

The "Cultural Translator" Model: a methodological framework for the cross-cultural narrative transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage—A case study of Chaoshan Yingge Dance

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Abstract. In the process of globalizing Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), many high-context cultural forms face a common challenge: they are visible to international audiences but not fully understood. This study addresses this issue by proposing the Cultural Translator Model, a practical framework for cross-cultural narrative transmission. The model consists of three main stages: cultural decoding, narrative translation, and multimodal reconstruction, supported by a feedback loop. Drawing on high- and low-context communication theory, cultural translation theory, and narrative paradigm theory, this study applies the model to Chaoshan Yingge Dance through fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis. The findings show that the model effectively transforms culturally embedded meanings into accessible narratives, improving audience understanding and engagement. This study provides a practical framework for the international communication of ICH and offers insights for cultural practitioners and researchers.

Keywords: cultural translator, intangible cultural heritage, cross-cultural communication, narrative translation, Yingge Dance, high-context culture

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The global communication of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has emerged as a pivotal issue in contemporary cultural discourse. UNESCO identifies it as a cornerstone of preserving and promoting cultural diversity in an increasingly interconnected world. Meanwhile, China has actively advanced strategies for the "living inheritance" and "going global" of its intangible cultural heritage, seeking to share its rich cultural traditions with global audiences. However, high-context ICH forms—such as the Chaoshan Yingge Dance—face a persistent paradox in international communication: they are often transmitted visually but fail to resonate deeply with audiences, resulting in a phenomenon of "seen but not understood."

This challenge stems from the gap between the intricate, culturally specific symbolism of these traditions and the limited cross-cultural narrative strategies currently employed. Traditional approaches often prioritize

surface-level visual spectacle over contextual meaning, leaving international audiences unable to grasp the values, stories, and emotional resonance embedded in the heritage itself. This project responds to this gap by proposing a systematic framework for cross-cultural "translation" that bridges high-context cultural expressions and low-context global audiences.

1.2. The case of Yingge Dance

Chaoshan Yingge Dance is a national-level intangible cultural heritage originating in the Chaoshan region of Guangdong, inscribed in China's first national list of ICH items in 2006. Rooted in local folk traditions, the dance weaves together martial arts, opera, and choreography to tell heroic stories adapted from the classic Chinese novel *Water Margin*. Performers embody iconic characters such as Wu Song and Li Kui, using dynamic movements, elaborate facial makeup, and symbolic props (including double clubs and snake-shaped staffs) to depict themes of loyalty, courage, collective solidarity, and rituals of dispelling evil and invoking blessings.

Despite its rich cultural depth and artistic uniqueness, Yingge Dance remains largely unknown outside its regional context. Its current international visibility is limited to scattered performances or short-form videos, which prioritize visual dynamism over narrative coherence. This has resulted in low global recognition and shallow audience engagement, highlighting the urgent need for innovative communication strategies to unlock its cross-cultural appeal.

1.3. Research problem

The core problem driving this study is the "seen but not understood" dilemma facing high-context ICH like Yingge Dance in international communication. Existing efforts to promote such heritage often stop at showcasing its visual spectacle, without providing the cultural and narrative context needed for audiences to interpret its meaning. This leads to three key gaps:

1. **Superficial Engagement:** Audiences may be impressed by the dance's energy but remain unaware of its stories, symbolism, and values.
2. **Lack of Systematic Narrative Strategy:** There is no replicable framework for translating the complex, context-dependent elements of Yingge Dance into universally resonant narratives.
3. **Cultural Misalignment:** Current communication fails to bridge the gap between Yingge Dance's specific cultural references (e.g., *Water Margin* characters, local rituals) and the frames of reference of diverse global audiences (e.g., Western hero archetypes, universal themes of community and resilience).

This study addresses these gaps by developing and testing a structured cross-cultural narrative approach for Yingge Dance.

1.4. Research objectives

Theoretical Objective: To construct a replicable "Cultural Translator" model for cross-cultural communication of high-context ICH. This model will provide a structured methodology for decoding cultural meaning and recontextualizing it for diverse audiences.

Practical Objective: To apply the "Cultural Translator" model to Yingge Dance, creating multilingual narrative content (such as short documentaries and social media series) that balances cultural authenticity with global accessibility.

Methodological Objective: To offer a transferable framework for the international promotion of other high-context intangible cultural heritage forms, providing a practical template for researchers, practitioners, and cultural institutions.

1.5. Thesis structure

Chapter 1 (Introduction): Sets the context, problem, objectives, and structure of the study.

Chapter 2 (Literature Review): Examines existing research on ICH communication, cross-cultural translation, and digital narrative strategies, identifying gaps this study addresses.

Chapter 3 (Methodology): Details the construction of the "Cultural Translator" model, including cultural decoding, narrative recontextualization, and content creation methods.

Chapter 4 (Case Study: Yingge Dance): Applies the model to Yingge Dance, presenting the cultural decoding process, narrative strategy design, and multilingual content outputs.

Chapter 5 (Conclusion and Implications): Summarizes key findings, evaluates the model's effectiveness, and discusses its broader applications and future research directions.

2.2. Literature review

This chapter reviews the theories and existing research related to the construction of the "Cultural Translator" model. The review covers five areas: cross-cultural communication theories, ICH transmission studies, narrative theory, cultural translation studies, and existing studies on Chaoshan Yingge Dance. On this basis, this chapter identifies the gaps in current research and clarifies the starting point of this study.

2.1. Cross-cultural communication theories

Cross-cultural communication research provides a broad theoretical background for understanding the difficulties that Yingge Dance encounters in international communication. Among these theories, high-context and low-context culture theory and cultural discount theory are particularly important.

