RESEARCH ARTICLE

GOING GLOBAL VIA TIKTOK: AN INCUBATION STRATEGY FOR HUXIANG'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE PRODUCTS

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ARTICLE INFO

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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive study develops and validates a strategic incubation framework for the internationalization of Huxiang's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) products through the TikTok platform, addressing the critical intersection of cultural preservation and global market integration in the digital age. Building upon established research documenting the symbiotic relationship between ICH-related industries and the knowledge economy, this investigation employs a mixed-methods approach combining digital ethnography, content analysis, and cross-cultural communication theory to examine how traditional crafts from China's Hunan region can achieve meaningful global presence through platform-native strategies. The research analyzes 450 posts and 22,000+ user interactions from five representative Huxiang ICH TikTok accounts over a three-month period, identifying four interconnected strategic pillars that constitute an effective incubation model: cultural translation through micro-storytelling, platform-optimized content architecture, algorithmic community cultivation, and sustainable commercialization pathways. Findings demonstrate that successful internationalization requires sophisticated adaptation of heritage narratives to resonate with global audiences while maintaining cultural authenticity, a process that transforms traditional crafts into viable elements within the creative economy. The study reveals that TikTok's participatory ecosystem enables a form of platform-enabled cultural entrepreneurship wherein heritage bearers evolve into digital opinion leaders, facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and value creation. This research makes significant theoretical contributions by extending current understanding of digital heritage dissemination and provides practical, actionable guidance for heritage practitioners, cultural institutions, and policymakers seeking to leverage social media for cultural sustainability and economic development. The proposed framework addresses identified gaps in strategies for digital ICH dissemination while offering a replicable model for other cultural regions navigating the complexities of digital globalization.

INTRODUCTION

The accelerating forces of globalization and digital transformation have created both unprecedented challenges and opportunities for the preservation and continuation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) worldwide. As traditional knowledge systems, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and craft techniques face pressures from modernization, urbanization, and cultural homogenization, digital platforms have emerged as crucial spaces for cultural reinvention, intergenerational transmission, and economic sustainability. This study addresses a particularly significant intersection in contemporary cultural policy and creative industries: how the distinctive ICH products of China's Huxiang region (Hunan Province)—encompassing renowned traditions such as Xiang embroidery, Liling underglaze porcelain, Tujia brocade, Miao silver jewelry, and Hunan paper-cutting—can strategically leverage TikTok's global reach and participatory culture to achieve meaningful international presence while maintaining cultural integrity and generating sustainable economic value for heritage communities. Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the economic potential of ICH within knowledge-based economies, with comprehensive research noting how the digital transformation of ICH resources presents significant opportunities for wider dissemination and access, opening new markets and revenue streams (Ma & Guo, 2024). However, despite growing academic and policy interest in this convergence, practical frameworks for actualizing this potential remain notably underdeveloped, particularly regarding systematic approaches to international market integration. While significant studies have explored the conversion of ICH into economic value through creative economy approaches (Huang, 2023) and examined experience marketing dimensions in new media contexts (Ma, Wang, & Zeng, 2023), few investigations have addressed the specific mechanics and strategic considerations of platform-driven

internationalization, particularly for heritage products with deep cultural specificity. This research gap is especially pronounced regarding China's regional ICH traditions, which possess immense cultural richness but face substantial barriers in reaching global audiences due to linguistic, cultural, and contextual distances. This investigation responds directly to identified needs for innovative legal reforms, strategies for digital ICH dissemination, and case studies for successful integration with various industries (Ma & Guo, 2024) by proposing and examining a comprehensive incubation strategy specifically tailored for Huxiang ICH products on TikTok. The research is guided by three central questions: (1) How can TikTok's unique platform dynamics and algorithmic systems be strategically leveraged to facilitate effective cross-cultural communication of Huxiang ICH's complex cultural meanings and values? (2) What specific content creation strategies, narrative approaches, and engagement techniques most successfully bridge cultural divides and resonate with diverse international audiences while maintaining heritage authenticity? (3) Through what pathways and business models can sustainable commercialization emerge organically from digital engagement without compromising cultural integrity or exploiting heritage communities?.

The significance of this research operates on multiple levels. Theoretically, it contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations at the intersection of digital media studies, cultural heritage management, cross-cultural communication, and international entrepreneurship, offering a nuanced framework for understanding how platform affordances mediate cultural globalization processes. Practically, it provides heritage practitioners, cultural organizations, and policymakers with evidence-based strategies for navigating the complexities of digital internationalization, addressing what bibliometric analysis has identified as emerging needs for experience marketing strategy innovation and development with intangible culture and digital product integration in mind(Chen, Zhou, & Liu, 2023). Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of digital ethnography and platform-specific content analysis for understanding contemporary cultural flows and audience reception patterns in increasingly algorithmically-mediated environments. This study is particularly timely given several converging trends: the rapid global expansion of TikTok as a dominant cultural platform, especially among younger demographics; increasing international interest in authentic cultural experiences and artisanal products as evidenced by the growth of platforms like Etsy and the craft economy; and heightened policy attention to cultural soft power and creative exports within China's broader cultural development strategies. By examining how Huxiang's specific ICH traditions can navigate these converging forces, this research offers insights with potential applicability to numerous other cultural regions and heritage traditions facing similar challenges and opportunities in the digital age.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

ICH in the Digital Economy: From Preservation to Innovation: The conceptualization of Intangible Cultural Heritage has undergone significant evolution in recent decades, moving from primarily preservation-focused approaches toward more dynamic frameworks emphasizing adaptation, innovation, and sustainable development. Comprehensive research has documented ICH's multi-faceted contributions to economic growth, innovation, and regional development (Ma & Guo, 2024), particularly when strategically integrated with knowledge-based economies and creative industries. This shift reflects broader recognition that heritage sustainability increasingly depends not only on safeguarding practices but on ensuring their continued relevance and value within contemporary socioeconomic contexts. Huang's (2023) detailed case study of Tantou New Year Prints illustrates potential pathways for traditional crafts within creative economies, emphasizing processes of cultural exploration, focusing on pain points, form translation, and urban regeneration. This research demonstrates how centuries-old artistic traditions can find new relevance through thoughtful adaptation and positioning within modern creative networks, though it primarily examines domestic rather than international contexts. These adaptation processes gain additional dimensions and complexities in global digital environments, where platforms enable direct engagement with diverse international audiences but also require navigation of significant cultural and contextual differences. The digital transformation of heritage dissemination has been extensively documented, with studies highlighting how new technologies can enhance accessibility, facilitate interactive learning, and create novel forms of cultural participation. Chen's (2023) research on human-computer interaction in ICH clothing customization systems exemplifies how digital interfaces can mediate between traditional craft knowledge and contemporary consumer expectations, creating personalized experiences while maintaining connections to cultural heritage. Similarly, bibliometric analysis of ICH and experience marketing in China notes growing scholarly interest in how intangible cultural heritage are better preservation, transformation and dissemination via digital products (Chen, Zhou, & Liu, 2023), suggesting expanding possibilities for innovative digital heritage applications.

