

From “Field Immersion” to “Portrayal”: A Study on the Ethnic Space Construction in Intangible Cultural Heritage Micro-Documentaries

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Abstract: In the context of digital technology reshaping the film and television communication ecosystem, micro-documentaries, with their short duration and lightweight characteristics, have become an important medium for the dissemination of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). As a composite of material and spiritual culture, the ethnic characteristics of ICH need to be visually represented through the creative construction of cinematic space. This paper, based on a film and television arts perspective, uses “space construction” as the core analytical framework to explore how ICH micro-documentaries achieve ethnic visual expression through “residence-based” realistic space documentation, “portrayal-based” psychological space symbolization, and “synchronized” cultural space visual encoding. The study finds that these works, through audiovisual construction of geographical landscapes and life scenes, psychological space presentation of the emotions and cognition of inheritors, and symbolic reorganization of audiovisual elements like costumes, lighting, and composition, not only represent the socialized living heritage of ICH but also strengthen ethnic cultural identity through the unique narrative logic of documentary film.

Keywords: ICH micro-documentary; Ethnicization; Space construction; Cultural imagery

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1. Introduction

The living character and inheritance characteristics of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) make it naturally compatible with the “representation” and “communication” aspects of film and television art. With the development of short video technology, ICH micro-documentaries, typically ranging from 5 to 12 minutes in length, have become a key medium connecting ICH with the general public, thanks to their advantages of being “short, fast, and refined” in dissemination. These works focus on traditional craftsmanship (such as embroidery and ceramics), ethnic performing arts (such as opera and dance), and folk activities (such as sacrificial rituals).

Through cinematographic recordings, they break the limitations of time and oral transmission, transforming ICH from “invisible inheritance” into “visible visual texts.”

As a cross-medium for both film art and ICH dissemination, the core value of ICH micro-documentaries lies not only in cultural preservation but also in the cinematic reconstruction of ethnic memory. The local customs, daily practices, and clothing designs presented in these films are all cultural codes formed over time, carrying the survival wisdom and spiritual core of specific ethnic groups. As Professor Song Junhua of Sun Yat-sen University stated, the concept of ICH protection, “seeing people, objects, and life”, emphasizes a “life-based” logic of inheritance. This concept aligns closely with the film art narrative principle of “focusing on people and moving people through emotions”^[1]. In the interaction between these film art and ICH dissemination, ICH micro-documentaries use innovative cinematic language to weave scattered folk symbols into a systematic ethnic narrative, showcasing the uniqueness of ICH while strengthening ethnic cohesion and cultural confidence through the construction of cultural identity.

2. The sentiment of field immersion: The ethnic roots of realistic space documentary

“Residence” emphasizes the deep involvement of the recorder in the site of ICH inheritance. Its theoretical foundation can be traced back to the “participatory observation” method in visual anthropology — that is, capturing the symbiotic relationship between ICH and the ethnic environment through the recorder’s immersive experience in the real space. This “rooted” documentary approach is not a simple replication of spatial appearances, but a “deep interpretation” of the visualized ethnic lifestyle.

2.1. Geographical and topographical symbolization: The visual anchor of ethnic living space

The geographical features (such as natural landscapes and architectural styles) of the real space serve as the “material containers” of ethnic culture. As stated in the Book of the Han (Hanshu), “Customs differ within a hundred miles, practices vary across a thousand miles”, reveals the shaping effect of geographical differences on cultural diversity. Cinematic language, through the use of visual symbols, transforms these “differences” into perceptible visual representations.

From the perspective of film semiotics, the geographical space in ICH micro-documentaries has a dual meaning of “signifier and signified”: the geographical appearance (signifier) is directly presented by the camera through shots of mountains, rivers, and buildings, while the ethnic cultural connotation (signified) needs to be deeply expressed through cinematography. For example, in the Jiangsu TV non-material cultural heritage documentary series *The Rebirth of All Things — Bamboo-Root and Ceramic Art*, the geographical landscape of bamboo forests and the architecture of Western Sichuan serve as the spatial foundation. Wide-angle shots of the swaying bamboo shadows and close-ups of the hands of bamboo weaving artisans form a visual echo, making the “bamboo forest” not just the production scene for “bamboo weaving craft”, but also a visual representative of the wisdom of “local materials and natural principles” unique to the Shu region. Similarly, in the documentary *I Repair Cultural Relics at the Forbidden City* by China Central Television, the shots of the red walls and yellow tiles of the Forbidden City, coupled with the carved beams and painted rafters, represent the historical space in cinematic form. These visual representations link the geographical symbol of “The Forbidden City” with the solemnity of “Peking culture” and the rigor of palace craftsmanship. The camera’s movement and pacing (slow and steady) also

subtly align with the “craftsmanship spirit” of the real world.

