections, and there is little discussion of cultural connotations in the comments [8]. Therefore, most research dimensions start from the number of views and likes, assuming that dissemination means arrival and arrival means influence. Few scholars have studied the audience's performance in the decoding stage, which has become the starting point of this study.

2.2. Cross-cultural audience perception: Understanding how it happens and how it shifts

Audience studies tradition provides direct theoretical resources for "understanding." Hall's encoding/decoding model points out that meaning does not necessarily correspond between the encoding and decoding ends, and audiences may engage in negotiation or even adversarial reading depending on their cultural position [9]; Ang's study of the audience of Dallas further shows that interpretation often deviates from the expectations of the text designer [10]. At the cognitive level, Bartlett's schema theory explains that understanding is to assimilate new information using existing experience frameworks. ASEAN youth's understanding of Honghe intangible cultural heritage often uses local schemas such as "mountain agriculture" and "ethnic folk songs" to frame unfamiliar objects. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar study suggests that composition, shot size, and color themselves carry meaning tendencies, and landscape-oriented shots will strengthen the framework of "landscape" rather than "livelihood" [11]. In cross-cultural communication research, Straubhaar's theory of cultural proximity points out that audiences tend to choose content that is similar to their own culture [12]; Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions explains that systematic differences in value orientation will affect the audience's acceptance of discourses such as "protection" and "inheritance" [13]. Chinese studies also point to superficial cognition: Liu Xinyu et al.'s survey of Japanese youth showed that 58.9% of respondents "did not know much" about traditional Chinese culture [14]; Xie Jun's study of ASEAN students in Guangxi vocational colleges found that Vietnamese and Cambodian students had a stronger sense of identity with Chinese culture due to cultural similarity [15]. However, cultural proximity is a double-edged sword: similar schemas lower the cognitive threshold and help understanding, but may also cause "familiarity misunderstanding." Proximity is not the same as understanding, and this distinction constitutes the basic position of this analysis.

2.3 Analysis framework

Based on this, this study constructs a six-stage analytical framework: exposure (whether the content is seen) — attention (what elements attract the audience) — understanding (what the audience perceives this intangible cultural heritage as) — interpretation (how the audience integrates it into their own cultural experience) — identification (whether the audience finds it valuable) — sharing (whether the audience is willing to like, forward, or recommend it). Among these, "understanding — interpretation" is the core stage. The framework draws on the focus of audience reception research on "meaning production," shifting the focus from the communication effect back to the audience's cognitive process.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research question

Based on the above discussion, this paper proposes four research questions:

RQ1: When ASEAN youth watch digital content about Honghe's intangible cultural heritage, what information elements should they pay attention to first?

RQ2: To what extent do they understand the cultural significance of the Hani Rice Terraces and the Haicai Opera?

RQ3: What cultural information are ASEAN youth most likely to exhibit "spectacular" and "performative" tendencies?

RQ4: Are there differences in understanding, memorization, and sharing among the three expression

methods: encyclopedic, story-based, and biographical?

3.2. Sample

This study employed a small-sample exploratory cross-cultural audience experiment to examine the impact of different digital communication narrative styles on ASEAN youth's understanding of the Honghe Hani rice terrace culture and the Haicai opera. The study included 15 Vietnamese students aged 19–21 studying at Chinese universities, randomly divided into three experimental groups of 5 students each: encyclopedic, story-based, and character-narrative-based. Before the experiment, participants' age, gender, Chinese language proficiency, length of stay in China, experience visiting Yunnan, and previous exposure to Chinese intangible cultural heritage were recorded. Each of the three groups viewed digital communication materials for approximately 90 seconds, sharing the same theme but differing in narrative structure. Post-experiment, four dimensions were measured: attention, cultural understanding, delayed memory, and willingness to communicate. Cultural understanding consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions and 5 open-ended questions, with a delayed test administered one week later. Willingness to communicate was measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Due to the small sample size, this study primarily aimed to identify potential communication mechanisms and variable relationships; the results should be interpreted as exploratory evidence.

3.3. Survey procedures and data analysis

The survey was conducted in three batches. Participants first watched a video on one theme and completed a questionnaire (about 12 minutes). After a 5-minute break, they watched another theme and took the test again. The order of the themes was balanced among the participants. After completing the questionnaire, 3 people were randomly selected from each group (9 people in total) to receive a semi-structured interview for about 10 minutes. The data measurement and analysis included four parts: (1) First attention elements, single choice: visual landscape, music sound, ethnic costume, personal stories, daily life, cultural labels; (2) Accuracy of understanding, 10 questions for each theme (5 questions each for terraced fields and Hai Cai Qiang), taking into account both surface recognition and deep meaning, such as "Are terraced fields primarily a landscape or a still-operating production system?" and "In what situations is Hai Cai Qiang usually sung?," with a full score of 10 points; (3) Memory retention, free recall of 3 core facts, with two coders scoring independently (Cohen's κ=0.86); (4) Willingness to share and willingness to continue to learn, 3 questions each, 5-point Likert scale, with α of 0.84 and 0.87 respectively. Data were compared post hoc with Bonferroni correction using one-way ANOVA at a significance level of 0.05.

