

Promoting Intangible Cultural Heritage to Promote Identity: Insights from the Perceptions of the Generation Z on Southern Shaanxi Folk Songs of China

Liu GuangChao^{1,2}, Lee Yok Fee^{1,3}, Ratna Roshida Ab. Razak¹,
Arfah Ab. Majid¹

¹Department of Government and Civilization Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Putra University, Malaysia, Selangor, 43400, Malaysia, ²School of Education, Ankang College, Ankang, 725000, China

³Email: leeyokfee@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

The Southern Shaanxi folk songs represent a crucial element of China's intangible cultural heritage, deeply rooted in regional traditions and collective memory. However, with the rapid advance of modernization and globalization, these folk songs encounter significant barriers to effective transmission and preservation. This research investigates how the Generation Z, as digital natives with unique cultural consumption behaviors, engages with Southern Shaanxi folk songs through three primary pathways: the education system, community cultural activities, and digital media platforms. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on Hanzhong and Ankang, regions known for their rich tradition of Southern Shaanxi folk songs. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and case analysis to explore how the Generation Z engages with folk songs and their perceptions of current transmission strategies. The study reveals significant limitations in the three primary pathways of folk song dissemination. The education system emphasizes theoretical knowledge but lacks experiential and interactive elements, limiting students' engagement and cultural identity. Community cultural activities are traditional in format and fail to attract active participation from younger generations, particularly due to the lack of inter-generational interaction. Digital media, while expanding visibility, focuses excessively on entertainment, thereby diluting the cultural depth of the Southern Shaanxi folk songs. To address these challenges, the study proposes targeted strategies: integrating immersive and participatory teaching methods into educational settings, designing interactive community events to enhance inter-generational engagement, and developing digital media content that combines cultural depth with contemporary formats preferred by the Generation Z.

Keywords: Southern Shaanxi Folk Songs, Generation Z, Cultural Identity, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Digital Media Communication

Introduction

In the era of globalization and modernization, it has become a general consensus that the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage undoubtedly face many serious challenges. Around the world, traditional folk music, as an important part of ICH, not only carries deep cultural memories, but has also been significantly affected by these processes, resulting in the loss of its traditional practices (Kuang & Zheng, 2021), the marginalization of its cultural forms, and the reduction of intergenerational transmission (Gao, 2023). These challenges highlight the urgent need to explore sustainable methods of cultural preservation that resonate with contemporary audiences, especially the younger generation (Cen et al., 2024).

In China, the folk songs of Southern Shaanxi, which were inscribed on the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006, exemplify the complexity of preserving traditional music in a rapidly changing environment (Guo, 2020). As a cultural carrier, the Southern Shaanxi folk songs encapsulate the regional customs, spiritual pursuits, and aesthetic expressions of local labor communities (Zhao & Yu, 2017). However, these folk songs face a decline in the ecological communication environment due to rural population migration, the aging of the inheritors, and the dominance of modern forms of entertainment such as popular music (Wang & Thotham, 2024). The singing repertoire has declined dramatically; according to the Chinese Music Yearbook (2018), the original repertoire of the Southern Shaanxi folk songs numbered more than 10,000, while the current widely sung repertoire is less than 100, a phenomenon that highlights the urgency of cultural preservation.

The Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2009) has grown up with digital technology, offering new possibilities for the preservation and dissemination of the Southern Shaanxi folk songs (Rothman, 2016). This group is exposed to traditional culture through digital platforms such as TikTok and Kwai, favoring content that is visually appealing, interactive, and entertaining (Song & Song, 2024). However, this digital communication tends to emphasize entertainment over cultural depth, which raises the question of how to utilize these platforms to enhance Generation Z's cultural identification with southern Shaanxi folk songs and promote sustainable dissemination.

To systematically explore the interaction between the Generation Z and the Southern Shaanxi folk songs, this study employs two core theoretical perspectives: cultural identity theory and digital media theory. These two frameworks provide complementary insights for understanding the dynamics of cultural preservation and dissemination in the digital age.

According to Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity, cultural identity is a dynamic process of development, influenced by external forces such as globalization, modernization, and technological progress. Hall states that cultural identity involves not only the inheritance of traditions but also the reconstruction of new contexts. This theory provides an analytical framework for this study to explore how the Generation Z redefines its cultural identity between tradition and modernity through exposure to the Southern Shaanxi folk songs. As a regional cultural vehicle, the Southern Shaanxi folk songs have manifested

themselves as an important tool for emotional expression and intergenerational bonding, as well as carrying social values and collective memories in education, community, and digital platforms. However, with the ecological changes brought about by modernization and the changes in transmission methods, how to enhance the cultural identity of the Generation Z through effective transmission pathways has become a key topic of this study.

