



# Ideological presentations in official promotion of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) on short-form video platforms: a multimodal content analysis

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir30iConf47317>

## Abstract

**Introduction.** This study investigates what ideological themes are embodied in the official promotion of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) on short-form video (SFV) platforms, and further examines how these ideological themes are presented through various content creation elements.

**Method.** Two trained researchers in information sciences conducted a multimodal content analysis of 532 SFVs downloaded from a nationally representative official Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) account promoting ICH.

**Findings.** This study identified four primary ideological themes embodied in the official promotion of ICH: (1) cultural democratization, (2) tradition revivalism, (3) patriotism, and (4) multiculturalism. Moreover, we revealed the distribution of content creation elements across SFVs reflecting various ideological themes.

**Conclusion.** In SFV platforms like Douyin, ICH promotion highlights grassroots-centered narratives and user-generated videography. Traditional and popular culture are integrated within this context. This fosters a relatively democratized discourse around ICH, creating a more inclusive and softened ideological expression.

## Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) refers to practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills recognized by people ‘as part of their cultural heritage’ (UNESCO, 2022; Vecco, 2010), such as folklore, performing arts, craftsmanship, and languages, which can be transmitted to and recreated by future generations (Lenzerini, 2011). Nowadays, ICH has increasingly been recognized in terms of political, economic, and cultural values (Chmil et al., 2021; Cominelli & Greffe, 2013; Petronela, 2016; Tavares et al., 2021), highlighting its important role in demonstrating a nation’s soft power (Rodrigues, 2023; Schreiber, 2017). Consequently, numerous official institutions have intensified efforts to promote and preserve ICH (Karampampas, 2021; Qiu et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022).

Ideology can be defined as a belief system that reflects the interests, values, and goals of a particular group, class, or society (Converse, 2006; Lichtheim, 1965). Prior practices showed that the promotion of ICH can facilitate the construction and expression of political, cultural, and social ideologies. For example, the European Union has implemented a ‘*placing heritage*’ strategy to utilize tangible and intangible cultural heritage in creating a collective European cultural value system across various countries (Lähdesmäki, 2016). Additionally, research suggested that ICH promotion is important for maintaining and strengthening multiethnicity and cultural diversity (Massing, 2018; M. N. Taylor, 2009; Vrdoljak, 2005).

For a long time, conventional media like film, photography, and print have been essential in ICH promotion (Sullivan, 2015). This kind of media content, especially those from official sources, often embodies dominant narratives and perspectives on the heritage that are sanctioned and promoted by authoritative bodies (Smith, 2006), which are usually used to advocate mainstream ideologies for governance (Macdonald, 2003). However, the advent of the digital era seemed to have redefined the ICH discourse and ideological expressions. Scholars suggested that digitization and social-medialization have made the interpretation of ICH more polyphonic and less reliant on authoritative perspectives, incorporating more interpretations from the audience side (Kalay et al., 2007; J. Taylor & Gibson, 2017).

In recent years, the rise of short-form video (SFV) platforms such as TikTok has become a vital vehicle for the official promotion of ICH (Cao, 2022), which offers more appealing information formats and content creation (H. Wang et al., 2024). First, most SFVs adopt a vertical video format ranging from 30 to 60 seconds in length (Van Daele et al., 2024), which aligns better with smartphone users’ habits and is well-suited for fragmented content dissemination (Ryan, 2018; Y. Wang, 2021). Second, compared to traditional media, the production of SFVs requires lower costs and has less stringent requirements for professionalism and aesthetics (Y. Wang, 2020). They focus more on micro-narratives and interaction, presenting a variety of engaging themes, expressions, and storytelling that appeal to the audiences (Y. Wang, 2021). Hence, SFVs may provide a more diverse, enriched, and even democratic ideological expression in the official promotion of ICH.

However, a notable research gap remains in how ideologies are embodied and presented in the official promotion of ICH on SFV platforms. More specifically, there is insufficient knowledge about the relationship among ideological presentations, ICH promotion, and content creation of official SFVs. Addressing this gap can foster a deeper understanding of the role of digitization and the social medialization of ICH in ideological construction. This can offer insights into the values and meanings of the official promotion of ICH from a cross-disciplinary and novel perspective, contributing to both social media and cultural heritage studies.