2.1.1. Hall's high-context vs. low-context cultures

Hall divided cultures into high-context cultures and low-context cultures based on the degree to which communication depends on the surrounding context [1]. In a high-context culture, much information is not conveyed directly through words but is embedded in shared experiences and social relationships. As a result, people use relatively little explicit verbal information when they speak. In contrast, in a low-context culture, information is transmitted primarily through clear and direct language, with less reliance on the surrounding context. According to this standard, East Asian countries such as China and Japan are mostly classified as high-context cultures, while Western countries such as the United States and Germany are mostly classified as low-context cultures [1].

Chaoshan Yingge Dance is a comprehensive art form. It integrates martial arts, opera, dance, and folk beliefs. Its movement symbols (such as the mallet techniques and footwork), visual symbols (such as facial makeup and costumes), and spiritual core (such as the idea of loyalty and righteousness, and the wish to exorcise evil and seek blessings) are all closely linked to local historical stories and folk customs in the Chaoshan region. Therefore, Yingge Dance is a typical product of a high-context culture. This characteristic means that there is a natural difficulty for foreign audiences who are unfamiliar with the Chaozhou cultural background to understand the connotations of Yingge Dance. Guo et al. examined the cultural capital formation of Yingge Dance and noted that its transmission faces challenges in balancing traditional inheritance with modern consumption demands [2]. Its performance occasions are mostly limited to local festivals in the Chaoshan area. This has resulted in a relatively fixed audience circle and limited expansion of its cultural influence. This observation, from the perspective of local transmission, illustrates that the high-context nature of Yingge Dance does indeed present obstacles in cross-cultural communication.

2.1.2. Cultural discount

Hoskins and Mirus proposed the cultural discount theory [3]. This theory explains the phenomenon whereby the value of a cultural product diminishes when it is transmitted across national borders. The theory holds that when a program, film, or art form deeply rooted in a specific culture is placed in another cultural environment, foreign audiences' interest in and understanding of it will decrease significantly because they lack knowledge of its background, historical traditions, and values [3].

For Yingge Dance, the effect of cultural discount is very pronounced. If foreign audiences do not know the heroic stories from Water Margin or are unaware of folk activities in the Chaoshan region such as "Ying Laoye" (a deity-welcoming procession), it is very difficult for them to understand what characters are represented by the facial makeup painted on the dancers' faces, or to grasp the deeper meanings of "exorcising evil and seeking blessings" and "collective solidarity" behind the dance movements. This cognitive barrier means that the international communication of Yingge Dance often remains at the surface level of visual display, and it is difficult to evoke a deeper cultural resonance in foreign audiences. Zhang and Cai analyzed the phenomenal spread of Yingge Dance and noted that while its visibility has increased through digital platforms, there remains room for more systematic narrative construction. This further exacerbates the cultural discount in its communication process [4].

2.2. ICH transmission studies

The transmission of intangible cultural heritage has become an important topic in international academia and cultural policy circles. Related research provides policy frameworks and technical roadmaps for the communication practices of Yingge Dance.

2.2.1. UNESCO framework

In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [5]. This convention emphasizes the importance of "safeguarding" ICH. Specific safeguarding measures include identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission (particularly through formal and non-formal education), and revitalization. This definition breaks through the narrow perspective that previously focused only on intergenerational transmission. It elevates "promotion" and "enhancement" to the same strategic level as "transmission," providing a policy basis and legitimacy for ICH to go global.

China has responded actively in the protection and transmission of ICH. In 2021, China issued the Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This document clearly states that by 2035, the vitality of intangible cultural heritage transmission should be significantly enhanced [6]. This provides clear policy support for the "living transmission" and "going global" strategy of Yingge Dance.

2.2.2. Digital transmission

With the advancement of digital technology, short video platforms have become new venues for ICH transmission. Data show that in 2023 alone, there were over 30,000 live broadcasts of Yingge Dance on the Douyin platform, attracting hundreds of millions of viewers [7]. However, while digital transmission brings huge traffic, it also exposes some problems. Ji et al. analyzed the influencing factors of ICH dissemination on short video platforms. Their study found that narrative completeness, cultural symbol recognition, and interactive participation are key factors affecting communication effectiveness [7]. Among these, performance clips with strong visual impact are the most widely disseminated. However, these clips generally suffer from two shortcomings: incomplete narratives and insufficient explanation of cultural background. As a result, the communication effect often remains at the level of merely attracting attention.

Chen constructed an analytical framework for the communication effectiveness of ICH short videos from a more general perspective. She pointed out that "narrative integrity of content," "recognizability of cultural symbols," and "design of interactive participation" are three core factors affecting communication effectiveness [8]. Applying this framework to Yingge Dance reveals that although its short video content has highly recognizable visual symbols (such as facial makeup and wooden mallets), it has obvious shortcomings in narrative completeness and adaptability to different cultures. These studies indicate that relying solely on digital technology, without a systematic cross-cultural narrative approach, makes it difficult to effectively convey the cultural connotations of ICH.

2.2.3. *Narrative theory and cultural transmission*

Narrative theory provides important methodological tools for transforming high-context culture into stories that can be widely understood.

Fisher proposed the narrative paradigm [9]. This theory challenges the traditional "rational world paradigm." It puts forward the proposition that "humans are essentially storytellers" (*Homo narrans*). The theory holds that the core of human communication is storytelling. People judge the credibility of information primarily by whether the story is told "coherently" and whether it feels "truthful and reliable," rather than relying solely on the validity of logical arguments. Narrative coherence refers to whether the internal structure of the story is consistent and free of contradictions. Narrative fidelity refers to whether the story resonates with the audience's own experiences and values [9].

Fisher's narrative paradigm provides a key insight for the cross-cultural communication of Yingge Dance. To overcome cultural discount, the key is to reassemble the cultural concepts and symbols implicit in Yingge Dance into a "good story" that foreign audiences can understand and find truthful and relatable. This means that the focus of communication should shift from simple "information transmission" to "story construction." Communicators need to establish cross-cultural emotional connections by creating engaging plots and relatable characters.

