

The Audiovisual Strategies and Cultural Communication of Intangible Cultural Heritage Documentaries

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Abstract

As the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) shifts from salvage-oriented documentation to modes of living transmission, ICH-themed documentaries have increasingly emerged as a key visual medium connecting traditional crafts with contemporary audiences. This paper takes *Handmade Yunnan* and *The Ancient Tea Horse Road: Deramu* as its primary case studies, employing textual analysis and an examination of cinematographic language to investigate the visual strategies of ICH documentaries with respect to authenticity, regional cultural expression, and new media communication contexts. The article examines shot types, camera positioning, camera movement, long takes, and montage, as well as the ways in which composition, color, lighting, and sound design collectively shape the visual construction and emotional experience of ICH inheritors in both films. The study finds that *Handmade Yunnan* emphasizes craft processes and tactile qualities through extensive handheld tracking shots, close-ups, and detailed framing, whereas *The Ancient Tea Horse Road: Deramu* constructs an immersive observational perspective through fixed long shots, deep focus, and the use of ambient sound. Both works enhance the audience's sense of immersion in regional spaces and the everyday lives of the characters through carefully structured narrative pacing and camera movement. Additionally, through secondary dissemination across new media and online platforms, ICH visuals are re-edited and recontextualized within a multi-screen environment, thereby further expanding the audience base and cultural influence of ICH imagery. This paper argues that audiovisual expression centered on cinematographic language not only shapes the aesthetic orientation of ICH documentaries but also, to a certain extent, reconfigures contemporary society's perceptions and value recognition of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage documentaries, Handmade Yunnan, The Ancient Tea Horse Road: Deramu, Cinematic language, New media communication

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage embodies the life wisdom, values, and aesthetic traditions accumulated by specific social groups over extended historical processes. Its continuity depends not only on intergenerational “living” transmission but also on processes of reproduction and recontextualization within contemporary media environments (Meissner, 2021). At the national level, institutional initiatives such as “Cultural and Natural Heritage Day” continue to reinforce the public agenda surrounding the protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Meanwhile, cultural departments and media organizations at multiple administrative levels have increasingly brought ICH into the public sphere through film screenings, themed events, and dedicated online platforms (Chakrabarti & Chakrabarti, 2025).

Compared with static recording methods such as written archives and photography, documentary film offers advantages in temporal continuity and multisensory layering. Documentary film can simultaneously capture craft processes, bodily movements, soundscapes, and interpersonal interactions, thereby presenting ICH practices in a more holistic and immersive manner (Hou et al., 2022). In recent years, domestic scholarship has emphasized that ICH documentaries fulfill three primary functions: documentation, presentation, and interpretation (Zhuo, 2023). These documentaries have gradually become an important medium linking fieldwork, institutional discourse, and public perception (Du, 2020). In international scholarship, documentaries and interactive documentaries are likewise regarded as important forms of cultural heritage digitization and narrative preservation. They not only serve archival functions but also engage audiences through multimodal storytelling that stimulates participation and emotional responses (Sun, 2024).

With the widespread adoption of digital imaging technologies and mobile devices, the integration of ICH themes with documentary formats has increasingly become a key cultural practice. On the one hand, high-resolution filming and nonlinear editing techniques enhance the representation of craftsmanship details and everyday life scenes, enabling creators to articulate aesthetic expression through composition, lighting, rhythm, and sound while maintaining a documentary orientation (Sanchez et al., 2023). On the other hand, multi-platform distribution and on-demand mechanisms significantly expand the audience base of ICH documentaries, transforming traditional craftsmanship from “local knowledge” into a public cultural resource that can be viewed, discussed, and reinterpreted across regions (Wang, 2025).

In the new media environment, the dissemination channels and audience structures of ICH documentaries have undergone significant restructuring. At the policy level, initiatives integrating “ICH + Internet” and “ICH + Short Video” have been actively encouraged. Local ICH authorities and digital platforms promote the widespread circulation of ICH visuals through cloud-based screenings, dedicated pages, and themed challenges (Li, 2024). Short video platforms have increasingly emerged as important spaces for the dissemination of ICH imagery. These platforms not only attract young audiences and general users to participate in content creation but also encourage ICH inheritors to actively engage with platform-specific

discourse systems in order to narrate their own stories through short videos or mini-documentaries (Du, 2020; Li, 2024). In the international context, studies have focused on digital platform adoption and immersive experiences, examining users' willingness to engage with "digital ICH" applications and interactive content. These studies indicate that immersion, performance expectations, and social influence are key factors driving public engagement with ICH (Li, 2025).