Hence, we proposed the following research questions (RQs) for this study:

**RQ1)** What ideological themes are embodied in the official promotion of ICH on SFV platforms?

**RQ2)** How are these ideological themes presented through various content creation elements of SFV?

## Methodology

To address the proposed RQs, we conducted a multimodal content analysis of SFVs from a China's official account promoting ICH in Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). Choosing China and Douyin as the research entry points of this study is appropriate for two reasons. First, China is a multi-ethnic country with a rich variety of ICH resources. Currently, China has 1,557 national-level representative ICH items, 43 of which are listed on the UNESCO ICH list (UNESCO, 2024), ranking first in the world. Second, nearly all of China's ICHs are now promoted on the Douyin (Cao, 2022), attracting a large audience. A significant portion of this content is produced by official media outlets, such as national television stations, broadcasters, and state-affiliated organizations.

### Data collection

We selected a representative official Douyin account promoting ICH for multimodal content analysis. As Gustafsson (2017) noted, focusing on a single case enables a richer and deeper exploration of a phenomenon compared to investigating multiple cases.

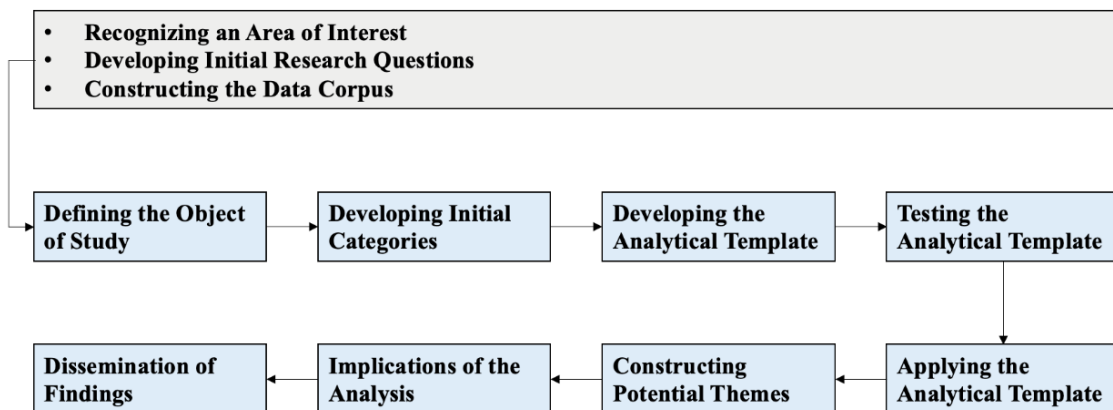
For representative account selection, we first searched on Douyin using the keywords ‘非物质文化遗产’ (Chinese translation of ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’) and its abbreviation ‘非遗’ (Chinese translation of ‘ICH’). Among the results, three criteria were applied for account filtering: 1) verified by official agency, 2) number of followers, and 3) number of likes received. Specifically, all unofficial accounts were first excluded. The remaining verified accounts were then ranked in descending order according to their number of followers. The top 10 accounts were further sorted in descending order based on their number of likes received. The account ranked first after this process was selected.

Finally, we identified the account ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage is Coming’ (IHC; Chinese name: ‘非遗来了’; ID: feiyitv). IHC is an official Douyin account managed by Radio Shanghai, a provincial, state-owned media organization. This account was dedicated to promoting Chinese ICH, which has gained significant recognition and popularity nationwide. As of September 12, 2024, this account had the highest number of followers (1.483 million) and the highest number of likes received (7.729 million) among all official accounts promoting ICH in Douyin. A total of 532 SFVs published in this account were downloaded for multimodal content analysis.

### Data analysis

We adopted Serafini and Reid's (2023) framework for multimodal content analysis. This framework (see Figure 1) includes 11 steps: (1) Recognizing an area of interest; (2) Developing initial research questions; (3) Constructing the data corpus; (4) Defining the object of study; (5) Developing initial categories; (6) Developing the analytical template; (7) Testing the analytical template; (8) Applying the analytical template to the data corpus; (9) Constructing potential themes; (10) Implications of the analysis; and (11) Dissemination of findings.

