



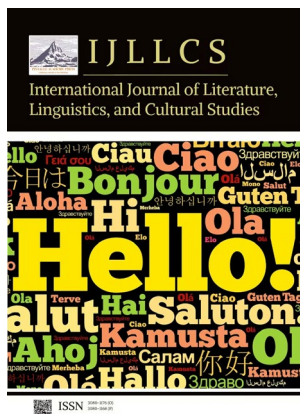
Article **Open Access**

Scroll, Like, Remember: The Role of Micro-Content in Reimagining Folk Traditions for Gen Z Audiences

Qiuying Li ^{1,*}

¹ Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

* Correspondence: Qiuying Li, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China



Received: 12 July 2025

Revised: 20 July 2025

Accepted: 15 August 2025

Published: 19 August 2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract: In the age of algorithmic media, short-form video platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, and Kuaishou have emerged as influential spaces for reimagining folk traditions in contemporary China. This study examines how micro-content—brief, highly stylized digital videos—serves as a dynamic medium through which Generation Z engages with intangible cultural heritage. Drawing on theories of cultural memory, media aesthetics, and participatory culture, we analyze a sample of 100 short videos across major Chinese platforms to explore the visual, narrative, and affective strategies used to mediate folk practices. Our findings reveal three dominant dynamics: first, the hybridization of traditional content with popular digital aesthetics; second, the compression of cultural memory into symbolic fragments optimized for attention economies; and third, the emergence of emotionally resonant viewer interactions that reframe heritage as a shared, affective experience rather than a linear historical narrative. Rather than dismissing these forms as superficial, we argue that micro-content platforms facilitate new modes of mnemonic participation, enabling youth to access and reinterpret tradition in ways that align with their media fluency and cultural imaginaries. This article contributes to broader debates on digital heritage, memory, and the mediation of culture in platformized environments, offering a critical perspective on how tradition survives and evolves in the scrollable present.

Keywords: cultural memory; digital heritage; participatory culture; platform affordances

1. Introduction

In an era where the act of scrolling has become second nature, cultural memory is no longer passed down solely through family rituals or educational institutions—it is curated, compressed, and reimagined through micro-content. For Generation Z, born into a digital ecosystem shaped by TikTok (Douyin), Bilibili, and Kuaishou, tradition is not encountered through textbooks or temples, but through 15-second videos, trending hashtags, and algorithmically tailored feeds. This shift raises urgent questions: What happens to folk traditions when they are mediated through fast-paced, performative, and attention-seeking formats? Can micro-content be a meaningful vessel for transmitting cultural heritage, or does it inevitably flatten and aestheticize it for easy consumption?

This paper explores how micro-content—defined here as short-form, often vertically-oriented videos under one minute in length—has become a central site for the reimagining of folk traditions in digital Chinese society. Rather than dismissing these platforms as spaces of cultural loss, we examine how they enable new forms of mnemonic engagement among youth audiences. We argue that micro-content functions as a fragmented but emotionally resonant interface of cultural transmission. In this landscape, traditional dances,

dialect songs, craft demonstrations, and food rituals are not merely preserved—they are re-scripted for virality, made to fit into the rhythm and aesthetics of digital attention economies.

The focus here is not on the loss or authenticity of tradition, but on how memory practices adapt and survive through new media environments. Through a qualitative content analysis of 100 short videos and close readings of selected cases, we examine how visual form, platform logic, and youth culture intersect to reshape the way folk traditions are remembered, performed, and felt [1]. Ultimately, this study proposes that while micro-content may fragment tradition, it also offers unexpected affordances for emotional connection, collective memory, and identity formation among digital natives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Memory and the Mediation of Tradition

The concept of cultural memory offers a vital framework for understanding how communities remember, transmit, and rearticulate their identities over time. Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory—everyday interpersonal transmission—and cultural memory, which is institutionalized and mediated through symbolic forms such as rituals, texts, and media. Folk traditions, long situated within the domain of communicative memory, are increasingly migrating into the realm of cultural memory through digital platforms, where they are curated, aestheticized, and archived. Nora's idea of *lieux de mémoire*—‘sites of memory’—is particularly relevant: in a world where lived tradition is fading, digital content becomes a substitute memory site, albeit one marked by fragmentation and ephemerality [2].

