

Digital Virality and Rural Heritage: The Paozhutang Case

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Abstract: *The digital transformation of cultural heritage preservation presents a paradigm shift for Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11). This paper critically examines the intersection of algorithmic virality, rural revitalization, and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) through a case study of the "Daidai Sister Paozhutang" event in Chongqing, China (January 2026), which generated 80 million video views and attracted thousands of urban tourists. By synthesizing Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) with network polarization theory, this study elucidates the dual mechanisms governing digital transmission of folk customs: UGT reveals user motivations including cognitive needs (folklore information acquisition) and emotional needs (nostalgic aesthetics), while network polarization theory illustrates the dual effects of "collective wisdom" and "collective lostness". This study introduces "collective lostness" as an analytical extension of network polarization theory. The analysis reveals that while short-video platforms democratize heritage visibility, they simultaneously introduce risks of overtourism and commodification that threaten rural communities' socio-ecological resilience. The findings suggest that sustainable digital heritage requires an "elastic governance" model integrating predictive analysis (social media monitoring), adaptive infrastructure (modular service systems), and community co-governance mechanisms to balance digital visibility with cultural authenticity preservation.*

Keywords: Digital Virality; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Rural Revitalization; Algorithmic Culture; SDG 11

1. Introduction

The trajectory of global heritage preservation has historically been defined by the tension between "freezing" in the past and adapting it to the present. The United Nations SDG 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Within this framework, Target 11 places a specific onus on protecting the world's cultural and natural heritage (United Nations, 2024).¹

Traditionally, this mandate has been interpreted through the conservation of physical sites and institutional curation of intangible practices. However, the ubiquity of mobile internet and algorithmic media have radically reconfigured heritage transmission ecology (Ginzarly & Teller, 2025). In China, digital platforms have become the primary locus where rural heritage is performed, consumed, and renegotiated. The national "Rural Revitalization" strategy

¹ United Nations. (2024). Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11>

explicitly leverages digital tools to bridge the urban-rural divide, transforming remote villages into nodes of the global digital economy.²

This paper anchors its analysis in the "Daidai Sister Paozhutang" event of January 2026, a phenomenon representing a watershed moment in Chinese folk custom's digital history. On January 9, 2026, a villager named "Daidai" in Hechuan, Chongqing, posted an unpolished video soliciting help to slaughter a New Year pig. The video's viral explosion, resulting in 80 million views and thousands of urban tourists converging on a small village, illustrates the "digital-physical" friction inherent in modern heritage tourism.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Intangible Cultural Heritage and SDG 11

Intangible Cultural Heritage encompasses practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Target 11.4 of the SDGs emphasizes "strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard" this heritage. Recent scholarship argues that ICH is a critical driver of social cohesion and sustainable development, providing communities with identity and continuity (Liu et al., 2025).³

However, digitalization introduces complex dynamics. While digital tools enhance accessibility and documentation (UNESCO, 2025), they risk "disembedding" heritage from social context. The commodification of heritage for digital consumption can lead to "staged authenticity," where rituals are performed for algorithms rather than communities.⁴

2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory in the Digital Era

Originating in the 1970s, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) remains a dominant paradigm for understanding media consumption. Unlike passive reception models, UGT posits that users actively select media to satisfy specific needs (Katz et al., 1974). In social media and rural tourism contexts, these needs typically cluster around:⁵

- Cognitive Needs: Information acquisition about destinations and customs (Keelson et al., 2024)
- Affective Needs: Emotional gratification, nostalgia, and aesthetic pleasure
- Social Integrative Needs: Desire for connection, belonging, and shared identity
- Escapism: Relief from urban life pressures⁶

² Ginzarly, M., & Teller, J. (2025). Leveraging social media for resilient cultural heritage: a people-centred conceptual framework for community engagement and crisis response. *Built Heritage*, 9(1), 40.

³ Liu, R., Gao, W., & Yang, F. (2025). Authenticity, integrity, and cultural-ecological adaptability in heritage conservation: A practical framework for historic urban areas. *Buildings*, 15(8), 1304. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings15081304>

⁴ UNESCO. (2025). Artificial intelligence and culture: Report of the independent expert group on artificial intelligence and culture. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000395723>

⁵ Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Uses and gratifications research. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509-523.

