

Recording China in Sound: Audio-Visual Landscape and Cultural Expression in “China in the Sound”

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Abstract: By focusing on 100 famous historical and cultural cities, “China in the Sound” vividly presents their dialects, intangible cultural heritage, municipal cuisine, folk stories, urban development, and other contents. It builds a three-dimensional audio-visual landscape, explores the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, displays the spiritual charm of urban culture, and better develops and disseminates excellent traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: China in the Sound; Audio-visual landscape; Urban culture; Cultural expression

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1. Introduction

“Listen to the local accent, hear the homeland.” With poignant soundscapes, familiar dialects, and widely celebrated folk stories, “China in the Sound” focuses the “lens” of auditory language on numerous famous historical and cultural cities in China. Through the diverse use and expression of auditory language, the cultural heritage and historical context of these cities are displayed, awakening shared sentiments and cultural imprints of the Chinese nation. It showcases the beauty of urban culture within the framework of local sounds and emotions and narrates the memories of a nation with shared roots across four corners.

2. Cultural connotation: decoding urban culture and preserving intangible cultural heritage

Throughout their continuous development, cities have amassed rich cultural legacies and gradually evolved their unique urban cultures, which serve as beautiful calling cards for their respective locales. Urban culture not only bears witness to urban development but also constitutes the invaluable material and spiritual wealth of the entire community^[1]. “China in the Sound” focuses on numerous renowned historical and cultural cities, capturing and showcasing the distinctive sounds of 100 Chinese cities, spanning 25 provinces and municipalities directly

under the Central Government, thus illuminating the diversity and allure of Chinese urban culture to the global audience.

According to the Chinese and Foreign Urban Knowledge Dictionary, urban culture encompasses both tangible and intangible elements. Tangible culture encompasses practical aspects such as geographical patterns, architectural styles, and landscape characteristics, while intangible culture manifests at the spiritual level, comprising the humanistic elements forged through the historical vicissitudes of urban development, including dialects, idioms, customs, and performing arts ^[2]. In “China in the Sound,” audiences encounter not only the presentation of tangible culture, such as the vibrant urban landscapes, but also the exposition of intangible culture, including dialects, opera, and folk arts, all rich in cultural heritage.

The author meticulously listened to all 100 episodes of the program, documenting and organizing the auditory elements featured in each episode. These elements are then visually depicted using CI cloud maps, offering a comprehensive portrayal of the program’s typical soundscape. “China in the Sound” is dedicated to preserving dialects and promoting the display and transmission of local intangible cultural heritage. Each episode meticulously records and exhibits the historical context and cultural heritage of its featured city, delving into aspects such as local language, intangible cultural heritage, folk narratives, and expert commentary, all within concise 4-minute sound videos. Examples include the Kaifeng Xiangfu Tune, Tianjin Style Tune, Wuyuan Hui Opera, Tengchong Shadow Play, Dong Grand Song, Anshun Di Opera, Yangzhou Minor Tune, Taiyuan Lianhualuo, and Wu’an Pingtiao Luozi Opera, among others. These auditory elements, serving as the city’s sonic calling cards, embody the cultural symbols of its developmental trajectory and evoke enduring sentiments of home and country within people’s hearts ^[3].

3. Audiovisual landscape: integration of audio, video, text, and visualization to recreate auditory space

Each installment of “China in the Sound” features and presents at least four to five iconic sounds, constructing an immersive auditory realm that enables listeners to fully immerse themselves in the historical and cultural splendor of Chinese civilization ^[4]. Furthermore, “China in the Sound” integrates audio, video, graphics, and multimedia content through platforms such as WeChat public accounts, WeChat video channels, H5, and others, providing a comprehensive portrayal of each city’s cultural heritage and spiritual essence ^[5].

- (1) Recording intangible cultural heritage through sound: “China in the Sound” was broadcast on “the Voice of China,” meticulously capturing the representative cultural sounds of cities like Kaifeng, Chengdu, and Yan’an across 100 radio programs. As cities evolve, the sound of one’s hometown has emerged as a vital conduit and expression of local culture. A robust hometown sound bridges the psychological gap between wanderers and their roots, showcasing the shared cultural foundation of the Chinese nation ^[6].
- (2) Enhancing user experience with video: With the ongoing convergence of media, broadcasting now appeals not only to the ears but also to the eyes ^[7]. The integration of video and audio in media broadcasts not only compensates for the limitations of radio listening but also heightens user engagement and experience ^[7]. “China in the Sound” premiered on the WeChat public account platform of “the Voice of China,” featuring the inaugural program, “Mandarin Becomes ‘Ordinary,’ Why Did it Begin Here?” consisting of five videos. These videos include excerpts from the grand-scale musical “Dasong Dongjin Dream,” a Yu opera performance by Sun Yingxue, the night scenery of Kaifeng Drum Tower, the vocal cries of Kaifeng’s “Zhao Jingwang” Zhang Er in the night market, and Song Ci music and dance. These videos not only document and showcase the city’s essence but also effectively

preserve traditional culture.