Although practices and scholarly discussions surrounding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and film production have become increasingly rich, existing research has largely concentrated on policy contexts, dissemination mechanisms, and audience studies, while lacking localized case studies at the textual level and, in particular, at the level of cinematographic language (Wang et al., 2024). Domestic scholars have examined several representative ICH documentaries from perspectives such as spatial narrative, genre narrative, and youth-oriented narrative; however, research on films depicting the minority cultures of Yunnan remains limited. Micro-level elements, including shot composition, camera positioning, camera movement, light-shadow interplay, and sound-image relationships, remain underexplored. How cinematographic language contributes to the construction of cultural meaning and emotional identification continues to require detailed, region-specific case studies. Meanwhile, international scholarship on documentaries and digital cultural heritage tends to focus on interactive mechanisms and user participation, while devoting comparatively less attention to the photographic style and audiovisual aesthetics of traditional long-form ICH documentaries.

This study focuses on ICH-themed documentaries, emphasizing their integrated strategies across four dimensions: "recording reality," "constructing character images," "fostering emotional identification," and the use of cinematographic language. On the one hand, the study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of cinematographic language and scene structure in representative works, exploring the visual logic through which craftsmanship processes, local spaces, and everyday life are constructed in ICH imagery. On the other hand, by taking into account changes in audience perception mechanisms within the context of digital communication, the study examines how ICH documentaries negotiate aesthetic styles and media forms, thereby offering theoretical insights and practical implications for the safeguarding, dissemination, and living transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, alongside the expansion of the documentary industry and shifts in the structure of mass cultural consumption, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has gradually moved from the realm of policy discourse and specialized terminology toward a public cultural issue deeply embedded in everyday life (Bortolotto & Skounti, 2023). Domestic scholarship generally holds that ICH-themed documentaries possess distinctive advantages in reconstructing cultural memory and shaping both national and local identities (Sun, 2024). Works represented by television documentaries and serialized productions, through their comprehensive presentation of craftsmanship processes, personal life histories, and regional spaces, have become an important visual mechanism for re-enacting scenes, narrating

traditions, and constructing identities.

In the Chinese context, research on ICH documentaries has been conducted from multiple analytical dimensions. Liang (2024) focuses on the cultural value and production dilemmas of ICH-themed documentaries, noting that such works, on the one hand, fulfill the function of “writing cultural memory,” while, on the other hand, they face the challenge of balancing typification, entertainment, and educational value. From the perspective of spatial narrative, Gou (2022) emphasizes that ICH documentaries employ camera movement and shot composition to weave “place–path–bodily practice” into a culturally symbolic space, thereby highlighting the intrinsic connection between ICH and the spiritual essence of local places. Wang (2021) examines educational and science-oriented ICH documentaries, reviewing narrative strategies such as knowledge-based explanations, storyline construction, and participatory experiences. He argues that the tension between popular science discourse and aesthetic expression constitutes a persistent issue that this type of production must continually address.

With the rise of media convergence and the short video ecology, micro-documentaries and short videos have emerged as a new focal area in ICH visual studies. Chen (2021) notes that ICH micro-documentaries have become increasingly “audiovisual essay–like” in terms of duration, narrative rhythm, and emotional expression, while also facing the risk of superficial narratives and symbolic consumption. Using the framework of media convergence, He and Ma (2022) analyze collaborative models between traditional television organizations and online platforms in the production, distribution, and interactive mechanisms of ICH micro-documentaries. They argue that the chain of “television production–online diffusion–social interaction” is reshaping the logic of ICH dissemination. Focusing on music-related ICH, Cui (2023) further analyzes short-form videos related to musical ICH on short video platforms, summarizing strategies in rhythmic editing, sound–image correspondence, and hashtag management. He demonstrates how algorithmic recommendation systems and user participation jointly shape the “everyday visibility” of ICH.

At the textual level, the series *Handcrafted Yunnan*, which centers on regional handicrafts, systematically presents ceramic, woodworking, weaving, and musical craftsmanship in ethnic minority regions, thereby constructing a threefold narrative space of “craft–environment–people.” Meanwhile, *Tea Horse Road: Drala* (hereafter *Drala*) observes Tibetan villages, the everyday lives of muleteers, and religious rituals along the Tea Horse Road, situating ICH within historical memory and the transregional flow of transportation networks. Existing research has often discussed these works from ethnographic or cultural narrative perspectives; however, systematic analyses of their cinematographic language remain relatively scarce, particularly with regard to how shot composition, camera positioning, camera movement, and montage structure jointly contribute to the construction of ICH meaning.

