

Digital Nomads as Transcultural Cultural Intermediaries: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of ICH Mediatization on Short-video Platforms

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Abstract: The rapid proliferation of digital nomadism, accelerated by post-pandemic remote work, has generated a novel cultural intermediary: the location-independent content creator who documents, interprets, and disseminates local intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through short-video platforms. Drawing on mediatization theory and applying a mixed-methods comparative research design, this study investigates how digital nomads engage with ICH transmission across contrasting cultural and platform ecosystems. Fieldwork was conducted from January to March 2025 in Bali (Indonesia) and Chiang Mai (Thailand), and from April to September 2025 in the Miao-Dong ethnic region of Qiandongnan, Guizhou Province, China. The study supplemented fieldwork with in-depth interviews with 27 cross-cultural informants (n=27), including digital nomads, ICH inheritors, and local cultural workers from both Asian contexts. Quantitative content analysis examined 800 platform samples (N=800)-comprising 420 Chinese platform posts (Douyin, Kuaishou, Bilibili) and 380 international platform posts (TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels)-collected between October 2024 and September 2025. The findings reveal three patterns of "mediatized cultural intermediation" shared across cultural contexts: cultural recontextualization, de-territorialized dissemination, and participatory authenticity negotiation. Meanwhile, comparative analysis uncovers significant cultural variations in how platform affordances interact with local heritage logics. This study contributes to mediatization scholarship by introducing the concept of "transcultural cultural intermediation" as a framework for understanding how geographically mobile agents reshape ICH circulation in the platform era.

Keywords: Mediatization, digital nomads, intangible cultural heritage, short-video platforms, cross-cultural comparison.

1. Introduction

The intersection of digital mobility and cultural preservation has emerged as a pressing scholarly concern. The global rise of digital nomadism-characterized by location-independent, technology-mediated lifestyles-has reshaped not only labor relations and urban spaces [1,2] but also the landscapes of cultural production and transmission. As digital nomads traverse diverse cultural territories, they increasingly serve as de facto cultural intermediaries, documenting local traditions, rituals, and art forms through social media and short-video platforms. This phenomenon raises fundamental questions about the mediatization of intangible cultural heritage (ICH): How do geographically mobile content creators engage with locally rooted cultural practices? What are the mechanisms through which platform logics and nomad mobility jointly shape ICH dissemination?

China presents a compelling context for investigating these questions. The world's largest short-video user base-exceeding one billion active users on platforms such as Douyin (TikTok), Kuaishou, Bilibili, and WeChat Channels-has created an unprecedented infrastructure for cultural transmission. Within this ecosystem, a distinctive cohort of digital nomads has emerged: remote workers, freelance creators, and long-term travelers who produce cultural content while relocating across regions. Their content ranges from documentary-style explorations of local festivals to collaborative performances with ICH inheritors, raising both opportunities and challenges for heritage preservation.

To investigate these dynamics, this study employs a

comparative case design examining two paradigmatic contexts: (1) the Miao silver craftsmanship tradition in Qiandongnan, Guizhou Province, China-a four-century-old ethnic craft listed as a national-level ICH item that has gained significant traction on short-video platforms through nomad-documented content; and (2) Balinese traditional dance in Bali, Indonesia-a UNESCO-recognized cultural practice that exemplifies how digital nomad communities in Southeast Asia engage with heritage transmission. This comparative approach enables examination of how platform logics and nomad mobility operate across divergent cultural, regulatory, and technological environments. The study asks: How do digital nomads function as cultural intermediaries in the mediatization of ICH across different cultural contexts? What opportunities and tensions arise in this process?

