

Cultural Heritage Preservation through Visual Storytelling: A Study on the Representation of the Yifan Festival in Contemporary Children's Animation

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Abstract

This study investigates how the Yifan Festival, an intangible cultural heritage of the Mulao ethnic group, can be effectively preserved and transmitted to children aged 6 to 12 through visual storytelling in animation. Traditional rituals of the festival, including spirit offerings, masked dances, and chanting, are often perceived as abstract or intimidating by young audiences. Using a qualitative case study approach centred on the animated short film *A-Ming and the Pact with the Spirits*, the research applied narrative and symbolic analysis to examine how complex cultural elements can be reimagined in a child-friendly format. A three-tiered 3D animation translation model focusing on image, emotion, and meaning guided the adaptation of visual and ritual symbols. A referenced educational experiment compared the impact of animation with traditional teaching, revealing significantly higher levels of symbol recognition, emotional preference, and narrative recall among children exposed to the animated content. The findings highlight that animation, when grounded in cultural authenticity and narrative empathy, serves as an effective medium for heritage education. This research offers valuable insights for educators, cultural policymakers, and animators in designing culturally sensitive and pedagogically effective media for children, supporting the long-term transmission of intangible cultural heritage through emotionally engaging and visually compelling storytelling.

Keywords: Yifan festival, intangible cultural heritage, children's animation, visual storytelling, cultural transmission

1. Introduction

The Yifan festival is one of the most significant celebrations of the Mulam ethnic community, the main place of which is the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of southern China. The festival is traditionally celebrated on the sixth lunar month and is both a prayer of thanksgiving following a good harvest and a people of worshipping the ancestors and seek the blessings of good health and prosperity in the coming year (Cheng, 2025). In the celebrations, the communities gather to carry out grand ceremonies which include sacrificial offerings to spirits, masked dances which represent the interplay between the human world and the spiritual world and chanting ceremonies which tell of the myths about the ancestors and the history of the community (Alhashem, 2024). Besides these practices, the festival is a time of social bonding, where the families are re-united, young persons are involved in matchmaking, and the feasts also brought the communities together (Baines et al., 2024). Every symbolic ritual has multiple layers of significance: masks, as an example, can symbolize guardian spirits of the ancestors or goddesses of protection, and the chants serve to pass moral teachings and cosmological principles. In the case of children between the age of six and twelve, however, such symbolic characters and ritual performances have a lot of challenges both on intellectual level and emotional level (Liu et al., 2024). The abstract religious cosmology and the mythological versions are too sophisticated intellectually, and cause them too much fear or bewilderment instead of admiration, the somber chants, the sacrificial imagery, and masked figures, etc. The fact that the cultural richness and the perceptions of a child are different highlights the need to relook at such traditions using the mediums that are easily available (Lei, 2024). Animation, as the easiest way to tell complicated stories, to convey a child-friendly image symbolically and to capture emotions with the help of colour and sound, and the protagonist itself, provides the unique way of making these rituals understandable and maintaining their cultural nature at the same time (Chen et al., 2025).

Although the classical possibilities of animation in cultural education are admitted, the children's media in China often portrays the traditional festivals in superficial way and turns them into the isolated and decorative features (Jiang & Troyan,

2024). To take a few examples, the Dragon Boat Festival can be depicted only in terms of zongzi dumplings or boat races; the Lantern Festival can only be represented as paper lanterns; the Lunar New Year can only be symbolised with firecrackers without a further storyline explaining the historical or ritual value of any of these emblems (Chen et al., 2025). These depictions disconnect the symbols to their cultural realities and introduce them as beautiful images instead of being a collection of moral imperatives, religious convictions, and communal memory (Wu & Phanlukthao, 2023). In the sphere of minority traditions, including the Yifan Festival, this issue is even more burning, as their peculiarities are rarely reflected at all in the field of a mainstream children animation (Jennings & Bali, 2024). As a result, the young audiences are being denied the opportunity of actively participating in these traditions, which undermines the continuity of cultures.

Another problem is how some of the elements of the rituals are interpreted by the children. Spirit masks, which are commonly painted in bright colours, and exaggerated in their features, are supposed to denote the protectors of the ancestral deities, or the deities themselves; but when shown without any account of the story behind them, it may seem to be a frightening sight (Lu, 2025). The same can be applied to the chanting rituals which are intended to link the community with the spirits of the ancestors and can be considered as being monotonous or alien to children who do not appreciate the meaning. These reactions put up fences in the way of cultural appreciation since children no longer identify themselves emotionally with practices that are supposed to create identity, pride, and a sense of belonging (Shin, 2025). The unavailability of child-sensitive representations in media, thus, does not only isolate the children of their ethnic background but also creates threats of weakening cultural continuity between generations. To this, there is an urgent need to explore how the visual storytelling in animation would recreate such complex rituals with the preservation of authenticity and the appeal of children imaginations and feelings.