In international scholarship, researchers have increasingly focused on the relationship between digital technologies and cultural heritage preservation, while gradually incorporating

emerging forms such as short video platforms and interactive documentaries into scholarly discussions. Through case studies on mobile technology and storytelling, Tzima et al. (2020) demonstrate potential pathways for engaging children in ICH experiences within educational settings. Using the interactive documentary *New Life* as a case study, Podara et al. (2021) analyze the “operability” and “co-creativity” of cultural heritage visuals from the perspectives of audience participation and digital storytelling. Building on this line of research, Ziku (2020) and Skublewska et al. (2022) further emphasize the role of data structure, linked data, and virtual reconstruction in the digital preservation of ICH, thereby providing a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between ICH imagery, knowledge graphs, and virtual displays.

In recent years, empirical research on short video platforms and the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has increased significantly. Drawing on value–belief–norm theory and the theory of planned behavior, Liu et al. (2025) analyze the “responsible behavior” of short video users in disseminating traditional sports and games as ICH, noting that platform algorithms, value alignment, and interaction norms jointly shape patterns of user participation. Focusing on music-related ICH content on the TikTok platform, Cao (2025) finds that digital communication strategies, including visual effects, soundtrack remixes, and user interaction mechanisms, significantly enhance young audiences’ familiarity with and engagement in ICH. From the perspective of “digital ICH” adoption, Ye et al. (2025) combine the UTAUT2 model with immersion theory, revealing the significant roles of immersion, performance expectations, and social influence in users’ adoption of digital ICH applications. Taken together, these studies indicate at multiple levels that digital platforms function not only as channels for ICH dissemination but also as crucial spaces for the reproduction of meaning and cultural recontextualization.

Additionally, a growing body of research has begun to focus on the application of immersive technologies in the display of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Drawing on AR/VR-based cultural heritage visits and virtual bamboo-weaving experience systems, Wen et al. (2023) and Zhang et al. (2023) analyze the effects of immersion, presence, and interactivity on audiences’ cultural understanding and attitudes. However, these studies largely concentrate on technological systems and user experiences, devoting limited attention to the relationship among cinematographic language, audiovisual style, and the ethnographic gaze in the context of traditional long-form documentaries.

In summary, both domestic and international scholarship on ICH documentaries and digital dissemination has produced a substantial body of work. However, two significant gaps remain. First, studies of representative works such as *Handcrafted Yunnan* and *Drala* have largely focused on thematic selection and cultural narrative, while detailed analyses of specific cinematographic language remain limited. Second, research on traditional documentaries and digital dissemination has largely proceeded in parallel, with insufficient discussion of how classic long-form documentary cinematography interacts with perception mechanisms in the new media context. Addressing these gaps, this study selects *Handcrafted Yunnan* and *Drala* as its core case studies and examines how shot composition, shot selection, camera movement, lighting, and sound design jointly contribute to the construction of ICH

cultural meaning through cinematographic and scene-based analysis. The study further reconsiders the aesthetic strategies and dissemination pathways of ICH documentaries within the contemporary media environment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design that combines case study and textual analysis, focusing on the interactive mechanisms among cinematographic language, audiovisual style, and cultural dissemination in long-form ICH-themed documentaries. It aims to examine how documentaries construct representations of cultural heritage and evoke emotional expression through cinematographic language within specific socio-cultural contexts.

With respect to visual texts, the study adopts a theory-driven close-reading approach. Core concepts derived from the narrative texts—including visual authenticity, character construction, emotional expression, regional space, and new media dissemination—constitute the analytical framework. Moreover, scene-based observation tables are constructed to systematically record time codes; shot types (long shots, medium shots, close-ups, and extreme close-ups); camera positions and angles; camera movements; compositional strategies; color and lighting characteristics; as well as sound elements, including synchronous sound, ambient sound, background music, and character narration, together with their narrative functions.

The analysis is conducted from three perspectives: visual authenticity and the presentation of craftsmanship; the construction of characters and emotional expression; and regional space and dissemination contexts. Specifically, the analysis examines how cinematographic language balances the documentation of craftsmanship processes with the highlighting of detail; how inheritors and their social relationships are positioned and represented within narrative structures; and how images construct the locality of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and are subsequently re-edited and recontextualized across new media platforms. On this basis, a comparative analysis of *Handcrafted Yunnan* and *Drala* is conducted to identify similarities and differences in audiovisual strategies, narrative pacing, and dissemination pathways, thereby further assessing the specific impacts of ICH cultural dissemination as manifested in visual form.

3.2 Case Selection and Research Objects

This study selects *Handcrafted Yunnan* (2015) and *Tea Horse Road: Drala* (2004) as its core case studies. On the one hand, this selection is motivated by the representativeness of their thematic focus: both works center on the handicrafts and lifeworlds of ethnic minority communities in southwestern China, exemplifying the close interrelationship between regional and ethnic cultures. At the same time, the two works exhibit marked differences in visual style. *Handcrafted Yunnan* adopts a more structured, serial television-like pacing that emphasizes the systematic presentation of multiple handicrafts, whereas *Drala* adheres more closely to the tradition of ethnographic cinema, employing a participatory observational approach as its primary mode of expression. This contrast provides a clear stylistic basis for

examining the construction of ICH visual representation through different cinematographic language trajectories.