Platform-Enabled Cultural Entrepreneurship: TikTok as Ecosystem: Contemporary social media platforms represent far more than passive distribution channels; they constitute complex ecosystems with distinct affordances, algorithmic systems, and participatory cultures that actively shape how cultural content is created, circulated, and received. TikTok, in particular, has emerged as a dominant force in global digital culture, with research documenting its transformative impact on digital marketing through its capacity to create engaging content that resonates with younger demographics (Guarda et al, 2021). For ICH practitioners and communities, this means moving beyond traditional preservation narratives toward active cultural co-creation within platform-specific environments. The concept of platform-enabled cultural entrepreneurship extends beyond conventional e-commerce or digital marketing to encompass more holistic value creation processes that leverage platform affordances for cultural innovation, community building, and sustainable economic development. This framework recognizes that successful digital heritage initiatives must navigate not only content creation but also algorithmic visibility, community management, platform governance, and evolving digital literacy. It acknowledges what Ma and Guo (2024) identify as necessary legal frameworks governing ICH reforms to address the dynamic landscape of the knowledge-based economy, suggesting that regulatory and policy considerations must evolve alongside technological and market changes.

Cross-Cultural Digital Storytelling and Value Communication: Effective internationalization of culturally-

specific heritage products requires sophisticated approaches to cross-cultural communication that acknowledge and bridge differences in cultural frames, aesthetic traditions, and value systems. Research by Zhang et al. (2022) identifies cultural identity as a crucial factor in ICH product purchase decisions, with particularly strong effects observed among more knowledgeable consumers. This finding suggests that successful internationalization strategies must simultaneously educate international audiences about cultural contexts while creating emotional resonance and perceived relevance to their own values and identities. Ma, Wang, and Zeng (2023) provide valuable insights into how new media platforms transform heritage communication dynamics, noting that ICH inheritors are increasingly becoming opinion leaders within digital spaces, enabling more nuanced communication of multiple experience value dimensions including aesthetic experience value, emotional experience value, functional experience value, and cultural value identity. This multidimensional approach to value communication appears particularly important for heritage products, which often embody complex cultural meanings alongside functional or aesthetic qualities. The researchers' observation that the diversity of inheritors in the process of new media display and marketing is more conducive to thickening the public's online consumption experience value suggests that authenticity and personal connection remain crucial even within highly mediated digital environments.

Conceptual Synthesis: Toward an Integrated Incubation Framework: Integrating these diverse theoretical insights and empirical findings, this study proposes a comprehensive framework for ICH internationalization via TikTok organized around four interconnected strategic pillars: (1) Cultural Translation and Micro-Storytelling – developing narrative approaches that make complex heritage accessible and resonant across cultural boundaries while maintaining authenticity; (2) Platform-Optimized Content Architecture – leveraging TikTok's specific technical affordances, format conventions, and algorithmic preferences to maximize visibility and engagement; (3) Algorithmic Community Cultivation – building and sustaining engaged international communities through platform-native interaction strategies and value co-creation; (4) Sustainable Commercialization Pathways – developing ethical economic models that generate fair returns for heritage communities while preserving cultural integrity and supporting transmission. This integrated framework addresses identified needs for coherent strategies for digital ICH dissemination(Ma & Guo, 2024) while responding to calls for greater attention to how experience marketing and consumers as the center, creating a unique experience can enhance heritage engagement (Chen, Zhou, & Liu, 2023). It recognizes that successful digital internationalization requires simultaneous attention to cultural, technical, social, and economic dimensions, with each pillar supporting and reinforcing the others within a dynamic system.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophical Approach: This study employs a qualitative, exploratory multiple-case study design situated within an interpretivist philosophical framework, recognizing that understanding digital heritage internationalization requires nuanced examination of meaning-making processes, contextual factors, and participant perspectives. The research combines digital ethnography with systematic content analysis to develop rich, contextualized insights into successful strategies for Huxiang ICH internationalization via TikTok. This mixed-methods approach aligns with established practices in digital media research and allows for triangulation of findings across different data types and analytical approaches. Digital ethnography, conducted over an immersive three-month period (January-March 2024), enabled deep engagement with platform cultures, content patterns, and community dynamics, following established protocols for ethical digital research. Content analysis provided systematic examination of posting strategies, aesthetic choices, and engagement patterns across selected case studies. This combination of immersive and systematic approaches facilitates both empathetic understanding of creator perspectives and objective analysis of content strategies and their outcomes.

Case Selection and Sampling Strategy: Case selection employed purposive sampling to identify information-rich examples of Huxiang ICH internationalization on TikTok. Five representative accounts (@ Xiang Embroidery Artisan, @Liling Porcelain Studio, @Tujia Textiles, @Hunan Paper Cutting, @ Miao Silver Craft) were selected based on four criteria: (1) primary focus on Huxiang region ICH traditions with clear cultural specificity; (2) substantial international follower base (minimum 30% non-Chinese followers based on profile analysis and comment patterns); (3) consistent content production over at least six months demonstrating sustained strategy rather than viral anomalies; (4) evidence of intentional commercialization attempts or clear value communication beyond purely cultural documentation. These cases represent diverse ICH categories (textile arts, ceramics, metalwork, paper arts) and varying scales of operation (individual artisans, family workshops, small enterprises), allowing for examination of both common patterns and contextual variations. All selected accounts operate primarily on TikTok International (non-Chinese interface versions), positioning them explicitly toward global rather than domestic audiences.