The cinematic presentation of geographical landscapes essentially decodes the “ethnic way of life” through the use of camera angles, movements, and compositions, allowing viewers to perceive the origins of ICH and, consequently, understand the ethnic roots of its culture — as film theorist André Bazin said, “The ontological significance of images is to make space the witness of history.”

2.2. The cinematic restoration of living space: The visual fragment of ethnic daily practices

Living space is a more micro and detailed real-world domain, focusing on the daily practices of ICH inheritors. Here, “reality” is not simply a replication of the scene, but rather a continuous capture of the “interaction between person, ICH, and daily life” through carefully designed shots — that is, how ICH is integrated into the daily activities of the inheritors, such as eating, living, and socializing, and becomes an organic part of the ethnic way of life.

An exemplary case is the second season of the Youku series *The Great Craftsman — The Romance of the Revival of Chinese Lacquerware*. The film follows the daily life of an ICH inheritor through long, following shots: shopping for lacquer materials with his wife in the morning (mid-shot, showing cooperation), discussing pattern designs in the evening under the light (close-up, capturing expressions), and a conversation with his wife as she wipes his tools (close-up, emphasizing details). These shots restore “lacquerware restoration” from a mere “craft display” to a “living practice”, making the “craftsman’s spirit” not an abstract concept but a specific persistence in everyday life. Similarly, in *Heritage* episode two, *Weaving Flames*, the shots of Li Wen picking fire grass in the mountains (tracking shots, showing labor), learning to weave cloth from her grandmother (fixed shot, emphasizing inheritance), and stripping plant stems with her mother (two-person shot, highlighting family collaboration), deeply connect the “fire grass weaving” ICH with the ethnic traits of “family ethics” and “intergenerational inheritance” among the Yi people.

By entering the living space from the “participant” perspective, the recorder avoids presenting ICH in a “specimen” manner. As ICH scholar Fang Lili emphasizes in her theory of the “post-ICH era”, ICH is not “static cultural heritage” but rather a “living cultural practice”^[2]. The cinematic restoration of living space respects this “vitality” — by recording the repetitive labor of the inheritors (such as repetitive embroidery or polishing) in long takes, ICH is returned from being a “cultural exhibit” to “ethnic everyday life”, with the duration of the shots themselves becoming a visual metaphor for the “difficulty of inheritance.”

3. The significance of portrayal: The symbolization of psychological space and the resonance of ethnicity

Psychological space is the projection of the inner activities of individuals, encompassing not only the emotions and cognition of ICH inheritors but also the emotional resonance generated by the audience through the imagery. In documentary creation, the externalization of this space is achieved through symbolic audiovisual means (such as shot composition, lighting, editing, and special effects). The core of this is to transform the abstract concept of “ethnicity” into a perceptible “emotional experience”, thus promoting the construction of cultural identity.

3.1. Cinematic tension between reality and ideal: The contemporary dilemma of ethnicity in film

The psychological space of ICH inheritors often presents a tension between “ideal” and “reality”: their love for ethnic culture drives their perseverance, while commercialization and inheritance gaps expose them to survival

dilemmas. This conflict is visually reflected through contrast shots and montage techniques, and it becomes a typical cinematic depiction of ethnicity in contemporary contexts.

An exquisite example of this is presented in the episode “I Am Not ‘Eastern Barbie’, I Am a Beijing Silk Figure” from the ICH Evolution Theory documentary series produced by Tencent Video and the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Association. The film employs cross-cutting editing to show two sets of shots: a focused close-up of Qi Congying (the third-generation inheritor of Beijing silk figures) adhering to the principle of “purely handmade” (ideal), and a medium shot of her apprentice He Mei feeling lost in an empty workshop (reality); a warm scene of Qi Congying touching a silk figure (tradition) juxtaposed with He Mei conducting market research at a cultural creative fair (innovation). This contrast not only portrays the “conflict between master and apprentice” but, through cinematic montage, elevates it into a deeper battle between “cultural purity” and “effective dissemination” — the visual presentation of psychological space provides a window into understanding the dynamic inheritance of ethnicity. As film psychology research suggests, “contrast shots can intensify the audience’s awareness of the contradiction, transforming them from bystanders into thinkers.”