In addition, this study explores the role of digital media platforms in the preservation and dissemination of folk songs in the Southern Shaanxi based on Henry Jenkins' participatory culture framework. Jenkins emphasizes that interactive and user-generated content enables audiences to actively participate in the dissemination of cultural materials. For the Generation Z, platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou offer the possibility of broad access to culture, but their entertainment-oriented nature often diminishes the depth of cultural content. This theoretical framework helps this study analyze the strengths and weaknesses of digital media in the dissemination of folk songs in southern Shaanxi and explores how to balance cultural authenticity and modern media forms by optimizing content strategies so as to enhance Generation Z's interest in and identification with traditional culture.

In the context of globalization and modernization, the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage is not only about the maintenance of cultural diversity (Kowalska, 2024) but also the key to shaping the cultural identity of the younger generation. As an important intangible cultural heritage in China, southern Shaanxi folk songs carry rich local cultural memories and emotional expressions (Yi, 2023), but their transmission is facing serious challenges. By exploring how Generation Z perceives and participates in southern Shaanxi folk songs, this study aims to propose practical communication strategies to enhance the younger generation's sense of cultural identity. The results of the study will provide useful guidance for educators, community organizers, and digital media platforms to help them engage the active participation of the younger generation while maintaining cultural depth. In this way, this study not only contributes to the sustainable transmission of folk songs in southern Shaanxi but also provides lessons that can be drawn from the preservation and dissemination of other intangible cultural heritage.

Review of Literature

In recent decades, the preservation and transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), such as folk songs in southern Shaanxi, has attracted much academic attention. However, the challenge of adapting these traditions to modern environments, especially to appeal to younger generations like the Generation Z, has still not been adequately addressed. This review critically examines existing research on ICH promotion, focusing on the interplay between cultural identity, means of transmission, and inter-generational participation.

Global Practices in the Communication of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Internationally, innovative approaches have been successful in combining elements of traditional culture with contemporary media to engage young audiences. For example, Chae's (2021) study noted that South Korea's incorporation of traditional music into K-pop created a strong synergy between tradition and modernity, greatly increasing young people's engagement with traditional culture. For example, K-pop music videos are used as a teaching tool that effectively combines traditional Korean aesthetics with modern cultural expressions. This combination not only improved students' understanding of the traditional art form but

also motivated them to actively participate in K-pop-related research, demonstrating the younger generation's interest and engagement with cultural content.

Similarly, Wu (2023) mentions in his study that Japanese anime and movies effectively incorporate traditional music symbols, which resonate emotionally with a global audience. For example, Makoto Shinkai's *Journey to Suzume* subtly utilizes classic City Pop music, which has a large fan base in both China and Japan and helps to stir emotional resonance and imagination among viewers. These success stories show that combining elements of pop culture and utilizing digital platforms can be an effective way to enhance the visibility and relevance of traditional culture. However, localized cultural practices such as combining pop music with folk songs (Lei, 2017) and the method of combining folk songs with films (Wang, 2016) applied to folk songs in southern Shaanxi Province remain under-explored.

Challenges in the Chinese Context

In China, government policies have played a key role in promoting ICH through funding, educational integration, and community activities (Zhao & Yu, 2017). However, as Xie (2021) points out, financial support for ICH communication tends to be fragmented, resulting in projects with limited impact in the short term. Community cultural events, while providing important venues for participation, often fail to attract younger participants due to their traditional and rigid format (Kuang & Zheng, 2021). Furthermore, educational initiatives such as the ICH in the Classroom program tend to prioritize theoretical knowledge over experiential learning, which weakens students' emotional connection to cultural heritage (Wei, 2021). The gap between policy intentions and actual results highlights the need for more innovative and youth-centered approaches to ICH communication.

The Generation Z and Digital Media

The role of the Generation Z in the safeguarding and communication of ICH is receiving increasing attention, especially in the context of digital media. Studies have shown that short-form video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou are effective in increasing the visibility of folk songs among young audiences. However, their entertainment-oriented nature tends to prioritize visual appeal over cultural depth (Yang, 2019). This raises concerns about superficial engagement and the potential loss of cultural content. Innovative digital strategies, such as combining storytelling with music or incorporating interactive elements, can address these limitations and foster a deeper cultural identity within Generation Z (Feng et al., 2024).

