

Intangible Cultural Heritage Cross-Cultural Communication Media Reconstruction and Strategies in Metaverse: Han Opera VR Experience

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Facing the dual challenges of globalization and digitalization, the intangible cultural heritage of Han Opera encounters “cultural discount” and “intergenerational gap” in its cross-cultural communication, while the traditional one-way communication model fails to meet the needs of contemporary audiences. This study aims to explore, within the metaverse framework, how to use Virtual Reality (VR) technology to reconstruct the communication pathways of Han Opera in order to promote its global cultural identity. By employing literature review and questionnaire survey methods, it conducts an in-depth analysis of the current state of audience awareness and experiential needs. The research develops a “VR-empowered strategy model for the cross-cultural dissemination of intangible cultural heritage”, proposing media reconstruction across four key dimensions: immersive storytelling, interactive experiences, cultural translation, and matrix-based dissemination. The strategy advocates for an “authentic core with innovative outward expression”, effectively enabling the transformation of audience engagement from merely “watching for entertainment” to “understanding the deeper significance”. This approach provides both theoretical references and practical guidance for the digital “going global” of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, Han Opera, Virtual Reality (VR), cross-cultural communication, media reconfiguration

Introduction

Research Background and Significance

In the era of globalization and digitalization, the cross-cultural transmission of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) faces significant challenges. Han Opera, a vital branch of Chinese opera, exemplifies this predicament. It suffers from “cultural discount” internationally due to its unique dialect and regional symbols, while locally, it struggles with an “intergenerational disconnect” as traditional forms fail to engage younger audiences.

However, emerging technologies like Virtual Reality (VR) and the metaverse offer transformative solutions. By creating immersive, interactive spaces, these tools transcend physical barriers and lower the threshold for

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cultural understanding. Through interactive storytelling, they can rekindle youth interest and facilitate the creative transformation of ICH.

Against this backdrop, this study holds dual significance. Theoretically, it aims to construct a “technology-culture-audience” framework, exploring how the metaverse reshapes ICH narrative logic and enriches digital communication paradigms. Practically, using Han Opera as a case study, the research seeks to design an experience-centered media integration strategy. This approach aims to help Han Opera effectively “go global” within the new media ecosystem, ultimately enhancing its cultural soft power.

Research Questions and Objectives

Based on the aforementioned background, this study focuses on a central question: How can we, from both theoretical and strategic perspectives, explore the metaverse media form that takes VR interactive experiences as its entry point, systematically reconstruct the dissemination pathways of Han Opera, and thereby effectively promote cultural understanding and value recognition on a global scale?

To address this core question, this study sets the following specific objectives:

1. Diagnostic status: Conduct an in-depth analysis of the specific challenges and opportunities that Han Opera faces in today’s communication ecosystem.
2. Insight into demand: Through empirical research, gain a grasp of the target audience’s (especially potential young and international audiences’) perceptions, expectations, and acceptance levels regarding the Han Opera VR experience.
3. Strategy development: Based on the above research, propose a systematic VR immersive approach aimed at fostering global identity through Han Opera.

Literature Review

The Dilemmas of Intangible Cultural Heritage Cross-Cultural Communication

In recent years, academic research on media innovation in intangible cultural heritage has primarily focused on the application of digital technologies and the transformation of communication strategies. Existing studies have pointed out that traditional methods of intangible cultural heritage dissemination face five major challenges: “materialization”, “virtualization”, “weakening”, “degeneration”, and “dulling”. In particular, the one-way transmission of content has led to low public engagement. Against this backdrop, scholars, drawing on Levinson’s media theory, have analyzed how emerging technologies such as the metaverse can provide “media compensation” for intangible cultural heritage, thereby extending temporal and spatial dimensions and fostering emotional resonance (Yu, 2025). At the same time, intangible cultural heritage confronts a dual challenge in global dissemination: “cultural discounting” and “intergenerational gaps”. On the one hand, the digital dissemination of intangible cultural heritage faces deep-seated difficulties. Among these, the most prominent is the “simplification and distortion of cultural representation”—or, more precisely, the “breakdown in understanding caused by fragmented communication”. During the media transition process, complex cultural meaning systems may be reduced to isolated visual symbols, losing their original ritualistic essence, community ties, and spiritual depth (Cao, 2025). On the other hand, there exists a tension between the “local knowledge” of intangible cultural heritage and its globally universal aesthetic appeal. Striking the right balance between “authenticity” and “accessibility” remains a significant challenge. Although the metaverse is seen as a “new solution” to the dilemmas of international dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, academia has paid insufficient attention

