

From Craft to Classroom: A narrative inquiry into the cultural identity and educational roles of intangible cultural heritage inheritors

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Abstract

This study explores how Chinese intangible cultural heritage (ICH) inheritors transform from traditional artisans to cultural educators. Through structured narrative analysis of six inheritors across Shu embroidery, sugar painting, and New Year paintings, it examines identity formation, pedagogical strategies, and adaptive transmission. Findings reveal a shift from skill-based preservation to symbolic, participatory, and media-integrated teaching. Importantly, ICH inheritors emerge as active agents and curriculum co-designers, bridging tradition with contemporary educational needs. Their roles are essential in sustaining cultural knowledge and shaping dynamic, youth-oriented heritage education.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH); Heritage Education; Narrative Inquiry; Cultural Transmission

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1.0 Introduction

In recent years, the integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) into formal education has emerged as a vital strategy for sustaining cultural diversity and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Lovtsova et al., 2021). Globally and within China, policy-driven initiatives have sought to incorporate ICH into school curricula through workshops, pilot programs, and community-based outreach (Dang et al., 2021). However, despite growing institutional attention to heritage preservation, the lived experiences and evolving identities of ICH inheritors—those responsible for safeguarding and transmitting traditional knowledge—have received limited pedagogical analysis. In particular, the transformation of ICH inheritors from practitioners of traditional craftsmanship to cultural educators remains insufficiently theorized and empirically underexplored (Zeng, 2025).

Existing literature primarily addresses ICH transmission through the lens of technique preservation or institutional engagement, often overlooking the subjective, narrative dimensions through which inheritors negotiate new educational roles. While recent studies acknowledge that transmission entails more than the replication of skills—encompassing identity, values, and symbolic meaning—there is a lack of narrative-based research that captures how ICH inheritors construct and reinterpret their roles within changing sociocultural and educational landscapes (Abdul Aziz et al., 2020), (Guo et al., 2025).

To address this gap, the present study adopts a structured narrative analysis approach to examine how six certified ICH inheritors in China articulate their transitions from artisans to educators. Focusing on three traditional Chinese art forms—Shu embroidery, sugar painting, and New Year paintings, as shown in the Fig. 1—this research explores how these practitioners narrate their identity formation,

pedagogical engagement, and adaptive transmission strategies. Drawing on narrative identity theory, cultural transmission theory, and social constructivist perspectives, the study highlights how cultural educators actively reinterpret heritage work in response to shifting generational expectations, institutional demands, and digital modalities.



Fig. 1: The ICH elements of Shu Embroidery, Sugar Painting, and Sichuan New Year Painting.

The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to investigate how ICH inheritors construct evolving cultural identities through personal narratives; (2) to analyze the pedagogical strategies employed by inheritors in educational settings; and (3) to conceptualize the role of the ICH Inheritor as both cultural transmitter and educational agent. By foregrounding the voices of ICH inheritors, this research contributes to the expanding discourse on heritage education, offering a deeper understanding of the reflexive and agentic dimensions of ICH transmission in contemporary society.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Identity, Transmission, and Pedagogy in Intangible Cultural Heritage

The ICH into formal education has gained increasing attention in both heritage studies and pedagogy. Prior research has largely focused on the preservation and revitalization of ICH through institutional mechanisms (Liu, 2022), (Shuai & Yu, 2021), emphasizing the safeguarding of traditional techniques and the sustainability of community-based practices. In China, government-led initiatives such as ICH curriculum pilots and school-based workshops have contributed to raising awareness among younger generations (Yance et al., 2025), (Bing et al., 2024), yet there remains a lack of attention to the role of ICH inheritors as pedagogical agents within this process.

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the identity of cultural practitioners, suggesting that ICH transmission involves not only the transfer of technical skills but also the negotiation of identity, values, and social meanings (Colomer, 2018). However, the transition of ICH inheritors from artisans to educators remains under-theorized. Studies such as Zhao, (2022) highlight how inheritors adapt their practices to meet educational goals, but often lack a narrative-based lens to understand how these identity shifts are internally experienced and expressed.

Narrative approaches offer a promising framework for addressing this gap. Drawing on the works of Bruner, (1990) and Riessman, (2008), narrative inquiry views identity as a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon that is enacted through storytelling. In the context of ICH, inheritors' narratives can reveal how they reinterpret their roles amidst evolving sociocultural expectations and educational demands. Moreover, Vygotskian perspectives on social constructivism Vygotsky, (2018) suggest that learning—and by extension, teaching—is shaped by cultural tools, social interaction, and mediated experiences, all of which are embedded in the life histories of ICH inheritors.