This transition from lived to mediated tradition raises questions about authenticity, continuity, and transformation. Scholars argue that media do not merely reflect memory—they actively shape what is remembered and how. In this context, short-form videos emerge as a new kind of mnemonic artifact, carrying cultural residues not through linear narration but through symbolic condensation and affective intensity [3]. These dynamics are central to how Gen Z engages with folk culture—not through knowledge acquisition, but through sensory, emotional, and performative modes of memory.

2.2. Platform Affordances and the Logic of Micro-Content

The rise of micro-content is inseparable from the affordances and logics of social media platforms. Platforms such as TikTok and Bilibili prioritize brevity, virality, and personalization—features that profoundly influence how culture is represented and consumed. Bucher and Helmond emphasize that platform architectures are not neutral but guide user behavior and visibility through algorithmic design. Van Dijck further argues that platforms are “techno-cultural constructs” that embed economic and ideological assumptions into content circulation [4].

For cultural heritage, this means that only certain forms of tradition—those that are visually striking, emotionally charged, or easily memetic—tend to gain traction. As Jenkins notes in his theory of ‘spreadable media,’ content must be modular and remixable to survive in digital ecologies. Traditional dances, craft tutorials, and folk music snippets often undergo stylized reinterpretation to meet these demands, creating what some scholars call “algorithmic aesthetics”. These dynamics both enable the visibility of folk traditions and risk detaching them from their historical and ritual contexts.

2.3. Youth, Heritage, and Participatory Culture

Generation Z engages with culture not as passive consumers but as remixers, co-creators, and performers. Applied to cultural heritage, this suggests that young users may encounter traditional culture not through deliberate heritage education, but incidentally—through scrolls, challenges, and memes.

Recent studies have explored how youth engage with tradition in hybridized forms, from cosplay that references historical aesthetics to dialect humor and culinary nostalgia [5]. These interactions suggest that heritage today is not merely inherited—it is performed, stylized, and commodified in ways that reflect contemporary values and identity work. The challenge is to understand how such engagements contribute to new forms of cultural memory that are mediated, affective, and temporally fragmented.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in content analysis and digital ethnography, aiming to explore how micro-content platforms reframe folk traditions for Gen Z audiences in digital Chinese society [6]. The methodological approach is intentionally hybrid, combining systematic sampling with interpretive analysis to capture both the structural features and affective dynamics of short-form heritage-related media.

3.1. Sample Selection

A total of 100 short videos were selected from three major platforms: Douyin (TikTok China), Bilibili, and Kuaishou. Sampling was conducted over a two-week period in May 2025 using platform search tools and trending tags such as #intangible cultural heritage, #handcrafts, #ethnic dance, and #national style. To ensure diversity in content type and presentation style, the sample included videos with varying levels of user popularity (10,000–1 million views), uploader background (official accounts, influencers, ordinary users), and folk content genres (e.g., performance, cuisine, language, costume) [7].

3.2. Analytical Framework

Each video was coded along the following dimensions:

Content Type: craft demonstration, dance/music performance, ritual reenactment, local dialect, folk cuisine, etc.

Visual & Aesthetic Features: use of filters, special effects, modern music overlays, staging and framing styles

Platform Affordance Use: presence of interactive tools (duet, stitch, subtitles, caption overlays)

Engagement Metrics: likes, comments, shares, and comment sentiment (categorized broadly as nostalgic, humorous, informative, or ironic)

Narrative Voice: whether tradition is portrayed as serious, playful, ironic, or hybridized

This coding scheme enabled both quantitative frequency mapping (e.g., percentage of videos with modern remix elements) and qualitative thematic analysis of recurring tropes, affective tones, and narrative strategies.