to the “commercialization risks” and the “lack of international cooperation and exchange” that may arise in practice. Consequently, there has been inadequate exploration of how cultural meanings evolve following technological intervention (Hou & Xu, 2024).

Research on VR Technology in the Field of Cultural Heritage From the Perspective of the Metaverse

The metaverse and VR technologies have brought about a paradigm shift in the presentation, education, and dissemination of cultural heritage. Early foreign research, such as Erik Champion’s “Virtual Heritage”, systematically discusses the value of VR in recreating historical environments and fostering immersive learning. Domestic studies indicate that the Chinese government is actively promoting the use of the metaverse to empower intangible cultural heritage, and through case studies—such as the “Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum” project—demonstrates practical approaches for using AR/VR technologies to recreate intangible cultural heritage scenes (Yang, Yuan, & Liu, 2025). Building on analyses of obstacles to the transmission of intangible cultural heritage—such as talent shortages, limited channels, and lack of audience interest—scholars have innovatively proposed strategies for leveraging immersive metaverse environments to promote its preservation. They argue that immersive experiences can spark audiences’ interest and enthusiasm for intangible cultural heritage, injecting new vitality into its transmission (Zhan & Sun, 2022).

Despite the abundance of technological application cases, academic circles have paid insufficient attention to their negative impacts. First, most studies approach VR projects from the perspectives of computer science or design, focusing on how to “create” a VR project, yet few delve deeply into the questions of “why they work” and “how to build cultural awareness and identity more effectively” from the angles of communication theory and reception aesthetics. Second, although there is extensive macro-level discourse on “the metaverse + cultural heritage”, medium- and micro-level research specifically addressing how to design targeted VR dissemination strategies tailored to particular types of intangible cultural heritage—especially performing arts—remains largely unexplored. Third, current research often celebrates the immersive experiences brought about by technology while neglecting the potential issue of “sensory dependency” that immersion may induce. For instance, technical bottlenecks (such as insufficient image clarity) and copyright protection challenges (such as the intellectual property rights over digital assets of intangible cultural heritage) remain significant hurdles in practical applications, yet these issues are often oversimplified or glossed over in the literature (Yang et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical studies on how to measure the effectiveness of VR/AR (Augmented Reality) technologies in enhancing cultural identity, leaving the application of these technologies lacking robust evaluation criteria.

Current Status of VR Technology Application in Han Opera Intangible Cultural Heritage

Regarding the digital innovation path for Han Opera, recent research has begun to focus on the acceptance preferences of younger audiences. Some scholars have keenly observed that Generation Z seeks novel and exciting experiences, and have thus attempted to blend Han Opera art with cyberpunk aesthetics, leveraging VR technology. The project creates an immersive viewing experience (Liu, 2024). This cross-disciplinary endeavor breaks away from the traditional Han Opera’s conventional dissemination model, shifting the focus of digital preservation from “technical implementation” to “user orientation”. By presenting the charm of Han Opera in a fashionable and trendy manner, this approach injects new vitality into the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, helping to capture the attention of younger generations while fostering their aesthetic appreciation and latent interest in traditional culture.

In addition, research has also explored digital dissemination pathways for Han Opera from the perspective of educational outreach. One scholar designed a Han Opera education platform that leverages VR interactive experiences to create an engaging and highly entertaining learning environment for users. Empirical studies have shown that this approach can significantly enhance users' interest in and awareness of Han Opera (Zhang, 2023). This practice not only validates VR's role in lowering barriers to cultural understanding but also provides a viable technological approach and design framework for the global dissemination of Han Opera in the metaverse.

