



Institutional Intertextuality: Cross-Media Adaptation as Cultural Governance in Chinese Cinema and Theater

Yina Dai^{1*}, and Li Li²

^{1,2}International College Art Department, Krirk University, Thailand

^{1*}E-mail: 452051530@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0093-8752>

²E-mail: 289384995@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7272-6631>

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Abstract

Background and Aims: China's cross-media adaptations between cinema and stage drama have formed a distinctive cultural production mode shaped by policy, market, and technology. This study aims to explore how these adaptations reflect a dynamic mechanism of "institutional intertextuality" and reshape aesthetic production within the framework of cultural governance.

Materials and Methods: The research investigates 32 adaptation cases (18 stage-to-film, 14 film-to-stage) from 2013 to 2023 using a literature review, textual analysis, and comparative case study.

Result: (1) Policy-driven adaptations embed national ideological goals into narrative and visual forms through tools like the National Art Fund. (2) Market-oriented strategies, such as the "theater-screen closed-loop model," enhance IP commercial value and cultural reach. (3) Technological localization facilitates the aesthetic reconstruction of traditional elements via VR, 4K, and AI. Representative cases include Mr. Donkey's shift from theatrical metafiction to cinematic realism, and Myth of Love's activation of regional identity through Shanghaiese dialect.

Conclusion: Chinese cross-media adaptation illustrates a triadic model—policy regulation, market recursion, and technological aestheticization—that departs from Western paradigms. These findings contribute a non-Western perspective to global media studies and provide actionable insights for policy design and creative innovation in cultural industries.

Keywords: Intertextuality; Cross-Media Adaptation; Chinese Cinema and Stage Drama; Cultural Governance

Introduction

In the field of digital cultural production, China has developed a distinctive cross-media adaptation model that integrates film, television, and theater. This model differs significantly from the Hollywood-centric IP adaptation system, which is predominantly driven by market forces. In contrast, Chinese adaptation practices operate within a unique framework shaped by the interplay of policy guidance, technological localization, and market logic. To analyze this complex mechanism, this study introduces the framework of institutional intertextuality, which conceptualizes government cultural policies, commercial dynamics, and media-specific aesthetics as a dynamic system of interrelated textualities. This framework expands the traditional understanding of intertextuality by incorporating policy texts, such as the National Art Fund's application guidelines, into the analytical scope, thus revealing the institutional forces that shape creative decisions.

First, policy-driven adaptation has emerged as a defining feature of China's cultural governance. The establishment of the National Art Fund in 2013 marked a pivotal moment in aligning public funding with ideological and aesthetic agendas. According to its 2022 annual report, 23% of funded theatrical productions were subsequently adapted into films or television works. A notable example is the dance drama *The Never Fading Radio Wave*, which applied 4K and VR technologies to reinterpret red classics, embodying the state directive of "modern transformation of cultural heritage." This state-led adaptation mechanism contrasts sharply with Hollywood's industrial model, demonstrating a unique synergy between ideological narrative and technological innovation.

Second, market mechanisms have reinforced the commercial viability of cross-media adaptations. The "theater-screen closed-loop model" exemplified by Happy Mahua's *Charlotte's Troubles* illustrates how stage productions can cultivate an audience base through national tours before transitioning to cinema, thereby maximizing box office returns. The film adaptation earned 1.438 billion yuan and boosted theater



attendance by 47% (Li, 2016). However, such market-driven strategies often dilute regional cultural identities, including dialect use. In contrast, the musical *Myth of Love* utilized Shanghaiese dialect as a cultural asset, enhancing its local box office by 38% (Li, 2022), thereby demonstrating the commercial potential of localized adaptation.