Research Gaps

In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in research on the transmission of intangible cultural heritage, but there are still significant gaps in the analysis of generational differences and regionalization. Most of the existing studies focus on the overall pattern of cultural transmission or the traditional behavior of specific groups, and there is a lack of systematic exploration of the cultural preferences and behavioral characteristics of the Generation Z, the digital natives (Dalaylı, 2023). Although some literature has analyzed young people's attitudes towards traditional cultural values (Tănase et al., 2023), these studies have remained more at the level of qualitative descriptions and failed to reveal in-depth how intangible cultural heritage influences the construction of cultural identities of the younger generation through digital media. At the same time, there is also a lack of adequate research support on the regional communication pathways of ICH. While policies and case studies at

the national level are relatively abundant, there is still a scarcity of research that addresses the challenges and opportunities of localized dissemination in specific regions, such as folk songs in Southern Shaanxi (Guo, 2020). This knowledge gap limits an in-depth understanding of the Generation Z's interactions with ICH and hinders the development of more targeted communication strategies for regional cultural heritage.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology and a case study approach to explore the interactions between Generation Z and southern Shaanxi folk songs. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is particularly effective for studying complex social phenomena in natural settings, providing insight into cultural practices and human interactions. The case study approach, as defined by Yin (2018), provides a framework for examining specific instances or contexts in detail, and is well suited to studying the geographical and cultural dynamics of folk songs in southern Shaanxi. This approach focuses on two main sites, Hanzhong and Ankang, both of which are located in the southern region of Shaanxi Province, China, and were chosen because of their representative practices of folk song dissemination and their contrasting approaches to cultural participation.

Observation, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), is a fundamental qualitative research method that allows researchers to capture real-world behaviors and interactions. In this study, observations were conducted during cultural events such as folk song contests, classroom teaching sessions, and community performances. These activities provided a rich context for examining the participation patterns of different age groups (especially Generation Z). For example, in a folk song competition held in Hanzhong, we observed older participants actively performing, while younger participants participated primarily through digital recordings shared on Douyin, directly supporting the generational gap in participation in previous research (Song & Song, 2024). Field notes documented participant demographics, activity structure, and interaction dynamics, providing valuable data for triangulating results from interviews and case studies.

Table 1

Observation Record Table for Southern Shaanxi Folk Song Competitions and Performances

Observation Aspect	Details
Activity Name	Southern Shaanxi Folk Song Concert - Shaanxi Provincial Tour
Date and Time	June 17, 2024, 7:00 PM
Location	Red Star Theater, Hanzhong City
Number of Participants	2,000
Age Distribution	18-30 years: 25%; 31-50 years: 48%; over 50 years: 27%
Participation Modes	Singing, Watching, Participating in Q&A Sessions
Interactive Elements	Live Voting, Song Requests, Interactive Games
Cultural Impact	High engagement, positive emotional response; strengthened cultural identity
Audience Feedback	Overwhelmingly positive, with some constructive suggestions for improvement

Source: Author

Interviews for qualitative research are particularly important when exploring the experiences of cultural and social groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This study primarily used semi-structured interviews advocated by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) to gather detailed insights from a variety of stakeholders. A total of 23 participants were interviewed, including six folk song heritors, five cultural organizers, and twelve representatives of Generation Z. This approach allowed for flexibility in exploring the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees while maintaining a structured framework. Folk song heritors shared the challenges of maintaining traditional practices in the face of the dominance of modern entertainment. Cultural organizers emphasized the need for innovative approaches to make folk songs resonate with younger audiences. Meanwhile, the Generation Z participants provided insights into their cultural preferences and digital engagement habits, revealing opportunities and challenges in promoting cultural identity in the digital age. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework to ensure systematic identification of key themes.

The case study approach, described by Stake (1995), is particularly effective for understanding complex phenomena in real life. This study analyzes two case studies to examine the different ways in which folk songs are communicated in southern Shaanxi. The first case study focuses on the "Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Classroom" program in Ankang, which integrates folk songs into the school curriculum. Classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students indicate that while students appreciate the musical elements, the lack of experiential learning limits their engagement. The second case study examined short-form video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, analyzing high-traffic folk song videos and their audience interaction metrics. This analysis emphasized the potential of digital media to increase visibility, as well as the need to balance entertainment and cultural depth (Yang, 2019).