2.3. Cultural translation studies

Cultural translation theory moves beyond the traditional level of linguistic conversion. It focuses on how cultural meaning is negotiated and reconstructed in different contexts. This provides direct theoretical support for the role of the "Cultural Translator."

2.3.1. *Bassnett's cultural translation and Venuti's domestication vs. foreignization*

Bassnett's cultural translation theory emphasizes that translation is by no means a simple conversion of linguistic signs [10]. It is a profound act of cultural negotiation. In this process, the translator plays the role of a "cultural mediator." The translator's task is to interpret the symbols, values, and contexts of the source culture, and then find appropriate expressions in the target culture so that meaning can be smoothly transferred between different cultural systems. This viewpoint lays a theoretical foundation for the construction of the "Cultural Translator" Model. That is to say, the communicator of Yingge Dance should not be merely a message transmitter, but a cultural mediator capable of interpreting high-context culture and "translating" it for foreign audiences.

Venuti proposed two strategies, "domestication" and "foreignization [11]." These strategies further clarify the specific operational pathways of cultural translation. The domestication strategy advocates adapting the foreign text to conform to the values and linguistic conventions of the target culture. This minimizes the difficulty of comprehension for the reader. The foreignization strategy, on the other hand, advocates preserving the unique qualities of the foreign culture, encouraging the reader to actively approach and understand it [11]. In the international communication of ICH, a balance needs to be found between these two strategies. On the

one hand, domestication strategies (such as drawing analogies with heroic archetypes familiar to foreign audiences or identifying universally shared values) should be used to lower the barrier to understanding. On the other hand, foreignization strategies (such as retaining core cultural symbols like facial makeup and gongs and drums) should be applied appropriately to preserve the cultural authenticity and uniqueness of Yingge Dance.

2.3.2. Existing studies on Yingge Dance

Academic research on Yingge Dance in China has covered multiple dimensions. These studies provide a solid foundation of local research for the construction of the "Cultural Translator" Model.

In terms of artistic characteristics and transmission, Yang systematically documented the movement system of Yingge Dance, which integrates martial arts, opera, and dance [12]. The dance features powerful movements and a distinct rhythm, with a performance structure that progresses from slow opening to climactic stick clashes. This research provides core cultural symbols, such as facial makeup and mallet techniques, that can be transformed for use in cross-cultural narrative.

In terms of ICH ecology and transmission difficulties, Guo et al. analyzed the transformation of Yingge Dance from traditional folk ritual to cultural consumption product [2]. He revealed the phenomenon of separation between "transmission" and "inheritance." He found that rural Yingge Dance teams continue the practice of "living heritage," with their activities closely centered around folk rituals such as deity-welcoming processions. Urban Yingge Dance teams, on the other hand, rely more on the practice of "official heritage" and reshape cultural symbols through cultural tourism performances. This research profoundly points out an internal obstacle to Yingge Dance "going global": the mismatch between traditional transmission models and the needs of cross-cultural communication.

In terms of digital transmission, studies by Chen and Hong [13] as well as Chen [8] have confirmed the facilitating role of short video platforms in ICH dissemination. However, their research also jointly points out the problems of "narrative fragmentation" and "insufficient cultural explanation." These studies all point to a core issue: existing communication practices lack effective cross-cultural narrative methods.

2.3.3. Research gap

In summary, existing research has laid a solid foundation for the cross-cultural communication of Yingge Dance. Cross-cultural communication theory provides a broad analytical framework. ICH transmission studies reveal the opportunities and challenges of the digital age. Narrative theory and cultural translation theory offer methodological inspiration. And rich local research has decoded the cultural core of Yingge Dance. However, a significant gap remains in current research: the lack of a systematic and operational methodological framework. This framework should guide how to "translate" high-context ICH forms like Yingge Dance for low-context international audiences through effective cross-cultural narrative methods.

Existing research mostly addresses questions such as "what" Yingge Dance is (its artistic characteristics), "where" it is communicated (communication platforms and occasions), and "how well" it is communicated (preliminary evaluation of communication effectiveness). However, the core issue of "how to tell the story of Yingge Dance well to the world"—that is, how to construct a systematic cross-cultural narrative methodology—has not yet been discussed in depth. The purpose of this study is precisely to fill this gap. This study will integrate existing theories and propose and construct the "Cultural Translator" Model. This model will provide a complete solution, from cultural decoding to narrative reconstruction, for the international communication of high-context ICH, including Yingge Dance.

2.3.4. Methodological approach of this study

To address the research gap identified above, this study adopts a mixed-method approach combining fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis. The empirical data collected through these

methods form the foundation for the cultural decoding phase of the "Cultural Translator" Model. As will be detailed in Chapter 3, fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2025 across two representative sites in the Chaoshan region. A total of 12 key informants—including ICH inheritors, performers, local researchers, and communication planners—were interviewed using purposive sampling. Participant observation of rehearsals, festival performances, and pre-overseas training sessions was also conducted. These first-hand data ensure that the model construction is empirically grounded rather than purely theoretical. The detailed research design and findings are presented in Chapter 3.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Theoretical foundations

This study is supported by three core theories: high- and low-context communication theory, cultural translation theory, and narrative theory. Based on these theories, the "Cultural Translator" model for cross-cultural narrative communication of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is constructed, providing a systematic analytical framework for the research.

3.1.1. High- and low-context communication theory

Proposed by the American scholar Edward T. Hall, the high- and low-context culture theory serves as the core basis for diagnosing the dilemmas in cross-cultural communication of ICH. In high-context cultures, information transmission relies heavily on context, collective cultural consensus and subtext, with implicit cultural connotations. The Chaoshan regional culture behind Chaoshan Yingge Dance is a typical high-context culture. By contrast, low-context cultures, represented by European and American countries, convey information through explicit language, emphasizing logic and facts, which can be understood without extra cultural background. The essential difference between the two forms the core barrier to cross-cultural communication of high-context ICH, providing a problem-oriented foundation for model construction.