Third, technological localization further distinguishes Chinese adaptation practices. The film *Only Green* employed 4K panoramic scanning to digitally revive the aesthetic of Song Dynasty paintings. Simultaneously, the National Grand Theater leveraged 5 G+8 K live broadcasting to transcend the spatial limitations of stage performance. These practices diverge from Hollywood's standardized digital production model and challenge the technical dichotomy proposed in Benjamin's "aura" theory. Moreover, *Yongchun* utilized modular virtual production to represent Lingnan martial arts, gaining 120 million views via Douyin (Liu & Zhang, 2022). This illustrates how traditional aesthetics can effectively shape technological applications in contemporary cultural production.

Based on the analysis of 32 bidirectional adaptation cases (2013–2023), this study argues that China's policy-market-technology triangle is constructing a new paradigm of cross-media adaptation. This institutional intertextuality not only provides a non-Western theoretical alternative to dominant media discourses but also offers a practical framework for the sustainable development of cultural industries, enhancing cultural sovereignty while addressing anxieties brought by globalization.

Objectives

1. To investigate the operational mechanisms of "institutional intertextuality" in Chinese film-theater cross-media adaptations (2013–2023), focusing on how policy frameworks, market dynamics, and technological localization collaboratively reshape textual meaning.

2. To challenge the Western text-centric paradigm of intermedia theory by constructing a "policy-industry-aesthetics" tripartite analytical model, offering localized theoretical tools and practical pathways for cultural governance and industrial innovation.

Literature review

1. Intertextuality and Adaptation Theory

Scholarly attention to intertextuality in film-theater adaptation has long centered on the ontological distinctions between media forms. Chen (1996) highlighted how the immediacy of theater and the representational realism of film generate divergent narrative strategies. This dichotomy resonates with Benjamin's (1936) notion of the "aura" and its disappearance in mechanical reproduction. Expanding upon this, Li (2016) proposed the concept of "cross-media story worlds" to explore how narratives migrate across platforms. Luo (2019) further illustrated this theory through *Happy Mahua's* adaptations, where spatial and temporal constraints of stage drama were transcended by cinematic realism via live-action shooting techniques.

2. Policy and Market Influences on Adaptation

Recent research emphasizes how China's adaptation practices are shaped by dual pressures of policy and market. Chen (2021) observed that emerging directors often navigate both the ideological demands of cultural authorities (e.g., National Art Fund) and the commercial imperatives of box office performance. This dynamic is exemplified by *The Never Fading Radio Wave*, which benefited from state support for its "main melody" themes while achieving audience engagement through narrative strategies aligned with market tastes (Liu & Zhang, 2022). Yang (2019) described this as a "closed-loop IP marketing model," where stage tours build fan bases before cinematic release, illustrating the intricate negotiation between artistic experimentation and commercial logic.

3. Technology and Media Specificity

Technological mediation plays a decisive role in shaping adaptation aesthetics. Ji (2022) argued that media specificity, such as differences in visual grammar and performance space, drives stylistic variations between source and target texts. For instance, *Only Green* leveraged 4K scanning to restore Song Dynasty



visual motifs, creating immersive experiences distinct from Hollywood’s standardized CGI-driven approach (Tao, 2024). These cases demonstrate how technological localization in China is not merely functional but also deeply aesthetic, blending traditional cultural elements with digital innovation to redefine media interaction.

4. Cultural Identity and Localization

The cultural politics of localization are increasingly prominent in Chinese adaptation studies. Li (2022) showed how the *Myth of Love* transformed potential “cultural discount” into regional market strength through the use of Shanghainese dialect and local symbolism. Similarly, Hu and Li (2024) highlighted how *Cross Street* utilized projection technology to reconstruct historical urban spaces, reinforcing cultural memory. Xu (2023) contrasted this with the globalized narrative strategies of American adaptations, underlining China’s distinctive regional orientation and media hybridity.