Data Collection Procedures: Data collection encompassed multiple complementary sources to ensure comprehensive understanding: Primary Content Corpus: 450 posts (90 per account) were systematically captured including videos, captions, hashtags, sounds, and metadata (upload dates, initial engagement metrics). Sampling employed time-based stratified selection to ensure representation across the three-month study period and different days/times. Audience Engagement Data: 22,000+ user comments were collected and analyzed, with particular attention to cross-cultural interaction patterns, language use, question types, and sentiment indicators. Top-performing posts (based on likes, shares, comments) received additional analysis of engagement trajectories and community response patterns.

Supplementary Materials: Account profiles, linked external content (websites, other social media), and publicly available creator information provided additional context for understanding strategic approaches and positioning. Data collection followed established ethical guidelines for digital research, utilizing only publicly available content, protecting account anonymity through pseudonyms, and focusing analysis on patterns rather than individual identification. No direct interaction with account owners or followers occurred during the study to avoid influencing natural behaviors.

Data Analysis Framework

Data analysis proceeded through two interconnected phases employing complementary analytical techniques:

Phase 1: Content Analysis utilized a structured codebook developed through iterative review of sample content and consultation with relevant theoretical frameworks. Coding categories included: (1) Narrative strategies and storytelling approaches; (2) Visual and auditory aesthetic choices; (3) Platform feature utilization (specific editing tools, interactive elements, algorithmic optimization techniques); (4) Cross-cultural adaptation techniques; (5) Value communication dimensions (aesthetic, emotional, functional, cultural); (6) Commercialization approaches and call-to-action strategies.

Phase 2: Discourse and Interaction Analysis examined comment sections and community dynamics using principles of digital discourse analysis and computer-mediated communication theory. Particular attention was paid to: (1) Cross-cultural dialogue patterns and mutual learning processes; (2) Emergence of cultural bridge users facilitating understanding; (3) Community norms and relationship-building behaviors; (4) Expressions of cultural appreciation, curiosity, or connection; (5) Purchase inquiry patterns and commercial interest indicators.

Analytical rigor was maintained through iterative coding refinement, intercoder reliability checks on sample segments, and systematic documentation of analytical decisions. The interpretive process remained sensitive to contextual factors and platform-specific conventions while grounding observations in empirical evidence.

Methodological Limitations and Considerations: Several methodological limitations warrant acknowledgment. Platform algorithm biases inevitably shape content visibility and audience composition in ways not fully transparent to researchers. The evolving nature of digital platforms means that specific features and trends identified during the study period may change rapidly. The focus on successful cases provides insights into effective strategies but cannot identify all potential approaches or reasons for failure. Additionally, the study examines publicly visible dimensions of digital strategy but cannot access private decision-making processes, financial outcomes, or offline impacts on heritage communities. Despite these limitations, the methodological approach provides valid insights into observable patterns of successful digital internationalization, with findings offering theoretical contributions and practical guidance while suggesting valuable directions for future research employing complementary methods such as creator interviews, audience surveys, or longitudinal tracking.

Strategic Pillar 1: Cultural Translation through Micro-Storytelling

The Imperative of Narrative Reconstruction: The internationalization of culturally-specific heritage products necessitates fundamental narrative reconstruction to bridge substantial cultural, historical, and contextual distances. Our analysis reveals that successful Huxiang ICH accounts on TikTok do not merely present heritage items as finished objects or document traditional techniques as anthropological artifacts; rather, they engage in sophisticated cultural

translation through what we term micro-storytelling – compact, emotionally resonant narratives that isolate specific accessible elements of complex heritage traditions. This approach aligns with Huang's (2023) identification of form translation as essential for integrating traditional crafts into contemporary creative economies, though extended here to address cross-cultural rather than merely contemporary adaptation. The most effective accounts demonstrate what might be termed strategic reductionism – intentionally simplifying complex cultural knowledge to its most communicable core elements while maintaining essential authenticity. For instance, @XiangEmbroideryArtisan's highest-engagement content (consistently receiving 3-5 times average likes and shares) focuses not on comprehensive technical explanations of Xiang embroidery's sixteen major stitch types or its two-thousand-year history, but on visceral, sensory moments: the distinctive sound of silk thread passing through fabric, the hypnotic rhythm of repetitive motions, the dramatic transformation as colorless outlines gain dimensional color. This sensory emphasis creates immediate, language-transcending accessibility while hinting at deeper cultural meanings, effectively performing what Ma, Wang, and Zeng (2023) identify as communication of aesthetic experience value through digital media.

Personalization and Humanization Strategies: A consistent pattern across successful accounts involves foregrounding individual artisans and their personal relationships to heritage traditions, transforming abstract cultural heritage into relatable human stories. @Liling PorcelainStudio's Generations of Fire series exemplifies this approach, documenting not merely technical ceramic processes but intergenerational dynamics between master potter Chen (age 72) and his granddaughter Ling (age 24) who left a corporate marketing career to learn the family tradition. This narrative frame achieves multiple strategic purposes: it provides natural dramatic tension and character development familiar to international audiences accustomed to storytelling conventions; it addresses contemporary concerns about intergenerational transmission and cultural sustainability; it authenticates the tradition through embodied lineage; and it creates emotional connection points beyond purely aesthetic appreciation.

This humanization strategy proves particularly effective for overcoming what might be termed cultural exoticization – the tendency for international audiences to perceive non-Western cultural traditions as monolithic, static, or fundamentally other. By presenting heritage as living, evolving, and personally meaningful, successful accounts facilitate what Zhang et al. (2022) identify as important connections between cultural identity and consumption, allowing international viewers to perceive points of commonality (family bonds, career passions, artistic dedication) while appreciating cultural specificities. The comment sections of such content reveal viewers frequently drawing parallels to their own family traditions, artistic practices, or intergenerational relationships, suggesting successful cultivation of what might be termed transcultural identification.

Contemporary Relevance and Functional Recontextualization: Perhaps the most sophisticated cultural translation strategy observed involves what we term functional recontextualization– demonstrating how traditional heritage items or techniques can serve contemporary needs, lifestyles, or aesthetic preferences beyond their original cultural contexts.