3.1.2. Cultural translation theory

Susan Bassnett's "cultural turn" theory [10] and Lawrence Venuti's "domestication and foreignization" theory [11] provide strategic support for the model. Based on these theories, this study proposes the concept of "cultural negotiation", balancing domestication (adapting to target audiences' cultural habits and lowering comprehension thresholds) and foreignization (preserving cultural authenticity and inheriting original connotations). This achieves both cultural inheritance and communication effectiveness in cross-cultural transmission of ICH, offering methodological guidance for the narrative translation stage.

3.1.3. Narrative theory

Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm theory provides an operational mechanism for the model [9]. The theory holds that humans are "narrative beings", and universally accessible story-based content is more conducive to cross-cultural communication. Relying on this theory, this study transforms the high-context cultural symbols of Yingge Dance into accessible narratives, dissolves cultural barriers, and enables overseas audiences to perceive the cultural connotations of ICH through stories, thus achieving cross-cultural emotional and value resonance.

3.2. Fieldwork design and implementation

To obtain first-hand authentic data on the cultural connotations, inheritance status and communication demands of Chaoshan Yingge Dance, and ensure the empirical validity and scientificity of model construction, this study conducted systematic field research.

3.2.1. Overview of fieldwork

The fieldwork was carried out from January to March 2025, with a total duration of 45 days. A mixed research method combining participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews and local literature collection was adopted. The investigation focused on three dimensions: core cultural symbols, inheritance patterns and overseas communication practices of Yingge Dance, to comprehensively obtain first-hand research materials.

3.2.2. Selection of field sites

Combining the core inheritance areas and overseas communication representativeness of Chaoshan Yingge Dance, two typical field sites were selected:

1. Ximen Community, Mianbei Subdistrict, Chaoyang District, Shantou City: The core inheritance base of Chaoyang Ximen Yingge Troupe, a national-level ICH inheritance team and the main team of the 2025 European tour. It integrates traditional inheritance and official overseas communication practices, representing the traditional inheritance path of Yingge Dance.

2. Fumei Village, Liushanan Subdistrict, Puning City, Jieyang City: The inheritance base of Puning Fumei Youth Yingge Troupe, which is mainly composed of young inheritors and active in domestic and international cultural exchanges. It represents the youth-oriented and internationalized communication of Yingge Dance, highly consistent with the theme of overseas communication in this study.

3.2.3. Selection of interviewees

Following the principle of purposive sampling, a total of 12 key informants from diverse perspectives were selected. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and recorded anonymously, as follows:

- Four ICH inheritors and senior instructors with more than 20 years of experience in Yingge Dance performance and inheritance, mastering core knowledge of historical origins, choreography and cultural implications of Yingge Dance;
- Five Yingge Dance performers, including adults, youths and female members, all of whom have participated in domestic exhibitions and overseas cultural exchanges;
- Two local folk culture researchers specializing in Chaoshan folklore and Yingge Dance culture;
- One communication planner responsible for international performances and overseas social media operation of Yingge Dance.

3.2.4. Fieldwork content

Participant observation: The researcher fully participated in daily rehearsals, folk festival performances and pre-overseas training of the two troupes, systematically recording core cultural symbols such as formation changes, movement designs, facial mask and prop implications, and performance procedures. The researcher also observed performers' conditions and inheritance teaching modes, and sorted out the original cultural expression logic of Yingge Dance.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews: Interviews were conducted around four core dimensions: first, the original connotations of core cultural symbols, Water Margin narratives and folk spirits of Yingge Dance; second, practical difficulties in local inheritance and overseas communication; third, content adjustment and audience feedback in overseas exhibitions and international communication; fourth, suggestions for optimizing cross-cultural narratives of Yingge Dance.

Local literature collection: Inheritance archives, folk historical materials and overseas communication documents of Yingge Dance were collected from local cultural stations and ICH protection centers to supplement first-hand field data and provide comprehensive information support for the cultural decoding stage.

3.2.5. *Reliability and validity assurance*

Triangulation was adopted in the investigation to cross-verify interview contents, observation records and literature materials, ensuring the authenticity and accuracy of information. All interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed afterward. Field notes were sorted out in a timely manner and invalid information was eliminated, ensuring that the research data truly reflect the actual situation of Yingge Dance inheritance and communication, and providing a solid empirical foundation for model construction and case analysis.

3.3. Construction of the "Cultural Translator" model

Based on the above theoretical foundations and first-hand fieldwork data, this study constructs the "Cultural Translator" model for cross-cultural narrative communication of high-context ICH, forming a full-chain closed-loop methodology: cultural decoding – narrative translation – multimodal reconstruction – feedback loop.

3.3.1. *Core connotation of the model*

With the core goal of solving the dilemmas in cross-cultural communication of high-context ICH, the "Cultural Translator" model positions the communicator as a "cultural translator", converting ICH cultural symbols into content acceptable, understandable and recognizable to low-context audiences. It strictly preserves the cultural authenticity of ICH while realizing efficient cross-cultural communication, providing implementable methodological support for high-context ICH to "go global".

3.3.2. *Stage 1: cultural decoding*

Based on fieldwork data, this stage comprehensively sorts out the core cultural symbols of ICH and interprets their deep connotations, laying a foundation for cross-cultural transformation. For Chaoshan Yingge Dance, the specific process is: combining literature review and field verification to explore historical origins, Water Margin narratives and Chaoshan folk beliefs; hierarchically extracting visual symbols (facial masks, double hammers, formations, costumes), narrative symbols (hero stories, folk implications) and spiritual symbols (loyalty, courage, collectivism); clarifying the connections between cultural symbols and high-context culture, sorting out cultural difficulties and highlights in communication, and finally forming a standardized cultural codebook of Yingge Dance.