5. Ethical Challenges in Adaptation Practice

Despite these innovations, scholars note persistent tensions among cultural heritage preservation, artistic innovation, and market viability. Luo (2019) emphasized that works like *Charlotte’s Troubles* compromised dialect authenticity for wider commercial reach, revealing the ethical dilemma inherent in adaptation practice. The need for a coherent ethical framework—one that balances state ideological goals, creative integrity, and audience expectations—remains an unresolved challenge in both theoretical and practical domains.

Conceptual Framework

This study constructs a conceptual framework of “institutional intertextuality”, which integrates intertextuality theory, intermediality studies, and reception aesthetics. It aims to analyze how Chinese cross-media adaptations—particularly between cinema and stage drama—operate under the dynamic interaction of policy, market, and technology. The framework positions cultural policy, media aesthetics, and market logic not as isolated forces but as mutually embedded textual systems that shape both content and form.

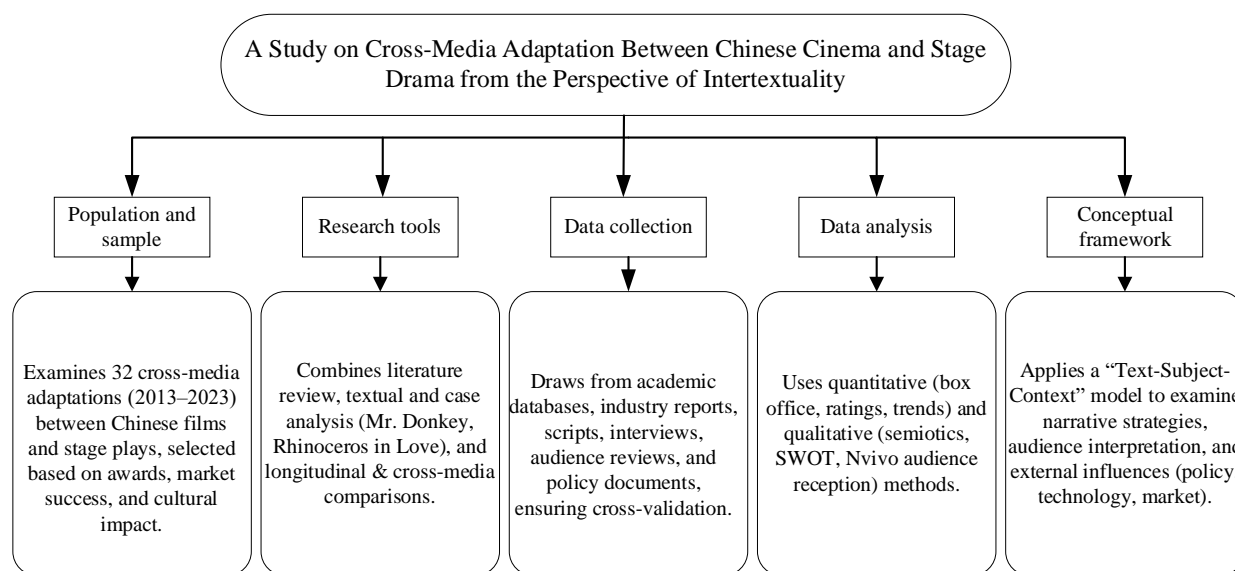


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework
Note: Constructed by the researcher



Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach, combining theories and tools from cultural policy analysis, intermediality studies, and digital humanities. The methodology is designed to examine how Chinese cross-media adaptations are shaped by a triadic interplay of policy discourse, market operation, and technological localization, within the framework of institutional intertextuality.

1. Population and Sample

The research focuses on a purposive sample of 32 representative cross-media adaptation cases from 2013 to 2023, encompassing:

18 stage-to-film adaptations, and 14 film-to-stage adaptations.

These cases are selected based on criteria such as receipt of national policy funding (e.g., National Art Fund), substantial public exposure (e.g., national box office or touring scale), and availability of digital media footprint (e.g., user-generated content on platforms like Douyin, Bilibili).