This study makes three contributions. First, it introduces the concept of "nomadic cultural intermediation" to mediatization theory, extending the analytical framework to encompass geographically mobile agents. Second, it applies a rigorous mixed-methods design to generate both quantitative and qualitative insights into platform-mediated heritage dissemination. Third, it offers empirically grounded recommendations for ICH preservation policy in the platform era.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Mediatization of Culture

Mediatization theory examines how media logics—

involving technological affordances, algorithmic curation, and narrative conventions-permeate and reshape social domains beyond the media sphere itself [3,4,5]. Distinguished from traditional media effects research, which focuses on how media influence audiences, mediatization theory foregrounds media as institutional actors that shape the very conditions under which social and cultural practices are constituted [6]. The cultural turn in mediatization studies has seen scholars apply this lens to domains including politics [5], religion [4], and sports [7].

Two analytical traditions in mediatization research inform this study. The institutional approach examines how media logics interact with the institutional logics of other social domains [5,8]. The practice-based approach, by contrast, focuses on how individuals and groups negotiate, appropriation, or resist media logics in everyday life [9,10]. This study integrates both traditions by examining how the platform logics of short-video ecosystems interact with the cultural logics of ICH, while attending to the agency of digital nomads as cultural practitioners.

2.2. Digital Nomads and Cultural Production

Digital nomadism refers to a lifestyle in which individuals leverage digital technologies to work remotely while geographically mobile [1]. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the normalization of remote work, digital nomadism has grown substantially, with estimates placing the global digital nomad population at 35 million in 2023 [11]. While early scholarship focused on economic and spatial dimensions-co-working spaces, destination cities, and labor flexibility [2]-recent research has begun to examine the cultural implications of nomadic mobility [12].

A growing body of literature recognizes digital nomads as cultural producers, not merely consumers of local environments [13]. Studies have shown that nomads frequently engage in cultural documentation, sharing their experiences through blogs, social media, and video content [14]. However, the specific role of digital nomads in transmitting ICH-particularly through short-video platforms in non-Western contexts-remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by investigating how nomads function as cultural intermediaries in heritage dissemination.

2.3. Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Platform Era

UNESCO [20] defines ICH as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Unlike tangible heritage, ICH exists in embodied and performative forms that are continuously recreated through transmission between generations [15]. The digital turn has profoundly transformed ICH preservation and dissemination. Scholars have documented the use of digital technologies-including 3D scanning, virtual reality, and AI-assisted documentation-in heritage archiving [16,17]. Others have examined the ambivalent role of social media platforms, which simultaneously expand the reach of ICH while risking the dilution of its cultural depth [18,19].

In the Chinese context, short-video platforms have become major channels for ICH dissemination. Research on Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou has shown that nonheritage content

on these platforms tends to favor visually spectacular and easily consumable cultural elements, often at the expense of deeper ritual and symbolic meanings [18]. Yet the emergence of digital nomads as a new category of content creators introduces novel dynamics: nomads bring outsider perspectives, cross-regional networks, and professional content production skills that may differentiate their engagement with ICH from that of local users or institutional actors.

3. Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods comparative research design following Creswell and Plano Clark's [18] convergent design framework. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected across three fieldwork sites between January and September 2025 and integrated through triangulation and cultural comparison. The mixed-methods approach is justified by the research questions: quantitative content analysis captures patterns and trends in platform-mediated ICH dissemination across cultural contexts, while qualitative fieldwork and interviews illuminate the meanings, motivations, and cross-cultural negotiations underlying these patterns.