Rationale for Case Study Selection

The Southern Shaanxi region was chosen as the focus of this study due to its deep cultural heritage, unique melodic and lyrical folk songs, and influences from the Qinling Mountains and the Daba Mountains. The multiple cultural strategies employed in Hanzhong and Ankang (e.g., community performances and educational integration) provide a representative snapshot for understanding the broader challenges of ICH conservation. This regional focus aligns with the focus of qualitative research on exploring specific contexts to generate insights that may inform wider applications (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018).

To ensure methodological reliability and validity, all procedures were carefully documented. Observations followed standardized protocols, interviews used purposive sampling to ensure diversity, and case studies were selected based on predefined criteria such as their representativeness and relevance to the study objectives. These methodological steps were in line with Creswell's (2013) recommendations for increasing rigor in qualitative research and Yin's (2018) criteria for case studies.

Findings

The findings of this study provide a detailed overview of the challenges and opportunities related to the communication of the Southern Shaanxi folk songs through the educational system, community cultural activities, and digital media platforms. Through the

analysis of the Generation Z's perceptions and behaviors, this study identifies key trends and highlights areas for improvement in fostering cultural engagement and identity.

Educational System

The integration of the Southern Shaanxi folk songs into the classroom has been an essential part of preserving intangible cultural heritage. During the "ICH in the Classroom" program in Ankang, data were collected through observations and interviews with 55 students and 4 teachers. While students were generally curious about the history and structure of the songs, their engagement was limited due to the theoretical nature of the lessons. For example, during a lecture attended by 55 students, only 10 actively participated, while the majority passively listened or took notes. One student remarked, "The content was informative, but it felt disconnected from my daily life." Interviews with teachers revealed that students felt the songs lacked relevance to their modern lives, and the absence of interactive methods further limited emotional engagement.

Post-lesson discussions with teachers and students suggested incorporating hands-on activities like folk song performances, workshops, and creative projects. This recommendation echoes findings by Wei (2021), who notes that experiential learning can enhance emotional engagement and understanding in cultural education. Teachers highlighted that incorporating more interactive elements, such as live performances or group-based songwriting activities, could bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and students' daily experiences.

Community Cultural Activities

Community-based cultural events are critical channels for transmitting folk songs across generations. In Hanzhong, observations were conducted at a local folk music festival attended by approximately 2,000 people. Of these, fewer than 400 were between the ages of 18 and 30, and the majority of this group participated as passive observers. Interviews with young attendees revealed that many perceived traditional festivals as outdated and less engaging compared to digital platforms. One respondent stated, "I prefer online activities because they are more interactive and feel more connected to my life."

Despite the challenges, these events hold significant potential for fostering inter-generational dialogue and cultural participation. Organizers suggested incorporating more interactive elements, such as improve competitions and audience voting, to increase youth participation. A community organizer emphasized, "We need to create activities where younger people can contribute their creativity and collaborate with older generations." Similar suggestions have been noted in research by Kuang & Zheng (2021), who argue that blending traditional cultural activities with modern formats can attract a broader demographic.

Digital Media Platforms

Digital media platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou have emerged as vital channels for the Generation Z's engagement with the Southern Shaanxi folk songs. A total of 20 high-traffic videos were analyzed, revealing that visual elements like traditional costumes and local landscapes received the most interaction, with these elements accounting for nearly 70% of user engagement. However, the actual cultural content, such as the lyrics and historical context, received minimal attention. A university student commented, "I love watching these

videos because they are visually stunning, but I rarely think about the deeper meaning behind the songs."

This suggests that while digital platforms increase visibility, they fall short in conveying cultural depth. Interviews with the Generation Z participants indicated that they appreciate the aesthetic appeal but crave deeper engagement. One respondent suggested, "It would be more meaningful if there were short explanations or stories behind the songs, perhaps mixed with modern elements to make it more engaging." The need for digital content that is both entertaining and culturally rich was echoed by Yang (2019), who found that younger audiences are drawn to content that combines traditional elements with personal narratives and interactive features.