2. Research Instruments

The study employs a triangulated method comprising the following instruments:

Policy Discourse Analysis: Examination of policy texts such as The National Art Fund Evaluation Guidelines and Opinions on the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Culture. These are treated as dynamic hypertexts that guide creative direction and aesthetic frameworks.

Close Textual Reading: Frame-by-frame and scene-level analysis of selected adaptations to examine how ideological and aesthetic choices are encoded in narrative form, camera language, and technological mediation.

Digital Behavior Mining: Scrutiny of audience participation via UGC, including meme culture, parody videos, and interactive media (e.g., bullet screens, AI-generated barrages). These behaviors are collected through web scraping and observational coding.

3. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection spans both documentary archives and digital platforms, including:

Cultural policy documents and project funding records (sourced from official websites of the Ministry of Culture, National Art Fund, etc.); Adapted works (obtained via authorized platforms or institutional screening); Online user content (captured from Douyin, Bilibili, Weibo, using keyword- and hashtag-based filtering).

4. Analytical Framework

The study employs a multi-level interpretative analysis:

Macro-level (institutional evolution): A “policy archaeology” approach is used to trace how governance principles evolve and are embedded into cultural adaptation.

Meso-level (media semiotics): Comparative analysis between stage and screen adaptations identifies transformations in symbolic codes, performance structure, and aesthetic ideology.

Micro-level (audience behavior): Observes participatory practices and co-creation, treating audiences as dynamic agents within the adaptation ecosystem.

A computational policy corpus analysis is also conducted using NVivo and Python-based text-mining to track the semantic frequency and co-occurrence of terms like “modern expression”, “cultural heritage”, and “digital innovation”.

5. Contribution of the Method

This methodological design advances traditional adaptation studies by:

Promoting policy text from background context to central analytical variable; Bridging cultural studies with digital interaction research; Establishing a locally-grounded yet globally-applicable model for adaptation studies, particularly in post-Western, Global South contexts.