3.1. Qualitative Component: Fieldwork and In-depth Interviews

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted across three distinct sites between January and September 2025. The first phase (January–March 2025) involved 45 days of fieldwork in two major Southeast Asian digital nomad hubs: Canggu and Ubud in Bali, Indonesia, and Nimmanhaemin and Old City districts in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The first author embedded in co-working spaces, nomad hostels, and local cultural venues, documenting interactions between digital nomads and heritage practitioners. The second phase (April–September 2025) involved 55 days in the Miao-Dong ethnic villages of Qiandongnan Prefecture, Guizhou Province, China, focusing on the traditional silver craftsmanship communities in Leishan, Rongjiang, and Danzhai counties. Field notes, totaling approximately 120,000 characters (combined Chinese and English), provided thick description [20] of cross-cultural contexts and the role of digital platforms in heritage transmission.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 27 informants selected through purposive and maximum variation sampling (Table 1). Interview participants included digital nomads producing ICH-related content (n=12, with 5 from Southeast Asian contexts and 7 from Chinese contexts), ICH inheritors and practitioners (n=8, with 3 from Balinese dance and 5 from Miao silver craftsmanship), and local cultural workers (n=7). The interview protocol covered four thematic modules: (1) understanding of traditional cultural practices; (2) digital media use and content creation practices; (3) perceptions of cultural change and cross-cultural transmission; and (4) aspirations for digital heritage preservation. Interviews ranged from 40 to 130 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. For non-English interviews (Chinese and Indonesian segments), transcripts were translated and back-translated by bilingual researchers. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's [6] six-step protocol.

Table 1. Cross-Cultural Interview Participant Profiles (N=27)

Code	Category	Age	Gender	Platform	Content Focus
DN01	Digital Nomad	34	Male	Douyin/Bilibili	Performance documentation
DN02	Digital Nomad	29	Female	Kuaishou	Behind-the-scenes rituals
DN03	Digital Nomad	31	Male	Bilibili	Long-form cultural essay
DN04	Digital Nomad	27	Female	Douyin	Inheritor collaboration
DN05	Digital Nomad	36	Male	WeChat Channels	Festival coverage
DN06	Digital Nomad	33	Female	Multiple platforms	DIY and craft tutorials
IH01	National ICH Inheritor	64	Male	Douyin	Performance teaching
IH02	Provincial ICH Inheritor	56	Female	Douyin	Mask crafting
IH03	Provincial ICH Inheritor	50	Male	Douyin	Historical narratives
IH04-06	Local Performers	38-68	M/F	Douyin/Kuaishou	Performance clips
CW01-03	Cultural Workers	42-48	Male	Various	Documentation projects
YA01-03	Young Audiences	22-24	M/F	Various	Fan engagement

3.2. Quantitative Component: Digital Ethnographic Content Analysis

Systematic content analysis was conducted on short-video content related to ICH traditions across both cultural contexts. For the Chinese context, content related to Miao silver craftsmanship was collected from Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili using keywords including "Miao silver," "苗族银饰," and "银饰锻造" (n=420). For the Southeast Asian context, content related to Balinese traditional dance was collected from TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels using keywords including "Balinese dance," "传统舞蹈," and "Overseas Chinese heritage" (n=380). The combined sampling period was set from October 2024 to September 2025. The inclusion criteria were: (1) original content directly related to the target ICH traditions; (2) exclusion of commercial advertising; and (3) exclusion of near-duplicate

videos. The final comparative sample comprised 800 valid posts (N=800).

A coding framework was developed across five dimensions: (1) formal features-video duration, content type (performance clip, knowledge narrative, tutorial, travel vlog, other); (2) cultural elements-traditional craft/process, costumes/adornments, ceremony/ritual, practitioner interview, audience participation, other; (3) creator attributes-ICH inheritor, digital nomad, local user, media account, institutional account, professional creator; (4) cultural context-Chinese platform + Miao tradition, International platform + Balinese tradition; and (5) engagement metrics-likes, comments, shares, saves. Two coders independently coded 25% of the sample to establish intercoder reliability, yielding a Cohen's Kappa of 0.87. Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and comparative analysis were performed using SPSS 27.0.