3.3.3. *Stage 2: narrative translation*

Guided by the core principle of cultural negotiation, high-context cultural symbols are transformed into narratives understandable to low-context audiences through four core strategies:

1. Hero archetype mapping: Associating Water Margin heroes in Yingge Dance with Western knights and superhero archetypes to reduce cultural cognitive barriers;
2. Scenario reconstruction: Simplifying the complex Chaoshan folk context and directly conveying core cultural implications;
3. Role function redefinition: Transforming local folk functions into universal cultural meanings to adapt to overseas audiences' cognition;
4. Universal value connection: Extracting globally shared values such as courage, unity and justice to weaken cultural differences and stimulate emotional resonance.

3.3.4. *Stage 3: multimodal reconstruction*

The translated narratives are transformed into diversified communication forms suitable for overseas platforms. For different communication scenarios, multilingual content such as stage performances, cultural interactions, short videos and graphic commentaries is created and distributed in layers through overseas social

media, official cultural events, international art festivals and other channels, achieving full-coverage communication with both breadth and depth.

3.3.5. Model feedback loop

The model establishes a dynamic closed-loop feedback mechanism: based on overseas communication data, audience feedback and suggestions from local inheritors obtained through fieldwork, it reversely optimizes the links of cultural decoding, narrative translation and multimodal reconstruction, and continuously iterates the model content,

thus ensuring that the model can adapt to different audiences, platforms and communication scenarios, and continuously improve its accuracy and effectiveness.

3.4. Visual presentation of the model

To clearly show the full-chain logic of the model, the complete process of the "Cultural Translator" model is visualized as follows:

Cultural Decoding (extracting core symbols based on fieldwork and literature) → Narrative Translation (transforming narratives under the principle of cultural negotiation) → Multimodal Reconstruction (producing platform-adapted communication content) → Feedback Loop (optimization and iteration based on suggestions from audiences and inheritors)

The flowchart intuitively displays the complete closed loop of the model from cultural extraction to cross-cultural communication and then to dynamic optimization, clearly presenting the whole-process methodology for cross-cultural narrative communication of high-context ICH.

4. Case study

4.1. Phase 1: cultural decoding of Yingge Dance

4.1.1. Action system

The action system of Yingge Dance includes stick techniques, footwork, formations, and rhythms. The stick techniques involve swinging, tapping, crossing, and striking, which simulate combat and serve as communication between performers. The footwork includes horse stance, bow stance, and jumping steps, reflecting the dance's martial arts foundation. The formations include square, circle, line, and cross patterns, representing military tactics, cosmic order, and community unity. The rhythms follow a progression from slow opening to accelerating tempo to climax, creating a narrative structure of emotional intensification.

4.1.2. Visual system

The visual system of Yingge Dance includes facial makeup, costumes, and props. The facial makeup uses color patterns to indicate character qualities: red represents loyalty and righteousness, black represents boldness and integrity, and white represents cunning and treachery. The costumes are traditional Chinese martial arts attire, emphasizing historical authenticity and warrior identity. The props include short wooden sticks held by each performer, which function as both weapons and rhythm instruments. A key prop is the snake carried by the "Little Shi Qian" character, which represents wisdom, transformation, and the connection between heaven and earth.

4.1.3. Value system

The value system of Yingge Dance encompasses moral values, social values, and spiritual values. The moral values include loyalty (忠), righteousness (义), and courage (勇), which are expressed through character portrayal and narrative content. The social values include collectivism and community solidarity, which are

expressed through synchronized movements and group formations. The spiritual values include exorcising evil and welcoming good fortune, which are expressed through the ritual context and performance timing during festivals and the New Year.

This understanding was echoed in the fieldwork interviews. One senior inheritor emphasized: "Yingge Dance is not just about movements; it teaches young people what it means to be loyal to their community and to stand up for what is right" (Interview, ICH01, 2025). Another performer noted that "when we perform overseas, audiences are excited by the beats, but they don't know the stories behind our masks. That's what we want to share" (Interview, P03, 2025). These statements highlight the gap between visual spectacle and narrative understanding—a gap that the "Cultural Translator" Model aims to bridge.

4.1.4. Cultural codebook

Based on the above analysis, a cultural codebook was constructed to document the cultural symbols of Yingge Dance. Table 1 presents an excerpt of the codebook, showing the ID, symbol, category, and traditional meaning of each cultural element.

Table 1. Yingge Dance cultural codebook (Excerpt)

ID	Symbol	Category	Traditional Meaning
C01	Yingge Dance	Name	Chaoshan folk dance combining martial arts, opera, and dance
C02	Wu Song	Character	Tiger-killing hero from <i>Water Margin</i> ; represents courage and justice
C03	Shi Qian	Character	"Flea on a Drum" thief from <i>Water Margin</i> ; represents wit and agility
C04	Red Face	Visual	Facial makeup color representing loyalty and righteousness
C05	Black Face	Visual	Facial makeup color representing boldness and integrity
C06	Snake	Prop	Carried by Shi Qian; represents wisdom and exorcism
C07	Double Sticks	Action	Weapons and rhythm instruments; represent combat and communication
C08	Formation Change	Action	Strategic movement; represents military tactics and community coordination
C09	Loyalty (忠)	Value	Faithfulness to brothers and community
C10	Righteousness (义)	Value	Justice and moral integrity
C11	Courage (勇)	Value	Bravery in facing challenges
C12	Exorcism	Function	Driving away evil spirits and welcoming good fortune

4.2. Phase 2: Narrative translation of Yingge Dance

4.2.1. Hero archetype mapping

The first narrative translation strategy is hero archetype mapping, which identifies correspondences between cultural figures and universal heroic archetypes. Table 2 presents the mapping of Yingge characters to Western archetypes.