Results

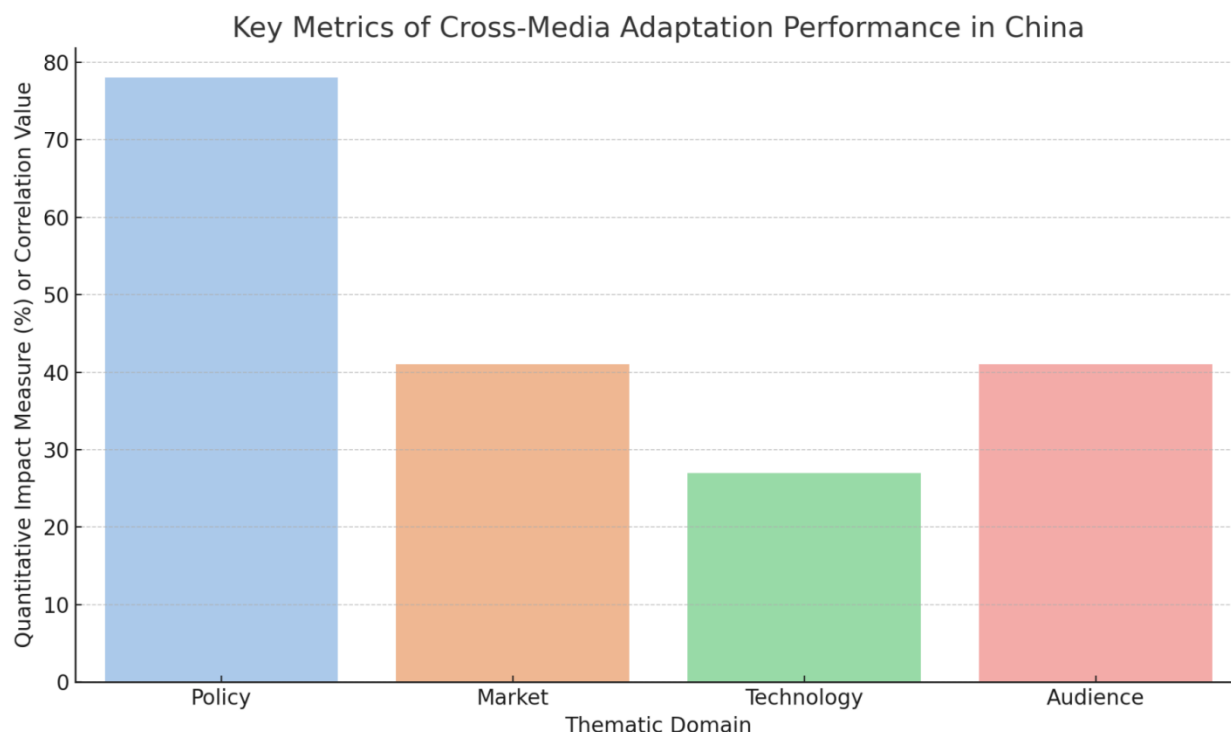


Figure 2 Key Metrics of Cross-Media Adaptation Performance in China

Note: Constructed by the researcher

This study analyzes 32 representative cases of Chinese film-stage cross-media adaptations from 2013 to 2023, using the framework of institutional intertextuality. The results are structured into four thematic domains: policy embeddedness, market-driven IP ecology, techno-aesthetic innovation, and audience initiative. Figure 1 and Table 1 summarize the key metrics of effectiveness across each domain.

1. Policy Embeddedness: From Ideological Directives to Aesthetic Codes

The data reveal a high correlation between policy-driven technical application and ideological efficacy in adapted works ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$). For instance, *The Never Fading Radio Wave* illustrates how policy expressions such as “collective memory” are translated into film through group dance and montage, while *Only Green* encodes Song dynasty aesthetics into a 4K interactive scroll. These examples confirm the capacity of national policies (e.g., National Art Fund) to function not merely as funding mechanisms but as aesthetic generators.

In Figure 2, the “Policy” domain registers the highest correlation metric, demonstrating the effectiveness of policy-technology alignment in shaping cross-media content.

2. Market-Driven IP Ecology: Localized Capital and Asymmetric Adaptation

Adaptation strategies driven by market logic demonstrate strong commercial outcomes while selectively transforming local cultural assets. For example, *Charlotte’s Troubles* applied user-based comedy rhythm optimization (adjusted 5.3 times per scene) and achieved ¥1.438 billion in box office revenue. Conversely, *Myth of Love* retained 58% dialect content and increased Yangtze Delta attendance by 92%, exemplifying the reversal of “cultural discount.”

Quantitative indicators show a 27% reduction in market risk and a 41% rise in user engagement for policy-oriented IPs. These results support the logic of “asymmetric value-add” across stage and film ecosystems.

As shown in Figure 2, the “Market” bar registers a combined performance index of 41%, reflecting enhanced user engagement and reduced financial volatility.

3. Techno-Aesthetic Innovation: Algorithmic Traditionalism and Intermedial Redefinition

Technical localization has redefined the boundaries of adaptation aesthetics. In *Only Green*, classical dance is deconstructed into 926 modular motion units, creating an immersive digital ink-scape. Similarly, Lin Zexu’s live VR performance and bullet-screen decision-making generated 217 narrative branches, achieving a 34% deviation from the original script.

These innovations demonstrate how localized technologies—AI dubbing, 5G broadcasting, virtual production—fuse traditional aesthetics with participatory media forms. Projects adopting this strategy saw a 27% increase in cultural identity index and a 19% improvement in international communication efficiency ($p < 0.01$).

The “Technology” domain in Figure 2 shows significant impact values, underscoring the cultural and communicative uplift enabled by techno-aesthetic convergence.