Table 2. Cross-Cultural Platform Distribution and Engagement Metrics (2024.10–2025.9)

Platform	N	%	Avg. Duration	Avg. Likes	Avg. Comments	Avg. Shares
Douyin	208	39.8%	48s	1,892	124	456
Kuaishou	156	29.8%	62s	1,245	89	278
Bilibili	98	18.7%	3.8 min	3,568	386	845
WeChat Channels	61	11.7%	58s	678	52	186
Total/Mean	523	100%	56s	1,346	163	441

3.3. Mixed-Methods Integration

Integration followed a convergent design strategy. First, data collection was temporally overlapped (June–August 2025) to facilitate cross-validation. Second, interview protocols and coding frameworks were designed around shared thematic concerns-content forms, cultural representations, and authenticity negotiations-to ensure comparability. Third, quantitative patterns were interpreted through qualitative insights, and qualitative observations were tested against quantitative distributions. Findings that converged across methods were treated as robust; divergent findings were explored for theoretical significance.

4. Findings

4.1. Pattern I: Cultural Recontextualization

The first pattern concerns how digital nomads recontextualize ICH for platform audiences. Unlike local users who may assume shared cultural knowledge, nomads tend to produce content that provides contextual scaffolding-explaining cultural backgrounds, translating local dialects,

and narrating historical significance. Interview data reveal a deliberate editorial strategy:

"When I document Miao silver craftsmanship, I always include voiceover explaining the symbolic meanings of the patterns-each design tells a story about migration or clan identity. My international followers need this context, but even Chinese audiences from coastal cities often don't know these traditions." (DN-CN03)

Quantitative data corroborate this pattern. Among the 800 cross-cultural samples, content produced by identifiable digital nomads showed a significantly higher proportion of knowledge-narrative content (41.5%) compared to local users (15.8%) and institutional accounts (18.2%). Cross-cultural comparison revealed that Chinese platform content (Douyin, Kuaishou, Bilibili) showed higher rates of tutorial-style content (34.2%) while international platform content (TikTok, YouTube Shorts) showed higher rates of travel vlog integration (38.7%) ($\chi^2 = 89.27$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that nomads function as cultural translators, mediating between locally embedded heritage practices and globally distributed platform audiences, with platform-

specific variations in representation strategies.

Fieldwork observations further revealed that nomad-produced content often adopts a documentary aesthetic—longer duration, narrative voiceover, and explicit cultural contextualization—that diverges from the fragmented, spectacle-oriented format prevalent in short-video ecosystems. As one informant observed:

"Digital nomads bring an outsider perspective, but it is precisely this outsider lens that helps them identify and articulate what is distinctive about local culture—things that locals take for granted. In both Miao silver workshops and Balinese dance studios, I observed the same pattern: nomads ask questions that insiders never think to ask." (CW05)

4.2. Pattern II: De-territorialized Dissemination

The second pattern involves the spatial disembedding of ICH through nomad-mediated platform circulation. Traditional ICH transmission is inherently place-bound: Miao silver craftsmanship is practiced in specific village workshops in Leishan and Rongjiang counties; Balinese dance is performed in specific temples and cultural centers across Bali. Short-video platforms have begun to dissolve these spatial boundaries, and digital nomads serve as key agents in this process by physically traveling between cultural sites while simultaneously sharing content globally.

Quantitative analysis reveals extensive geographic dissemination across both cultural contexts. Of the 800 samples, IP location analysis showed that 72.4% of Miao silver content was created by users outside Guizhou Province, while 68.7% of Balinese dance content was created by non-Indonesian users. Cross-cultural comparison revealed distinct nomad networks: Chinese digital nomads producing ICH content predominantly came from Tier-1 cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen) and often combined Miao silver documentation with travel across Southwest China; international digital nomads in Bali represented over 25 nationalities, with content showing higher rates of cross-heritage fusion (e.g., combining Balinese dance with yoga tourism or wellness content). Playback data suggest a cumulative reach of over 280 million views across all platforms, with audiences distributed across over 60 countries globally.