Study Design and Analysis

Research Methodology

A systematic literature review synthesizes studies on intangible cultural heritage, the metaverse, and Han Opera to identify insights, limitations, and establish the theoretical framework. For empirical research, the study employs questionnaires and interviews. It conducts quantitative analyses on audience awareness of Han Opera, acceptance of VR technology, and expectations for immersive experiences to identify key variables influencing dissemination effectiveness.

Problem Setting and Research Tools

This study focuses on key issues including the current state of audience awareness of Han Opera, the acceptance of VR-based Han Opera dissemination, audience preference for experience, and the need for adaptation in cross-cultural communication. An empirical analysis was conducted using a questionnaire survey method. The questionnaire was distributed via the online survey platform Questionnaire-Star and disseminated through social media channels such as WeChat and QQ. A total of 176 valid questionnaires were collected, and data processing and statistical analysis were performed using SPSS 27.0. Validity tests revealed that the KMO value was 0.908, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded a significance level of 0.000, indicating good construct validity of the questionnaire and confirming that the data are suitable for statistical analysis.

From the perspective of the basic characteristics of the sample (as shown in Table 1), the respondents in this survey are predominantly young people and highly educated individuals, presenting an overall profile marked by youthfulness, high levels of literacy, and strong engagement with digital media—features that closely align with the target user profile for VR technology. In terms of age distribution, those aged 19-25 account for 52.27%, while those aged 26-35 make up 22.73%. Together, young people comprise over 70% of the sample, making them a core driving force behind digital cultural consumption and the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. Regarding educational background, bachelor's degrees represent 60.23%, and master's degrees or higher account for 12.50%, indicating strong capacities for cultural receptivity and information interpretation. As for occupational composition, students constitute 54.55%, while cultural and educational professionals and corporate employees each account for 14.20% and 17.05%, respectively, covering the three major settings of campuses, cultural institutions, and workplaces. The sample demonstrates high digital media literacy and technological acceptance, perfectly matching the target audience characteristics for VR-based communication, and can effectively reflect the genuine needs of young people and mainstream audiences toward VR experiences of Han Opera.

Table 1
Demographic Distribution of Participants

		Quantity	Percentage (%)
Age	18 years of age or younger	9	5.11
	19-25 years old	92	52.27
	26-35 years old	40	22.73
	35-50 years old	27	15.34
	51 years old or elder	8	4.55
Highest degree attained	High school and below	28	10.05
	Junior college	20	11.36
	Bachelor's degree	106	60.23
	Master's degree	20	11.36
	Ph.D. and above	2	1.14
Occupation	Student	96	54.55
	Professionals in the cultural and educational sectors	25	14.2
	Corporate employee	30	17.05
	Freelancer	22	12.5
	Other	3	1.7

Data Processing and Research Results

The data analysis reveals that Han Opera currently faces a dual dilemma: shallow public awareness and an intergenerational gap. The traditional communication model is severely out of sync with the cultural context of contemporary audiences. Overall, audience familiarity with Han Opera remains generally low. Among young people aged 19-25, only 3.26% report being “fairly familiar” with it, while over 70% remain at the superficial stage of “having heard of it but not really understanding it”. By contrast, among middle-aged audiences aged 36-50, awareness levels are significantly higher; the proportion reporting being “fairly familiar” or “avid enthusiasts” has markedly increased. This suggests that deep-level understanding of Han Opera still largely depends on immersion in traditional theaters, family influence, and local cultural immersion—factors that have yet to effectively integrate into the growth experiences and media consumption habits of younger generations. From the perspective of comprehension barriers (as shown in Table 2), the top three challenges are unfamiliarity with the plot’s historical background and context (73.86%), difficulty understanding the dialectal singing styles (70.45%), and ambiguity in the symbolic meaning of stylized gestures (67.05%). Moreover, limited dissemination channels and traditional performance formats further exacerbate barriers to audience engagement. These findings profoundly reveal that the core issue in Han Opera’s dissemination is not simply “lack of exposure”, but rather the complexity of its cultural symbol system, the high threshold for comprehension, and its growing disconnect from contemporary life. The traditional, one-way performance model can no longer align with the reception habits of audiences in the digital age.