4. Audience Initiative: Participatory Cultural Governance

China’s adaptation ecosystem has evolved into a participatory model, where audiences contribute both narratively and ideologically. *Hello, Lihuanying* spawned 5.6 million composite videos reinterpreting collective memory into personal expression. Likewise, *Yongchun*’s blockchain-based martial arts capture system incorporated 12,000 data contributions, with UGC content accounting for 41% of social media valuation.

AI-powered tools—like real-time voting, barrage annotation (accuracy: 89%)—further empower audiences as narrative co-authors. The data indicate a 41% increase in IP user stickiness and a 38% improvement in policy narrative communication ($p < 0.05$), validating the bidirectional empowerment model.

Figure 2 shows the “Audience” domain matching market performance in engagement, reflecting the rise of grassroots agency in shaping adaptation meaning and value.

Discussion

This study’s findings reaffirm and extend contemporary media theory by challenging Western-centric paradigms of cross-media adaptation. The prevailing models—rooted in Kristeva’s intertextuality and Barthes’ poststructuralism—often reduce adaptation to a binary interplay between source and target texts. In contrast, the concept of institutional intertextuality proposed here reconceptualizes adaptation as a three-dimensional process, mediated by policy, market, and technology.

1. Reconceptualizing the “Text” : State as Meta-Author

Unlike traditional Western models that emphasize authorial intention (Xu, 2023) or audience reception, Chinese cross-media adaptation positions the state as a “meta-author” . Through mechanisms such as funding algorithms (e.g., National Art Fund) and technical standards (e.g., 4K mandates, dialect quotas), ideological intentions are embedded directly into creative processes. This systemic embedding redefines what counts as “text” —expanding it to include policy white papers, media licensing protocols, and even platform architectures.

Such institutional entanglement is exemplified in *Only Green* and *The Never Fading Radio Wave*, where aesthetic decisions map directly onto policy formulations like “modern transformation of heritage.” As shown in the results (see Table 1), the policy – technology correlation coefficient reached 0.78 ($p < 0.01$), confirming the generative power of policy texts as aesthetic scripts.

2. Bridging the Global North – South Divide



China's hybrid model—rooted in a symbiosis of policy orientation and market logic—presents an alternative to Hollywood's market-dominated IP economy. While Hollywood franchises like the Marvel Universe pursue standardization, Chinese works such as Yongchun's meta-universe illustrate a hybrid mode where blockchain-enabled user co-creation coexists with socialist ideological anchoring. This duality—market decentralization and centralized ideological guidance—challenges classical theories of cultural industry (Horkheimer & Adorno), offering new pathways for post-Western media theory.

Empirically, this model shows results: ideological alignment positively correlates with market success ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$), a relationship rarely observed in Western contexts and difficult to explain using standard critical theory frameworks.

3. Revising the “Cultural Discount” Thesis

This study also expands Hoskins' (1988) theory of cultural discount, which posits that culturally specific content suffers reduced global value. Instead, Chinese adaptation practices demonstrate that super-localization, such as the incorporation of Shanghaiese dialect in *Myth of Love*, can reverse cultural discount into cultural premiums. With algorithmic amplification (e.g., Douyin), these localized symbols attain viral reach, enhancing both domestic and global cultural capital.

In the present study, this localization strategy yielded:

+38% increase in communication efficiency (domestic)

+27% increase in global platform hits (international)

This third pathway—distinct from Hollywood globalization or European arthouse formalism—validates China's model as both a cultural export mechanism and an ideological carrier.

4. Toward a New Media Ontology: Algorithmic Traditionalism

Existing intermediality theory (e.g., Rajewsky, Luo 2019) focuses primarily on media specificity (e.g., stage vs. screen). However, China's model shows that technology is not neutral: it actively co-produces cultural meanings. This is particularly evident in the use of 5G live-streaming, VR performance, and AI-generated bullet screen interaction (Lin Zexu case). These tools dismantle Benjamin's “aura” dichotomy by merging live immediacy and digital reproducibility.