@Miao Silver Craft's viral Silver in the City series (individual videos reaching 2.4M, 1.8M, and 3.1M views respectively) exemplifies this approach, featuring traditionally-crafted Miao silver jewelry styled with minimalist streetwear, office attire, and festival fashion rather than traditional Miao clothing. Each video follows a similar narrative arc: opening with close-up documentation of intricate silverwork fabrication (establishing craft authenticity and skill), transitioning to try-on sequences with diverse models in contemporary settings, concluding with subtle styling suggestions (Try layering with your favorite denim jacket, Perfect for adding texture to monochrome looks). This re-contextualization strategy serves multiple crucial functions for internationalization: it overcomes perceptions of heritage items as merely decorative, ceremonial, or museum-appropriate rather than wearable in everyday life; it provides concrete styling guidance that reduces uncertainty for potential international purchasers unfamiliar with how to integrate such items into their existing wardrobes; it positions heritage craftsmanship within familiar fashion and lifestyle categories rather than isolating it as purely ethnic or traditional. Most importantly, it addresses what Huang (2023) identifies as essential focusing on pain points in creative economy integration – here, the pain point being international consumers' uncertainty about how culturally-specific items fit into their lives and self-presentation.

Symbolic Simplification and Universal Theme Extraction: Successful accounts demonstrate remarkable skill in identifying and emphasizing universal human themes within culturally-specific heritage practices, what we term symbolic simplification. @TujiaTextiles' content around wedding blanket motifs provides a compelling example: rather than comprehensively explaining the dozens of symbolic animals, plants, and geometric patterns in Tujia textile traditions (which would require substantial cultural knowledge to appreciate), the account focuses consistently on one accessible theme – protection. Videos highlight how specific motifs historically represented wishes for newlyweds' safety, health, and prosperity, then connect this to contemporary desires for security and well-being that transcend cultural boundaries. This thematic narrowing allows international viewers to grasp emotional essence without needing comprehensive symbolic literacy.

This symbolic simplification proves particularly effective when paired with what might be termed tactile visualization – using extreme close-ups, slowed motion, and sensory descriptions to create almost physical experiences of materials and processes. @HunanPaperCutting's most successful video series (average 1.7M views) employs macro photography so extreme that individual paper fibers become visible as scissors pass through them, with audio emphasizing the satisfying crisp sound of precise cuts. This approach transcends language and cultural barriers by appealing to what appears to be near-universal human fascination with meticulous craft process and material transformation, what online communities frequently tag as oddly-satisfying content. The strategy effectively communicates what Ma, Wang, and Zeng (2023) categorize as multiple dimensions of experience value simultaneously – aesthetic, emotional, and even what might be termed processional appreciation.

Educational Layering and Curiosity Cultivation: While emphasizing accessibility and emotional resonance, successful accounts nonetheless incorporate sophisticated educational content through what we identify as layered or progressive approaches that accommodate varying audience knowledge levels and engagement depths. @Liling Porcelain Studio's content strategy exemplifies this layering: entry-level videos focus purely on visual fascination (glaze transformations, liquid clay manipulation); intermediate content introduces basic terminology and process explanations through captions and quick verbal explanations; advanced content (often in longer formats or multi-part series) delves into historical contexts, regional variations, and philosophical dimensions. This tiered approach respects what educational researchers term scaffolded learning while accommodating TikTok's predominantly fast-paced, entertainment-oriented environment. Crucially, even educational content employs narrative framing rather than didactic presentation. Technical explanations emerge organically within human stories (When my grandfather teaches me this kiln loading technique, he always says...); historical context surfaces through family anecdotes (My great-grandmother used this cobalt recipe during the war because...). This narrative embedding maintains emotional engagement while transmitting cultural knowledge, effectively performing what Ma and Guo (2024) identify as important dissemination functions while avoiding dry academic presentation that might disengage TikTok's predominantly young audience. Comment analysis reveals that this approach successfully cultivates viewer curiosity, with many expressing intentions to research further or asking thoughtful questions that indicate genuine cultural interest rather than superficial engagement.

Strategic Pillar 2: Platform-Optimized Content Architecture

TikTok's Distinctive Affordances and Conventions: Successful internationalization of Huxiang ICH products on TikTok requires not only effective cultural translation but equally sophisticated adaptation to the platform's distinctive technical affordances, format conventions, and algorithmic preferences. Our analysis reveals that the highest-performing accounts demonstrate what might be termed platform literacy – deep understanding of how TikTok differs fundamentally from other social media platforms in its content consumption patterns, creation tools, and community behaviors. This literacy encompasses both explicit platform features (editing tools, interactive elements, algorithmic signals) and implicit cultural conventions (appropriate video length, pacing, style, and tone for different content categories).

Perhaps the most fundamental platform adaptation involves what content strategists term vertical-first thinking – designing content specifically for smartphone vertical viewing rather than adapting horizontal formats from other platforms. All top-performing content in our study (representing the highest 10% by engagement metrics) employs TikTok's native 9:16 aspect ratio without exception, utilizing the full vertical canvas through strategic composition that guides viewer attention downward through natural scrolling motion. Successful creators understand that TikTok functions as what media scholars term a flow medium where content discovery occurs primarily through continuous algorithmic feeds rather than intentional navigation to specific creator pages, making immediate visual impact within the first 0.5-1.5 seconds absolutely critical for retention and engagement.

The Strategic Content Matrix: Balancing Educational, Emotional, and Experiential Modes: Our analysis of posting patterns across successful accounts reveals what we term a strategic content matrix – a balanced, intentional mix of content types addressing different audience needs, engagement modes, and platform functions. This matrix operates along two primary dimensions: content purpose (educational, emotional, experiential) and content format (short-form, series, interactive). The most effective accounts maintain approximately a 40%/35%/25% balance across the three purpose categories, avoiding over-reliance on any single mode that might limit audience reach or engagement depth.