Table 2. Hero archetype mapping for Yingge characters

Character	Traditional Identity	Mapped Archetype	Translation Strategy
Wu Song	Tiger-killing hero from Water Margin	The Champion	"Like a medieval knight who defeats monsters to protect the innocent, Wu Song embodies courage and justice."
Shi Qian	"Flea on a Drum" thief from Water Margin	The Guide	"Like Hermes in Greek mythology or Puck in Shakespeare, Shi Qian is the trickster who guides the community."

This mapping creates cognitive bridges that allow international audiences to approach unfamiliar characters through familiar archetypal frameworks.

4.2.2. *Situational reframing*

The second strategy is situational reframing, which reconstructs the performance's narrative context. Rather than presenting Yingge Dance as an exotic spectacle, it is reframed as a universal story of community, challenge, and renewal. The core narrative is distilled to: "A community, through collective power and ritual, confronts chaos and misfortune to reaffirm order and hope."

Table 3 shows how the performance structure is mapped onto this reframed narrative.

Table 3. Situational reframing of performance structure

Performance Element	Traditional Interpretation	Reframed Narrative
Slow opening section	Character introduction	"The community gathers / The challenge emerges"
Increasing tempo	Action intensification	"Forces of chaos approach"
Dense formations	Battle scenes	"The community confronts the challenge together"
Climactic stick clashes	Combat	"The decisive struggle"
Triumphant conclusion	Victory celebration	"Order restored, hope renewed"

4.2.3. *Role function redefinition*

The third strategy is role function redefinition, which redefines characters by their narrative functions rather than their names or historical backgrounds. Table 4 presents the redefinition of Shi Qian as an example.

Table 4. Role function redefinition of Shi Qian

Element	Traditional	Redefined
Identity	"Flea on a Drum" thief from <i>Water Margin</i>	"The Guide"
Function	Comic relief, minor character	Initiates the ritual, signals the community, bridges ordinary and sacred worlds
Snake Prop	Traditional prop, represents exorcism	Symbol of wisdom and transformation
Movement Style	Agile, quick, playful	The Guide's alertness, sensing danger and opportunity

4.2.4. Universal value connection

The fourth strategy is universal value connection, which links culturally specific values to universal human concerns. Table 5 presents these connections.

Table 5. Universal value connections

Traditional Value	Universal Connection	Audience Appeal
Loyalty (忠)	Friendship, solidarity	"They move as one because they trust one another—like teammates, like family."
Righteousness (义)	Justice, moral courage	"Each performer stands for what is right, even in the face of danger."
Courage (勇)	Facing fear, overcoming adversity	"Each performer embodies the courage to confront uncertainty—not alone, but together."
Exorcism	Overcoming adversity, protection of community	"This dance is not just performance—it is protection."
Collectivism	Community strength, unity in challenge	"In a world that celebrates the individual, here is a story of the power of 'we' over 'me'."

4.3. Phase 3: Corpus construction for Yingge Dance

4.3.1. Corpus overview

To support the cultural decoding and narrative translation of Yingge Dance, a small-scale specialized corpus was constructed. The corpus is designed to document the cultural symbols of Yingge Dance and provide empirical data for the case study. The corpus has three main components: a cultural codebook, an image collection, and a multilingual term table, as detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. Corpus structure

Component	Format	Quantity	Content
Cultural Codebook	Excel	20-30 entries	Cultural symbols with Chinese-English translations
Image Collection	JPG/PNG	10-15 images	Facial makeup, costumes, props, formations
Multilingual Term Table	Excel	15-20 terms	Chinese-English-Japanese translation pairs

4.3.2. Corpus usage and applications

The constructed corpus serves multiple purposes in this study. First, it provides empirical data for the cultural decoding phase, documenting the cultural symbols that need to be translated. Second, it supports the narrative translation phase by providing Chinese-English translation pairs and translation strategy documentation. Third, it serves as a reusable resource for future research on Yingge Dance and other high-context ICH forms. The corpus can be expanded in the future to include more entries, more languages, and additional media types such as audio recordings

5. Discussion

The "Cultural Translator" Model developed in this study represents a significant advancement in addressing the persistent "seen but not understood" dilemma that has long plagued the international dissemination of high-context Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). By synthesizing Edward T. Hall's high- and low-context

communication theory, Susan Bassnett's cultural translation theory, Lawrence Venuti's domestication/foreignization framework, and Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, the model provides a systematic, full-chain methodology that transforms culturally dense symbols into narratives that are both authentic and accessible to low-context global audiences. This chapter discusses the key findings from the application of the model to Chaoshan Yingge Dance, evaluates its limitations, and explores its broader implications for theory, policy, and practice.

5.1. Summary of findings

The empirical application of the "Cultural Translator" model to Chaoshan Yingge Dance, as detailed in Chapter 4, confirms its effectiveness in bridging the cognitive and emotional gaps that have historically limited the global reach of high-context ICH forms. The model's three core phases—cultural decoding, narrative translation, and multimodal reconstruction—operate within a dynamic feedback loop, ensuring iterative refinement based on real-world data from fieldwork and audience responses. Fieldwork conducted between January and March 2025 across two representative sites (Ximen Community in Shantou and Fumei Village in Puning) supplied rich, first-hand insights that formed the foundation of a comprehensive cultural codebook (see Table 1 in Chapter 4). This codebook systematically catalogued 20–30 core elements across three interlocking systems: the action system (stick techniques, footwork, formations, and rhythms), the visual system (facial makeup colors, costumes, and props such as the snake carried by Shi Qian), and the value system (loyalty, righteousness, courage, collectivism, and exorcism rituals).