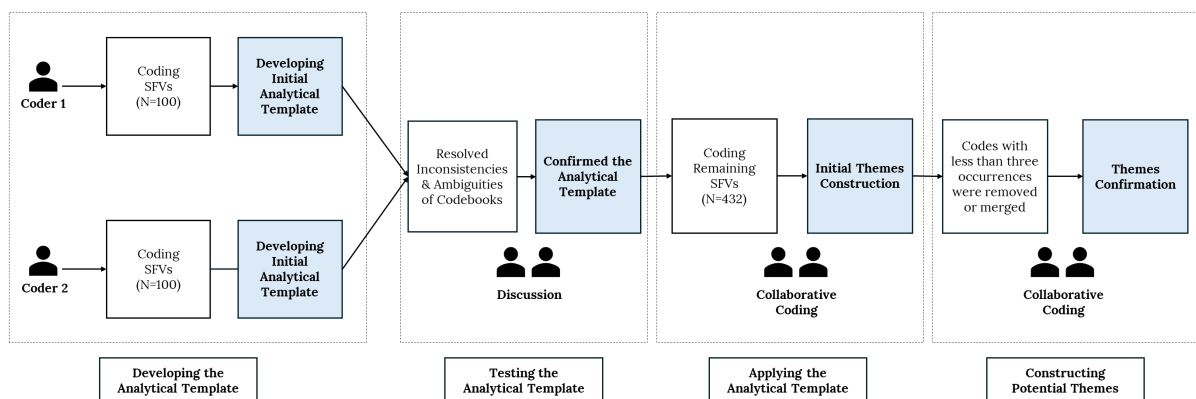
The rationale for selecting this framework lies in its extension of the traditional content analysis approach (e.g. Schreier, 2012) by integrating a multimodal theoretical perspective (e.g. Kress, 2009). This enables researchers to consider the interactions among various communication modalities, including video, image, text, and audio, which is particularly suited to the information characteristics of SFV content.



**Figure 1.** Serafini and Reid's (2023) approach to multimodal content analysis

To better address the proposed RQs, the analytical template (AT) for this study included two codebooks, each addressing RQ1 and RQ2, respectively. Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were used. To address RQ1, we applied Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis approach. This is a pure inductive coding approach. The codebook was developed based on the commonality of raw qualitative data. All generated codes were subsequently categorized, evaluated, and refined to construct appropriate themes. To address RQ2, we leveraged Kress's (2009) social semiotic theory of multimodality. This theory highlights that signs exist in various modes (e.g., visual, auditory, linguistic) and emphasizes the interplay among these modes in meaning construction. Drawing on this theoretical lens and considering the SFV's contexts, we proposed four primary categories: *narratives*, *videography*, *visual symbols*, and *music genres*. These categories served as a foundation for developing the elements within the codebook. Specifically, we further developed and confirmed corresponding elements (i.e., codes) of each category by coding a portion of the data. This process culminated in a finalized RQ2-specific codebook.

In the actual coding process, two trained researchers in information sciences systematically coded all SFVs (N=523). As shown in Figure 2, they first independently coded the first 100 SFVs and developed the initial AT. Subsequently, they discussed and resolved all inconsistencies and ambiguities of codebooks in AT. After that, they confirmed the AT. Guided by the AT, the two researchers worked collaboratively to code the remaining SFVs. Based on the coding results, they constructed a series of initial themes. In the last stage, codes with less than three occurrences were removed or merged. And coded themes were finally named, defined, refined, and confirmed. To ensure intercoder reliability, the coding process was repeated twice.



**Figure 2.** Workflow of the coding process

## Results

For RQ 1, we identified four primary themes of ideological presentations in SFVs published by ICHC, including (1) Cultural democratization, (2) Tradition revivalism, (3) Patriotism, and (4) Multiculturalism. It is worth noting that the abovementioned themes were not mutually exclusive. Put differently, a SFV may present multiple ideological themes. Table 1 shows the distribution of themes in the RQ1-specific codebook of the final AT.

Themes	Frequency	Percentage of Total
Cultural Democratization	303	56.96%
Tradition Revivalism	198	37.22%
Patriotism	81	15.23%
Multiculturalism	65	12.22%
Total	532	100%