Scholars have also noted the changing modalities of cultural transmission, from embodied apprenticeship to symbolic and digital-mediated dissemination (Gao et al., 2022), (Wu, 2022). This transformation challenges conventional binaries between authentic preservation and adaptive innovation. Understanding how inheritors navigate this shift requires close attention to the narratives they construct about themselves and their craft in relation to public education, digital platforms, and youth engagement (L. Zhao & Kim, 2024).

Therefore, this study adopts structured narrative analysis to examine how Chinese ICH inheritors construct evolving identities and educational roles. While context-specific, its insights extend globally, reflecting common challenges of balancing preservation and innovation, integrating cultural bearers into curricula, and adapting transmission to digital platforms, thereby enriching international discourse on heritage education and pedagogy.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

As shown in Fig. 2, this study adopts Structured Narrative Analysis as its primary analytical approach to explore the evolving cultural identity and educational engagement of ICH inheritors. The theoretical underpinnings of this method are grounded in a multidisciplinary convergence of narrative theory, social constructivism, and cultural transmission theory.

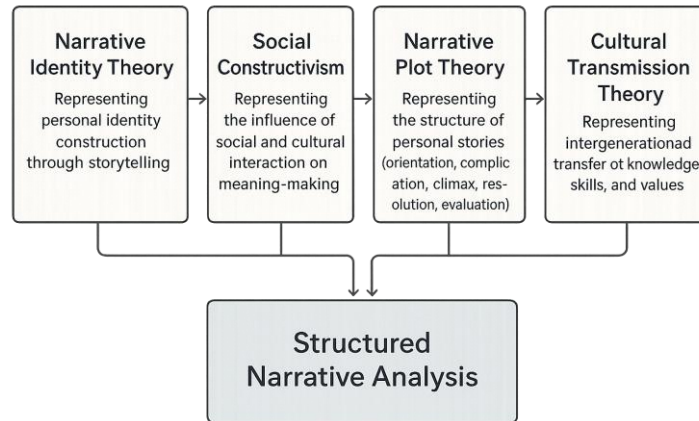


Fig. 2: Theoretical Framework

At its core, the Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams & McLean, 2013), (Bruner, 1990) posits that individuals make sense of their lives through narrative construction. Personal stories are not merely recollections of past events, but active processes of identity formation and meaning-making. In the case of ICH inheritors, narrative becomes a vehicle through which they construct their self-image—not only as artisans, but also as educators, cultural mediators, and agents of heritage preservation.

Complementing this is Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 2018); (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which emphasizes that knowledge and identity are co-constructed through interaction within cultural and historical contexts. The transformation of ICH practitioners from “craftspeople” to “cultural educators” is situated in dynamic social interactions with families, communities, and educational institutions, highlighting the importance of context-sensitive narratives.

Additionally, the analysis draws on Narrative Plot Structure (Labov, 1972), (Riessman, 2008), which provides a framework to analyze the internal structure of life stories. Key elements such as orientation, complication, climax, and resolution are used to trace critical moments in the practitioners’ transition from learning to teaching, thereby revealing the logic and coherence behind identity change.

Finally, Cultural Transmission Theory (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1982), (Eerkens & Lipo, 2007), reinforces the significance of storytelling in intergenerational knowledge transfer. Within this framework, narratives are not only personal accounts but also vessels for the transmission of values, techniques, and cultural memory. The inheritors’ stories demonstrate how traditional knowledge is recontextualized and reimagined in contemporary educational settings.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative narrative design with structured narrative analysis to capture how ICH inheritors shift from practitioners of traditional crafts to cultural educators. This design was selected because it allows exploration of lived experiences in depth, focusing on how identity formation is narrated over time and across contexts. Structured narrative analysis was chosen to provide a systematic framework for comparing identity transitions, ensuring both rigor and coherence. This approach is particularly appropriate given the study’s objectives of linking personal histories, family backgrounds, craft learning, and educational engagement (McKibben & Breheny, 2023).

