

# Research on the use of social media to break the information cocoon of niche cultures

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**Abstract.** This study explores the role of TikTok as a platform for promoting Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), with a particular focus on traditional Chinese operas such as Huangmei, Yue, and Shanghai operas. Despite the digitalization efforts and the potential of new media platforms, these operas have struggled to gain significant traction on TikTok, largely due to the platform's algorithmic that reinforces information cocoons. The research examines the audience demographics of TikTok influencers who focus on these operas, revealing that the followers are predominantly older adults. To target younger audiences, the study also makes a comparison between musical theatre and Chinese operas in terms of their dissemination. This comparison emphasizes the importance of creative content creation and smart use of social media algorithms. The study intends to improve Chinese ICH's online visibility and preservation by examining the present issues and offering solutions for bursting the "information cocoon," assuring its sustained development in the digital era.

## 1 Introduction

To try and get a consensus on a definition, UNESCO conducted a poll of nations and non-governmental organizations in 2001. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was drafted in 2003 to conserve and promote this cultural heritage. The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills (including instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces) that communities, groups, and occasionally individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage are all considered to be intangible cultural heritage, according to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) [1]. Compared with cultural heritage, ICH can be recorded but hard be touched and stored in physical form.

In 2006, the State Council of China established the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists which included 518 items of folk literature, folk music, folk dances, traditional theatre, operas, etc. in total. At the same time, China began to focus on education related to Chinese intangible cultural heritage. Yueyang's local vocational colleges have already conducted a number of investigations and practices in the preservation and inheritance of indigenous cultural heritage, including recording traditional performances,

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establishing digital archives, and formulating curricula that educate students about local ICH [2].

In order to preserve Chinese ICT, the Chinese Government published several laws and official documents. For example, Opinions on the Implementation of the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture, explicitly mention the need to implement a project to revitalize opera and promote digital preservation and dissemination; the need to implement a plan for the creation and dissemination of online literature and art, and to promote the transmission and development of Chinese outstanding traditional culture through online literature, online music, online dramas, microfilms, etc.; and the need to implement a project for the dissemination of Chinese culture through new media, etc [3]. This means it has become clear at the international and national policy level that dissemination is an important part of achieving the objectives of ICT preservation, and that digitalization, networking, and new media are increasingly becoming the core means of ICT dissemination [4]. In this condition, a lot of new technologies such as VR or AR were used and software for the introduction of ICH was produced as well. Its digital media interaction is mostly based on flat images and text data electronic, three-dimensional presentation, with supplemental AR and VR digital media. Statistics show that about 80% of cultural organizations have launched virtual academic lectures and digital exhibitions, but they are mostly located in affluent regions [5].

The popular variety show "Ten Thousand Miles to Ride Alone" on Zhejiang Satellite TV, the documentary "I Repair Cultural Relics in the Forbidden City," the large-scale cultural program "China in Intangible Cultural Heritage" on CCTV, the hit show "The Great Craftsman," and other shows have all drawn attention to and expanded the audience's understanding of intangible cultural heritage [6]. However, taking a look back at the research history, it can be seen that while there are many successful digitization case studies, the research on the creation of digital inheritance systems has only advanced the theory. The case study of the digital inheritance of intangible cultural assets is still in its early stages.

Because the most mainstream promotion method in China has shifted from traditional media to new media, the most important thing that intangible cultural heritage wants to do is to promote it in the new media platform. TikTok, as a social platform on the Internet, has a huge audience, and at the same time, it is able to do so by breaking down regional restrictions to maximize the sharing of information. Therefore, in this article, TikTok will be used as a foremost new media platform to explore how ICH can be effectively promoted.

## **2 Basic descriptions of Chinese traditional opera**

Huangmei opera, Yue opera, and Shanghai opera are three Chinese traditional operas that were first included in China's National Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006. According to the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), China should safeguard and raise awareness at the local, national, and international levels of the importance of ICH, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof [1]. China used graphs, audio, or videos to document Chinese intangible cultural heritage over a long time and raised a project of revitalization of Chinese Opera. However, ICH is changing and invisible so the recorded resource is not useful for the preservation of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, the main point of digitization of Chinese intangible cultural heritage moved from recording to creating new digital works for spreading [4]. This means creators of Chinese intangible cultural heritage have tried to post videos on social platforms such as TikTok to make more people know knowledge of ICH since users of TikTok increased rapidly. Even while Chinese opera is more likely than other Chinese intangible cultural heritage to be shared on TikTok in video form, there still have been no videos about

Chinese traditional opera becoming popular. This means the impact of ICH spreading online is not significant.