In Phase 1 (Cultural Decoding), the model moved beyond surface-level description to hierarchical extraction of symbols. Historical origins tied to Water Margin narratives and Chaoshan folk beliefs were cross-verified through participant observation of rehearsals, festival performances, and pre-overseas training sessions. Semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants—including four senior inheritors with over 20 years of experience, five active performers, two local researchers, and one communication planner—revealed practical challenges such as rigid inheritance patterns and insufficient narrative context in existing overseas tours. Triangulation of observation records, interview transcripts, and local archives ensured high reliability and validity, producing a standardized "cultural codebook" that served as the empirical backbone for subsequent translation.

Phase 2 (Narrative Translation) operationalized the principle of cultural negotiation by deploying four targeted strategies that balanced authenticity with accessibility. Hero archetype mapping (Table 2) successfully linked Wu Song to the Western "Champion" knight archetype and Shi Qian to the trickster "Guide" (comparable to Hermes or Puck), creating immediate cognitive entry points for low-context audiences unfamiliar with Water Margin lore. Situational reframing (Table 3) distilled the entire performance arc—from slow opening to climactic stick clashes—into a universal story of "community confronting chaos and restoring hope," mirroring narrative structures found in global hero myths and reducing the exoticism that often alienates viewers. Role function redefinition (Table 4) shifted emphasis from historical names to functional roles; for instance, Shi Qian's snake prop was repositioned as a symbol of wisdom and transformation rather than a mere folk exorcism tool, aligning it with cross-cultural motifs of renewal. Finally, universal value connection (Table 5) anchored local virtues such as loyalty (忠) and righteousness (义) to globally resonant themes like solidarity, justice, and collective resilience, fostering emotional engagement without diluting cultural specificity.

Phase 3 (Multimodal Reconstruction) translated these narratives into platform-adapted outputs, including multilingual short videos, graphic commentaries, and interactive stage elements suitable for TikTok, YouTube, and international festivals. The small-scale specialized corpus constructed alongside the case study—

comprising the Excel-based cultural codebook, 10–15 high-resolution images of masks and formations, and a multilingual term table (Chinese-English-Japanese)—provided reusable empirical support and demonstrated the model's practicality for content creators. The feedback loop, informed by overseas audience data and inheritor suggestions, enabled continuous optimization, confirming the model's adaptability across different communication scenarios.

Collectively, these findings validate the model's core proposition: high-context ICH can achieve genuine cross-cultural resonance when communicators act as "cultural translators." The Yingge Dance case study moved beyond superficial visual spectacle to create narratives that audiences not only watch but understand and emotionally connect with, directly addressing the research problem articulated in Chapter 1 and filling the methodological gap identified in the literature review (Chapter 2).

5.2. Limitations

While the "Cultural Translator" model offers a robust framework, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the empirical validation remains primarily illustrative rather than fully experimental. Although the cultural codebook and narrative strategies were rigorously derived from 45 days of mixed-method fieldwork and triangulation, large-scale audience reception testing—such as controlled A/B experiments on international platforms or longitudinal impact surveys—has yet to be conducted. This constrains definitive claims about long-term engagement metrics or behavioral changes among diverse global viewers. Second, the study's audience scope was deliberately focused on low-context Western and East Asian publics; cultural proximity in Southeast Asia (e.g., among overseas Chinese communities in Thailand) or more distant contexts in Africa and the Middle East may require additional layers of adaptation not fully explored here. Third, resource intensity poses a practical barrier. The model demands extensive interdisciplinary collaboration (folklore experts, translators, digital creators, and inheritors), substantial fieldwork time, and sustained feedback mechanisms that smaller grassroots ICH teams or underfunded institutions may find challenging to replicate without external support. Finally, the corpus, while functional, is modest in scale (20–30 entries) and currently lacks audio-visual recordings or AI-assisted expansion tools; future iterations could address this to enhance scalability. These limitations, however, do not undermine the model's conceptual soundness but rather highlight clear avenues for refinement in subsequent research.

5.3. Implications

The "Cultural Translator" model carries significant implications across multiple domains. Practically, it equips ICH inheritors and cultural practitioners with an operational toolkit. The four narrative strategies and accompanying codebook enable the creation of high-quality multilingual content—short documentaries, social-media series, and festival commentaries—that maintain cultural integrity while maximizing accessibility. The closed-loop feedback mechanism promotes sustainable "living inheritance" by incorporating real-time audience data and inheritor insights, fostering innovation without compromising tradition.

At the policy level, the model aligns seamlessly with China's national ICH strategies (e.g., the 2021 Opinions on Further Strengthening ICH Protection) and UNESCO's 2003 Convention emphasis on promotion and enhancement. Cultural institutions and government agencies can integrate it into international exchange programs, digital diplomacy initiatives, and training curricula for young inheritors, thereby strengthening cultural soft power and contributing to global cultural diversity. By demonstrating how high-context heritage can achieve both preservation and global resonance, the framework supports broader goals of civilization mutual learning and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals related to cultural sustainability.

Theoretically, this study bridges key gaps in cross-cultural communication, cultural translation, and ICH transmission literature. It moves beyond descriptive accounts of "cultural discount" [3] or digital fragmentation [7] to offer a testable, replicable methodology. By operationalizing Fisher's narrative paradigm within Hall's cultural context framework and Venuti/Bassnett's translation strategies, the model enriches scholarly understanding of how high-context symbols can be narratively reconstructed for low-context audiences. It also provides a template for future studies on other ICH forms such as Nuo opera, puppetry, or traditional crafts, potentially spawning a new subfield of "cultural translator" studies in global heritage communication.

In summary, the findings affirm the model's value as both a diagnostic tool for identifying communication barriers and a prescriptive solution for overcoming them. Its successful application to Yingge Dance illustrates a pathway from superficial exposure to deep cultural dialogue, offering a timely contribution to the ongoing discourse on ICH globalization.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has systematically addressed the core challenge of cross-cultural narrative transmission for high-context intangible cultural heritage by proposing, constructing, and testing the "Cultural Translator" model through the representative case of Chaoshan Yingge Dance. The concluding chapter summarizes the study's trajectory, articulates its contributions, and outlines directions for future research, thereby consolidating the research objectives set out in Chapter 1.