3.3. Platform Contextualization

To better understand platform-specific dynamics, we also analyzed the comment sections and platform interface features surrounding selected videos [8]. Particular attention was given to the role of comment cultures, trending challenges, and algorithm-driven visibility (e.g., placement on “For You” pages or curated playlists such as “Folk Art Revival”). These contextual insights were interpreted using principles of digital ethnography, treating platforms as socio-technical ecosystems where cultural meaning is actively co-constructed by users and algorithms.

3.4. Limitations

This study does not aim to generalize about all forms of youth heritage engagement across digital societies, but rather to offer a focused snapshot of how folk traditions are mediated through micro-content in popular digital spaces. The sample size is sufficient

for exploratory analysis, though future work could incorporate longitudinal or comparative designs across regions or platform types [9].

4. Findings: Reframing Folk Traditions in the Platform Ecology

The analysis of 100 short videos from Douyin, Bilibili, and Kuaishou reveals three major patterns in how folk traditions are represented and received on micro-content platforms:

- (1) the stylistic hybridization of traditional and popular elements;
- (2) the aesthetic compression of cultural practices into short, affective formats;
- (3) the formation of emergent participatory memory among youth audiences.

4.1. Content Typology and Stylistic Features

The distribution of content types, engagement levels, and the prevalence of popular aesthetic features are summarized in Table 1. The majority of videos integrate modern stylistic features such as background music remixes, filters, time-lapse transitions, and high-saturation color schemes. These aesthetic choices are not neutral—they reflect both platform affordances and a generational shift in how tradition is made visible and emotionally accessible.

Table 1. Content Types, Engagement Levels, and Adoption of Popular Aesthetic Features.

Content Type	Proportion of Sample	Mean Likes	Use of Popular Aesthetics
Traditional Handicrafts	34%	28,400	71%
Folk Dance / Music	26%	42,100	85%
Local Cuisine Practices	18%	39,800	67%
Dialect & Oral Heritage	12%	21,300	53%
Ritual Performances	10%	17,600	31%

4.2. Case Analysis I: Embroidery as Hybrid Craft Performance

In one widely circulated digital platform video, a young content creator performs Miao embroidery techniques while synchronized to an energetic electronic dance music (EDM) track. The video intersperses rapid-fire edits, zoomed-in details of the stitching process, and visually saturated subtitles that translate the embroidery's complex iconography into bite-sized, digestible explanations. What unfolds is not a tutorial nor a documentary, but a stylized micro-performance where tradition is re-scripted through the logics of virality.

Here, Miao embroidery functions less as a static repository of ethnic memory and more as a mutable aesthetic medium, repackaged for algorithmic circulation. While the craft remains visually central, its epistemic framing shifts from heritage-as-knowledge to heritage-as-affect. The emphasis on rhythm, affective color grading, and platform-native editing tropes reflects the affordances and constraints of short-form video ecosystems, where visibility hinges on attention economics rather than ethnographic fidelity.

In this reconfiguration, cultural authority is no longer held exclusively by elders, scholars, or institutions. Young creators now embody hybrid roles: performer, curator, and informal educator. They navigate a field where credibility is gauged more by engagement metrics than by lineage. Yet, this empowerment is double-edged. The mediation flattens historical depth, replacing narrative complexity with aesthetic immediacy. What emerges is a form of spectacularized pedagogy, where craft knowledge is transmitted not through contemplation but through immersion—fast, flashy, and emotionally engaging.

This case thus illuminates a broader shift: from preservation to reperformance, from authority to aesthetic resonance. It calls into question whether visibility equates to vitality, and whether the digitized revival of intangible heritage marks continuity—or rupture.

4.3. Case Analysis II: Reimagining Folk Dance through Pop Fusion

A popular video group on Bilibili reinterpreted a traditional Guizhou bamboo dance by integrating elements of K-pop choreography and contemporary music production. The resulting hybrid performance retained the linear spatial configuration and rhythmic coordination characteristic of the original dance, but recontextualized these within a globalized kinetic vocabulary—marked by sharp gestures, synchronized group dynamics, and high-tempo musicality drawn from Korean idol aesthetics. This aesthetic fusion not only appealed to a Gen Z audience attuned to transnational pop culture but also recoded the semiotic texture of the dance itself, shifting it from a ritualized communal practice to a visually consumable, algorithmically favorable performance unit.