Perceptions of the Generation Z

Interviews with 12 representatives of the Generation Z further clarified their perceptions of Southern Shaanxi folk songs. While most participants expressed an appreciation for the artistic qualities of the songs, they noted that the music felt disconnected from their everyday experiences. One participant said, "I think the songs are beautiful, but they don't feel relevant to my life today." This suggests a gap between the cultural heritage of Southern Shaanxi and the lived experiences of younger audiences.

However, digital media's role in bridging this gap was highlighted. Many respondents mentioned that platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou helped make the songs more accessible, though they emphasized the importance of adding cultural depth. Suggestions included the creation of interactive digital experiences, such as Gamification modules or virtual reality performances, to foster deeper engagement with the songs. These findings are consistent with previous research by Tănase et al. (2023), who argue that younger generations often seek culturally enriched yet accessible experiences.

Discussion

This study identifies a significant limitation in current educational strategies: the lack of experiential learning to connect students emotionally with the Southern Shaanxi folk songs. While Wei (2021) emphasized the importance of interactive learning in general cultural education, this study provides a novel insight by showing how specific activities—such as youth-led folk song workshops—can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and emotional engagement. This finding contributes to the field by offering practical, context-specific strategies that align with the preferences of the Generation Z. For example, the observation that students responded positively to live demonstrations suggests the potential of incorporating "learn-by-performing" approaches into the curriculum. These findings pave the way for a new framework in cultural education that integrates experiential learning and inter-generational collaboration.

Community events have been central to cultural transmission, but this study uncovers an overlooked factor: the role of digital tools in reshaping participation dynamics. Unlike Kuang and Zheng (2021), who focused solely on traditional formats, this study reveals that integrating live-streaming and audience feedback mechanisms can modernize cultural festivals while preserving their traditional essence. For instance, data from the Third Southern Shaanxi Folk Song Competition showed that hybrid formats (in-person + live-streaming)

increased youth engagement by 30%. This finding highlights a shift in how the Generation Z interacts with cultural activities, suggesting a need for hybrid strategies that leverage both traditional and digital tools.

Digital media's potential for communicating the Southern Shaanxi folk songs is well-documented, but this study highlights a novel tension: while visually engaging content attracts viewers, it risks oversimplifying cultural depth. Unlike Yang (2019), who focused on entertainment-driven metrics, this study identifies the specific types of content that resonate with the Generation Z. For example, videos combining personal stories with folk song performances generated 50% more engagement than standalone performances. This finding underscores the importance of "narrative enrichment" as a strategy to balance entertainment and cultural depth. This study thus contributes by proposing a narrative-driven approach to digital media dissemination, which has not been systematically explored in previous research.

While previous studies, such as Wang (2021), noted the Generation Z's preference for modern relevance over traditional authenticity, this study identifies specific gaps in cultural engagement. The interviews revealed that while the Generation Z appreciates the aesthetic value of folk songs, they often perceive them as disconnected from their personal lives. A novel insight from this study is the potential of co-creation as a strategy to enhance cultural relevance. For instance, incorporating the Generation Z into the creative process—such as writing lyrics or remixing songs—could foster a sense of ownership and deeper cultural connection. This finding expands current knowledge by emphasizing participatory approaches that align with the collaborative tendencies of digital natives.

Conclusion

This study highlights the opportunities and challenges in communicating the Southern Shaanxi folk songs through the educational system, community cultural activities, and digital media platforms, particularly from the perspective of the Generation Z. Findings indicate that while the educational system provides a formal platform for transmission, its emphasis on theoretical knowledge limits engagement, necessitating more interactive and experiential approaches. Similarly, community cultural activities, though historically vital, struggle to attract younger audiences due to outdated formats. Modernizing these events with interactive elements such as youth-led performances or live-streaming could significantly enhance their appeal and foster inter-generational connections.

Digital media platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou have emerged as powerful tools for increasing the visibility of folk songs but face challenges in maintaining cultural depth. The study suggests that incorporating storytelling and gamification content could bridge the gap between entertainment and education, making these platforms more effective in promoting cultural identity among the Generation Z. Interviews reveal that younger audiences value visually appealing and narrative-driven formats but seek more meaningful engagement that connects with their daily lives.

These findings underscore the need for integrated strategies that balance traditional and modern approaches, leveraging the strengths of each communication channel to enhance cultural identity and ensure the sustainable transmission of the Southern Shaanxi folk songs. While this research offers valuable insights into these challenges and opportunities, it is

geographically limited to Southern Shaanxi and does not explore the potential of cross-cultural communication, highlighting avenues for future research.

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