4. Results

4.1. Note: Landscape and performance come first

62.7% of the participants listed "visual landscape" or "musical sound" as the primary element of attention, while "character story" (15.1%) and "daily life" (3.2%) combined accounted for less than 20%. There was no significant difference in the distribution of attention among the three groups (χ^2=4.31, P=0.83), indicating that "what is seen first" is mainly determined by the form of the content.

4.2. Understanding: Superficial accessibility, deep-seated loss

The accuracy of comprehension differed significantly among the three groups (F(2,123)=8.02, p=0.001,

η^2=0.12): the character narration group had the highest accuracy (M=6.71, SD=1.52), followed by the story group (M=6.05, SD=1.71), and the encyclopedia group had the lowest accuracy (M=5.26, SD=1.83); the differences between the character narration group and the encyclopedia group, and between the story group and the encyclopedia group were significant (P<0.01), while the differences between the first two groups were not significant (P=0.18). There was a significant difference in accuracy between surface-level and deeper-level questions: 91.3% answered "terraced fields are located in the mountainous areas of Yunnan Province, China"; 52.4% answered "terraced fields are still operating agricultural production systems"; and 47.6% answered, "Haicaiqiang opera serves a social function in the form of male-female duet singing." Regarding the concept of "intangible cultural heritage" itself, 63.5% of the participants understood it as "traditional or ancient things in China," while only 28.6% could explain its meaning as "needing protection and living transmission."

4.3. Memory: Stories are the most reliable

Significant differences were found in memory retention among the three groups (F(2,123)=6.51, P=0.002): the story group (M=2.38, SD=0.63) had significantly higher retention than the character recounting group (M=2.05, SD=0.71) and the encyclopedia group (M=1.76, SD=0.82). The story group recalled more specific details, such as "a family's autumn harvest" and "wood carving of water division"; the encyclopedia group mostly relied on labels such as "Yunnan" and "World Heritage."

4.4. Willpower: The most moving aspect is the character's storytelling

The willingness to share differed significantly among the three groups (F(2,123)=7.21, P=0.001): the person-narration group (M=3.87, SD=0.79) was significantly higher than the story group (M=3.42, SD=0.85) and the encyclopedia group (M=3.11, SD=0.90), as shown in **Table 1**. The willingness to continue learning followed the same order (M=3.95, 3.60, 3.28; F(2,123)=6.89, P=0.001). During interviews, several participants in the person-narration group stated that "what he said felt like my own experience when I first arrived in China," a sense of identification absent in the encyclopedia group.

Table 1. Performance of the three groups on four indicators (M ± SD)

Index	Encyclopedic format (n= 5)	Story-based (n= 5)	Narrative style (n= 5)	F(2,123)	P
Accuracy of comprehension (0-10 points)	5.26±1.83	6.05±1.71	6.71±1.52	8.02	0.001
Memory retention (0-3 points)	1.76±0.82	2.38±0.63	2.05±0.71	6.51	0.002
Willingness to share (1-5 points)	3.11±0.90	3.42±0.85	3.87±0.79	7.21	0.001
Further inquiries about willingness (1-5 points)	3.28±0.91	3.60±0.86	3.95±0.74	6.89	0.001

Note: F-values are the results of one-way ANOVA; Bonferroni correction was used for post-hoc comparisons

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1. First understanding of "landscape-performance"

ASEAN youths' first understanding of Honghe intangible cultural heritage generally stays at the level of landscape and performance: 62.7% of their first attention is directed at the landscape and sound, and the understanding rate of the deeper meaning is less than 60%. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's meta-cultural production

perspective can explain this result: after the living tradition is transformed into digital performance, the form that can be displayed (terraced field images, Haicaiqiang singing) naturally takes precedence over the meaning that cannot be displayed (community relations, production mode) [5]. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar analysis shows that the aerial photography of the terraced fields in the distance and the stage-like singing shots themselves guide the audience to see it as a landscape [11].

5.2. The difficulty lies in the transformation of cultural meaning, rather than in language translation

The results of the three sets of data are consistent: surface information is almost unimpeded, but deep meaning is lost in large quantities. Hall's encoding/decoding model points out this gap — "intangible cultural heritage," "protection," and "inheritance" are value discourses at the encoding end, and the decoding end lacks a corresponding cultural position to receive them [9]. The most typical evidence is the concept of "intangible cultural heritage" itself: the value premise of "why protect it" has hardly entered the decoding framework. International communication research has long focused on translation and subtitles, but this study suggests that translation solves the problem of "literal understanding," while the transformation of meaning solves the problem of "why it is worthwhile."