- (3) Presenting urban style through images: The production team of “China in the Sound” employs audiovisual graphics and other multimedia methods to depict urban characteristics in a three-dimensional manner. Pictures, serving as effective complements to auditory business cards, present users with the most intuitive and concise representations of a city’s transportation network, landmarks, historical sites, city life, and cultural elements, thus serving as an effective medium for urban cultural promotion^[8].
- (4) Engendering user empathy through text: In “China in the Sound,” textual narratives chronicle a city’s development journey, showcase the creative transmission of culture, and foster a shared cultural identity among the Chinese nation^[9]. The opening paragraph of the first episode illustrates this: “Every city possesses its unique sound, each resonating with millennia of historical memory^[9]. For Sun Yingxue, a Yu opera performer rooted in Kaifeng since childhood, the melodious Xiangfu tune embodies the essence of Kaifeng.” Similarly, each episode concludes with an unforgettable sentiment. For instance, in the tenth episode, “Why Does Hangzhou Dialect Resemble the ‘Children’s Pronunciation’ Found Only in Northern China?” the concluding passage reads: “In the memory of Jiangnan, Hangzhou leaves an indelible mark. Hangzhou’s beauty, akin to Song poetry, exudes grace and melody, always modestly appropriate. Hangzhou’s allure is also warm, blending northern and southern sensibilities, passing down through generations with enduring radiance”^[10]. After immersing oneself in the rich tapestry of hometown sounds, such poetic prose evokes nostalgia and a pursuit of beauty.
- (5) Utilizing “sound maps” to expand spatial connectivity: The 100 cities (counties/districts) featured in “China in the Sound” span over 70% of the country’s provinces. To visually and accurately present the auditory business cards of each city, the program team ingeniously devised the “sound map”: By clicking on a traditional Chinese scroll, users are transported into a sonic landscape. Subsequently, clicking on provinces on the map and city names on the scale enables users to hear the resonances emanating from their hometown depths.

4. Cultural expression: Activating and preserving intangible cultural heritage through sound and constructing collective cultural memory

4.1. Unveiling the stories behind dialects and safeguarding the essence of local history and culture

Home is an indelible psychological anchor, and dialects serve as enduring markers of identity. In unfamiliar territories, dialects assume a distinctive cultural significance, fostering a profound sense of attachment among wandering souls to their places of origin^[11]. “China in the Sound” invokes nostalgic memories of hometowns through the resonant sounds of listeners’ native locales, conveying local customs and traditional culture through the artistry of sound language^[11]. Dialects, emblematic of local speech patterns, constitute the fabric of urban and rural civilization, representing irreplaceable intangible cultural assets and the cherished legacy of traditional Chinese culture. In 2015, the state initiated the “Chinese Language Resources Protection Project” in response to the dwindling number of speakers of traditional dialects amid an aging population and rapid urbanization. Localities nationwide are actively advocating for the preservation and transmission of dialects, thereby upholding linguistic diversity and ensuring the sustainable development of language ecosystems^[12].

The focal point of each episode of “China in the Sound” lies in the documentation and portrayal of dialects, encompassing local vernaculars imbued with the distinctive ambiance of their respective cities, widely sung dialectal nursery rhymes and captivating Quyi performances. Through live audio recordings, a broader audience

gains insights into the unique linguistic characteristics of different regions, fostering greater engagement in the preservation and transmission of dialects – immersing themselves in, comprehending, utilizing, and disseminating dialects. For instance, in the 5th episode, “Why Does Tianjin Dialect Differ So Significantly from its Surrounding Dialects?”, experts from the Tianjin Language Work Committee offer a comprehensive analysis of the origin, evolution, regional variations, and tonal nuances of the Tianjin dialect. In the 43rd episode, “Why Is Changsha Dialect Not True Xiang Dialect?”, Changsha scholars elucidate the preservation of ancient Chinese accents in Changsha, with the poetry recitations in Changsha dialect showcasing a unique rhythmic beauty. The rendition of Changsha dialectal nursery rhymes by children serves as a hallmark of intergenerational heritage. In the 66th episode, “Why Is Panzhihua, a City in Sichuan, the Least Resembling Sichuan?”, folk experts delve into the multifaceted immigrant culture of Panzhihua, where a fusion of southern and northern dialects from across the globe intermingles with the local Sichuan-dian minority dialect, giving rise to an inclusive Panzhihua Mandarin – a vibrant emblem of local dialectal diversity.