Such acts of cultural remixing unfold within participatory culture, where users are not merely consumers but co-creators who actively shape the symbolic meaning of cultural artifacts. In this context, legitimacy is no longer tied to lineage, geography, or authenticity as defined by heritage institutions, but is instead negotiated through affective resonance, shareability, and alignment with platform-native aesthetics. While this decoupling from historical and ritual origins may raise concerns about cultural dilution or appropriation, it also signals a form of vernacular heritage-making that is responsive to the expressive needs of a digitally native generation. The practice occupies a liminal space between erosion and innovation, where intangible cultural heritage becomes not a fixed inheritance, but a site of playful negotiation, affective investment, and mediated translation.

4.4. Platform-Driven Cultural Compression

The formal qualities of short videos—vertical framing, 15–60 second durations, algorithmically optimized cuts—contribute to a distinctive mode of compressed cultural communication. Instead of full contextual narratives, the content isolates symbolic fragments: a pattern, a gesture, a vocal phrase.

These fragments function as affective cues rather than historical texts. Rather than conveying comprehensive cultural knowledge, they evoke recognition, association, and aesthetic appreciation. This mode aligns with the concept of “present pasts”—a form of memory shaped more by visual familiarity than historical depth.

4.5. Affective Engagement and Memory Circulation

Across the sample, video engagement was not solely performance-based but also memory-oriented. Viewer interaction patterns—such as high comment volume in craft and food videos, or frequent sharing of localized content—indicate that audiences respond to cultural fragments not only as entertainment, but as markers of regional, familial, or ethnic identification.

Importantly, this affective engagement does not rely on prior heritage knowledge. Instead, micro-content platforms facilitate what could be called lightweight mnemonic participation—moments of cultural recognition and resonance that are temporally brief but emotionally salient.

5. Discussion: Memory, Mediation, and Meaning in the Age of Micro-Content

The findings of this study point to a crucial shift in how folk traditions are engaged, remembered, and reconfigured in digital China. Micro-content does not merely digitize tradition; it transforms the mode through which tradition is made meaningful. This section explores the broader cultural implications of this transformation, focusing on three interrelated dynamics: aestheticization, fragmentation, and affective memory circulation.

5.1. Aestheticization and the Logic of Platform Performance

The dominance of highly stylized, remix-oriented representations in short videos suggests that folk traditions are increasingly subject to platform-driven aesthetic norms.

Filters, transitions, music overlays, and rapid editing not only shape visual presentation but act as selective mechanisms, favoring those aspects of tradition that are most legible within attention economies. While this enhances the visibility of cultural practices, it also results in what some scholars have called the “flattening of meaning”—where symbolic depth is replaced by surface affect.

Aestheticization is not inherently reductive. For Gen Z, aesthetic experience serves as a form of cultural engagement. The stylization of heritage may not replicate original contexts, but it enables new modes of identification and expression, particularly in a cultural environment saturated with image-based communication.

5.2. Fragmentation and Compressed Cultural Memory

Micro-content reconfigures memory into non-linear, fragmentary experiences. Folk traditions are often disassembled into visual or auditory motifs—an embroidery pattern, a cooking technique, a dance step—detached from broader historical or ritual frameworks. This aligns with the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, where the memory of a practice survives not through continued use, but through symbolic representation.

This compression is not necessarily a loss, but a reformatting: cultural memory is reorganized to match the affordances and rhythms of digital platforms. Short-form videos thus become compressed memory vehicles, capable of evoking heritage not through historical continuity, but through sensory recognition and algorithmic repetition.

5.3. Affective Participation and Cultural Re-Encoding

Perhaps most significantly, the emotional responses and identity associations emerging in viewer interactions reveal a form of affective heritage participation. In contrast to institutional or formalized heritage education, micro-content allows for spontaneous, informal modes of cultural affiliation. These interactions, while lightweight, contribute to a broader ecology of everyday memory-making, where users participate in the re-encoding of tradition in ways that are personal, playful, and deeply affective.