On the other hand, both works have undergone multi-platform distribution through television broadcasting and online repurposing, closely aligning with the contemporary integrated dissemination model that combines long-form documentaries, online platforms, and short video clips. By comparing these two texts—which are representative in terms of subject matter, visual style, and dissemination pathways—the study enables an examination of how different audiovisual strategies shape the presentation of ICH visual representations and their recontextualization within the new media environment, while controlling for a shared regional context.

4. Presentation Strategies of ICH Imagery

4.1 Visual Authenticity and the Construction of Cinematographic Language

The intrinsic characteristic of documentary film lies in its observation and recording of the real world. However, so-called “reality” is not a mechanical replication of the real world; rather, it is constructed through a range of audiovisual means, including camera positioning, shot selection, editing rhythm, and sound design, which together produce what can be understood as “visual authenticity” (Ellis, 2021). In other words, what a documentary presents is a reorganization of the real world at the level of cinematographic language—namely, a reproduction of reality filtered through the creator’s subjective choices and artistic processing, while remaining constrained by the principles of documentary practice.

In ICH-themed documentaries, craftsmanship processes are often highly specialized and repetitive. While respecting the internal logic and operational sequence of the craft, creators must employ multi-angle and multi-scale shot combinations to integrate both processual completeness and tangible detail into the visual structure (Zhu, 2024). In *Drala*, long shots and medium shots are initially employed to establish snowy villages, mule caravan routes, and labor environments, thereby constructing spatial connections among ICH practices, regional culture, and natural geography. Following this, medium shots capture bodily postures and labor stances, rendering ICH not merely an abstract “project” but a practical activity rooted in specific landscapes and everyday life. In contrast, *Handcrafted Yunnan* places greater emphasis on close-ups and extreme close-ups, repeatedly presenting hand movements, tool textures, and material surfaces, thereby enabling audiences to observe subtle actions—such as pinching, tapping, weaving, and carving—from an intimate visual perspective. This visual strategy allows audiences to perceive the temporal accumulation and embodied memory embedded in craftsmanship at a micro level.

At the narrative level, ICH documentaries often adopt an open-ended structure, in which the creative process cannot be fully predetermined and the trajectories of individual lives and everyday practices remain contingent and uncertain. Consequently, shooting practices and post-production editing become a process of “finding structure within uncertainty.” On the one hand, creators need to follow the rhythms of inheritors’ lives and craft processes,

preserving both the tempo of labor and the sense of everyday temporality. On the other hand, during the phase of material organization, creators must segment, arrange, and regulate pacing so that the narrative remains both compact and watchable, without erasing the inherent looseness and randomness of everyday life. This balancing act between documentary openness and narrative coherence constitutes one of the key characteristics that distinguish ICH documentaries from general interest documentaries or promotional videos.

Thus, adherence to the principle of “restoring real-life scenes” does not entail the rejection of artistic processing; the two are not inherently opposed. On the contrary, while ensuring informational authenticity and contextual reliability, creators must consciously employ cinematographic language and editing techniques to selectively capture the most meaningful and expressive moments of everyday life, thereby transforming fragmented details into narratively effective and aesthetically engaging visual segments. This process allows ICH practices to be faithfully recorded while simultaneously entering audiences’ perception and memory in a form that carries aesthetic and artistic impact.

4.2 Construction of Character Images in ICH Documentaries

The core of ICH-themed documentaries lies not only in the “craft itself” but also in the holistic relationship among people, craft, and the lifeworld. As key subjects of cultural practice, ICH inheritors constitute the most significant category of characters in visual narratives. Their bodily labor, experiential knowledge, emotional expressions, and social relationships provide the primary entry point through which ICH is rendered visible and meaningful on screen.

With regard to character development, three analytical dimensions can be identified in ICH documentaries, which together shape the construction of cultural subjectivity and audience identification.

1) **Life history and identity narrative:** Through interviews, everyday life scenes, and archival footage, the documentary traces the inheritor’s growth, learning trajectory, and creative journey, intertwining personal life histories with the historical development of the craft. In doing so, individual experiences are situated within broader processes of cultural transmission, allowing identity formation to emerge through the continuity of practice rather than as a fixed or isolated attribute.