3.2 Participants

Six certified ICH inheritors were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across three art forms. The inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) have at least five years of practical experience in their respective art; (2) be recognized as a Inheritor or active practitioner of an ICH item; and (3) have experience in public outreach or educational activities (e.g., community workshops, school teaching, media communication). Table 1 demonstrates the demographics of participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Current Residence	ICH Type
P1	Female	30	Chengdu, China	Shu Embroidery
P2	Female	32	Deyang, China	Shu Embroidery
P3	Male	35	Chengdu, China	Sugar Painting
P4	Male	52	Mianyang, China	Sugar Painting
P5	Female	28	Chengdu, China	Sichuan New Year Painting
P6	Male	46	Mianyang, China	Sichuan New Year Painting

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes, conducted in participants' preferred settings to promote comfort and openness. Semi-structured interviews were selected to balance consistency with flexibility, ensuring coverage of core themes while allowing participants to shape their narratives. Interviews explored personal journeys, teaching practices, and reflections on cultural transmission. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Structured narrative analysis was applied, focusing on orientation, identity shifts, pedagogical strategies, and transmission logics. This analytic approach was chosen for its ability to trace narrative coherence, highlight participant voice, and systematically compare individual cases while preserving contextual depth.

4.0 Findings

This section presents structured narrative analyses of six ICH inheritors representing three types of traditional Chinese folk arts. The findings are organized to address the study's three objectives: Sections 4.1–4.6 focus on how inheritors construct evolving cultural identities through personal narratives (Objective 1) and demonstrate the pedagogical strategies they employ in practice (Objective 2). Section 4.7 provides a cross-case analysis that conceptualizes the broader role of inheritors as both cultural transmitters and educational agents (Objective 3).

Table 2. Summary of Narrative Patterns Among Six ICH Inheritors

Participant	ICH Type	Identity Formation	Educational Involvement	Innovation Strategy
P1	Shu Embroidery	Familial apprenticeship	Workshops, museum programs	Symbolic decoding, school collaboration
P2	Shu Embroidery	Design-background transformation	Classroom modules, visual interpretation	Wearable design, media storytelling
P3	Sugar Painting	Informal intergenerational learning	School visits, cultural events	Edible art, folklore integration
P4	Sugar Painting	Digital-native inheritor	Digital-based teaching, media integration	Online content, symbolic narratives
P5	New Year Painting	Artistic reinterpretation through family ties	Community-based art activities	Creative branding, interdisciplinary modules
P6	New Year Painting	Traditional master with institutional links	Apprenticeship, exhibitions, school demos	Conservative with digital collaboration

4.1 Narrative 1: P1 — From Traditional Apprenticeship to Public Education

P1's journey in Shu embroidery began within a family apprenticeship model, learning from elder relatives. She reflected, "My grandmother taught me not just stitches, but also the meanings behind the patterns—we were weaving blessings, not just fabric." Her narrative illustrates a classic pathway of cultural inheritance rooted in familial ties and gendered labor. With time, she transitioned from a practitioner to an educator, integrating embroidery into school-based workshops and museum education programs. She believes that transmission must include both technique and aesthetic understanding and actively develops youth-centered curriculum emphasizing symbolic reading and handcraft experience. Her narrative reveals a firm belief that heritage survives when it connects both skill and meaning to everyday lives.

4.2 Narrative 2: P2 — From Designer to Cultural Interpreter

Coming from a professional design background, P2 entered the world of Shu embroidery not through lineage but through aesthetic inquiry. She noted, "I used to think embroidery was just for decoration, but now I see it as visual storytelling rooted in generations of women's hands." Initially perceived as an outsider, she gradually reconstructed her cultural identity by fusing modern design elements into traditional embroidery. Her focus on wearable embroidery products and media dissemination marks a strategic shift toward public-oriented reinterpretation. As an educator, she uses "visual decoding" pedagogy in classrooms to guide students from pattern appreciation to symbolic understanding and creative reinterpretation. Her narrative embodies a redefinition of heritage work—from conservation to cultural innovation.

4.3 Narrative 3: P3 — Reviving Street Art Through Intergenerational Bonds

P3 learned sugar painting as a child through informal street practice with family elders. "My earliest memory is of my father squatting by a stove, pouring sugar into dragons and phoenixes," he shared. His narrative is rooted in survival, memory, and adaptation. With the decline of street-based art spaces, he shifted to demonstrations at tourist sites and art festivals. He incorporates educational elements through school visits and media engagement, often linking sugar painting with stories from folklore and regional customs. For him, sugar painting is not only a craft but a live performance and a social bond. He emphasizes the importance of making the art "visible and edible" to captivate youth.