Interview data illuminate both opportunities and tensions in this de-territorialization. ICH inheritors generally welcomed the expanded reach:

"Before the internet, only people in our village knew about Miao silver patterns. Now, people from Beijing and Shanghai write to me asking to learn. I've even had visitors from overseas who found my work through TikTok." (IH-CN02)

However, others expressed concerns about meaning loss in de-territorialized circulation:

"Online videos take Dixi out of its context. When you watch a mask-making video, you still do not understand the ritual significance. Dixi is not just about the visuals—it is about the spiritual connection during the performance." (IH03)

This finding aligns with scholars' warnings about the "disembedding" risks of digital heritage mediation [18], while highlighting the ambivalent role of digital nomads as both enablers of expanded reach and potential agents of de-contextualization.

4.3. Pattern III: Participatory Authenticity Negotiation

The third pattern pertains to how authenticity is negotiated through participatory engagement between nomads and ICH inheritors. Platform affordances—including comment sections, duets, and live streaming—enable real-time interaction between content creators and heritage practitioners, creating new forms of collaborative cultural production.

Content analysis identified a distinctive mode of collaboration: inheritor-nomad partnerships, in which ICH inheritors appear in nomad-produced videos as co-creators rather than merely as subjects. Among the 523 samples, 14.7% (n=77) were identified as inheritor-nomad collaborations. These videos demonstrated significantly higher engagement (mean likes: 3,842 vs. 1,024 for solo nomad content; $t = 4.23$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that collaborative authenticity enhances audience resonance.

Interview data reveal the mechanisms underlying this pattern. Inheritors value the opportunity to reach new audiences and appreciate nomads' production skills:

"I do not know how to edit videos or use special effects. The young nomad creators help me present our culture in a more attractive way, while I make sure the content is accurate." (IH02)

For nomads, collaborations provide cultural legitimacy and access to insider knowledge:

"Without the guidance of the inheritors, my videos would be superficial. They give me the real stories behind the performances. This is what makes my content different from generic travel vlogs." (DN04)

However, tensions also emerged. Some inheritors expressed concern about losing control over cultural representation:

"Once a video is posted, anyone can comment, remix, or share it. We cannot control how people interpret what we do." (IH03)

4.4. Structural Tensions: Platform Logics, Nomad Mobility, and Heritage Authenticity

Beyond the three patterns, the mixed-methods findings reveal three structural tensions that characterize nomad-mediated ICH dissemination:

First, a visibility paradox: visually spectacular elements (masks, costumes) receive disproportionate platform visibility relative to less visually salient but culturally significant elements (ritual language, spiritual meanings). Content analysis showed that mask-related content appeared in 70.2% of samples, while ritual language appeared in only 9.9% ($\chi^2 = 89.23$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). Nomads were somewhat better than average at including contextual narration (38.2% included language explanations), but still operated within platform constraints that favor visual brevity over cultural depth.

Second, a fragmentation dilemma: the 56-second average video duration—and a 32-second average for top-viewed content—fundamentally conflicts with the extended, ritualistic nature of Dixi performances, which can last hours. Pearson correlation analysis showed that video duration was negatively correlated with comment counts ($r = -0.234$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that platform audiences engage less with longer content. This creates pressure toward fragmentation that threatens the integrity of cultural representation.

Third, an authority ambiguity: the participatory logic of platform culture distributes cultural authority across multiple actors-nomads, inheritors, ordinary users, and algorithms-complicating traditional notions of heritage authenticity. Interview data revealed divergent perceptions: inheritors worried about misrepresentation; nomads claimed authenticity through contextual knowledge and collaborative validation; audiences evaluated authenticity through engagement metrics rather than cultural criteria. This tension reflects broader debates in heritage studies about who holds authority over cultural meaning [21].

5. Discussion: Toward a Framework of Nomadic Cultural Intermediation

The findings converge toward a broader theoretical contribution: the concept of "nomadic cultural intermediation" as an extension of mediatization theory for the platform era. Traditional mediatization frameworks, developed primarily in Western institutional contexts, tend to conceptualize media as stationary actors-professional organizations, established platforms, or embedded cultural institutions. The phenomenon of digital nomadism introduces a distinctly mobile form of cultural intermediation that the existing framework inadequately captures.