2) **The presentation of everyday labor and the body:** Through sustained observation of work scenes, the film enables audiences to perceive the subtle relationship among the body, craftsmanship, and tools through repetitive yet subtly varied actions. This visual emphasis foregrounds the body as a primary medium for the transmission of craftsmanship, highlighting how tacit knowledge, skill memory, and technical precision are accumulated and enacted through embodied labor.

3) **Social relationships and emotional networks:** Through the presence of family members, apprentices, and community residents, the documentary highlights the interconnections among ICH transmission, family structures, generational relationships, and community life. By embedding the inheritor within a dense network of social relations, the film avoids

portraying the practitioner as an isolated “genius artisan” and instead emphasizes the collective, relational, and affective dimensions of cultural inheritance.

Unlike the celebrity- or expert-centered narratives common in other types of cultural documentaries, the image of the ICH inheritor often emerges through multiple roles—as an ordinary laborer, a community member, and a cultural guardian. Their appeal derives from the temperament accumulated through long-term practice and their rootedness in local life, rather than from externally conferred prestige or symbolic “halos.” This mode of character portrayal in ICH documentaries facilitates audience resonance with the notion of ordinary people as cultural creators.

4.3 Emotional Expression of Characters in ICH Documentaries

ICH-themed documentaries demonstrate a pronounced tendency toward character-driven narratives, in which characters’ emotions function as a core driver of narrative development. Creators often employ a combination of cinematographic language and sound design to articulate the complex and nuanced emotional layers of inheritors as they confront social change, craft decline, and the pressures of self-preservation.

Character emotions are frequently conveyed through visual signifiers such as facial expressions, bodily movements, and spatial relationships. Images of solitary figures working in workshops, patient demonstrations during teaching, or lingering gazes directed toward aged tools and objects function as affective cues. In addition, emotional expression is intensified through sound design, including personal narration, strategic pauses, sighs, rhythmic sounds produced through craftwork, and the interweaving of ambient sound and music.

In *Drala*, for example, several scenes depict muleteers sitting around a campfire at night, discussing family matters and livelihood. The camera frequently frames them from a medium-close, eye-level perspective, quietly observing as they spontaneously recount their life experiences. The flickering firelight in the background, together with faint ambient sounds from the surrounding environment, creates a tranquil yet subtly melancholic atmosphere, enhancing audiences’ perception of the characters’ emotional states (Zhou, 2023). Through the integration of emotional expression, ICH documentaries transcend a purely instructional record of craftsmanship and shift attention toward the life trajectories and inner worlds of the individuals behind cultural practices. This deeper level of engagement offers a more compelling explanation of why ICH is worth protecting.

5. Presentation of ICH-Themed Documentary Visual Creation

5.1 Regional Representation of Local ICH Culture

Culture is inherently shaped by regional characteristics, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is deeply embedded in specific geographic spaces, ecological environments, and social structures. Through the systematic presentation of regional landscapes, living spaces, and craft sites, ICH documentaries enable audiences to understand the local grounding of ICH as a form of “local knowledge.”

For example, *Handcrafted Yunnan* takes multi-ethnic regions of Yunnan as its primary filming spaces, focusing on diverse craft categories, including metalworking, food production, musical instruments, papermaking, and clothing. While presenting specific craft processes, the film extensively employs long shots and aerial shots to depict landscapes, rivers, valleys, villages, and market spaces in locations such as Dali and Lijiang. Through the combined representation of regional landscapes and craft techniques, the film constructs a cultural landscape characterized by multi-ethnic coexistence and cultural diversity.

On a broader scale, China's vast territory and ethnic diversity mean that even the same category of ICH may exhibit distinct craft details and aesthetic styles across different regions. By capturing images from multiple regions and perspectives, documentaries help reveal both the commonalities and variations of ICH in processes of cross-regional dissemination and localized evolution, thereby providing visual evidence for subsequent protection policies and inheritance strategies.

5.2 Composition and Organization of Craft to Cultural Space

Composition constitutes the foundation of visual creation, shaping viewers' visual pathways and guiding the interpretation of meaning through the organization of elements such as characters, objects, space, and light. In ICH-themed documentaries, composition concerns not only the aesthetic effects of the image but also whether the logic of craftsmanship and cultural information can be clearly conveyed.

When depicting specific ICH practices, creators employ a range of compositional techniques, including central composition, diagonal composition, and frame-within-a-frame structures. Central composition is employed to highlight key actions—such as hands shaping clay on a pottery wheel or a shuttle moving back and forth on a loom—thereby directing viewers' attention to the craft itself. Diagonal composition or deep perspective is used to emphasize the spatial depth of craft sites—such as long workbenches or narrow workshops—thereby reflecting the relationship between craft production and everyday living space. Frame-within-a-frame composition—such as the use of door frames, window bars, or tool racks in the foreground—creates a process of reframing characters and their handcrafting actions, prompting audiences to attend to the localized context of ICH within a specific lifeworld.