5.3. The double-edged sword of cultural proximity

National differences align with Straubhaar's theory of cultural proximity: Vietnamese participants who share experience in mountain rice cultivation are more likely to understand the agricultural significance of terraced fields [12]. However, proximity does not equal understanding—they also categorize the Hai Cai tune as a "folk song." Bartlett's schema theory provides a mechanistic explanation: successful assimilation leads to "understanding," but assimilation may also smooth out differences. This finding corroborates Xie Jun's observations and also serves as a reminder that cultural proximity can lead to "understanding" [15]. The depth of verification is required.

5.4. Division of labor in expression and "value misalignment"

Each of the three modes of expression has its strengths: character-based storytelling is the best for understanding and sharing, storytelling is the best for memorization, and encyclopedic information is the most complete but has the weakest emotional engagement. Character-based storytelling provides a "relational position"—the storyteller and the audience share the experience of being outsiders, making it easy to empathize; stories provide a plot structure that can be recounted. Behind this is a misalignment of values: inheritors care about whether the culture is completely passed down, the audience cares about "why I should know it," and the platform cares about staying and interacting. When the content first answers "What does it have to do with me?" (character-based storytelling group), the willingness to share is significantly higher; when the content only answers "What is it?" (encyclopedic group), both understanding and willingness are at their lowest. Therefore, the international dissemination of Honghe intangible cultural heritage should not continue to "translate one set of content into different languages" but should instead be narrated in layers according to the audience's cultural experience: for the Vietnamese and Lao audiences who share the experience of mountain agriculture, highlight agricultural wisdom; for the audiences in Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia who are further away, start with universal human experience; at the same time, establish an "audience understanding feedback mechanism," changing the standard for the effect of "spreading out" to

"how much is understood."

6. Research conclusions

This paper focuses on the cross-cultural understanding of Honghe intangible cultural heritage (ICH) digital content among ASEAN (Vietnam) youth. It proposes a cognitive framework of "contact—attention—understanding—interpretation—identification—sharing," and compares visual and auditory ICH through two case studies: the Hani Rice Terraces and the Haicai Opera. First, the digital dissemination of Honghe ICH exhibits a phenomenon where "visibility outweighs comprehensibility." The Hani Rice Terraces initially enter the audience's perception as a landscape, and the Haicai Opera as a sound and performance. This does not signify a failure of dissemination, but rather illustrates that visual and auditory symbols can only complete the first step in cross-cultural communication. Second, the core difficulty in cross-cultural communication lies not in simple language conversion, but in the conversion of cultural meaning. The translation of "ICH" is merely a superficial issue; the key lies in whether the audience can understand why a particular cultural practice possesses historical, community, and cultural identity significance. Third, cultural proximity has a two-way effect. Similar agricultural, village, and life experiences can provide ASEAN youth with an entry point for understanding, but may also lead them to substitute their own cultural experiences for a specific understanding of Chinese local culture. Therefore, dissemination needs to simultaneously present both "similarities" and "irreplaceable cultural differences." Fourth, the use of personification and contextualization in expression deserves further attention. Communicators should not merely tell overseas audiences "this is Chinese intangible cultural heritage," but rather let them see "who uses it," "why it is needed," and "how it enters daily life." Fifth, this article further proposes a more operational perspective: what is truly needed for the international dissemination of intangible cultural heritage is not a one-way "output mechanism," but rather an "understanding feedback mechanism." Communicators should understand where audiences linger, where misunderstandings arise, and which cultural meanings are lost in media translation. Only by re-inputting audience feedback into the content production process can a cycle of "encoding—dissemination—decoding—feedback—re-encoding" be formed.

This study still has the following limitations: First, the research subjects are mainly Vietnamese university students in China, whose education level and digital media usage ability are relatively high, and their cultural cognition cannot directly represent all ASEAN social groups; second, the experiment mainly focuses on short videos and digital content, and has not fully considered the changes in cultural cognition formed by long-term contact; third, there are significant differences among ASEAN countries in terms of language, religion, ethnicity, and media use, and the sample needs to be expanded. Future research can be advanced in the following directions: First, expand the sample and conduct cross-border comparisons with countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia; second, deepen the research on "cultural intermediaries." Narrative communication changes the path for cultural meaning to enter the audience's cognitive system. Further comparisons can be made of three models: "narrative by local inheritors," "narrative by Chinese youth," and "narrative by ASEAN students," to answer the fundamental question of who should narrate culture in cross-cultural communication.

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