Factors contributing to limiting dissemination of Chinese traditional opera may be information cocoon, which means the limitation of an individual's information exposure, but the term "echo chamber" describes a closed social circle where members are imprisoned by the same information, which can cause crazy mistakes, excessive confidence, and unwarranted fanaticism [7]. The algorithm of TikTok makes the impact of the information cocoon more serious during the diffusion of three Chinese traditional operas. Only amateurs can keep brushing up on the videos of Chinese opera while a large number of users are not able to watch this content as platforms would not push videos that they may not be interested in. In this condition, it is very hard to promote videos about Chinese opera on TikTok through its algorithm, so the effects of social platforms for disseminating Chinese opera are not practical.

Above all, Huangmei opera, Yue opera, and Shanghai opera are acting as representatives of Chinese intangible heritage. In this article, data from three chosen ICTs will be gathered. Also, Chinese musicals will be taken as an example to compare and look at how ICH can get wider audiences by using social media platforms like Weibo and TikTok.

### 3 Data collection

In 2018, the China Association of Performing Arts published the 2018 China Performance Market Annual Report, which shows that in 2018 the number of musical theatre performances was 0.3 million, and its revenue was 343 million yuan, accounting for about 5% of the overall market revenue [8]. This means musicals and operas were non-mainstream activities in China. A large number of Chinese had a stereotypical view of musicals and operas as they thought musicals and operas were very elegant and they could not be able to understand the stories and lyrics of the songs. Under these circumstances, a music-competition reality show called Super Vocal, which changed the condition of the musical market at that time, was released both on Hunan TV and video platforms such as Mango TV. The program team and members participating in the program also registered accounts on new media platforms such as Weibo, which allows audiences to get closer to the program and members.

**Table 1.** Basic information of selected account on TikTok

Chinese Opera	Account	Number of Fans	Tags
Huangmei Opera	She Chang	300k	Culture, Chinese Opera
	Wu Qiong & Ruan Xun	2.74m	Celebrity
Yue Opera	He Saifei	111k	Culture, Chinese Opera
	Chen Lijun	3.506m	Culture, Chinese Opera
Shanghai Opera	Mao Shanyu	127k	Celebrity
	Xu Xiang	1.837m	Drama

According to Table 2, comparing these six accounts, it can be found that their target user groups are relatively old, basically the mainstream of the group over 30 years old. However, Chen Lijun is special as most of its followers are younger than 40 years old, 87.71% of them. The reason may be Chen Lijun played the role of Jia Ting in the play New Dragon Inn, with a handsome and upright appearance. A short video of her smile and a hug with her partner in the curtain call of the play was very popular and attractive on TikTok, reaching 10 billion views. On the other way, top influencers have a relatively higher average age distribution of followers due to their diverse content. For example, the main theme of Xu Xiang's videos is

drama about Shanghai culture shown in Table 1, so Shanghai opera is only a part of his works. While Xu Xiang’s works of Shanghai opera were watched by more people, they were helpless for Shanghai opera breaking the information cocoon.

**Table 2.** Age composition of the followers of the selected account

Opera	Account	50- (%)	41-50(%)	31-40(%)	24-30(%)	18-23(%)
Huangmei Opera	She Chang	66.49	23.37	8.11	1.69	0.35
	Wu Qiong &	57.24	24.90	11.91	3.67	2.28
Yue Opera	He Saifei	20.05	29.99	33.59	10.43	5.94
	Chen Lijun	2.88	9.41	39.33	28.70	19.68
Shanghai Opera	Mao Shanyu	73.34	15.79	9.11	2.05	0.70
	Xu Xiang	41.97	23.62	14.74	12.09	7.58

## 4 Analysis of the success factors of Super Vocal

### 4.1 Unique race system and group portrait

Super Vocal invited 36 musicians with high appearances, high education, and high quality, which first satisfied viewers’ visual and auditory. Also, the appearance of 36 singers whose attributes align with popular aesthetics will pique the interest of the audience in this unexplored area to a great extent. In the end, the audience will feel a strong sense of subversion and an audio-visual impact due to the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar [9]. "Super Vocal" creatively adopted a no-elimination format from the beginning of the show, i.e., the 36 members remain the same from the beginning of the show until the end of the 12 episodes [9].