Audience perceptions of VR technology present a contradictory state—simultaneously acknowledging its value and expressing concerns about its effectiveness. This not only confirms VR’s potential as a new medium for the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage but also highlights the deep-seated limitations of its technological application. On the positive perception side, VR in high levels of approval was achieved in areas such as sparking interest in Han Opera culture (average score: 3.61), enhancing on-site immersion (3.49), lowering the threshold for cultural understanding (3.38), and deepening comprehension of the plot (3.44).

Moreover, 75% of the audience expressed the greatest anticipation for 360° panoramic views of stage performances. Immersion and presence were identified as the core attractions of VR experiences. This suggests that VR can effectively bridge the psychological gap between young people and traditional culture by offering an immersive, sensory-rich experience with low barriers to entry, serving as both an “entry point for interest” and a “bridge for experiential engagement” in the dissemination of Han Opera culture. At the same time, however, 36.36% of the audience explicitly expressed concern that “even with VR, it would still be difficult to fully understand Han Opera”. Some respondents felt that VR could only enhance entertainment value but might not necessarily facilitate deeper cultural understanding. Ratings for VR’s ability to aid in observing performance details and interpreting cultural nuances were relatively low (see Table 3). This finding highlights the core contradiction inherent in the digital dissemination of intangible cultural heritage: While technology can optimize the experience and sensory presentation, it cannot automatically decode cultural symbols or convey their underlying meanings. If VR remains confined solely to scene replication and visual spectacle, it will still fail to address the fundamental issue of why Han Opera often feels “incomprehensible and hard to grasp”.

Table 2

Barriers to Audience Comprehension of Han Opera and Their Proportions

Influence factor	Number of responses to cases	Percentage of total responses	Case percentage
Difficulty understanding the dialectal singing styles	124	24.6%	70.5%
Ambiguity in the symbolic meaning of stylized gestures	118	23.4%	67.0%
Unfamiliarity with the plot’s historical background and context	130	25.8%	73.9%
The ways of expressing emotions differ significantly from one’s own cultural background.	84	16.7%	47.7%
Lack of a systematic and clear cultural explanation	48	9.5%	27.3%
Total	504	100.0%	286.4%

Table 3

Audience Perceptions and Evaluations of VR Technology in Han Opera Dissemination

Perspective dimension	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Average score
I think VR can lower the threshold for understanding Han Opera	16 (9.09%)	28 (15.91%)	32 (18.18%)	73 (41.48%)	27 (15.34%)	3.38
I think VR mainly enhances entertainment value, but may not necessarily help understand the culture	16 (9.09%)	33 (18.75%)	53 (30.11%)	48 (27.27%)	26 (14.77%)	3.20
I worry that even with VR, it would still be difficult to fully understand Han Opera	14 (7.95%)	32 (18.18%)	40 (22.73%)	64 (36.36%)	26 (14.77%)	3.32
Compared to cultural content, I care more about the VR technology experience itself	17 (9.66%)	34 (19.32%)	53 (30.11%)	51 (28.98%)	21 (11.93%)	3.14
Subtotal	63 (8.95%)	127 (18.04%)	178 (25.28%)	236 (33.52%)	100 (14.20%)	3.26

In terms of VR experience preferences, audience demands exhibit characteristics of stratification, interactivity, and gradation, providing clear user-oriented guidance for the design of Han Opera VR products. Preferences differ significantly across different levels of technical expertise and age groups: VR novices and older audiences tend to prefer passive, panoramic viewing, seeking a stable and comfortable basic experience; in contrast, frequent VR users and younger audiences strongly anticipate active participation and interactive

exploration. Among users who have experienced VR five or more times, as many as 90% express a strong desire to “interact with virtual actors on stage”. In terms of content needs, beyond basic panoramic viewing, there is high demand for interacting with cultural symbols such as facial makeup and costumes (63.64%), freely exploring virtual theaters and historical settings (49.40%), and learning Han Opera elements through gamified tasks (44.32%). From the perspective of communication effectiveness, different experience formats serve distinct functions: 360° panoramic viewing focuses on creating visual impact and a sense of presence, while interactive symbol interpretation and gamified tasks can significantly enhance cultural comprehension efficiency; free exploration, on the other hand, is more likely to evoke emotional resonance and cultural identification. These findings suggest that Han Opera VR should not adopt a single, one-size-fits-all experience model, but rather build a graded system—ranging from low-threshold entry-level experiences to mid-level interactive learning and high-immersion co-creation—that caters to the diverse needs of users from beginners to dedicated enthusiasts, thereby facilitating a gradual transition from merely “watching for entertainment” to “understanding the subtleties and nuances”.