Educational content (approximately 40% of posts) focuses on transmitting cultural knowledge, technical information, or historical context, but crucially employs TikTok-native presentation styles rather than academic or documentary approaches. @Xiang Embroidery Artisan's Stitch Dictionary series exemplifies effective educational content, using quick cuts between extreme close-ups, animated text overlays identifying stitch names, and satisfying visual demonstrations of technique. Each video follows a consistent formula: intriguing hook question (What gives Xiang embroidery its 3D effect?), rapid visual answer demonstration, brief technical explanation via text overlay, closing with curiosity prompt (Which stitch should I explain next? Comment below!). This format respects TikTok's fast pace while delivering substantive content, effectively performing what Chen, Zhou, and Liu (2023) identify as important functions for preservation, transformation and dissemination via digital products. Emotional content (approximately 35% of posts) prioritizes human connection, storytelling, and affective resonance, often featuring artisan personal narratives, community interactions, or heritage emotional dimensions. @TujiaTextiles' Blanket Stories series exemplifies this category, documenting elderly community members sharing memories associated with specific textiles, often with emotional depth regarding family, loss, tradition, or resilience. These videos frequently employ slower pacing, lingering shots, and evocative sound design (traditional music, natural ambient sounds, voiceover narration) distinct from the platform's typically frenetic style, effectively creating what Ma, Wang, and Zeng (2023) identify as emotional experience value through digital mediation. Comment analysis reveals these posts generate particularly high rates of personal sharing and empathetic response, suggesting successful cultivation of emotional community bonds.

Experiential content (approximately 25% of posts) emphasizes sensory immersion, process fascination, or interactive participation, often leveraging TikTok's unique features for creative expression. @LilingPorcelainStudio's Satisfying Ceramics series typifies this category, employing extreme close-ups, slowed motion, and amplified sounds of clay manipulation, wheel throwing, glaze application, and kiln unloading. These videos frequently employ what the platform terms ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) techniques – deliberate attention to tactile sounds and visual patterns that many viewers find pleasantly immersive or relaxing. This content category appears particularly effective for attracting viewers through algorithmic discovery, as such sensory-focused content frequently performs well within TikTok's For You recommendation system regardless of language or cultural context.

Technical Platform Mastery: Beyond Basic Competence: Successful accounts demonstrate what might be termed technical platform mastery extending far beyond basic video shooting and editing to encompass sophisticated understanding of TikTok's specific toolset, algorithmic preferences, and evolving feature ecosystem. This mastery manifests in several consistent patterns across high-performing content:

Strategic sound utilization represents perhaps the most distinctive technical adaptation, with 65% of top-performing videos employing what creators term sound strategy – intentional selection and sometimes modification of audio elements to maximize discoverability and cultural resonance. Effective approaches include: using trending global sounds (often Western pop music, electronic tracks, or viral audio clips) juxtaposed with traditional craft visuals to create intriguing cultural contrast; employing original sounds (platform terminology for creator-recorded audio) featuring authentic ambient workshop noises, artisan voices, or traditional instruments to enhance authenticity; modifying sound parameters (speed, pitch, echo effects) to match visual pacing or create distinctive audio signatures. This sophisticated audio dimension directly addresses what research identifies as TikTok's status as increasingly sound-on platform where audio elements substantially influence content performance and algorithmic distribution.

Interactive feature integration represents another crucial technical dimension, with successful accounts employing TikTok's built-in interactive tools not as occasional additions but as fundamental structural elements. Our analysis reveals that videos incorporating at least one interactive element (polls, Q&A stickers, quizzes, duet invitations) receive on average 140% higher comment rates and 85% higher share rates than comparable non-interactive content. @Hunan Paper Cutting's Design Together series exemplifies strategic interactivity, beginning each video with a poll inviting viewers to choose between design options, incorporating real-time results into the creative process, and concluding with duet invitations for viewers to create their own variations. This approach transforms passive viewing into participatory co-creation, effectively building what community management literature terms participatory culture around heritage traditions. Algorithmic optimization techniques evident in successful accounts demonstrate sophisticated understanding of how TikTok's recommendation systems operate, though always within ethical boundaries of authentic content creation rather than outright manipulation. Observable strategies include: consistent posting schedules aligned with primary international audience time zones (particularly North American and European evening hours); strategic hashtag layering combining broad interest tags (handmade, 2.3B views), cultural category tags (chinesecraft, 840M views), niche community tags (embroideryartist, 560M views), and trending challenge tags (craftchallenge, 410M views); careful attention to retention metrics through pacing adjustments based on analytics; strategic use of series and multi-part content to encourage sequential viewing and channel subscriptions. These techniques collectively enhance what platform studies term algorithmic visibility – the likelihood of content appearing in users' For You recommendation feeds.

Aesthetic Coherence and Brand Identity Development: Despite TikTok's reputation for spontaneous, casual content, successful Huxiang ICH accounts demonstrate remarkable

attention to aesthetic coherence and brand identity development across their content portfolios. This coherence operates at multiple levels: consistent color palettes (often drawing from traditional material colors or regional aesthetic traditions); signature editing styles (particular transition types, text overlay designs, pacing patterns); recurring visual motifs (specific camera angles, compositional approaches, symbolic elements); and tonal consistency (balancing respect for tradition with approachable, engaging presentation).

@MiaoSilverCraft's content exemplifies this strategic aesthetic coherence, employing what might be termed heritage modernism – clean, minimalist compositions that showcase intricate silver work against neutral backgrounds, employing subtle animation to highlight design details, utilizing consistent typography for text overlays drawn from traditional Miao script aesthetics modernized for legibility. This coherent visual identity serves multiple strategic purposes: it creates immediate recognizability within crowded feeds; it communicates professional quality and intentional curation rather than accidental viral content; it reinforces brand positioning at the intersection of tradition and contemporary design; it provides aesthetic pleasure that itself becomes part of the value proposition.

This attention to aesthetic coherence and brand development represents what Ma and Guo (2024) identify as necessary movement beyond conventional boundaries between culture and commerce, suggesting that successful digital internationalization requires heritage initiatives to develop sophisticated brand identities that communicate value while maintaining cultural authenticity. The most effective accounts achieve this balance by ensuring aesthetic choices emerge organically from cultural traditions rather than imposing external branding conventions, thus maintaining what might be termed culturally-grounded coherence.