For documentaries focused on crafts and related subjects, composition must not only ensure the clarity of craft operations but also balance the coexistence of religious spaces, ritual scenes, and everyday living spaces. Through the repeated deployment of compositional patterns, a recognizable visual symbol system is established, enabling ICH documentaries to convey cultural meaning in a stable yet nuanced visual form.

5.3 The Construction of Color in Visuals for Ethnic Aesthetics and Emotional Atmosphere

Color constitutes a key aesthetic dimension in documentary imagery and serves as a crucial visual cue for conveying regional culture and ethnic aesthetics. ICH-themed documentaries frequently employ color to emphasize cultural differentiation and emotional tonality. For instance, in documentaries addressing the tile cat tradition in Yunnan, warm tones—such as

yellow, brown, and earthy red—are commonly employed to echo earthen textures and the glow of flames, thereby creating a natural, restrained, and warm visual atmosphere.

In themes such as embroidery, more saturated colors—including red, blue, and gold—are used to highlight the sacred and ceremonial qualities of religious art. In *Handcrafted Yunnan*, many outdoor scenes employ highly saturated colors under natural lighting conditions. The blue sky, green vegetation, ethnic clothing, and colorful objects collectively form a bright overall color palette, closely linking craftsmanship with a vibrant natural and cultural environment and conveying a lively ethnic aesthetic sensibility (Wang, 2021). Accordingly, in works emphasizing salvage documentation, the original environmental color tones may be retained to highlight visual authenticity, whereas works emphasizing contemporary transformation and innovation may adopt brighter or more contrasting color schemes to intensify visual impact.

In the production of *Handcrafted Yunnan*, scenes depicting traditional instrument making often employ warm-toned close-ups or extreme close-ups, such as wood chips flying in golden light or metals changing color in fire. These shots not only accentuate the texture of manual labor but also convey a warm and intimate emotional atmosphere.

In *Drala*, by contrast, high-contrast lighting and cool mountain color tones are frequently juxtaposed with the rough textures of muleteers' lives. Through medium-to-long shots, the film constructs a visual style that is poetic yet grounded in reality. The cinematographic language here moves beyond the mere recording of scenery and, through a careful, restrained, and subtly melancholic style, continuously probes the present conditions and historical trajectories of the people along the Tea Horse Road. Therefore, the film's color style remains closely aligned with its overall thematic orientation.

5.4 Light and Shadow Presentation of Craft and Spiritual Aspects

Light and shadow constitute key elements in the construction of visual space and emotional atmosphere. In ICH documentaries, the combination of natural and artificial lighting is frequently employed to articulate both craft processes and characters' emotional states.

When emphasizing craft processes, creators often employ side or top lighting to accentuate the textures of objects and materials, such as fabric creases, the undulating surfaces of textiles, or highlights reflecting off metal objects. This visual strategy allows audiences to perceptually sense the tactility and warmth of craftsmanship.

When portraying the emotional and spiritual dimensions of characters, contrasts between light and shadow are often employed. In dimly lit workspaces, a beam of natural light entering through a window or skylight illuminates parts of the character while leaving the surrounding space in semi-darkness, thereby creating an introspective, quiet, and subtly mysterious atmosphere. In nighttime outdoor scenes, warm light from a campfire or lamp contrasts with the cool hues of the surrounding night, thereby emphasizing the emotional community formed through collective gathering.

In *Drala*, the use of daylight from a small window and firelight from the hearth creates

pronounced contrasts between light and darkness. The grandmother sits in the corner of the room, her face outlined by light from above, while the background recedes into shadow (Li, 2018). This treatment of light and shadow not only accentuates the details of the character's expression but also symbolically gestures toward the depth of her lived experience and the accumulation of historical time.

6. Detailed Analysis Using *Handcrafted Yunnan* and *Drala* as Examples

6.1 Shot Selection and Perspective: From “Watching Craft” to “Entering the Scene”

Cinematographic language constitutes a core expressive tool in documentary filmmaking. In ICH-themed documentaries, its function extends beyond mere recording to the construction of audiences' holistic understanding of craftsmanship, characters, and cultural space through shot selection, camera positioning, movement styles, and shot transitions. In *Handcrafted Yunnan*, scenes depicting the making of traditional instruments often follow a layered progression from long shots to medium shots, close-ups, and extreme close-ups.

Long shots introduce village environments and mountainous landscapes, linking craftsmanship to regional ecology. Medium shots present the artisan's overall posture within the workshop, allowing audiences to perceive the relationship among body, tools, and objects. Close-ups and extreme close-ups focus on hand movements, tool details, and material textures—such as wood shavings flying from a blade or sparks produced during metal polishing—thereby visually emphasizing the complexity and intricacy of craftsmanship. This “from far to near” shot organization enables audiences to shift perspective from distant observers to an embodied sense of standing at the workbench, directly sensing the operational logic and bodily experience of ICH techniques.