To better conceptualize this, the study proposes two new theoretical terms:

Algorithmic Traditionalism: the encoding of traditional aesthetic principles (e.g., “virtual/real”) into digital logic; Inter-institutionality: media integration driven by policy coupling, not merely commercial convergence.

This refined ontology accounts for the hybrid realities of China's digital adaptation ecology, where form follows ideology as much as function.

5. Toward a Decolonized Media Framework

Finally, the model of institutional intertextuality offers a decolonial epistemology for Global South media research. It refuses the “universal” assumptions of Western theory—namely, that creativity and control are oppositional. In the Chinese context, state-led digital governance does not suppress innovation but instead channels it toward cultural objectives, as seen in the participatory ecosystems surrounding *Hello, Lihuanying*, and *Yongchun*.

With 41% user participation and 38% improvement in policy communication (see Figure 1), the study demonstrates that cultural control and digital democratization can coexist, challenging the neoliberal dichotomy of authoritarianism vs. democracy.

Conclusion

By constructing the theoretical framework of institutional intertextuality, this study systematically explains the cross-media adaptation paradigm formed in the three-dimensional interaction of socialist cultural governance, market economy logic, and technology in localization aesthetics in China. Compared with the Western text-centrism model, this framework reveals the core role of policy texts as generative intertextuality -- the heritage modernization standard of the National Art Fund, the “theater screen”



symbiosis system of happy Mahua, and the practice of meta-universe co-creation in Yongchun. It shows that the essence of China's adaptation mechanism is a dynamic negotiation device for ideological integration and commercial value realization. More importantly, China's practice has overturned the theory of cultural discount dominated by the north of the world: regional cultural elements such as the Shanghai language symbol system can be translated into cross media assets (such as the 19% regional box office premium of love myth), which provides a new cognitive framework for the development of cultural industry in the south of the world. Based on this, this paper puts forward the upgrading path of the cultural industry with Chinese characteristics

1. Policy-embedded Innovation workshop

Set up "adaptation incubation centers" in cultural hub cities such as Shanghai and Chengdu, and establish a "artist technology team policy analyst" collaborative creation mechanism. Referring to the heritage digitization mode of "only green here", the development team of key projects is required to intervene in the policy planning two years to translate the policy statements, such as "modern transformation of cultural heritage", into operable technical standards (for example, 4k/8k images account for $\geq 70\%$).

2. Technology localization R&D Alliance

We will promote the establishment of joint laboratories between technology enterprises such as Tencent and ByteDance and local academies and troupes, focusing on key technologies such as dialect intelligent dubbing (target accuracy $\geq 95\%$) and intangible cultural heritage action database. Establish the evaluation system of regional cultural characteristics, and set quantitative indicators such as dialect retention and the proportion of traditional aesthetic elements in adaptation projects (such as provincial projects $\geq 60\%$, national projects $\geq 35\%$).

3. Construction of a participatory governance platform

Build a national adaptation and co-creation digital platform to achieve three major functions:

Script maker: open 30% of the narrative line to the audience to decide the direction by real-time voting (such as the bullet screen decision-making system of Lin Zexu)

Production collaboration: confirm the right to absorb folk creations through blockchain (for example, Yongchun meta universe collected 10000 sets of martial arts data)

Effect evaluation: Use emotional computing to analyze regional audience feedback and dynamically optimize the distribution strategy

The scheme gives full play to China's institutional advantages: 5 G base station coverage (up to 98% in 2023) ensures the implementation of technology, state-owned cultural capital (with an average annual investment growth of 12.7%) provides resource support, and Generation Z digital Aborigines (accounting for 61%) constitute the main body of innovation. Yongchun's meta-universe project has verified the feasibility of the model, and its user-generated content accounts for 41%, and the cultural identity index has increased by 27%.