During the competition, the atmosphere of supporting and helping one another between 36 members made the concept of “group portrait” first time, which means a group of people who have the same interests or dreams gathered together and strive to improve their singing skills and get more opportunities of performing on bigger stages. Group portraits attracted a lot of young people because of their desire for friendship and group activities in this reality show. For example, Wang Xi, who already had rich performance experience, and Gao Yang, who was still a university student at the time, were asked to collaborate on a musical song. Wang Xi taught Gao Yang performance skills and also calmed Gao Yang's tense emotions like his brother in the practice process even though they were in a competitive relationship during the competition. There are many more examples like this, and it's all because the people gathered at the program are of different ages and have different experiences, but they are all here with the same goal in mind. These differences enable them to keep colliding ideas and techniques during the game and ultimately improve together. Group portrait not only enriches the presentation effects of variety shows but also enhance the potential for values to resonate with the audience. The portrayal of the protagonist's group image naturally introduces diverse personalities and work styles, and this diversity broadens the appeal to audiences with varying traits [10].

Even after the reality show finished, members started a tour or acted roles in different musicals in China, and clips behind the scenes of Super Vocal are posted on the Weibo official account. These actions keep young fans of Super Vocal active both online and offline. The total volume of readings reached 11.16 billion and the total number of creativities reached 2.12 million under the hashtag of Super Vocal on Weibo in 2024.

## 4.2 Combination of classical and popular music

The selection of music songs is one of the most important determinants of the audience for a music reality show. The goal of Super Vocal is to promote musicals and operas in China, so the choice of music should have features that can break the stereotype of musicals and operas and keep novelty at the same time.

Therefore, in the competition, not only did a lot of classic musical and opera clips appear, but also a lot of popular music was performed with musical or operatic vocals. For example, in the first episode, Cai Chengyu performed Ah! Mes Amis was selected from the classic opera 'La fille du regiment', Zheng Yunlong performed a segment of the Broadway musical 'Jekyll & Hyde' and Huang Zihongfan performed a Chinese pop song Songbie using the operatic skill. This selection allowed the audience to feel the professionalism of the show for the first time, while the innovative performance style also brought them surprises and expectations for future programs. In the later stage of the program, the performance of the song changed from solo to duet, which not only increased the interaction and tacit understanding among the members but also made the song more versatile and powerful in terms of listening experience. For example, the nursery rhyme "Kusk Mail Car" performed by the 1975 group and the performance of "Yuewanwan" by Zhou Shen and Wang Xi both left a deep impression on the audience. These groups were also very popular on tours after the show finished.

The most inspiring part of the program is Chinese musicals. The excellent performances of Zheng Yunlong and Ayunga as old classmates in the program have attracted more attention to Chinese musicals. Because they were once university classmates and both became Chinese musical theatre actors after graduation, their interaction in the program has increased a lot of CP fans. Their fans have posted many related videos on social media, such as a comparison video of their graduation stage Season of Love from the musical "Rent" and the performance of Season of Love Chinese version in the show. Meanwhile, the performance of a segment from the Chinese original musical "Butterfly" in Super Vocal has also received widespread attention due to its lyrics. These videos have received extremely high views on social media in China and Super Vocal also gained a lot of new audience.

After the program ended, the original musical actors continued to perform in the theatre, and the original variety show audience also entered the theatre and watched Chinese musicals because of the members of Super Vocal. In 2021, China's musical theatre performances increased to 15300, with revenues of 1.002 billion yuan [11]. Super Vocal made the Chinese musical market flourish. In addition, fans of the show began to buy tickets to watch live musicals and operas and published their reviews of performances they watched on new media platforms so musicals in China successfully broke the circle in 2018.