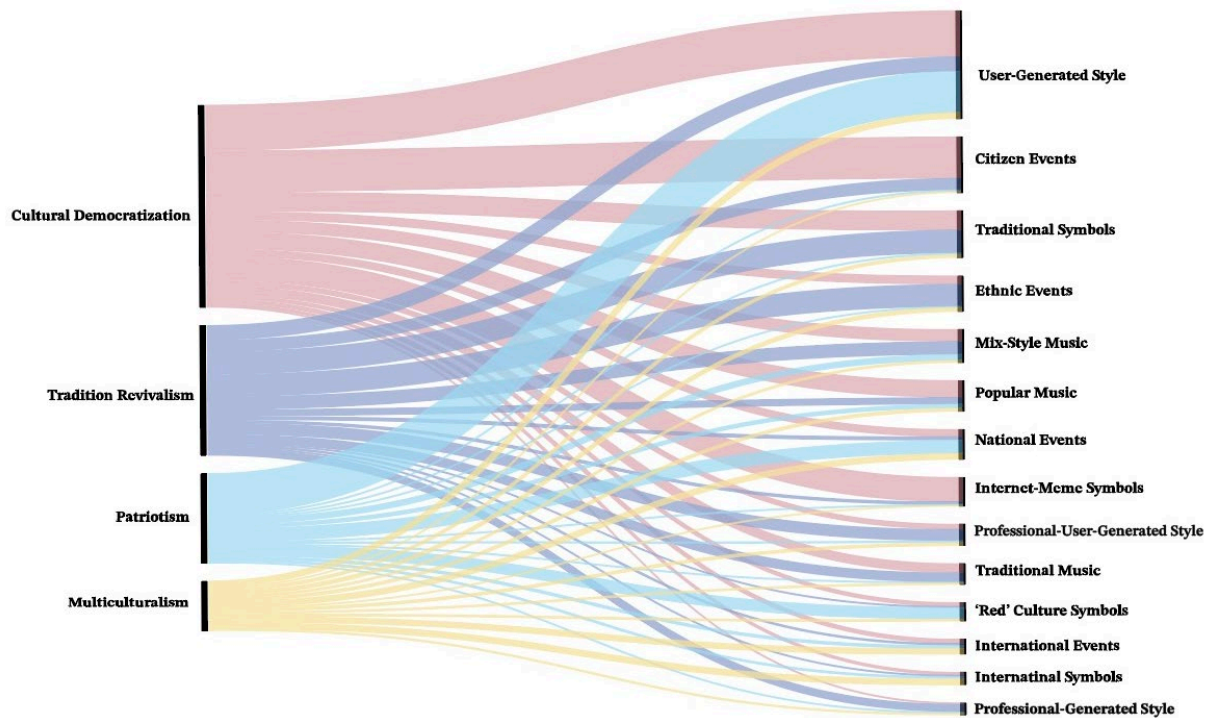
**Table 1.** Distribution of themes of ideological presentations

For RQ 2, we further explored how the abovementioned ideological themes were presented through the content creation of SFVs. Based on the four predefined categories, an RQ2-specific codebook with 11 elements (i.e. codes) of content creation was finally developed. Similarly, these elements were not deployed independently. In ICHC, most SFVs utilized a combination of multiple elements, reflecting the blending of various ideological themes presentations. Table 2 presents the statistics distribution of these elements across both the general set of SFVs and those featuring different ideological themes. Figure 3 visually shows these distributions using a Sankey diagram.

Categories	Elements	Cultural Democratization (N=303)	Tradition Revivalism (N=198)	Patriotism (N=81)	Multi-culturalism (N=65)	Total (N=532)
Narratives	Citizen Events	236 (77.9%)	67 (33.8%)	9 (11.1%)	8 (12.3%)	267 (50.2%)
	Ethnic Events	48 (15.8%)	127 (64.1%)	5 (6.2%)	24 (36.9%)	144 (27.1%)
	National Events	42 (13.9%)	20 (10.1%)	75 (92.6%)	35 (53.8%)	124 (23.3%)
	International Events	24 (7.9%)	12 (6.1%)	17 (21.0%)	34 (52.3%)	60 (11.3%)
Videography	User-Generated Style	261 (86.1%)	84 (42.4%)	236 (77.9%)	36 (55.4%)	350 (65.8%)
	Professional-User-Generated Style	30 (9.9%)	65 (32.8%)	10 (12.3%)	18 (27.7%)	112 (21.1%)
	Professional-Generated Style	8 (2.6%)	43 (21.7%)	8 (9.9%)	11 (16.9%)	70 (13.2%)
Visual Symbols	Internet-Meme Symbols	139 (45.9%)	17 (8.6%)	3 (3.7%)	6 (9.2%)	147 (27.6%)
	Traditional Symbols	110 (36.3%)	131 (66.2%)	9 (11.1%)	19 (11.1%)	201 (37.8%)
	International Symbols	17 (5.6%)	7 (3.5%)	13 (16.0%)	36 (55.4%)	78 (14.7%)
	'Red '-Culture Symbols	23 (7.6%)	5 (2.5%)	65 (80.2%)	13 (20.0%)	53 (10.0%)
Music Genres	Popular Music	96 (31.7%)	38 (19.2%)	23 (28.4%)	19 (29.2%)	137 (25.8%)
	Traditional Music	52 (17.2%)	53 (26.8%)	4 (4.9%)	12 (18.5%)	93 (17.5%)
	Mix-Style Music	68 (22.4%)	74 (37.4%)	34 (42.0%)	14 (21.5%)	150 (28.2%)