Strategic Pillar 3: Algorithmic Community Cultivation

Understanding TikTok's Community Dynamics: The internationalization of Huxiang ICH products on TikTok requires more than effective content creation; it necessitates sophisticated community cultivation strategies that leverage the platform's unique social dynamics and algorithmic systems. Our analysis reveals that the most successful accounts approach community building not as a secondary activity but as a core strategic function integrated with content creation, cultural translation, and value communication. This integrated approach recognizes that TikTok communities differ fundamentally from those on other social platforms in their formation patterns, interaction norms, and relationship to algorithmic visibility. TikTok's community dynamics are profoundly shaped by what platform studies term algorithmic sociality – the way recommendation systems mediate not only content discovery but also social connections, community formation, and cultural participation. Successful accounts demonstrate sophisticated understanding of these dynamics, recognizing that community growth often occurs through what might be termed interest-based adjacency rather than direct follower recruitment. @Xiang Embroidery Artisan's growth pattern exemplifies this phenomenon: initial visibility emerged not through embroidery-specific audiences but through adjacency to broader interest communities including slow-fashion (285M views), mindfulness (3.2B views), and artistsoftiktok (21.4B views). The account's content strategically employed tags, aesthetics, and narrative hooks that resonated within these adjacent communities while maintaining clear embroidery focus, effectively performing algorithmic bridge building between heritage specificity and broader interest categories.

Cultural Bridge Users and Trans-cultural Interpretation: A particularly significant community dynamic observed across successful accounts involves what we term cultural bridge users – bilingual or bi-cultural community members who voluntarily facilitate cross-cultural understanding through comment section explanations, translations, and contextual clarifications. Our analysis identifies these bridge users in approximately 18% of substantive comment threads (those containing multiple conversational exchanges rather than simple reactions), with their presence correlating strongly with positive sentiment, decreased cultural misunderstanding, and increased expressions of appreciation and curiosity from international viewers. These bridge users perform multiple crucial functions: they provide real-time translation of culturally-specific terms or concepts that creators might assume are universally understood; they offer contextual explanations that help international viewers interpret symbolic meanings or historical references; they occasionally correct misinterpretations or cultural generalizations before they spread; they model respectful cross-cultural engagement through their tone and approach. Successful accounts actively identify, acknowledge, and sometimes subtly collaborate with these bridge users through various strategies: featuring particularly helpful explanations in follow-up video responses; inviting bridge users to participate in live Q&A sessions; creating collaborative content that highlights cross-cultural exchange; occasionally offering small acknowledgments or rewards for sustained supportive engagement.

This strategic engagement with bridge users represents a sophisticated form of what community management literature terms participatory moderation, leveraging community resources to enhance cultural communication while reducing creator burden. It effectively addresses what Zhang et al. (2022) identify as important needs for consumer education programs about ICHP-related knowledge by distributing educational functions across community networks rather than centralizing them solely with creators. Most importantly, it transforms cross-cultural communication from unidirectional transmission to multilateral dialogue, creating what might be termed trans-cultural interpretation communities that collectively enhance understanding.

Participatory Culture Activation and Co-Creation: Beyond facilitating understanding, successful accounts actively cultivate what media studies term participatory culture – environments where community members move beyond passive consumption to active contribution, collaboration, and creative expression. This participatory activation takes multiple forms across different accounts, each tailored to specific heritage traditions and community characteristics. @ Tujia Textiles' Global Quilt Project exemplifies large-scale participatory activation, inviting community members worldwide to contribute textile squares representing their own cultural traditions or personal stories, with the account documenting the gradual assembly of these contributions into a collaborative physical quilt. This project generates sustained engagement across multiple content formats: call-to-action videos explaining participation guidelines; progress updates

showing received contributions; behind-the-scenes documentation of assembly processes; featured contributor stories highlighting particular squares and their meanings; culminating in digital and eventual physical exhibition of the completed work. This initiative effectively creates what might be termed distributed heritage creation, expanding traditional Tujia textile practices into global collaborative frameworks while maintaining core craft principles. Smaller-scale participatory activation occurs through features like duets, stitches, and collaborative filters. @ Hunan Paper Cutting's Cut-It-Yourself series employs Tik Tok's duet function to create interactive templates where viewers can attempt simplified versions of traditional paper cutting designs alongside expert demonstration. These participatory formats achieve multiple objectives: they lower barriers to hands-on engagement with heritage techniques; they generate substantial secondary content as viewers share their attempts; they create natural community bonding through shared challenge experiences; they provide authentic learning experiences that often deepen appreciation for technical skill levels. Comment analysis reveals that these participatory features substantially increase what might be termed investment indicators – expressions of personal connection, stated intentions to learn more, and sharing of personal creative outcomes.

Niche Community Development versus Mass Audience Growth: A crucial strategic insight emerging from our analysis involves the relative value of niche community development versus mass audience growth for heritage internationalization. Counter-intuitively, the most commercially successful accounts in our study generally maintain moderate follower counts (typically 50,000-200,000) with high engagement rates rather than pursuing massive followings with lower engagement. @LilingPorcelainStudio's community structure exemplifies this pattern: 68% of followers self-identify in profiles or comments as belonging to specific interest categories including ceramic artists (22%), interior designers (18%), collectors (15%), and sustainability advocates (13%), with only 32% categorized as general interest viewers.

This niche concentration creates multiple advantages for heritage internationalization: it enables more targeted content tailored to specific interest groups with shared reference points; it facilitates deeper relationship building through recognized community identity; it generates higher conversion rates for educational or commercial offerings due to preexisting interest alignment; it supports premium pricing through perceived specialist value rather than mass-market positioning. Perhaps most importantly for heritage sustainability, niche communities often demonstrate what might be termed stewardship behaviors – active protection of cultural authenticity, correction of misinterpretations, and advocacy for fair compensation and ethical practices. This strategic emphasis on niche development aligns with findings by Zhang et al. (2022) regarding the particular importance of perceived scarcity and specialist knowledge in heritage product valuation. By cultivating communities that appreciate technical nuances, historical contexts, and cultural specificities, successful accounts create environments where heritage value is understood and respected rather than reduced to superficial aesthetics or exotic appeal. This approach represents sophisticated application of what marketing literature terms community-based positioning, leveraging engaged niche communities as both market segments and cultural ambassadors.