In *Drala*, the camera frequently employs stable medium-to-long shots and long lenses to quietly follow muleteers along the Tea Horse Road or to observe their resting figures on hillsides and distant gazes (Song, 2016). Maintaining a deliberate distance, the camera refrains from intrusive entry into the characters' lives and instead adopts an ethnographic observational perspective, allowing audiences to experience their living conditions and states of mind through the accumulation of time. This relatively restrained shot selection and perspective align with the film's creative strategy of avoiding exaggerated special effects and overly stylized imagery.

6.2 Camera Movement and the Creation of a Sense of Time

In ICH documentaries, camera movement frequently functions as a key means of expressing temporality and the rhythm of labor. In *Handcrafted Yunnan*, when presenting key stages of the craft process, the camera often employs slow push-ins or tracking shots, moving gradually from the overall object to its details or following the inheritor from the side or rear during task performance. Through this sustained movement, audiences are able to experience the continuity and rhythm of labor as an embodied temporal process.

In more emotionally charged sections—such as when inheritors discuss concerns about craft loss or personal life struggles—stationary camera positions combined with medium-to-close

shots are adopted. By reducing visual stimulation from movement, these shots direct attention toward verbal expression and facial nuance, thereby rendering emotional expression more restrained and powerful.

In contrast, *Drala* frequently employs long-duration observational shots, such as muleteers slowly traversing winding mountain roads, villagers singing in churches, and children playing in simple highland sports fields (Cui, 2015). These shots rarely involve deliberate camera movement; instead, they allow time to stretch, enabling audiences to gradually immerse themselves in the rhythm of the scene and experience a way of life that oscillates between hardship and calm.

6.3 Shot Transitions and Narrative Structure

In terms of editing, *Handcrafted Yunnan* tends to construct narrative rhythm through parallel editing and thematic transitions. For example, in the episode “Natural Notes,” scenes of craft production, performance, and everyday life are alternated. Production scenes highlight the labor-intensive and intricate nature of instrument making; performance scenes demonstrate the use of instruments in festive rituals and everyday entertainment; and scenes of daily life foreground interactions between inheritors and their families or apprentices. This editing approach departs from a linear narrative of the craft process and integrates craft production, cultural use, and social relationships into a unified narrative, presenting ICH not merely as an object or technique but as a practice embedded within a complete lifeworld.

By contrast, *Drala* often adopts a segmented narrative structure in which each section focuses on different characters and situations along the Tea Horse Road. Minimal subtitles are used to introduce locations or backgrounds, linking the film through relatively independent narrative units. Transitions between shots do not rely on tight causal relationships but are instead organized around spatial continuity and emotional flow, creating a slow-moving narrative rhythm. This approach reinforces the imagery of the road, rendering the Tea Horse Road not only a physical space but also a cultural symbol that connects multiple ethnicities, historical periods, and ways of life.

In summary, shot selection, lighting, and camera movement work together in the construction of meaning. The cinematographic language of ICH-themed documentaries not only serves to document craft processes and everyday life but also actively participates in the construction of cultural meaning and emotional depth through strategies of shot selection, perspective, movement, and transitions. *Handcrafted Yunnan* and *Drala* represent two distinct paths: one centered on craft and regional culture, and the other on geographical space and audience experience. Their respective cinematographic practices provide valuable references for visual expression in ICH documentaries.

6.4 Sound Design: Auditory Aspects of ICH Documentation and Narrative

In ICH-themed documentaries, sound and imagery function together to shape the overall narrative structure. Synchronous sound, ambient sound, folk music, as well as added background music and narration operate at different levels to construct the auditory image and emotional atmosphere of intangible cultural heritage.

On the one hand, many ICH practices inherently possess strong sonic characteristics, such as the rhythmic and tonal qualities generated by actions including tapping, rubbing, weaving, and blowing. On the other hand, regional dialects, echoes from valleys, temple bells, and the bustle of marketplaces collectively contribute to a region's distinctive soundscape. Through high-quality synchronous sound recording and careful post-production mixing, ICH documentaries are able to preserve these forms of sonic heritage to a considerable extent.

In *Handcrafted Yunnan*, sections devoted to the making and performance of ethnic musical instruments tightly integrate sounds of tapping, scraping, and the music produced by the finished instruments. Audiences hear the coarse sounds of material processing and experience the harmonious melodies produced during rituals or everyday life, forming an auditory narrative path that moves from sound to music.