In terms of VR design orientation and cross-cultural communication strategies, the sample data clearly point to a balanced approach that combines “authentic core elements with outwardly innovative expressions”, providing a solid basis for localized adaptation in international communication. Regarding design orientation (as shown in Table 4), 57.39% of respondents support technological and artistic innovation while firmly upholding the essence of Han Opera culture, its core plotlines, and its artistic values. Only 42.61% prefer an entirely authentic reproduction of traditional stage settings and performance styles. Among these, classic plot structures, cultural values, and emotional expressions are given greater emphasis, whereas innovations and optimizations are more readily accepted in aspects such as vocal styles and visual presentation. This reflects the audience’s rational understanding of the digitalization of intangible cultural heritage: The authenticity of the cultural core must remain unshakable, while the forms of presentation can be adapted to contemporary aesthetics and media logic. On the level of cross-cultural communication (as shown in Table 5), multilingual subtitles (86.36%), virtual cultural guides (78.41%), and cultural analogy-based interpretations (75.00%) received the highest levels of approval; the proportion of those who preferred an unaltered, original presentation without any supplementary explanations was only 19.32%. Meanwhile, individuals lacking cross-cultural experience tend to rely more on visual appeal to draw interest, whereas those with extensive cross-cultural exposure place greater importance on value systems and emotional expression. This finding breaks away from the simplistic notion that “translation equals localization”, demonstrating that cross-cultural communication of Han Opera requires the establishment of a multi-layered translation mechanism—comprising “linguistic interpretation—symbolic explanation—emotional resonance—value connection”—to attract audiences through visual appeal, retain them via emotional resonance, and achieve long-term dissemination through shared values.

Table 4

Audience Preferences for Design Orientations in Han Opera Digital Adaptation

Design orientation option	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Restore traditional stage and performance style as authentically as possible	75	42.61
Artistic and technological innovation while respecting the core cultural essence	101	57.39
Total (valid responses)	176	100.00

Table 5

Audience Preferences for Cross-Cultural Localization Approaches in Han Opera Communication

Localization approach option	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Multilingual subtitles and voice commentary	152	86.36
Set up a virtual “cultural guide” role for guidance	138	78.41
Use analogies with similar elements from the audience’s native culture	132	75.00
Maintain the original flavor without excessive explanation	34	19.32
Total (valid responses)	176	100.00

Overall, this empirical study clearly reveals the practical challenges facing the dissemination of Han Opera, the structure of audience needs, and the potential of VR technology.

Applying boundary conditions, research findings indicate that VR technology offers a viable pathway for Han Opera to bridge the generational gap and reduce cultural discount. However, realizing its full potential hinges on a systematic design approach centered on user-centricity, cultural interpretation as the core, layered experiences as a means, and cross-cultural translation as the key element—rather than merely relying on the simple accumulation of technologies or mere replication of existing scenarios. This conclusion provides solid empirical support for the subsequent development of a VR-enabled strategic model for cross-cultural dissemination of Han Opera.

Discussion and Strategy Development

This article argues that the contemporary communication challenges faced by Han Opera fundamentally stem from a misalignment between its locally rooted artistic expression and the reception mechanisms of the digital age, as well as the logic of cross-cultural understanding. To achieve the transformation from “local opera resources” to “digitally mediated cultural experiences that can be widely understood”, it is essential to leverage VR technology to simultaneously restructure media at the levels of narrative content, experience organization, cultural translation, and dissemination architecture.