## 5 Suggestions

Compared with the Chinese musical market, Chinese operas like Huangmei opera, Yue opera, and Shanghai opera do have stereotypes for people, and their melodies and scripts are very hard to understand because they use dialects to sing. Young people hardly have a chance to learn local dialects as schools only teach them Mandarin so Chinese opera is more popular among elders. This means Chinese operas may not be easy to spread on the Internet as elders may not be able to post attractive content on social media.

Also, there is no single topic or activity that can bring about a level of discussion on new media platforms such as Weibo, and TikTok for Chinese opera. In fast-paced new media platforms, without a large number of relevant information posted in a short period of time, even if some people watch, their minds about Chinese opera will not change, which means

the ability to break through the information cocoon of a short video of Chinese opera has not improved.

### **5.1 Blending the latest fashion elements with Chinese ICH**

The benefit of new media social platforms is that any user can create and share material, with a high degree of user participation, unlike in the past when the transmission of ICH information was mostly interpersonal and static, with a limited scope of dissemination [12]. For example, in the reality show *Ride the Wind 2024*, which is an international women's cultural exchange and music competition variety show, an actress called Chen Lijun from Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue opera troupe went viral recently. When other actresses were wearing like princes and singing pop songs, she wore her red costume and performed a clip of Yue opera. What's more, Chen tried to incorporate Yue opera into pop music when she was asked to perform with other actresses. Viewers were easily focusing on her clothes and voice in the show. The clip of Chen's adaption of Yue opera gained a lot of kudos and comments on TikTok. These actions also help Chen get a lot of young followers as shown in Table 1 and the possibility of breaking the circle in the following videos increases.

### **5.2 Making innovative content for Chinese opera**

Many Chinese operas are interpretations of Chinese traditional stories or folks such as Yue Opera *Liang Shanbo* and *Zhu Yingtai*, and young people are already familiar with these classic stories in different ways, so they may not be interested in expressions of the opera. Therefore, to make more young people watch Chinese opera, the selection of script content needs to be more innovative, and the values that opera conveys need to be in line with the times. Not only the scripts but also the stages and spaces of theatre can be improved. While other musicals were still being performed in large theatres, immersive small theatres appeared. Take the musical *Sleep No More*, which rents an entire hotel as a stage and allows the audience to follow the actors around the space. With this one innovation, despite the high ticket price, it still attracted many tourists with the publicity on social media platforms. This means Chinese opera should find the most interesting thing for young audiences to promote shows on social platforms.

### **5.3 Making good use of platform algorithms**

As ICT content naturally finds its way into new media, these platforms have progressively started to investigate this premium content category. As an important demonstration of their civic obligation to promote exceptional traditional Chinese culture, all of China's main new media platforms have implemented regulations that encourage the production and distribution of short films on non-heritage topics [12]. For example, TikTok launched the *#Intangible Cultural Heritage Adventure* live event, the relevant topic views amounted to more than 2.1 billion between January 2021 and July 2022. In this case, posting Chinese opera-related content on the TikTok platform and mentioning related keywords or tags in the published text can gain the platform's support and bring more viewers to the videos through the algorithm. Thus, the possibility of breaking the circle of intangible cultural heritage increases.

## **6 Conclusion**

In the process of improving ICTs, updating information about ICH on social media platforms has been the main method of preserving and transmitting ICH. Among them, Chinese opera, as a kind of Chinese ICH that can be easily spread in video form, has not attracted attention on social media platforms like TikTok for various reasons.

In this case, through data analysis and case studies, the main focus is on content, combined with TikTok's algorithm, to summarize the reasons for the poor dissemination of ICT and propose corresponding solutions. By analysing representative accounts on TikTok, the lack of young enthusiasts is a significant reason why Chinese opera failed to spread on TikTok. Therefore, creators of ICH should attract more young people by innovating the content of ICH and combining it with instantaneous hotspots on social platforms. Very little of the content disseminated on the Internet remains in the memory of Internet users. This means for ICT to be preserved over time via the new media on the Internet requires sustained and continuous excellence in outputs. This study aims to provide references and insights for the communication of ICH in social media, promoting the sustainable development of ICH in the new era.

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