**Table 2.** Distribution of content creation elements across ideological presentations





**Figure 3.** Sankey diagram of the content creation elements distribution

## Discussion

### Cultural democratization

Cultural democratization was the most frequent theme of ideological presentations (N=303; 56.96%), which refers to the advocacy of making cultural access, participation, and production available to a wider and more diverse population. Within the official SFVs published by ICHC, a non-formal, de-authoritative discourse environment was gradually constructed to democratize the ICH. The content allowed people to be active digital participants rather than passive information receivers of the culture. This looked for broader rights for communities and individuals by involving more stakeholders in heritage practices.

This ideological theme was most likely expressed through grassroots events. For instance, stories about the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, such as plots of marriage proposals or creating postcards for Teacher's Day, were frequently used by ICHC to engage a broad audience. In terms of videography, user-generated styles, including point-of-view and close-up shots, were employed to enhance visual appeal. The SFVs usually started with or were introduced by craftsmen or artisans, emphasizing the role of ICH artisans in heritage preservation and promotion practices. These kinds of interactive videography were hardly seen in previous ICH promotions by traditional media. Additionally, internet meme elements like popular animations or gifs, along with background music based on trending songs, were widely deployed in content creation. The incorporation of these elements made the SFV's content more layman-friendly and easier to understand, reducing the emphasis on authoritative official discourse in the promotion of ICH, while highlighting a more democratized engagement with popular culture.

### Tradition revivalism

The second frequent ideological theme reflected in ICHC was tradition revivalism (N=198; 37.22%). In recent years, the importance of traditional culture for the improvement of China's soft power and the construction of the national ideological system has been increasingly emphasized. ICHC placed great emphasis on promoting traditional Chinese culture or philosophy. However, this

action did not refer to the blind praising of ancient values. We found that this ICHC leveraged SFVs to revitalize traditional customs or values of ICH, making them vibrant and relevant in today's political and societal landscape.

The SFVs categorizing this ideological theme often drew upon various ethnic events in their narratives, such as traditional festivals or folklore. This approach allowed the integration of diverse values from multiple ethnic traditions. For example, by reporting the dragon boat races during the *Duanwu* Festival, ICHC sought to convey current inheritances and interpretations of the ancient Chinese spirit of perseverance and determination. This also subtly implied the country's strength and prosperity. Regarding videographic presentation, SFVs featuring this theme adopted a more conservative style than others, frequently utilizing professional production formats like documentaries and official interviews. Traditional visual symbols, such as Spring Festival couplets and dragon stickers, were also extensively used in this content. However, we surprisingly observed that the background music in these SFVs showcased the fusion of traditional and popular elements. For instance, traditional instruments might be used to play popular music. The abovementioned SFV practices of ICH conveyed the ideological value of Chinese tradition revivalism, highlighting its important role in fostering ethnic and cultural identity.

### **Patriotism**

Patriotism (N=81; 15.23%) was a key ideological theme embodied in the SFVs published by ICHC. These SFVs evoked a strong resonance of national identity among the audience, through presenting a sense of national pride or collectivist beliefs. Further, due to political and historical factors, the 'Red' culture was inextricably linked with patriotic beliefs in China (Huang et al., 2023), especially in the cyber context. The connection between ICH and the Communist Party of China (CPC) was constructed in these SFVs, to spread the ideology of patriotism.

