

From "He Shu" to "Zi Shu": Research on the Construction of Intangible Cultural Heritage Discourse Power in the Change of News Narrative

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Abstract: Intangible cultural heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH") serves as an extremely important carrier of national culture, and its inheritance and dissemination have always been highly valued by the academic community. In today's highly developed media landscape, the narrative approach of ICH has undergone a clear and significant transformation: from the previous "other narration" dominated by external forces such as media, scholars, and the government, to the current "self narration" actively voiced by internal subjects like ICH inheritors and community members. Therefore, this shift in narrative subjects is not merely a change in communication forms but also a restructuring of the discourse power structure [1]. Hence, this paper adopts critical discourse analysis as its theoretical framework [2], selects representative ICH projects, and systematically and rigorously examines the narrative texts presented on traditional media and new media platforms. It clarifies the differences between "other narration" and "self narration" in terms of discourse strategies, narrative perspectives, communication motivations, and power relations. This naturally and appropriately leads to a discussion on the discourse power of ICH in the contemporary construction mechanism of China, and further analyzes the practical impact of the shift in discourse power on the protection and inheritance of ICH. Ultimately, it provides theoretical references and practical paths conducive to the healthy development of ICH in modern society.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Discourse Power; Narrative Transformation; Otherness; Self-Narration; Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

As the "living" gene pool of ethnic culture [3], intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has always been more than just the preservation of skills and knowledge—it fundamentally concerns the interpretation of cultural significance and the attribution of value definitions. In the era of traditional mass media, the public image and narratives of ICH were predominantly shaped and disseminated by external forces including news media, academic research, government propaganda, and commercial development, resulting in a highly typical and clear "otherness" model.

This model has proven highly effective in enhancing the social visibility of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and securing policy and resource support. However, its inherent contradictions have become increasingly apparent: media prioritize sensationalism and spectacle, academia emphasizes systematic rigor and exemplary models, while commercial interests focus on symbolic value and consumer appeal. Meanwhile, narratives from external perspectives often diverge from the community contexts that sustain ICH, the life experiences of its bearers, and the cultural authenticity. Consequently, the 'told' ICH and the 'living' ICH have essentially formed two mutually alien discursive systems.

New media technologies, represented by social media and short video platforms, have endowed intangible cultural heritage inheritors and community members with low-cost, wide-coverage, and highly interactive self-expression spaces. Therefore, from the grand narrative of CCTV's "China in Intangible Cultural Heritage" to the everyday videos of embroiderers sharing their daily stitching techniques on Douyin, the subjects, tones, scenes, and purposes of narration have undergone very clear and layered changes. More importantly, the shift from "other narration" to "self-narration" is not merely an expansion of communication channels; it is essentially a significant

restructuring of cultural discourse power. This naturally raises several questions worthy of deeper exploration: Who defines the value and future of intangible cultural heritage? What power and interest games lie behind different narratives? Does the inheritance of "microphones" by inheritors equate to the true return of discourse power? Does such a transformation empower the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage or bring new risks? Since this article is based on the texture of the change of news narrative, it is natural to take the discourse power as the basic analysis perspective, and then systematically and properly clarify the narrative transformation mechanism of the intangible cultural heritage from "other narration" to "self narration", and discuss its cultural and political implications accordingly, and finally answer the fundamental question of "who to tell, who to tell, and how to tell" in the protection of intangible cultural heritage.

2. Research Significance of Constructing Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Discourse Power in the Evolution of News Narratives

2.1 Theoretical Significance

Current academic research on ICH predominantly examines protection technologies, dissemination methods, and industrialization pathways, while rarely systematically analyzing the power dynamics underlying narratives from a discourse perspective. This study introduces critical discourse analysis theory, framing ICH narratives as discursive practices. This approach naturally and appropriately addresses questions of "who speaks," "why speak," "how speak," and "the consequences of speaking," thereby proposing a novel theoretical framework.

2.2 Practical Significance

The persistent phenomenon of "media frenzy versus inheritance neglect" and "commercial boom versus cultural substance" in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) transmission can be fundamentally attributed to the imbalance of discourse power. This study compares the "other's narrative" and "self-narrative" modes to reveal the underlying contradictions in ICH dissemination. It proposes actionable strategies for building a more equitable, diverse, and sustainable discourse ecosystem, enabling ICH to preserve its cultural essence while embracing innovation in the modernization

process.

3. Comparative Analysis of ICH Discourse Construction in Traditional Media and New Media

3.1 Research Design

The practical landscape of intangible cultural heritage discourse construction is illustrated through comparative case studies of narrative texts in traditional mainstream media ("other narration") and new media platforms ("self narration") [4], revealing the differences and interactions in discourse construction.

3.2 Case Study

Kunqu Opera – From "Elegant Heritage" to "Perceptible Living Art" The narrative framework (using the cultural section of Guangming Daily as an example) begins by systematically defining Kunqu Opera's attributes as the "ancestor of all operas" and "intangible cultural heritage of humanity," emphasizing its "elegance," "depth," and "classic status." It then seamlessly transitions to broader themes including "inheritance crisis," "national preservation efforts," "campus-based transmission," and "international performances." Actors are appropriately positioned as "performing artists," with their artistic achievements analyzed within established mentorship lineages and aesthetic standards, naturally leading to discussions of "technical mastery," "artistic nuance," and "cultural refinement." The production and dissemination process involves collaboration among cultural management agencies, professional troupes, and elite media, targeting an audience of culturally literate individuals with established cultural capital.