4.4 Narrative 4: P4 — Digital Revivalist and Storyteller

P4 is a young practitioner of sugar painting who emerged from a family lineage. Differentiating himself from his predecessors, he emphasizes multimedia storytelling and online presence. "I shoot short videos not just to show techniques, but to tell the stories behind each image—why we make a tiger or a lotus," he explained. He believes sugar painting can enter classrooms not merely as an art project but as a vehicle for historical imagination. His teaching approach includes digital projection of sugar painting steps, symbolic

deconstruction of images, and fusion with digital drawing tools. His narrative reflects a generational shift toward digitally mediated heritage expression, aiming to attract interest through novelty without compromising authenticity.

4.5 Narrative 5: P5 — *Artistic Stewardship and Educational Innovation*

P5, a young New Year painting practitioner, entered the field through family heritage and personal artistic interest. “I want to prove that New Year paintings can be more than just old posters—they can be fashion, branding, even classroom tools,” she stated. She redefines New Year painting from ritual object to creative cultural commodity. Her focus lies in integrating local iconography with contemporary product design and collaborative campaigns. As an educator, she stresses hands-on engagement and community-based art activities. She advocates for curriculum modules that emphasize student participation, cultural contextualization, and interdisciplinary crossover. Her narrative showcases heritage not as a relic, but as a flexible aesthetic practice.

4.6 Narrative 6: P6 — *Traditional Mentor and Institutional Collaborator*

P6 represents the voice of a senior New Year painting master who has witnessed the gradual decline and partial revival of the art. He maintains a conservative pedagogical model, favoring workshop apprenticeship and stepwise skill acquisition. “I still believe in the old way—learn by doing, day after day, until your hands remember,” he asserted. Yet, he also engages in collaborative exhibitions and digital archives. His narrative centers on cultural responsibility and the challenges of motivating youth in a fast-paced society. While critical of formal education’s time constraints, he supports incorporating heritage into interdisciplinary modules through practice-based learning.

4.7 Cross-case Narrative Analysis

The cross-case analysis of six ICH inheritors shows a clear shift from craft practitioners to cultural educators. Across Shu embroidery, sugar painting, and Sichuan New Year paintings, all expressed a growing pedagogical responsibility. This change stems less from policy than from personal commitment to cultural sustainability, emphasizing the need to preserve not only technical skills but also the social values, community memories, and lived experiences embedded in ICH.

From the perspective of identity construction, the transition from craftsman to educator emerges not solely through institutional recognition, but through experiential self-identification in educational settings. For instance, P3, though not trained through traditional apprenticeship, has legitimized his identity through consistent community-based instruction. In contrast, P5 exemplifies a hybrid identity that integrates academic inheritance with the demands of digital-era communication, such as livestreaming and platform-based teaching. These cases suggest that pedagogical agency is not passively granted but actively claimed through practice.

Cultural transmission logic is also evolving. Veteran practitioners such as Master P4 emphasize the embodied immediacy of face-to-face, performative skill display. By contrast, younger inheritors like P5 and P1 focus on symbolic representation and mediated dissemination, where ICH is reframed as shareable content rather than merely situated practice. This shift from “embodied technique” to “cultural knowledge” reflects a broader epistemic transformation—one that renders ICH more adaptable to both institutional and media-driven pedagogical platforms.

Differences in educational philosophy and instructional strategies further illustrate the diversity of teaching perspectives among inheritors. For example, P3 foregrounds hands-on experiential learning, prioritizing students’ creative participation in material practice. Meanwhile, P6 emphasizes cultural narration and value reconstruction, encouraging students to critically engage with the symbolic meanings embedded in Sichuan New Year paintings. These pedagogical preferences reflect not only personal style but also deeper cultural attitudes toward what constitutes meaningful ICH education.

5.0 Discussion

The discussion interprets these findings through narrative identity theory, cultural transmission, and heritage education frameworks, and while situated in China, they carry broader implications for global heritage education as the identity shifts and pedagogical strategies observed are shared across diverse cultural contexts.

5.1 From Craftsperson to Cultural Educator: Identity as Practice

Across all narratives, a shared trajectory of identity transformation emerged—from heritage practitioner to cultural educator. This shift was not merely a response to institutional mandates, but a self-initiated redefinition grounded in lived experience. Following Bruner’s narrative identity theory, identity is constructed through storytelling and social interaction. In this study, participants narratively reframe their own roles as “cultural mediators” who shoulder the responsibility of teaching, contextualizing, and advocating for intangible heritage.