Strategic Pillar 4: Sustainable Commercialization Pathways

The Commercialization Ethics Framework: The commercialization of intangible cultural heritage via digital platforms necessitates particularly careful ethical consideration, balancing economic opportunity for heritage communities against risks of exploitation, misrepresentation, or cultural dilution. Our analysis reveals that successful Huxiang ICH accounts approach commercialization not as separate from cultural communication but as integrated within broader value frameworks that prioritize cultural integrity, community benefit and sustainable practice. This integrated approach addresses what Ma and Guo (2024) identify as necessary attention to legal frameworks governing ICH and reforms to safeguard these cultural resources, though operating here at the level of individual creator ethics and community norms rather than formal policy. The most effective accounts demonstrate what might be termed transparent commercialization ethics–clear communication about commercial aspects including pricing rationale, production processes, community benefit structures, and cultural authenticity assurances. @ Miao Silver Craft's commercialization approach exemplifies this transparency: each product listing includes not only standard specifications but detailed information about which community members contributed which production stages, percentage distributions to different contributors, cultural significance explanations for design elements, and even challenges or limitations in production processes. This transparency serves multiple functions: it educates potential buyers about cultural and production contexts; it justifies premium pricing through detailed value explanation; it builds trust through vulnerability and honesty about limitations; it models ethical commercial relationships for broader heritage sectors.

This ethical framework proves particularly important given research findings by Zhang et al. (2022) regarding consumer responses to ICH products, specifically that perceived scarcity underlies such effect, but the scarcity account holds only for handmade ICHP, not for machine-manufactured products. By transparently communicating handmade processes, individual artisan contributions, and cultural specificities, successful accounts enhance perceived scarcity and authenticity while simultaneously performing ethical commercial practice. This represents sophisticated application of what might be termed ethical scarcity–maintaining premium positioning through genuine limitations (time-intensive processes, specialized skills, authentic materials) rather than artificial exclusivity.

Education-First Commercial Models: A distinctive pattern among successful accounts involves what we term education-first commercialization – structuring commercial offerings as extensions of educational content rather than separate sales initiatives. @ Xiang Embroidery Artisan's digital workshop series exemplifies this approach: free TikTok content establishes technical expertise and teaching ability through mini-lesson videos; intermediate offerings include low-cost digital pattern packages ($8-15) with accompanying video tutorials; premium offerings involve live virtual workshops ($75-120) with interactive instruction, personalized feedback, and community access; highest-tier offerings encompass small-

group mentorship programs ($300-500) with sustained guidance on technical development. This tiered educational model creates multiple advantages: it builds trust and demonstrated value before requesting substantial financial commitment; it accommodates varying levels of interest and investment capability; it generates sustainable revenue streams rather than one-time purchases; most importantly, it directly supports heritage transmission by actually teaching skills rather than merely selling products. This education-first approach aligns particularly well with digital platform dynamics, where value demonstration through free content establishes credibility and relationship foundations before commercial transactions. It also addresses what Huang (2023) identifies as needs for cultural exploration and skill development in creative economy integration, positioning heritage commercialization as fundamentally connected to knowledge transmission rather than separate from it. The model proves especially effective for international audiences who may lack physical access to heritage communities for traditional apprenticeship learning, creating what might be termed digital apprenticeship pathways that maintain core pedagogical principles while adapting to technological mediation.

Digital-Physical Hybrid Value Creation: Successful accounts demonstrate particular innovation in what we term digital-physical hybrid value creation–developing commercial offerings that integrate digital and physical elements to enhance both accessibility and perceived value. @Liling Porcelain Studio's Story Behind the Piece collection exemplifies this hybrid approach: each physical ceramic piece is accompanied by exclusive digital content accessible via QR code including video documentation of its specific creation process, artisan commentary about design intentions and technical challenges, cultural context about symbolic elements, and even meet-the-maker interview segments. This digital augmentation achieves multiple commercial objectives: it justifies premium pricing through enhanced experiential value; it creates emotional connection between buyer and maker despite geographical distance; it provides educational content that increases appreciation and proper care; it generates shareable digital assets that provide organic marketing as buyers share their exclusive content. This hybrid model represents sophisticated response to what Chen, Zhou, and Liu (2023) identify as emerging trends toward digital products and experience marketing strategy integration, creating cohesive experiences that span digital and physical realms. It proves particularly effective for heritage items whose value derives substantially from stories, contexts, and making processes that cannot be fully communicated through physical objects alone. By embedding these narratives directly within purchase experiences, successful accounts transform commercial transactions into what might be termed cultural relationship initiation–beginnings of sustained engagement rather than concluded exchanges.

Licensing, Collaboration, and Ecosystem Development: Beyond direct sales models, successful accounts increasingly develop what might be termed ecosystem commercialization through strategic licensing, collaboration, and partnership frameworks that extend reach while maintaining cultural integrity. @Tujia Textiles' collaboration with an ethical fashion brand exemplifies this ecosystem approach: rather than simple licensing of designs for mass production, the collaboration involves co-creation processes where Tujia

artisans work directly with designers to adapt traditional motifs for contemporary apparel, maintains transparent revenue sharing with artisan communities, includes educational components about cultural origins in marketing materials, and limits production quantities to preserve handmade authenticity. This model creates multiple benefits: it accesses new markets through established brand channels; it generates licensing revenue with relatively low additional labor investment; it provides international exposure that often drives traffic back to primary channels; it models respectful cross-cultural collaboration for broader industry. Such ecosystem approaches address what Ma and Guo (2024) identify as needs for case studies for successful integration with various industries, demonstrating practical pathways for heritage integration within broader creative economies while maintaining ethical standards. They prove particularly valuable for heritage traditions with strong visual elements adaptable to diverse product categories, allowing expansion beyond traditional forms while maintaining cultural connections. Most importantly, they create diversified revenue streams that enhance economic resilience for heritage communities, reducing dependence on any single product category or market channel.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications and Practical Applications

Redefining Digital Heritage Entrepreneurship: This study extends current conceptualizations of heritage entrepreneurship into digital platform contexts, proposing what might be termed platform-enabled cultural entrepreneurship as a distinct framework for understanding how traditional heritage practices can generate sustainable value in global digital markets. This framework integrates elements from multiple theoretical domains: digital media studies regarding platform affordances and algorithmic visibility; cultural economics concerning heritage valuation and creative industry integration; cross-cultural communication theory regarding narrative adaptation and symbolic translation; and community studies examining participatory culture and relationship building in digital environments. The proposed framework demonstrates how successful digital heritage initiatives navigate what might be termed the platformization paradox–the tension between platform conventions that often favor simplified, standardized content and heritage values that emphasize complexity, specificity, and authenticity. Successful accounts resolve this paradox not by choosing one pole over the other but by developing sophisticated strategies that make complexity accessible, specificity relatable, and authenticity communicable within platform constraints. This represents significant theoretical advancement beyond dichotomous perspectives that often position digital mediation as inherently threatening to heritage authenticity or, conversely, as unproblematically liberating for heritage dissemination.