The fundamental purpose is thus unequivocal: to affirm Kunqu Opera's status as a national cultural classic, honor its international heritage protection commitments, and promote the appreciation of high art. More crucially, the discourse power remains firmly in the hands of cultural authorities, academic institutions, professional troupes, and traditional media. This has led to the repeated reinforcement of Kunqu's "orthodoxy," "purity," and "artistic excellence," which implicitly establishes a high aesthetic threshold, effectively excluding the general public.

This study analyzes the content of B-side

profiles for young Kunqu opera performers, "Kunqu Xiaosheng Wang Mou," through a "self-narrative" lens. The material demonstrates remarkable diversity: The article systematically explores backstage "head-pinching" techniques and their psychological impact, seamlessly transitions to daily training routines, and discusses interdisciplinary experiments like "Kunqu + EDM" and "Kunqu recitation with anime." Using accessible language, it popularizes the symbolic meanings of "water sleeve techniques" and "fan manipulation," blending humor with internet slang to bridge the psychological gap with younger audiences. Performers, working individually or in small teams, create content directly for online audiences-particularly Gen Z-collecting real-time feedback and openly attributing creative inspirations to netizens. Live streaming sessions further transcend physical theater limitations, allowing remote viewers to experience performances as if present. This evolution transforms actors from traditional "art interpreters" into active "cultural ambassadors," "community connectors," and "innovative experimenters" [5]. They dismantle Kunqu's "aloof" facade, revealing the arduous efforts behind this highly professionalized "bodily art" and its vitality in dialoguing with contemporary pop culture. While practitioners rightfully hold creative agency, they inevitably navigate the delicate balance between market preferences, platform policies, and artistic integrity.

3.3 Comprehensive Analysis

Existing discourse reveals a clear hierarchy: "he-speech" narratives objectify, canonize, decontextualize, and symbolize intangible cultural heritage (ICH), serving grand objectives like national cultural identity construction, academic knowledge accumulation, or cultural industry development. Thus, discourse power concentrates at the top of the social power structure. In contrast, "self-speech" narratives subjectify, contextualize, and modernize ICH, aiming to highlight cultural practitioners' lived experiences, sustain emotional bonds within communities, and develop survival strategies for modern society. This shift demonstrates a clear trend toward grassroots cultural practice. More importantly, the dynamic negotiation between these two narratives naturally and appropriately reflects the evolution and reconstruction of ICH discourse fields.

4. The Dynamics, Paradoxes, and Future of Discourse Power Shift

4.1 The Rise of 'Self-Narration' and Technological Empowerment

Mobile internet, smart devices, and user-friendly editing tools have dramatically lowered the technical barriers and economic costs of content creation and global distribution, creating the material foundation for the 'everyone has a microphone' phenomenon[6].

Policy Encouragement: The government has clearly and strongly advocated the "creative transformation and innovative development" of intangible cultural heritage, and implemented the concept of "people-centered" and "seeing people, objects and life" in cultural policies, which objectively creates a political and cultural space for the expression of the subjectivity of inheritors.

Subjective awakening[7]: because the inheritors, especially the Internet natives, have higher media literacy, cultural consciousness and rights consciousness, they are no longer willing to be passive "represented", and naturally they will take the initiative to strive for the dominance of their own cultural narration.

4.2 The Deep Paradox and Challenges of Discourse Shift

Digital Divide[8] and Reconfiguration of Internal Discourse Hierarchies. Given that technological empowerment is inherently uneven, the elderly, those in remote areas, economically disadvantaged groups, and inheritors with limited media literacy are particularly vulnerable to "secondary digital aphasia." (a state where vulnerable inheritor groups lose their new media narrative channels again due to insufficient digital capacity and resource access, resulting in re-silence in the digital discourse space). The transfer of discourse power itself fosters a new divide between "cultural stars" and the "silent majority" within the inheritors' community, thereby naturally reshaping internal power structures.

The Conflict of Interpretive Authority and Meaning Games: As self-narratives inherently possess personalized, localized, and experimental characteristics, they inevitably challenge the mainstream definitions of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) established by academia and preservation institutions-such as

"authenticity," "representativeness," and "normativity." This may lead to fragmented meaning systems and difficulties in reaching consensus.

The adaptive assimilation of "self-narrative" power: Capital, local governments, and professional media organizations, endowed with resources and keen insight, swiftly recognize the communicative value and commercial potential of "self-narrative." Consequently, they systematically integrate this burgeoning practice into their existing industrialization and branding frameworks through MCN incubation, project collaborations, IP acquisitions, and traffic support. This dynamic may lead to selective absorption and appropriation of "self-narrative" by capital and administrative forces, ultimately eroding its critical and independent nature.

4.3 Toward Diverse Coexistence: Building a Negotiated Discourse Ecosystem for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

Since the ideal future of ICH dissemination should never be reduced to a simplistic "self-narration" replacing "other-narration", it is essential to pursue a pluralistic discourse ecosystem through negotiation, grounded in the establishment of cultural subjectivity. Expectations for the role of "other-narrators": Media and scholars should adopt the stance of "authoritative spokespersons".who guide, coordinate and support rather than dominate or replace the self-narration of inheritors, and jointly build an open, inclusive and balanced

ICH discourse pattern with multiple subjects participating and interacting.

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