Participants like P2 and P5 illustrate this process vividly. Their engagement with younger generations, classroom collaboration, and use of visual or symbolic literacy strategies exemplify how pedagogical identity is actively formed through repeated practice and reflection. Meanwhile, P6’s adherence to traditional mentorship reveals a parallel identity anchored in craftsmanship but extending toward institutional outreach, underscoring that educational roles are shaped both by generational beliefs and adaptive needs.

5.2 Pluralizing Transmission: From Embodied Skill to Symbolic Knowledge

Traditional ICH transmission has emphasized embodied mastery through apprenticeship (Chung, 2024). However, this study reveals a shift toward symbolic and mediated forms of cultural knowledge dissemination. Younger inheritors, such as P4 and P5, embrace digital tools, design principles, and narrative strategies to frame ICH not just as technique, but as storied knowledge with contemporary

relevance. This evolution echoes Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which posits that learning and meaning-making are mediated through cultural artifacts, symbols, and tools.

This pedagogical broadening enables ICH to reach wider audiences through modular curriculum design, school-based interventions, and virtual exhibitions. Importantly, this transition from “hands-on making” to “symbolic interpretation” does not signal a loss of authenticity. Rather, it reflects a necessary adaptation that permits heritage practices to survive beyond their original social and material contexts.

5.3 Diverse Strategies and the Evolving Role of the Inheritor in Heritage Education

The findings reveal that ICH inheritors employ a wide range of instructional strategies shaped by their personal backgrounds, worldviews, and evolving educational roles. Some, like P1 and P3, adopt participatory models grounded in experiential learning, emphasizing storytelling, sensory immersion, and hands-on engagement. Others, such as P2 and P6, prioritize symbolic interpretation and historical contextualization, encouraging students to critically engage with cultural meaning. These pedagogical variations reflect a spectrum of approaches negotiating between preservation, innovation, and student agency.

Crucially, this diversity in practice repositions ICH inheritors not as passive custodians of tradition but as active cultural agents and curriculum co-designers. Their narratives illustrate how heritage transmission is a dynamic, relational process shaped by intergenerational dialogue, institutional collaboration, and digital mediation. Inheritors like P3 and P4 show that legitimacy in heritage work increasingly derives from public engagement rather than lineage alone. This shift challenges traditional binaries between “authentic” and “adapted” practice, emphasizing the cultural legitimacy of innovation and the essential role of inheritors in bridging traditional knowledge with contemporary pedagogical goals.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

This study explored the narrative trajectories of six ICH inheritors representing Shu embroidery, sugar painting, and New Year paintings to understand their evolving identities and pedagogical roles. Narrative analysis revealed that these inheritors are no longer defined solely by their craftsmanship but increasingly by their roles as educators, cultural interpreters, and curriculum contributors. Their stories reflect an identity shift—from survival-based apprenticeship to symbolic transmission, intergenerational teaching, and digital mediation. This transformation is driven not only by institutional pressures but also by personal agency, cultural responsibility, and a desire to keep heritage meaningful for today's youth. Diverse educational strategies emerged, ranging from experiential, hands-on learning to interpretive, symbol-based pedagogy, shaped by individual teaching philosophies and broader shifts in ICH transmission.

Based on these findings, ICH education should be reframed as a dynamic, identity-centered process emphasizing cultural meaning-making and participatory learning. Policymakers should embed ICH in school curricula and support school–inheritor partnerships through grants and residency programs. Educators should collaborate with inheritors in co-designing flexible modules that integrate traditional expertise with symbolic interpretation, digital storytelling, and experiential workshops. Cross-sector cooperation, complemented by digital platforms and virtual exhibitions, is essential to enhance accessibility, equity, and sustainable cultural engagement.

Last, the limitation of this study is its reliance on self-reported narratives, which may reflect idealized self-perceptions rather than actual teaching practices. Future research should examine how these identities are enacted in classroom settings and compare ICH educational practices across regions and disciplines.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the field of heritage education by revealing how ICH inheritors actively reshape their roles as educators within formal education settings. Through structured narrative analysis, it highlights their evolving identities, diverse pedagogical strategies, and the shift from traditional apprenticeship to symbolic and media-driven transmission. The study positions inheritors as co-designers of culturally responsive curricula, offering a nuanced understanding of their agency in bridging tradition and innovation. By centering inheritor narratives, the research expands current discourse on cultural sustainability, intergenerational learning, and the integration of ICH into contemporary educational practices.

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