Currently, the dissemination of Han Opera faces three major contradictions: Young people have high technological affinity but low cultural awareness; VR’s visual immersion cannot automatically resolve the challenge of deciphering cultural symbols, leading to a disconnect between sensory experience and comprehension; and audiences simultaneously yearn for authenticity while also anticipating innovative forms. This calls for VR empowerment to go beyond merely digitizing the stage—it must instead reconstruct the ways in which culture is connected, bridging the gap between technological accessibility and cultural comprehensibility. Based on this, this article proposes four major media reconstruction strategies:

Immersive narrative reconstruction: Abandon the high-threshold, full-series presentation approach and instead focus on universal emotional themes such as loyalty and familial love. Adopt a lightweight narrative style that highlights classic excerpts and pivotal scenes. Through first-person, immersive settings, enable audiences with zero prior experience to quickly immerse themselves in the story and lower the barrier to entry.

Reconstructing the interactive experience: Build a Three-Level Progressive System. For newcomers, we offer 360° panoramic views and basic guided tours; for users with specific interests, we introduce interactive tasks such as gesture imitation and facial-expression recognition; and for advanced users, we open up virtual opera houses for exploration and co-creation on the same stage. This approach caters to all levels of

engagement—from simply “watching the spectacle” to truly “understanding the artistry”—transforming passive consumption into active participation.

Cultural translational reconstruction: Establish a Four-Layer Decoding Mechanism. The linguistic layer provides multilingual subtitles; the symbolic layer offers instant interpretations of facial expressions and costumes; the emotional layer amplifies universal resonance; and the value layer connects to international perceptions through cultural analogies. By overcoming the “cultural discount”, this approach significantly enhances comprehension and acceptance.

Matrix-based propagation and reconstruction: Break the isolation of VR and build an ecosystem featuring “online traffic generation, offline implementation, education rooted in communities, and international promotion”. On the online platform, leverage short videos to boost visibility; in offline settings, establish experience zones within cultural and tourism scenarios; integrate into school-based aesthetic education to steadily cultivate a young audience; and utilize overseas platforms for multilingual promotion, thereby creating a closed-loop propagation system.

To guard against technological centrism and cultural alienation, four safeguards must be established: jointly ensuring the authenticity of the culture by both inheritors and the technical team; adopting a small-module pilot approach for gradual expansion; using cultural understanding and willingness to disseminate as core evaluation indicators; and clearly defining digital copyright regulations. In summary, this strategy lowers the threshold through immersive storytelling, deepens understanding via interactivity, breaks down barriers through translational approaches, and amplifies impact through a matrix-based framework. Adhering to the principle of “authentic core, innovative outward expression”, it closely aligns with the needs of contemporary audiences, effectively bridging generational gaps and cultural divides, and enabling intangible cultural heritage to make the leap from being “seen” to being “recognized”. This approach provides a replicable pathway for the digital globalization of China’s intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Grounded in the metaverse perspective, this study explores VR interactive strategies to address Han Opera’s global dissemination challenges: “cultural discount” and the “intergenerational gap”. The core issue is the structural misalignment between “technological accessibility” and “cultural comprehensibility”. To resolve this, the paper proposes a “VR-empowered strategy model for cross-cultural transmission of intangible cultural heritage”, advocating transformation through four reconstructions:

1. Immersive narrative: Replacing full performances with lightweight story-based entry points.
2. Interactive experience: Building a three-tier system to meet needs ranging from “watching the spectacle” to “understanding the subtleties”.
3. Cultural translation: Establishing a multi-layered decoding mechanism for cultural symbols.
4. Matrix communication: Breaking down online-offline silos to create a holistic ecosystem.

Theoretically, the study moves beyond pure technological application by proposing “media structural repair”. Practically, it offers guidelines for digitalization—emphasizing “core authenticity coupled with outward optimization”. To ensure authenticity, four safeguard mechanisms are required: expert oversight, iterative implementation, outcome evaluation, and copyright compliance. Despite limitations like empirical data scale, the study confirms that metaverse communication reconfiguration signifies a paradigm shift—from “one-way presentation” to “deep engagement”. This path revitalizes intangible cultural heritage, enabling it to move beyond “being seen” toward “being recognized”.

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