This cinematic depiction of conflict does not negate inheritance but highlights the resilience of the ethnic spirit through “perseverance in adversity.” When Qi Congying says in an interview, “This craft is a remembrance of my ancestors; it must not be broken” (shot in first-person narration), her facial close-up (with a determined gaze) and the blurred background filled with silk figures form a visual focal point, turning her personal belief into a collective declaration of the ethnic “inseparable” attachment to its culture.

3.2. Audiovisual translation of psychological cognition: The emotional pathways of ethnic resonance

Another dimension of psychological space is the emotional resonance between the audience and the inheritors, achieved through film techniques such as “first-person narration” and “jump-cut editing for psychological visualization.”

First-person narration allows the inheritor to express their emotions directly, transforming their feelings for ICH into an emotional experience that the audience can perceive. In the Here is Fuzhou ICH episode, the inheritor of Fuzhou rice noodles recalls, “When my grandmother taught me, she said, ‘The noodles should be as thin as a strand of hair, and your heart should be as calm as still water.’ I’ve repeated this thousands of times for decades, not for money, but because I’m afraid her words will end with me.” This narration, captured through a close-up shot of the inheritor’s wrinkled eyes and calloused hands, transforms the repetitive labor into not only a skill inheritance but also a “family memory” and “ethnic filial piety” visual carrier. The slow, heavy pacing of the language and the long shot duration reinforce the authenticity of the emotion.

“Jump-cut editing”, on the other hand, externalizes the psychological activity of the inheritor through time and space reorganization in the film. In *The Great Craftsman*, the restoration of lacquerware is depicted with fast switching between shots: the close-up of cracked lacquer (close-up), the focused gaze of the craftsman (close-up), the smooth texture of the restored pattern (mid-shot), and the appreciative smile of his wife (wide shot). This editing not only showcases the restoration process but, through variations in visual rhythm (from broken to complete), conveys a psychological sense of accomplishment — this accomplishment itself is a metaphor for the “regenerative power” of ethnic culture.

According to the mirror neuron theory in film psychology, the audience emotionally resonates with the protagonist’s psychological portrayal, achieving a transformation from cognition to identification. When the

audience feels moved by the inheritor's persistence, their emotional experience transcends the individual level, becoming a collective recognition of the ethnic culture — this is the core value of the cinematic construction of psychological space.

4. The language of synchronization: Audiovisual symbol encoding of cultural space and the sublimation of ethnicity

Cultural space is the fusion of real space and psychological space, referring to the “ethnic cultural domain” constructed through audiovisual elements such as costumes, lighting, and composition. The core of this is to transform ethnicity into a “visually and sensually perceivable” cinematic aesthetic, achieving a resonance between “traditional symbols” and “contemporary aesthetics.”

4.1. The visual symbol system of costumes: Cinematic markers of ethnic identity

As the most direct symbolic carrier of ethnic culture, costumes in ICH micro-documentaries serve a dual function: both as “identity markers” and as “narratives of customs.” From the perspective of film styling, the colors, patterns, and cuts of costumes are not only the external representations of ethnic identity but also key carriers of cultural encoding within the narrative.

In the micro-documentary *Heritage of the Heart* by China Central Television, the costumes of Tibetan people in Sichuan are presented in close-up shots, showing the bright red and royal blue color scheme (symbolizing piety and sanctity), the prayer flag patterns on sleeves and skirts (representing religious beliefs), and the wide design (adapted to the plateau climate). These elements are not isolated but are visually connected with the hand movements of the Tibetan people as they spin prayer wheels. Thus, “costumes” become a dynamic image of “ethnic spirit.” Similarly, in *This Embroidery*, the “embroidered ball patterns” and “indigo dyeing” technique of Zhuang costumes are presented in macro shots, showing embroidery details. The “costumes” not only display the “embroidery craftsmanship” but also serve as a visual symbol of the Zhuang people's cultural values — “embroidered balls symbolize love, indigo represents auspiciousness.”

As film styling scholar Jin Yike said, “Costumes in images are ‘talking symbols’, with every design carrying cultural information”^[3]. Through the cinematic presentation of costumes, ICH micro-documentaries achieve the cognitive effect of “seeing the tribe through the clothes”, laying the visual foundation for ethnic visual expression.