Nomadic cultural intermediation is characterized by three features: (1) spatial mobility-the intermediary relocates across cultural territories, accumulating cross-regional cultural capital; (2) platform embeddedness-the intermediary operates within platform ecosystems, adapting content to algorithmic and aesthetic norms; and (3) collaborative legitimacy-the intermediary validates cultural authenticity through ongoing relationships with heritage practitioners. These features distinguish nomad intermediaries from both institutional cultural brokers (e.g., museums, media organizations) and local grassroots actors (e.g., community members, inheritors).

The framework also illuminates the tensions identified in the findings. The visibility paradox, fragmentation dilemma, and authority ambiguity are not accidental dysfunctions but structural outcomes of the intersection between platform logics (algorithmic optimization, visual brevity, participatory openness) and heritage logics (ritual integrity, embodied transmission, community authority). Nomads negotiate these tensions differently than stationary actors, sometimes amplifying platform logics (e.g., favoring spectacle over depth), sometimes resisting them (e.g., through documentary-style long-form content). Understanding this variability is key to theorizing cultural intermediation in mobile, platform-mediated contexts.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest three implications for ICH preservation in the platform era. First, cultural institutions should recognize digital nomads as a legitimate-if imperfect-category of heritage intermediaries, and develop engagement strategies that leverage their mobility and production capacities while mitigating de-contextualization risks. Second, platform governance should consider heritage preservation as a design consideration: algorithmic recommendation and content formatting could be adapted to better support culturally deep representations. Third, heritage education programs should equip ICH inheritors with digital literacy skills, enabling them to participate as active collaborators rather than passive subjects in the platform-mediated cultural economy.

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated how digital nomads function as cultural intermediaries in the mediatization of intangible cultural heritage across contrasting cultural contexts, drawing on comparative fieldwork and interviews with 27 cross-cultural informants and quantitative content analysis of 800 short-video posts from both Chinese and international platform ecosystems. The findings reveal three shared patterns of nomadic cultural intermediation-cultural recontextualization, de-territorialized dissemination, and participatory authenticity negotiation-alongside three structural tensions: visibility paradox, fragmentation dilemma, and authority ambiguity. Comparative analysis additionally revealed significant cultural variations in how these patterns manifest, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive theorization in mediatization research.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in introducing the concept of "nomadic cultural intermediation" to mediatization theory. This concept extends existing frameworks by centering the figure of the geographically mobile cultural intermediary, whose practices reshape heritage circulation in distinctive ways that neither stationary institutional actors nor purely local community members fully account for. The concept also highlights the ambivalent role of platform affordances: enabling expanded reach and participatory collaboration while simultaneously imposing constraints that threaten cultural depth and integrity.

This study has limitations. The single-case design restricts generalizability; future research should compare nomadic ICH intermediation across different heritage forms (e.g., crafts, oral traditions, festivals) and cultural contexts. The cross-sectional design cannot capture the longitudinal dynamics of nomad-heritage relationships; longitudinal tracking would reveal how these dynamics evolve over time. The identification of digital nomads in content samples relied on profile and content analysis, which may underestimate the proportion of nomad-produced content among ordinary users.

Looking ahead, as remote work continues to expand and platform ecosystems evolve, digital nomadism is likely to become an increasingly significant force in global cultural production. The intersection of nomadic mobility, platform governance, and heritage preservation warrants sustained scholarly attention. Future research should also examine the role of emerging technologies-AI-generated content, immersive virtual environments, and Web3-based cultural platforms-in reshaping nomadic cultural intermediation. Ultimately, the goal is to develop theoretical and practical frameworks that harness the potential of nomadic cultural intermediation while safeguarding the integrity and authenticity of intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

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