Re-mediating Heritage: ICH Documentaries as Generative Memory Devices

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Abstract: In the digital context, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) documentaries have evolved from salvage recording tools into" re-mediation devices" reorganizing tradition and modernity. This paper elucidates how they actively construct contemporary cultural memory. In narrative generation, strategies like reconstructing" sacred time" and symbol activation encode practices into accessible" memory time." In space production, images establish presence through" location-soundscape" and" body-stage" performance, constructing symbolic" sites of memory". Ultimately, these mechanisms transform ICH from local experiences into open public memory, functioning as digital devices that rebuild cultural continuity at the fracture points of modernity.
Keywords: ICH Documentaries; Cultural Memory; Re-mediation

1. Introduction: From" Visual Conservation" to" Memory Generation"

In recent years, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) documentaries have developed rapidly, assigned roles such as promoting tradition and awakening collective memory [1]. However, within the current platform-based communication environment, algorithmic logic often fragments these videos into short, consumable clips [2]. Consequently, the deep cultural context they carry risks being diluted. In practice, documentaries are often viewed merely as tools for" visual conservation," following a logic of "representation and emotion [3]". This limited perspective, however, fails to reveal the active internal role media plays in generating cultural memory.

Examining the theoretical lineage of memory and media offers a key to understanding this mechanism. From Aby Warburg's view of images as externalized energy [4] to Maurice Halbwachs's "collective memory" [5] and Pierre Nora's "sites of memory" (lieux de mémoire) [6], scholars have emphasized that memory is organized within social frameworks and symbolic sites. Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory" further highlights how external media—like texts and rituals—allow groups to recognize their identities [7] while Paul Connerton focuses on the role of embodied practices [8]. Applying these theories to digital documentaries reveals a dual process: on one hand, these films are embedded in material-spatial environments; on the other, they reorganize symbol systems to gather emotional energy and solidify community identity.

This paper proposes the concept of "generative cultural memory," viewing ICH documentaries as re-mediation devices that actively reorganize tradition within a context of deep mediatization. By analyzing representative works, this study identifies two mutually linked mechanisms:

(1) The narrative memory generation mechanism: Images rearrange ritual rhythms through "cultural circulation, narrative focus, and symbol activation," transforming ICH skills into reusable "memory time."

(2) The spatial anchoring mechanism: Based on "artistic truth," images construct symbolic "sites of memory" through location-soundscapes and body-stage performances, participating in the reproduction of the contemporary cultural order.

2. A perspective: The mediatization and re-mediation of memory

2.1. The evolution of memory's mediatization

From this perspective, media products serve as agenda setters for collective memory. Symbols act as intermediaries bridging space and time, allowing historical narratives to take root through repetition. Thus, the media is not a passive conveyor but an active agent" mediatizing" our relationship with the past.

Memory has been intertwined with media since its inception, relying on material support—from Stone Age symbols to writing systems—for transmission. Crucially," externalization" exceeds merely updating carriers; it establishes media as an operational hub for information. Materiality theory views media as an active mediator intervening in subjectivity and perception. By dictating formatting and narration through technical structure, media continuously shape the boundaries of cultural practices.

The digital age has expanded this scope to include "non-existent" memories. Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" suggests that individuals can develop deep empathy for past events they did not personally experience by interacting with experiential historical narratives [9]. As a crucial form, digital video allows memory to be persistently encoded and retrieved. Documentaries now store text, sound, and body data, making digital storage the norm and forgetting the exception. Media shapes this process not just by storing, but through "selection and forgetting." The oral history project Family Imprint (Zu Yin) captures diverse social phenomena—from parent-child conflicts to the care of "empty nesters" — preserving individual family fates amidst modern changes [10].

From this perspective, media products act as agenda setters for collective memory. Symbols serve as intermediaries connecting individuals across space and time, allowing historical stories to take root in group memory through repetition. Thus, the media is not a passive conveyor but an active agent that "mediatizes" our relationship with the past.

2.2. Technological apparatus and re-mediation: The memory generation mechanism of ICH documentaries

Pierre Nora proposed that we rely on external media precisely because memory no longer exists naturally within community life [11] . Consequently, humans become both carriers and mediators, interacting with memory through externalization (storage in technical systems) and traces (encoding in cultural symbols).

Re-mediation functions as a dynamic mechanism of renewal. Astrid Erll points out that cultural memory is generated through the continuous interaction of mediatization, re-mediation, and public presentation [12]. The core of this concept lies in how new media gains legitimacy by absorbing and reorganizing the logic of old media [13]. Thus, documentaries are not just media for memory but become objects of memory themselves. Consequently, research has shifted focus from static" products" to dynamic" processes" within this socio-technical system [14].

ICH documentaries utilize digital collection to record technical processes and rituals, transforming video texts via database management into reusable resources that serve as verifiable evidence for academic research. On a communicative level, these documentaries reorganize the structure around inheritors to transcend regional limits and enhance public visibility. Taking CCTV's China in the Intangible Cultural Heritage as an example, the program embeds ICH into detailed

daily scenes; this approach not only integrates heritage into collective memory in an approachable way but also lowers barriers to access through platform distribution.