4.2. The emotional narrative of lighting: Cinematic metaphors for the warmth of ethnic culture

In ICH micro-documentaries, lighting is not only a “tool for illumination” but also a “temperature symbol” for conveying cultural emotions. Many works prefer natural light and warm tones (yellowish, orange-red), as they can use the contrast of light and shadow to metaphorically represent “the weight of history” and “the warmth of inheritance.”

The “sunset teaching embroidery” scene in *This Embroidery* is highly representative. An elderly Zhuang grandmother sits in the doorway teaching her granddaughter embroidery, with the light from the setting sun casting diagonal rays through the door frame, creating light and dark spots on both the grandmother and the embroidery. The light areas emphasize the sheen of the embroidery thread, while the shadowed parts hide the cluttered background. This use of natural lighting not only realistically restores the rural living scene but also uses the “sunset” imagery (time passing) to hint at the “urgency of inheritance”, while the “warm tones” convey the intimacy of

“grandmother and granddaughter.” This creates a “culturally warm transmission” of ICH inheritance. Similarly, *Transmission of the Songs of the Dong* records the “Dong People’s Grand Songs” in the morning light of the mountains, with diffused light passing through tree leaves and falling on the singers. The soft lighting weakens the details of the people’s faces but emphasizes the overall harmony of “man and nature”, with the purity of the light itself becoming a metaphor for the “heaven and earth unity” spirit of the Dong people.

The “critique of everyday life” theory by Henri Lefebvre provides an explanation for this use of lighting. The combination of natural light and warm tones transforms the everyday living space into a cultural domain with aesthetic value, allowing the audience to experience the warmth of ethnic culture through light and shadow.

4.3. Cinematic formal aesthetic expression: The cinematic embodiment of ethnic aesthetic DNA

The composition of ICH micro-documentaries often draws on traditional Chinese painting techniques (such as the use of blank space and freehand brushwork), using the division of the frame to convey the unique aesthetic DNA of ethnic culture. This “painterly composition” is not a simple formal imitation but a cinematic response to the “ethnic aesthetic psyche.”

In *The Great Craftsman*, when presenting the details of lacquerware, the composition adopts “close-up + large blank space”: on the left side of the frame is the twisted branch pattern of the lacquerware (occupying one-third of the frame), while the remaining blank space only has the small caption “Thousand Years of Lacquer Art, One Piece for a Lifetime” (occupying one-tenth of the frame). This composition comes from the traditional Chinese ink painting concept of “counting white as black”, highlighting the exquisite beauty of the lacquerware (the beauty of ethnic craftsmanship) through close-up, while the “blank space” allows the audience to imagine, subtly aligning with the “reserve and restraint” aesthetic of Chinese culture. Similarly, in *The Hundred Crafts of the Sea*, when recording coin production, the “golden ratio” composition is used: the artisan is positioned at one-third of the frame (the visual focus), while scattered tools and unfinished products fill the remaining two-thirds. This composition follows the “balance principle” of Western film aesthetics but also emphasizes the “human-centered” view of Chinese creation, with the symmetrical arrangement of tools itself aligning with the “order” and “fairness” cultural values carried by coins.

This “ethnic” handling of composition subtly guides the audience to subconsciously accept the ethnic aesthetics through visual experience, thereby enhancing their cultural identification. As film aesthetic scholar Rudolf Arnheim said, “The balance of composition can provoke the audience’s psychological identification with cultural order.”

5. Conclusion

The ethnic space construction in ICH micro-documentaries is a progressive process, moving from “realistic documentation” to “psychological resonance” and then to “cultural identity.” The cinematic artistry of these works runs through the entire process: real space is documented through geographical and life scenes; psychological space is symbolized through emotional audiovisual expressions; and cultural space is creatively reconstructed through elements such as costumes, lighting, and composition. Together, these elements form a “visible, perceptible, and recognizable” narrative system, transforming ICH from a “niche heritage” into a “mainstream cultural symbol.” In the “post-ICH era”, the value of this spatial construction lies not only in cultural inheritance

but also in allowing ethnicity to gain new vitality in contemporary contexts through innovative cinematic expressions. As Fang Lili said, ICH protection should “avoid conservatism and focus on its true value in social development.” ICH micro-documentaries, through the ethnic audiovisual coding of space, create a dialogue between tradition and modernity, resonance between niche and mass, providing a unique cinematic path for the construction of cultural confidence.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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