Practical Implementation Framework for Heritage Practitioners: For heritage practitioners and communities seeking to internationalize through TikTok, this study provides a comprehensive implementation framework organized around the four strategic pillars with specific actionable components:

Cultural Translation Implementation involves: (1) conducting heritage element mapping to identify core cultural components

and their potential cross-cultural resonance; (2) developing micro-story banks of compact narratives highlighting different value dimensions (emotional, aesthetic, functional, cultural); (3) creating sensory emphasis guides focusing on visually and awrally compelling aspects of heritage practices; (4) establishing personalization protocols for presenting heritage through individual artisan stories and relationships. Platform Optimization Implementation encompasses: (1) conducting platform literacy development through systematic analysis of successful content within relevant categories; (2) creating content matrices balancing educational, emotional, and experiential modes across appropriate formats; (3) developing technical mastery roadmaps for gradually acquiring platform-specific skills; (4) establishing aesthetic coherence systems ensuring visual and tonal consistency across content. Community Cultivation Implementation includes: (1) implementing bridge user identification and engagement protocols to leverage community translation resources; (2) developing participatory activation strategies utilizing platform features for co-creation; (3) creating niche community development plans focusing on specific interest groups rather than mass audiences; (4) establishing relationship cultivation systems for sustained engagement beyond transactional interactions. Commercialization Pathway Implementation involves: (1) developing ethical framework documentation transparently communicating commercial principles; (2) creating education-first model structures with tiered learning pathways; (3) designing digital-physical hybrid offerings that enhance value through integrated experiences; (4) establishing ecosystem partnership criteria for ethical collaboration with external entities. This comprehensive framework addresses what Ma and Guo (2024) identify as needs for managerial implications for policymakers, cultural institutions, and practitioners, providing specific, actionable guidance rather than general principles. It recognizes that successful digital internationalization requires simultaneous attention to cultural, technical, social, and economic dimensions, with each component supporting and reinforcing the others within an integrated system.

Policy Implications and Institutional Support Structures: Beyond individual practitioner guidance, this study suggests important policy implications and institutional support needs for facilitating effective digital heritage internationalization. These include:

Digital Literacy and Skill Development Programs that equip heritage practitioners with not only basic digital skills but sophisticated understanding of platform dynamics, content strategy, community management, and ethical commercialization. Such programs should move beyond technical training to include strategic thinking, cross-cultural communication, and business development components tailored specifically to heritage contexts. Platform Partnership Initiatives that facilitate constructive relationships between heritage institutions and social media platforms, potentially including: dedicated heritage categories or features within platforms; algorithmic adjustments to support cultural content visibility; collaborative educational resources about ethical heritage representation; co-developed certification systems for authentic heritage accounts. Financial and Technical Support Mechanisms that address particular challenges heritage practitioners face in digital internationalization, including: grants for equipment and production resources; technical assistance for content creation and platform optimization; legal support for intellectual property protection and ethical licensing; marketing support for initial audience development phases. Research and Evaluation Frameworks that systematically document and assess digital heritage initiatives to build knowledge about effective practices, identify challenges, and support continuous improvement. Such frameworks should include both quantitative metrics (engagement rates, audience growth, commercial conversion) and qualitative dimensions (cultural integrity maintenance, community relationship quality, inter-generational transmission impacts). These policy implications address what Ma and Guo (2024) identify as necessary attention to how legal frameworks governing ICH require reforms for the dynamic landscape of the knowledge-based economy, suggesting that supportive policy environments must evolve alongside technological and market changes to effectively facilitate ethical, sustainable digital heritage internationalization.

CONCLUSION

This study has developed and examined a comprehensive strategic framework for internationalizing Huxiang's Intangible Cultural Heritage products through TikTok, addressing significant gaps between heritage preservation imperatives and global market opportunities in the digital age. Through detailed analysis of successful case studies employing digital ethnography and content analysis methodologies, the research has identified four interconnected strategic pillars that constitute an effective incubation model: cultural translation through micro-storytelling, platform-optimized content architecture, algorithmic community cultivation, and sustainable commercialization pathways. The findings demonstrate that successful digital internationalization requires sophisticated adaptation strategies that make heritage traditions accessible and resonant across cultural boundaries while maintaining authenticity and integrity. This involves not merely technical platform mastery but deep understanding of cross-cultural communication principles, community dynamics, and ethical commercialization approaches. The proposed framework extends current conceptualizations of heritage entrepreneurship into digital platform contexts, proposing platform-enabled cultural entrepreneurship as a valuable lens for understanding how traditional practices can generate sustainable value in global digital markets.

The research makes several specific contributions: theoretically, it integrates insights from digital media studies, cultural heritage management, cross-cultural communication, and international entrepreneurship into a coherent framework for understanding digital heritage internationalization; methodologically, it demonstrates the value of digital ethnography and platform-specific content analysis for examining contemporary cultural flows and audience reception; practically, it provides heritage practitioners, cultural institutions, and policymakers with evidence-based strategies and actionable guidance for navigating digital internationalization complexities. While providing comprehensive insights, this study has several limitations that suggest valuable directions for future research. The focus on successful cases, while informative about effective strategies, cannot identify all potential approaches or reasons for failure; comparative studies including less successful initiatives would provide valuable complementary perspectives. The

examination of publicly visible dimensions of digital strategy cannot access private decision-making processes, financial outcomes, or offline impacts on heritage communities; mixed-methods research incorporating interviews, surveys, and longitudinal tracking would enhance understanding of these dimensions. The study's concentration on TikTok, while justified by its global dominance, limits generalizability to other platforms with different affordances and cultures; comparative platform studies would illuminate how strategies might vary across digital environments. Future research should particularly explore: longitudinal impacts of digital internationalization on heritage transmission fidelity and community well-being; cross-cultural variations in audience reception and engagement patterns; ethical frameworks and best practices for heritage-commercial platform relationships; inter-generational dynamics within digitally-mediated heritage practices; policy innovations supporting sustainable digital heritage initiatives. As digital platforms continue to evolve and reshape global cultural flows, ongoing research must examine how heritage communities can navigate these changes while maintaining cultural integrity and achieving sustainable development.

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