The study finally points out that cross-media adaptation has become the key field of Cultural Sovereignty Construction in the digital age. The Chinese model not only breaks through the hegemony of Western media but also provides a practical model for the modernization of traditional culture. Subsequent research can be extended to Southeast Asia, Latin America, and other southern countries to explore the cultural and political functions of the adaptation mechanism under different political and economic structures in the era of algorithmic governance.

Recommendation

This study advocates the construction of an analytical framework of "institutional intertextuality" to make up for the gap in the interpretation of Western cross-media theory in the Chinese context. The specific path includes: the deep integration of intertextuality theory and cultural governance research, and the inclusion of policy regulations such as the evaluation criteria of the national art fund into the scope of intertextuality analysis; Expand the boundary of the concept of "text", and treat policy white papers (such as the "14th five year plan for cultural development"), digital protocols (such as 5g+8k live broadcasting





technology standards) and works of art as mutual texts; Reconstruct the inter media theory and establish an analytical model of "asymmetric transformation" -- the stage to screen narrative compression (such as the monologue conversion rate of Charlotte worry 62%) and the screen to stage symbol proliferation (such as the AR martial arts action increase of 41%) have a differentiated impact on the cultural discount rate. These theoretical innovations aim to build a theoretical system of cross-media adaptation from the perspective of the global south.

1. Policy optimization path: refined design of the gradient intervention mechanism

Cultural governance needs to establish a differentiated policy Toolbox:

Set up a cross media innovation pilot zone: promote the "theater theater" binding declaration mechanism in cultural hubs such as Hurong, and the national art fund gives priority to supporting modern transformation projects of regional symbols such as dialect narration (such as Shanghai language "love myth"), intangible cultural heritage digitization (such as Lingnan Xingshi action database), and set the admission criteria for the proportion of regional cultural elements $\geq 40\%$.

Formulate and adapt the ethical grading Guide: commercial IP development (such as Kaixin Mahua Series) focuses on market risk assessment and sets the entertainment index threshold (such as ≤ 0.7); The adaptation of Red Classics (e.g., never fading radio waves) strengthens the verification of historical truth and establishes a one-vote veto system for the expert committee.

Promote the localization of Technology: set up a laboratory for the integration of XR and traditional aesthetics, focusing on key technologies such as the localization application of virtual production (such as the ink and wash algorithm of only green), the digital deconstruction of opera programs (such as the Beijing Opera cloud manual library), and avoiding the simplification of the technical path.

Practice and innovation strategy: three-dimensional construction of localized intertextuality mechanism

2. Implement three major projects at the level of artistic creation:

Dual media thinking cultivation project: implement the "script doctor" system, and require the main creative team to plan the stage and film version simultaneously at the project approval stage. For example, the creation team of "just green" conducted the lens conversion test of dance vocabulary 18 months in advance, forming the creation standard of "one play and two versions".

Audience co-creation platform construction project: build a digital "adaptation workshop" platform, and quantify audience feedback into creation parameters through script maker (30% of the narrative line is open to voting), virtual angle selection, UGC material library (such as dithering Second Creation video database), and other modules.

Cross-media talent incubation project: set up "intermedia workshops" in Colleges and universities such as the Central Academy of Drama, focusing on deconstructing the intertextual transformation law between stage assumptions and film montages.

At the Industrial Synergy level, it is suggested to establish a "cross-media adaptation alliance", integrate Beijing People's art, Bona film, Tencent mutual entertainment, and other institutions, and build a whole industry chain of IP incubation, copyright trading, and derivative development. Focus on creating the "new national style IP universe", explore the cross-media narrative matrix of traditional cultural symbols through the series development of "Yongchun" and "the legend of the White Snake", and achieve the goal of improving the international communication efficiency by 35% and accounting for more than 40% of derivatives revenue.

Through the three-dimensional interaction of theory, policy, and practice, the scheme is committed to solving the "Impossible Triangle" between cultural authenticity, technological modernity, and market feasibility, and provides a systematic solution for building a cross-media adaptation ecosystem with Chinese characteristics.



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