⁶ Keelson, S. A., Bruce, E., Egala, S. B., Amoah, J., & Jibril, A. B. (2024). Driving forces of social media and its impact on tourists' destination decisions: A uses and gratification theory. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), 2318878. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2318878>

2.3 Network Polarization: Wisdom and Mob

Digital crowd dynamics are characterized by polarization. Sunstein's theory suggests networked groups drift toward extremes (Sunstein, 2017). In viral events, this manifests as two opposing forces: "Wisdom of the Crowd" (collective intelligence enabling self-organization) versus "Collective Lostness" (herd behavior leading to overtourism and resource depletion). This duality is central to understanding governance challenges in digital heritage (Chan & Yi, 2024).⁷

2.4 Digital Storytelling and Rural Revitalization

Digital storytelling has emerged as a potent tool for rural revitalization, allowing communities to craft narratives projected globally. The short-video format favors "short, flat, and fast" content privileging visual impact and emotional resonance (Chen et al., 2025). However, this can lead to "spectacleization" of rural life, where complex social realities are reduced to aesthetic tropes.⁸

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study approach utilizing digital ethnography and content analysis. Primary data sources include detailed chronology, traffic metrics (online views, offline footfall), and participant behaviors from the Paozhutang event documentation. Secondary data comprises a meta-analysis of recent academic literature on digital heritage and rural tourism (2021-2026), with over 50 peer-reviewed sources analyzed.

4. Case Analysis: The Paozhutang Phenomenon

4.1 The Viral Spark

On January 9, 2026, "Daidai," a villager in Hechuan District, Chongqing, posted a 15-second video on Douyin (TikTok) showing her family preparing for the traditional "Paozhutang" (Year Pig Feast). The video's unpolished authenticity, combined with the nostalgic appeal of rural New Year traditions, triggered algorithmic amplification. Within 72 hours, the video garnered 80 million views, transforming a local custom into a national phenomenon (Cao, 2025).⁹

4.2 The Physical Convergence

The digital virality translated into physical mass mobility. Within one week, over 10,000 urban tourists descended upon the village, overwhelming local infrastructure. The event demonstrated both the power of nostalgia consumption to mobilize populations and the fragility of rural systems when faced with algorithmic surges. This phenomenon aligns with overtourism research highlighting congestion and environmental degradation risks (Foronda-Robles et al., 2025).¹⁰

⁷Chan, M., & Yi, J. (2024). Social media use and political engagement in polarized times. Examining the contextual roles of issue and affective polarization in developed democracies. *Political Communication*, 41(5), 743-762.

⁸Chen, M. M., Dong, Y., Zhang, J., Qu, G., Sun, Z., Jiang, Y., & Hu, G. (2025). Body exhibition or idyllic imagination? Female microcelebrities in mobile short videos depicting the Chinese countryside. *Frontiers in Communication*, 9, 1489893.

⁹Cao, H. Exploring the promotion of musical intangible cultural heritage under TikTok short videos. *Sci Rep* 15, 21772 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-09723-3>

¹⁰Foronda-Robles, C., Galindo-Pérez-de-Azpillaga, L., & Armario-Pérez, P. (2025). The sustainable management of overtourism via user content. *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights*, 6(2), 100184.

The reason why "Sister Daidai's" videos can stand out from countless rural videos is not only because of nostalgia, but also because it breaks the traditional "idyllic imagination" narrative. Chen et al. (2025) pointed out in their research in *Frontiers in Communication* that rural micro-celebrities often construct a purified rural image through "body exhibition".

"Sister Daidai's" videos are actually a reverse performance of authenticity. Instead of showcasing the idyllic rural life exemplified by Li Ziqi, she presents the bloody, rough, yet vibrant labor scene of "slaughtering pigs for the New Year." The urban middle class's yearning for this kind of "rough reality" is the core driving force behind her 80 million views, rather than simple nostalgia.

Chen et al. (2025) pointed out that rural micro-celebrities construct a "pastoral imagination" that caters to the urban gaze by showcasing "physical labor" (such as carrying a basket, chopping firewood, and cooking). In the "pig-slaughtering soup" case, the uncut video of "Sister Daidai" asking for help while slaughtering a pig, seemingly crude, is actually a very high level of "performed authenticity".

4.3 Governance Response

The Hechuan District government implemented emergency measures including traffic control, safety protocols, and infrastructure reinforcement. This "crisis management" approach, while effective in maintaining order, revealed the reactive nature of current governance frameworks. The case underscores the need for proactive "elastic governance" models that anticipate and accommodate digital virality's unpredictable nature.

The Hechuan government's "flexible governance" should not be limited to offline traffic control. A "digital twin monitoring system" should be established to analyze the semantic sentiment and geographic tags of the hashtag "#HechuanPigSoup" on Douyin in real time. When the frequency of specific keywords (such as "traffic jam" or "no food") increases, the algorithm should automatically trigger a diversion mechanism, pushing information about similar activities in other surrounding villages to potential tourists. This is true "Smart Village Governance" (Herpamudji et al., 2025).