However, mediatization is not a loss-free translation. Tactile experiences and local contexts are difficult to replicate, while platform mechanisms may compress cultural depth. As art detaches to rebuild meaning elsewhere, the introduction of the Lion Dance promotes cross-cultural consumption but risks re-encoding the practice as a symbol detached from its roots. Ultimately, ICH documentaries function as a technological apparatus constantly adjusting between preservation and dissemination, and between expanding visibility and resetting context.

3. Memory generation pathways: Narrative mechanisms of memory construction

3.1. Reconstruction of sacred time and generation of historical maps

Documentaries function as typical" re-mediation" devices possessing a stronger sense of temporal presence than static media, while festivals act as condensed cultural memory devices using cyclic rituals to confirm community identity. Consequently, ICH documentaries themed around traditional festivals (e.g., the Spring Festival) reconstruct "sacred time" by visualizing rituals such as New Year's Eve dinners and lion dances, where the repetitive presentation immerses the audience in a symbolic time field. By focusing on daily details—from seasonal food to the journey home—these films bridge macro-narratives with individual experiences, transforming abstract symbols into tangible emotional echoes. This turns on-screen festivals into constantly activated" present-moment rituals" that, through motifs like "reunion," generate a re-experiential "memory time," guiding the audience from passive viewing to empathy and a sense of belonging.

From a production perspective, multiple types of documentaries filming a specific festival constitute a form of intertextual repetition, creating a cycle that can be repeatedly accessed and re-interpreted. This shifts festival narratives from single-point presentations to map-like generation. This process involves narrative reconstruction on two levels:

(1) In the dimension of time: Documentaries like Heritage ("Chuan Cheng") and A Bite of China seek a "thick description" with "partial completeness" over long historical periods. Through serialization and seasonal sequels, images embed festival rituals into the context of institutional evolution.

(2) In the dimension of text: ICH documentaries effectively fill narrative gaps by connecting materials like local chronicles and oral histories. Therefore, the ritual dimension provides an entry channel to "sacred time," establishing an emotional anchor for group identity through compelling audiovisual experiences.

3.2. Narrative reconstruction: Audiovisual rhetoric promoting cultural identity

Current ICH documentaries and non-fiction images emphasize micro-level close-ups. These close-ups of" technique-body-situation" are precise responses to the ontological characteristics of ICH. The core of ICH is embodied knowledge carried by body techniques, ritual order, and emotional ethics. In a media context where attention is fragmented, only high-density, centrally focused narratives can effectively translate internal traditions into explicit experiences.

The narrative of ICH images functions as a reconstruction practice that anchors specific spaces and subjects through detailed close-ups. For instance, Handmade in China employs close-up amplification on ritual units like "dotting the eyes" or "placing into the kiln" to restore abstract rituals into vivid operational mechanisms, thereby activating collective memory. To balance this, contemporary works often adopt an objective "zero-focalization" strategy supplemented by experiential dimensions—such as inheritors' flashbacks—which transforms the "tradition of the other" into a shared cultural resource. By centering ontological questions like " how to inherit," these narratives guide the audience to intervene not merely as bystanders but as cognitive subjects, converting the confirmation of cultural continuity into deep value identification.

3.3. Symbol activation: Activating the vitality of ICH

In the memory construction logic of ICH images, "symbol activation" constitutes a means of intervening in traditional

culture. The core meaning of ICH is often difficult to reveal naturally through traditional linear recording. Contemporary ICH images strive to use digital technology for "symbol re-coding" within the principle of authenticity, achieving a contemporary activation of ICH vitality. Digital media restores ICH objects from static exhibits into flowing, generative texts. Relying on photography technology, images break the threshold of daily vision, capturing micro-details that the naked eye misses. Symbol translation activates material remains into a vivid cultural operation mechanism.

Images also repair the rupture formed by the ICH culture in time and space. Strategies like visual blurring, narrative fragmentation, and animation translation are used for situational reenactment. Commentary and sound design act as a meta-language device regulating narrative rhythm and depth of meaning. Through defamiliarization strategies, a tension structure is established between the intuitive presentation of the image and the abstract understanding of the audience.

On one hand, it delays the reception time of symbols, prompting the audience to move from sensory pleasure to value reflection. On the other hand, it forms an intertextual relationship with realistic conflicts in the image (such as inheritance dilemmas or generational differences), completing an emotional re-positioning without dissolving the contradictions. This proxy narration successfully pulls ICH away from the gaze of " spectacle," leading to a deep identification with its cultural logic and ethical core.

4. Space production: The construction of "Sites of Memory" in ICH images

4.1. Image space-time: Constructing embodied presence

Siegfried Kracauer explained the efficacy of non-fiction images through the" flow of life," positioning their power in reawakening material reality. In ICH documentaries, the inclusion of artifacts translates tradition into video slices of the life-world. The resulting" site of memory" is a symbolic system interwoven with situations and embodied experiences. Spatial elements—city walls, inscriptions, villages—are activated as explicit evidence of historical deposition through audiovisual rhetoric. Here, technical operations and ritual orders, anchored by narrative, synergize with material symbols to drive ICH from static display objects into dynamic" generative practices."