Language serves as a crucial conduit for cultural transmission and encapsulates the essence of local history and culture; thus, safeguarding dialects is imperative for preserving historical and cultural diversity. With over 130 languages spoken in China, of which 25 are spoken by fewer than 1,000 individuals, dialect preservation has emerged as a pressing imperative. “China in the Sound” delves into the multifaceted dialectal cultures across diverse regions, paving the way for innovative approaches to dialect preservation^[13]. On one hand, the profound resonance of local sounds sustains the heartfelt connections to one’s childhood hometown; on the other hand, it serves as the backbone of mainstream cultural discourse. Documenting the kaleidoscope of local sounds represents the most effective means of safeguarding and perpetuating dialectal culture.

4.2. Preserving opera and Quyi culture vibrantly and evolving within modern linguistic contexts

Through oral traditions and centuries of evolution, Quyi has evolved into a cherished form of auditory art within Chinese culture, with approximately 400 variations still thriving among the populace. Opera, as a traditional art form, embodies both local nuances and national characteristics, with its music, vocals, recitations, and instrumental accompaniments possessing profound auditory allure. The production team behind “China in the Sound” has curated folk arts and local operas, rich in sonic charm, serving not only as potent promotional tools for cities but also as invaluable intangible cultural heritage of China.

For instance, in the 66th episode, “Why Is Panzhihua, a City in Sichuan, the Least Resembling Sichuan?”, the program commences with an exploration of Sichuan Province’s intangible cultural heritage spanning over 600 years, showcasing “Talking Classics and Ancient Music.” Through the delicate performances of non-genetic inheritors, listeners are immersed in the melodious and graceful courtly melodies. The genesis of Quyi is intricately intertwined with urban development and transformation. Historically serving as a stopover on the ancient Southern Silk Road, Yishala Village emerged as a melting pot of Tan Jing and ancient musical traditions, earning the moniker “a wondrous garden nestled beyond the mountains”^[14]. Quyi, utilizing dialects as conduits of communication, vividly showcases the allure and essence of rap art.

In the 83rd episode, “Why Do the Tanka Saltwater Songs in Beihai, Guangxi Province, Utilize Cantonese Dialect?”, listeners are introduced to the Tanka people of Beihai, who document their lives through song, expressing their profound love for the sea and aspirations for life through Hepu Dialect saltwater songs. These saltwater songs, a hallmark of Tanka culture, have been designated as provincial intangible cultural heritage in Guangdong Province, effectively transmitted through local primary and secondary education, thus becoming living cultural relics and historical testaments.

In addition to documenting the unique folk melodies of various regions, such as Tianjin Style Opera, Yangzhou Opera, Taiyuan Lianhualuo, Wu'an Pingtiao Luozi Opera, Buyi Eight-tone Sitting Singing, and Huayin Laoqiang Opera, the production team has also preserved operas boasting local linguistic characteristics, including Chun'an Mu Opera, Siping Ji Opera, Shanghai Opera, and Han Opera. In the 64th episode, "Why Are There So Many Ancient Chinese Accents in Wuxi Dialect?", inheritors of the national intangible cultural heritage, Xiju opera, encapsulate the essence of Xiju with the adage "small bridges, flowing waters, refined elegance." Leveraging the Wuxi dialect, Xiju opera retains a plethora of ancient Chinese tones, illustrating how dialects and opera transmission serve as fertile ground for linguistic renaissance.

Just as each facet of soil nourishes its inhabitants, cities cultivate their distinctive local cultures. Intangible cultural heritage embodies millennia of cultural accumulation and the painstaking efforts of generations of custodians. Preserving these invaluable intangible cultural heritages of spoken languages is our collective cultural mission and responsibility. The living transmission of intangible cultural heritage necessitates fully mobilizing the enthusiasm of custodians, adhering to principles of integrity and innovation, harnessing the potent charm of linguistic and cultural communication, and constructing a collective memory of Chinese civilization^[15].

"China in the Sound" presents a panoramic series of city business cards, showcasing the richness of intangible cultural heritage. By listening to local accents and delving into the essence of urban cultural development through sound, the program endeavors to safeguard and perpetuate intangible cultural heritage within cities, continuing the narrative of China's extensive and profound civilization spanning over 5,000 years.

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