According to media reports, the Hechuan government did not proactively plan the "Pig Soup Festival," but was "forced" to establish the festival by online traffic (netizens suggested January 11th, which the government then adopted) (Du & Chen, 2026). This means that in the age of algorithms, the power to identify cultural heritage and establish festivals has shifted from the government's cultural and tourism departments (Supply-side) to algorithms and netizens (Demand-side).

5. Discussion

5.1 Implications for SDG 11

The Paozhutang case illuminates the tension between SDG 11's dual imperatives: inclusivity (making heritage accessible) and sustainability (protecting communities from overexposure). Current metrics for Target 11.4 focus on per capita expenditure for heritage protection (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025), but this case suggests the need for additional indicators measuring digital heritage's socio-ecological impacts.¹¹

¹¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2025). SDG 11.4 indicators: Monitoring progress toward safeguarding the world's cultural and natural heritage. <https://www.uis.unesco.org/en/methods-and-tools/sdg114-indicators>

5.2 The Algorithmic Paradox

Short-video platforms like Douyin operate on engagement-maximizing algorithms that privilege sensational, emotionally resonant content. While this democratizes heritage visibility, it also creates "algorithmic monoculture" where only certain types of heritage (visually striking, easily digestible) gain traction. Research on TikTok's ICH promotion reveals that traditional opera music achieves 80% familiarity while religious ritual music languishes at 52% (Cao, 2025), demonstrating algorithmic bias toward spectacle over substance.

Applying this conclusion to "Paozhutang", the "pig-slaughtering" ritual, with its strong visual spectacle (red meat, white steam, and bustling crowds), was selected by the algorithm. Other intangible cultural heritage customs in Qingfu Village, which may possess greater cultural significance but lack visual impact (such as family ancestral worship prayers), may remain "invisible" in this data-driven frenzy. This demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage protection in the algorithmic era faces a serious risk of "spectacular survival"—only those heritages that can become short-video spectacles will survive, while others will be accelerated to disappear. This is the biggest challenge facing SDG 11 in the digital age.

5.3 Toward Elastic Governance

The concept of "elastic governance" proposed here draws on smart rural development literature (Herpamudji et al., 2025), emphasizing adaptive capacity and participatory decision-making. Key components include:¹²

- Predictive Analytics: Using social media monitoring to anticipate viral events
- Adaptive Infrastructure: Modular systems that can scale during surges
- Community Co-Governance: Including local stakeholders in decision-making processes
- Cultural Buffer Zones: Protected spaces where heritage practices occur without digital mediation

6. Conclusion

The Paozhutang phenomenon represents a critical inflection point in the digital history of intangible cultural heritage. This study demonstrates that algorithmic virality, while democratizing heritage visibility, introduces unprecedented governance challenges that threaten the socio-ecological resilience of rural communities. The analysis reveals three key findings:

First, the dual mechanisms of "accidentality" (algorithmic amplification) and "inevitability" (deep-seated nostalgia consumption) drive digital heritage virality. Uses and Gratifications Theory explains the psychological needs—cognitive, affective, social, and escapist—that motivate massive participation in viral heritage events.

Second, network polarization creates both opportunities (collective intelligence, crowd-sourced problem solving) and risks (herd behavior, overtourism, resource depletion) for heritage communities. The tension between "wisdom of the crowd" and "collective lostness" demands new governance approaches.

Third, current governance frameworks remain reactive rather than proactive. The "elastic governance" model proposed here—incorporating predictive analytics, adaptive infrastructure,

¹² Herpamudji, D. H., Mulyanto, M., Saptaningtyas, H., & Widiyanto, W. (2025). Assessing technology and governance integration in smart village development. Proceedings of the 3rd Lawang Sewu International Symposium on Humanities and Social Sciences 2024. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-428-0_8

community co-governance, and cultural buffer zones—offers a pathway toward sustainable digital heritage management aligned with SDG 11's vision of inclusive, resilient communities.

Future research should develop quantitative metrics for measuring digital heritage's socio-ecological impacts, test elastic governance interventions in diverse cultural contexts, and explore how artificial intelligence can be harnessed for heritage protection rather than mere spectacle amplification (UNESCO, 2025). As MONDIACULT 2025 emphasized, culture must be recognized as a standalone goal in the post-2030 UN agenda—and digital heritage governance will be central to realizing that vision.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research was conducted independently without commercial or institutional pressures that could have influenced the study design, data analysis, or interpretation of results.

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