In terms of narratives, these SFVs were often themed around national events, presenting the country's development milestones and heroic stories through ICH practice. For instance, an artisan used paper-cutting to commemorate important events like the national day. Another typical example was that during major disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the content connected to or conveyed the values of nationwide solidarity and collective resilience. In addition, the user-generated style of videography was primarily employed by ICHC, which showcased more spontaneous acts of patriotism by individuals, rather than state-driven initiatives. This significantly differed from the previous patriotism education or communication in mass media. Moreover, visual symbols associated with the identification of the country or CPC, such as the national flag, Tiananmen Square, or CPC emblem, were frequently incorporated to promote patriotic values. Notably, compared to other themes, SFVs featuring patriotic content often utilized mixed-style background music to evoke emotional responses. For instance, epic-style or 'Red culture' songs were performed using ICH instruments to heighten emotional impact.

### **Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism was also an important theme reflected in ICHC's ideological presentation (N=65; 12.22%). The values of respectfulness and inclusivity of diverse cultures were incorporated in many SFVs in ICHC. This constructed democratized discourse for the promotion of ICH from various ethnic groups. At the same time, ICHC also widely introduced the ICH from other countries and regions, such as African or Oceania tribes. This placed its official viewpoints of heritage in a broader context of globalization. Surprisingly, we also discovered that there was cross-cultural integration of ICH among ethnic groups, regions, and even countries in the ICHC's content. The folklore customs and artistic elements of various regions were dynamically represented, exchanged, and co-created, transcending the boundaries of individual groups.

Both national and international events were frequently selected as narrative topics. For example, during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, ICHC published numerous works related to the event,



such as an ICH artisan using gourd carving to create the pattern of the panda mascot, *Bing Dwen Dwen*. In these types of SFVs, although user-generated style remained dominant, professional-generated, or professional-user-generated styles were more prominently featured compared to other SFVs with other ideological themes. For example, common filming techniques of documentaries and news reporting, such as wide-angle and high-angle shots, were frequently utilized, emphasizing a sense of objectivity by creating a distance from the subject (Berglund, 2007). In terms of visual elements, international symbols were extensively utilized in these SFVs. For instance, in response to the hosting of the 2023 Asian Games, the logo was transformed into a paper-cut design, becoming a significant visual motif in its presentation. Lastly, the content of this ideological theme did not focus on any genres of main or background music, which indirectly reflected their broader content positioning for a wider range of audience.

## Conclusion

This study investigates the ideological presentations in the official promotion of ICH on SFV platforms. Through a multimodal content analysis of 532 SFVs published in ICHC, we first identify four primary ideological themes embodied in ICH promotion: (1) Cultural democratization, (2) Tradition revivalism, (3) Patriotism, and (4) Multiculturalism. Based on four proposed categories, namely *narratives*, *videography*, *visual symbols*, and *music genres*, we further investigate how these ideological themes were presented through various content creation elements of SFV.

Overall, the presentation of the ideological themes is not mutually exclusive. In addition, the application of various content creation elements of SFV is closely intertwined, collectively forming ideological presentations within the context of ICH promotion. In SFV platforms like Douyin, ICH promotion has increasingly reflected grassroots-centered narratives and user-generated videography. Elements of traditional and popular culture are integrated within this context. This fosters a relatively democratized discourse around ICH promotion, leading to a shift from conventional, authority-based perspectives towards a more inclusive and softened ideological expression.

Based on these findings, the contributions of this study can be articulated as follows. First, we provide new perspectives on what ideological themes are embodied in official SFVs promoting ICH and how they are presented through various content creation elements. Additionally, these findings offer insights into how current multimodal-oriented SFV platforms facilitate a decentralized and participative heritage practice (Giaccardi, 2012; Smith, 2017). This addresses the existing research gaps and contributes to both ideological and ICH research within SFV contexts. Moreover, drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) social semiotic theory of multimodality, we developed a semiotic-based multimodal analytical template, which further extends the application of Serafini and Reid's (2023) multimodal content analysis framework within the SFV context. This template can be a valuable tool for future research in related areas. In terms of practical implications, our findings may benefit content creators, offering insights on how to effectively promote heritage and traditional culture to the public on digital media, particularly in SFV platforms.

A limitation of this study may point to directions for future research. We only collected data from one representative Douyin account for analysis. Although this allows for a richer and deeper investigation, it may also limit the generalizability of findings. Hence, future investigations could include more accounts for data collection. It is also considerable to conduct a comparative analysis between non-official and official content of ICH promotion, to gain complimentary findings.

## Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback.

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