In terms of sound style, *Drala* primarily employs restrained background music alongside abundant environmental sound and character narration. The sounds of rushing river water, bell chimes, wind, and the plain narration of characters collectively create a daily yet poetic soundscape, allowing audiences to experience the rhythm and emotional fluctuations of life along the Tea Horse Road.

Overall, sound design in ICH documentaries functions both as a means of preserving the auditory dimension of intangible cultural heritage and as a narrative resource that drives narrative progression, enhances emotional expression, and constructs cultural atmosphere. Through the combined deployment of visual and auditory elements, ICH documentaries create a multisensory cultural memory space, providing richer expressive pathways for the protection, dissemination, and recontextualization of intangible cultural heritage.

7. The Dissemination and Reception of ICH Documentaries in the New Media Context

7.1 Integration of ICH Documentaries with Digital Platforms in the Internet Age

In a media environment characterized by the widespread accessibility of the internet and mobile devices, the dissemination of ICH documentaries has undergone a significant transformation. This process has evolved from a predominantly one-way distribution through television channels and film festivals to a multidirectional, interactive model centered on online platforms and social media.

Long-form documentary series are now available on online platforms, breaking traditional constraints related to broadcast schedules and geographic limitations. Audiences can engage in on-demand viewing, repeated watching, and participatory discussion and secondary dissemination through features such as bullet comments and comment sections. Additionally, numerous short videos and micro-documentaries present ICH in a slice-based format, breaking complex craft processes into short, high-density audiovisual units that align more closely with the viewing habits of mobile users.

For example, after its television broadcast, *Handcrafted Yunnan* was re-disseminated through online video platforms, with episodes re-edited into trailers, highlight segments, and other short-form content that circulated across social media, generating sustained exposure for

topics such as “Yunnan handicrafts” and “ethnic musical instruments.”

This long-form documentary combined with short-video slices dissemination model not only enhances the accessibility of ICH visuals but also shifts ICH from an official discourse toward a shared cultural topic, thereby increasing audience interaction. In doing so, it opens up new pathways for the reproduction and re-consumption of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary society.

7.2 The Impact of New Media on the Production and Reception of ICH Documentaries

In the new media environment, both the production and reception of ICH documentaries have undergone profound transformations, reshaping the structure of creative subjects and the mechanisms of meaning generation in ICH imagery.

On the production side, lightweight digital imaging equipment and nonlinear editing software have significantly lowered the threshold for creation, enabling diverse participants—such as university faculty and students, independent documentary makers, and local cultural institutions—to engage in ICH visual production. This technological shift has fostered a more diversified and decentralized creative ecosystem, in which professional filmmakers, grassroots creators, and institutional actors coexist and interact.

On the reception side, audiences have shifted from being mere spectators to participants and even co-creators. Beyond engaging in secondary dissemination through commenting, sharing, and re-editing, audiences may actively record and share their own ICH-related experiences through vlogs, live streams, or short videos. In this process, a bottom-up ICH visual network emerges, extending the circulation of ICH imagery beyond traditional institutional frameworks.

The integration of ICH documentaries with new media has thus transformed ICH from a passive object of display into a cultural resource that can be continually retold and reimagined through multidirectional interaction. This shift has not only increased the visibility of ICH among younger audiences but has also redistributed discursive authority from single institutions toward multi-stakeholder participation, opening new possibilities for the contemporary transmission and reinterpretation of intangible cultural heritage.

8. Conclusion

This study takes *Handcrafted Yunnan* and *Tea Horse Road: Drala* as representative case studies to examine the strategies used to balance “recording reality” and “aesthetic expression” in ICH-themed documentaries across three dimensions: cinematographic language, character and emotional construction, and new media dissemination. The findings indicate that *Handcrafted Yunnan* highlights the details of craftsmanship and the vitality of Yunnan’s multi-ethnic culture through the extensive use of close-ups, extreme close-ups, and bright color palettes. By contrast, *Drala* creates an ethnographic sense of presence through medium-to-long shots, long lenses, and a restrained use of light, shadow, and sound, presenting how ICH is embedded in specific regions, everyday life, and the emotional worlds of its subjects.

The study further indicates that, with the increasing involvement of the internet and short-video platforms, the long-form narratives of ICH documentaries are continuously sliced, re-edited, and recontextualized. While this process expands the audience base for ICH imagery, it also introduces the risk of oversimplification and symbolic reduction. Overall, audiovisual strategies centered on cinematographic language not only shape the stylistic characteristics of ICH documentaries but also profoundly influence contemporary society's perception and value reconstruction of intangible cultural heritage. Due to limitations in sample size and methodology, future research could expand the range of textual materials and incorporate audience surveys and platform-based data analysis to further test and enrich the preliminary conclusions of this study.

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