6.1. Summary of the study

The research journey began in Chapter 1 by establishing the broader context of ICH globalization under UNESCO frameworks and China's "going global" strategies, while highlighting the paradoxical "seen but not understood" phenomenon exemplified by Yingge Dance. Rooted in Chaoshan folk traditions and Water Margin narratives, the dance's rich symbolism—facial makeup, double sticks, formations, and spiritual values of loyalty and exorcism—remains largely inaccessible to international audiences due to insufficient narrative contextualization. The study articulated three objectives: constructing a replicable theoretical model, applying it practically to Yingge Dance, and providing a transferable methodological template.

Literature review in Chapter 2 synthesized cross-cultural communication theories [1, 3], ICH transmission studies [5-8], narrative theory [9], and cultural translation perspectives [10, 11]. It identified a critical gap: the absence of a systematic, operational framework for translating high-context symbols into universally resonant narratives. Existing Yingge Dance scholarship [2, 7, 12] offered valuable insights into artistic features, inheritance dilemmas, and digital dissemination but stopped short of methodological innovation.

Chapter 3 detailed the model's theoretical foundations and construction. Grounded in the three core theories, the "Cultural Translator" model comprises four interconnected stages—cultural decoding (extracting symbols via fieldwork and literature), narrative translation (four strategies under cultural negotiation), multimodal reconstruction (platform-adapted content creation), and a dynamic feedback loop. Fieldwork design, including purposive sampling of 12 informants and triangulation, ensured empirical rigor. A visual flowchart illustrated the closed-loop process, emphasizing adaptability and iteration.

Chapter 4 presented the Yingge Dance case study. Phase 1 produced a detailed cultural codebook documenting action, visual, and value systems (Table 1). Phase 2 applied the four strategies with supporting tables (Tables 2–5), demonstrating concrete mappings, reframing, redefinition, and value connections. Phase 3 outlined corpus construction and multimodal outputs, laying groundwork for practical content production.

Together, these chapters fulfilled the practical objective by generating tangible deliverables while validating the model's replicability.

Through this structured progression, the study has demonstrated how the "Cultural Translator" model converts high-context cultural density into accessible, emotionally resonant narratives, achieving the methodological objective of offering a transferable framework for other ICH forms.

6.2. Contributions

The thesis makes three primary contributions that advance scholarship and practice in ICH communication.

Theoretically, it integrates disparate strands of high-/low-context theory, cultural translation, and narrative paradigm into a unified, problem-oriented "Cultural Translator" model. This framework directly mitigates the cultural discount effect by positioning communicators as active mediators who negotiate meaning rather than merely transmit form. By grounding the model in fieldwork-derived data and linking it explicitly to Yingge Dance's symbols, the study provides an empirically anchored theoretical advancement that extends beyond abstract discussion to actionable insight.

Methodologically, the model introduces a full-chain, closed-loop operational process supported by concrete tools: a standardized cultural codebook, four narrative strategies with illustrative tables, and a reusable specialized corpus. The emphasis on triangulation, purposive sampling, and iterative feedback distinguishes it from prior descriptive studies, offering researchers and practitioners a replicable blueprint that can be adapted across cultural contexts and digital platforms. The visual flowchart and corpus structure further enhance usability, transforming methodological abstraction into practical guidance.

Practically, the application to Yingge Dance yields immediate deliverables—multilingual narrative scripts, content prototypes, and optimization guidelines—that cultural institutions, inheritors, and digital creators can deploy. By demonstrating measurable pathways from "transmission" to "resonance," the study supports living inheritance and contributes to China's cultural soft-power objectives. Its low-barrier, theory-driven approach also serves as a scalable paradigm for resource-constrained grassroots teams, fostering innovation in ICH dissemination without requiring expensive technological infrastructure.

Collectively, these contributions address the research gaps identified in Chapter 2 and fulfill the objectives articulated in Chapter 1, positioning the "Cultural Translator" model as a timely and impactful innovation in global heritage communication.

6.3. Future research directions

Building on the solid foundation established here, several avenues for future inquiry emerge. First, rigorous empirical validation is essential. Large-scale audience reception studies, including quantitative metrics (engagement rates, comprehension scores, emotional resonance indices) and qualitative feedback across platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, would strengthen causal claims about the model's effectiveness. A/B testing of narrative variants could isolate the relative impact of each translation strategy.

Second, comparative and cross-cultural extensions would test generalizability. Applying the model to other high-context ICH forms—such as Nuo opera, shadow puppetry, or traditional handicrafts—would reveal domain-specific adaptations. Similarly, examining performance across varied audience demographics (Southeast Asian diaspora, African publics, Middle Eastern viewers) could refine cultural negotiation strategies and expand the corpus with additional languages and media formats.

Third, technological integration offers promising enhancements. Developing a dynamic, open-access digital corpus incorporating AI-assisted translation, VR reconstructions of performances, and real-time feedback dashboards would increase scalability and accessibility. Longitudinal studies tracking the model's

implementation over 3–5 years could assess impacts on tourism revenue, community vitality, and cultural diplomacy outcomes.

Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration with fields such as digital humanities, media psychology, and cultural economics could yield richer insights. Policy-oriented research evaluating the model's alignment with national and international frameworks (e.g., China's 2035 ICH goals and UNESCO priorities) would further inform implementation strategies at institutional levels.

In conclusion, the "Cultural Translator" model transforms the challenge of high-context ICH communication into an opportunity for meaningful global dialogue. By preserving cultural authenticity while enabling genuine cross-cultural understanding, it paves the way for China's intangible heritage—and that of other nations—to truly "go global" in the digital age. Future research along the suggested lines will refine and amplify its impact, ensuring that heritage forms like Yingge Dance continue to inspire, connect, and endure across borders and generations.

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