This suggests that micro-content may be expanding the cultural field of heritage, inviting users who might otherwise remain disengaged to engage with cultural practices in ways that align with their digital fluency and lifestyle. In this sense, platforms become both mediators and co-creators of folk tradition, shaping not only its representation but its contemporary meaning.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how folk traditions are reframed, reimaged, and emotionally re-engaged through micro-content platforms in China, particularly among Generation Z audiences. Through a qualitative analysis of short-form videos across Douyin, Bilibili, and Kuaishou, we identified how digital folk representations are shaped by platform logics, aesthetic conventions, and affective participation. Rather than viewing these representations as superficial or culturally hollow, we argue that they constitute a new modality of cultural memory—one that is compressed, visual, participatory, and emotionally resonant.

Three key dynamics emerged from the analysis. First, aesthetic hybridization allows traditional content to travel across generational and cultural boundaries, often gaining renewed relevance through stylized performance. Second, cultural compression reframes tradition into short, potent fragments, transforming how heritage is perceived and remembered. Third, affective participation, visible in comment culture and engagement patterns, reveals how youth audiences experience heritage not as historical instruction, but as emotional familiarity and shared symbolic belonging.

These findings suggest that the cultural relevance of folk tradition today lies not solely in its preservation, but in its reinterpretation within the fluid media ecologies of the digital era. As memory becomes increasingly mediated by platforms, folk heritage is less

about continuity and more about connection—however brief, visual, or hybridized that connection may be.

Future research may explore how different platform architectures shape cultural memory differently, or compare how other generations engage with similar content. As digital heritage practices continue to evolve, understanding their affective and symbolic dynamics will remain essential to grasping how culture lives, changes, and survives in the age of the scroll.

References

1. B. Burkey, "From bricks to clicks: How digital heritage initiatives create a new ecosystem for cultural heritage and collective remembering," *J. Commun. Inquiry*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 185-205, 2022, doi: 10.1177/01968599211041112.
2. I. Siliutina, et al., "Cultural preservation and digital heritage: challenges and opportunities," *Amazonia Investiga*, vol. 13, no. 75, pp. 262-273, 2024, doi: 10.34069/AI/2024.75.03.22.
3. C. Bareither, "Capture the feeling: Memory practices in between the emotional affordances of heritage sites and digital media," *Memory Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 578-591, 2021, doi: 10.1177/17506980211010695.
4. E. Stainforth, "Collective memory or the right to be forgotten? Cultures of digital memory and forgetting in the European Union," *Memory Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 257-270, 2022, doi: 10.1177/17506980211044707.
5. Y. Hou, et al., "Digitizing intangible cultural heritage embodied: State of the art," *J. Comput. Cultural Heritage*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 1-20, 2022, doi: 10.1145/3494837.
6. L. Zhang, et al., "Digital Presentation and Interactive Learning for Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation Using Artificial Intelligence," *IEEE Access*, 2025, doi: 10.1109/ACCESS.2025.3588520.
7. S. Mandolessi, "The digital turn in memory studies," *Memory Studies*, vol. 16, no. 6, pp. 1513-1528, 2023, doi: 10.1177/17506980231204201.
8. H. Shim, et al., "Heritage values, digital storytelling, and heritage communication: the exploration of cultural heritage sites in virtual environments," *Digital Creativity*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 171-197, 2024, doi: 10.1080/14626268.2024.2313585.
9. S. Modrow and T. Youngman, "Theorizing cultural heritage informatics as the intersection of heritage, memory, and information," *Proc. Assoc. Inf. Sci. Technol.*, vol. 60, no. 1, pp. 666-671, 2023, doi: 10.1002/pr2.836.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The views, opinions, and data expressed in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of PAP and/or the editor(s). PAP and/or the editor(s) disclaim any responsibility for any injury to individuals or damage to property arising from the ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.