Contemporary ICH images employ narrative reflexivity to incorporate the current state of heritage, forcing audiences to confront the tension between representation and identity construction. Cultural memory here is not a panoramic restoration but a" historical authenticity" relying on perceptual structures. While imitating tradition," ICH space-time" grounds itself in realism to form a shared reality. This reality is embedded in specific media situations: fragmented mobile viewing generates a sense of spatial" presence." As Bernard Stiegler's concept of" temporal objects" [15] reveals, synchronous mass viewing extracts ICH from local experience, transforming it into accessible public memory—elevating presence from individual feeling to a mediatized experience.

4.2. Local anchoring: Place and soundscape

The "locality" of ICH documentaries is not mere visual "realism", but a memory anchoring mechanism grounded in geography and sensory experience. Within this creative logic, place serves as both material evidence for cultural remains and a vehicle for retrieving meaning. Reconstructed as" generating fields," geographical spaces act as structural devices. Echoing Wu Bing'an's view of place as" identifiable historical evidence" and Aleida Assmann's definition of a" container of memory," these images embed abstract skills back into their ecological contexts.

For example, the documentary Heritage contrasts skills across the Taiwan Strait—such as bridge building versus fishing—as products of natural ecology and local knowledge. Similarly, The Last Dance returns the Andai dance to the living scene of the Horqin Grassland. By capturing local discourse on "Old" versus "New" Andai, the film reveals the deep connections between tradition and local life, such as herding, providing essential coordinates for value identification.

Supporting" place" is the soundscape, which triggers and stabilizes memory. As Aleida Assmann emphasizes, sound acts as a stabilizer in forming socialized memory, translating experience into shared memory. In practice, synchronous sound, commentary, and music constitute the soundscape structure, where narratives provide not just information but an

experiential scene imbued with human warmth.

The soundscape also reveals the "absence of sound". The Last Dance traces the shift from embodied singing to fixed recordings, signaling structural changes in transmission. The sealing of lyrics in museums suggests a move from living scenes to institutionalized preservation—" preservable but hard to restore." Dialects further reinforce locality: they enhance local identity but may create cross-regional barriers requiring subtitles. Meanwhile, commentary and music provide an emotional framework without replacing the live nature of synchronous sound, giving the ICH experience a clear narrative order.

4.3. Embodied imagination: Body performance and stage images

What ICH images record is living culture with the body as the carrier. Maurice Merleau-Ponty defined the body as the" medium of existence," suggesting memory is not purely psychological. Embodied art forms like ICH dance rely on movements solidifying into body memory through repeated practice [16]. Performance-based documentaries thus gain a narrative advantage. By using bodily practice as core evidence, they allow the audience to enter the internal logic of ICH. Taking The Last Dance as an example, the presentation of Heavenly Rhythm Andai incorporates rain-seeking rituals into choreography, making the ritual a cultural script reproduced by the body. Innovations in color and rhythm do not imply the disappearance of tradition; they are more likely a re-coding of symbols within a stage context. Audience participation further pushes this re-coding into the public space, giving bodily practice new communicative energy.

In The Last Dance, the structural connection of historical evidence (photos, texts) and performance clips provides testimonial material, arranging scattered memories into internalizable meanings. For performance-based ICH, ritual performance has a strong image-summoning power. Dynamic postures and collective rhythms foster emotional resonance, allowing the audience to enter the generation of community imagination.

As Bauman notes, folklore is meaning negotiation unfolded in performance [17]. The interaction between actors and audience in The Last Dance makes viewers agents of meaning production. The image solidifies this into a spreadable visual experience, transforming inheritance practices into public imagination resources. Thus, the key to embodied communication lies in the coupling of body and stage images, giving ICH a learnable, perceptible, and participative contemporary life.

5. Conclusion

In the present moment, where digital existence has become an ontological fact, the value of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) documentaries has long surpassed the tool-like category of" salvage recording." Tracing the argumentative path of this paper, we can clearly see the deep logic of ICH images as" memory production devices."

As Stiegler stated, technology is the" externalization" form of memory. Through" realistic" camera language and" re-mediated" symbol coding, ICH images transform tacit culture attached to physical inheritance into" public memory resources" that can be retrieved, shared, and re-interpreted by broader social groups. The sites of memory and emotional communities constructed by ICH images provide individuals with the possibility of" root-seeking subjectification." In the embodied presence created by audiovisual rhetoric, the audience not only completes an aesthetic gaze at traditional skills but also confirms the blood connection between themselves and history, the land, and the community within their deep psychological structure.

As a digital memory device for contemporary society, ICH connects pre-modern ritual traditions with post-modern digital life, stitching together fractured historical experiences with current daily perceptions. In future cultural practices, the mission of ICH images lies in continuously exploring the dialectical unity of technology and cultural truth.

Disclosure statement

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