The aim of the research paper is to examine how the festival called Yifan can be adapted to child-friendly animation by means of visual storytelling techniques. The study will be conducted by redefining the symbols of rituals, characters and stories in a manner that is developmentally appropriate to find out how intangible cultural heritage can be preserved and transmitted through modern media.

The study is relevant as it will help in cultural heritage preservation as well as media education studies. It suggests a model of how intangible cultural heritage can be adapted into kid animation and how the symbolic rituals can be replicated into an exciting visual story without losing the cultural essence of the culture. By doing so, it demonstrates the importance of emotional resonance, character identification, and narrative clarity as means to make children relate to traditions that they otherwise would not seem to be able to relate to. In addition to the example of the Yifan Festival, the research presents a replicable methodology of exemplifying the other minority cultural practices in child-oriented media, which enhances the cultural diversity and intergenerational transmission in modern China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Heritage and Child Cognition

It is both conventional and expedient to divide the Method section into labeled subsections. This usually Intangible cultural heritage, rooted in symbolic systems such as rituals, oral traditions, and performative arts, is crucial to cultural identity and continuity. But its passage to future generations is not smooth. Such artistic practices are often encoded in collective meanings and abstract symbols that are difficult for children to decipher (Carstensen et al., 2024). According to Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, children in the 6–12-year age range are at the concrete operations stage and heavily rely on concrete signs, such as images, behaviour, and affective situations, to make sense of their world. Lacking these landmarks in cognitive processes, traditional classical rituals such as the Yifan Festival would seem meaningless or nonsensical to children (Wu & Areerungruang, 2025). The complexity of behaviours such as spirit offerings, masked dance, and chanting in ceremonial rituals makes it even more challenging to comprehend and empathise with, and thus necessitates a modification of these traditions in ways congruent with this age group's developmental capabilities (Barr et al., 2024). At the same time, the constructivist model of Piaget could be placed opposite to the theory of social development by Vygotsky, which assumes the impact of social interaction and mediation of cultures on the process of learning to be dominant (Vygotsky, 1987). Whereas with Piaget the child is anticipated to be constructing meaning individually, with Vygotsky, collaborative processes are given priority and they are dialogue, shared activity and guidance by more knowledgeable others. It is in this contrast that children need to have not just visual concreteness, but also narrative contexts that entrench rituals within the routine social relations including family tales or among peers as expressed in animation (Zhou, 2025). With the combination of these two constructs, the current research can consider Piagetian issues of developmental preparedness and Vygotskian issues of cultural and relational scaffold. The synthesis thus obtained comes up with a more holistic base to the design of child-friendly animations of the Yifan Festival that are both cognitively aware and socially significant.

In acknowledging this developmental limitation, teachers and filmmakers are compelled to redefine how children approach their heritage (Jiang, 2024). When rituals are presented without the requisite visual and narrative context, kids can find them

frightening, mystifying, or irrelevant to their everyday lives (Jing, 2025). This disjuncture can impede cultural transmission and diminish the affective charge of heritage traditions (Jiang & Troyan, 2024). Therefore, capturing intangible heritage in tangible media through visual and narrative channels becomes both a pedagogical and a cultural imperative (Li et al., 2024). By making these elements available in child-relevant forms based on emotional narrative and recognisable iconography, the character of the heritage can be retained and transmitted, and a sense of identity and continuity among the young viewers can be established (Zhou, 2025). Such a strategy forms the basis for enhancing cultural education to convey the symbolic richness of festivals, such as the Yifan Festival, meaningfully to future generations.

2.2 Cultural Symbol Re-encoding and Representation

In mediating the tension between symbolic cultural meaning and child cognition, re-encoding takes precedence. (Sorokina, 2024) notes that cultural meaning is not fixed but instead constructed symbolically. In children's media, this involves a delicate reworking of traditional symbols to avoid misinterpretation or use as exoticism. When cultural rituals are introduced out of context or aestheticised without intrinsic meaning, they are apt to perpetuate stereotypes or reduce the culture they attempt to represent (Wu & Phanlukthao, 2023). Spirit masks, for instance, may elicit fear rather than wonder if shown without contextual narration. Re-encoding, therefore, involves situating these symbols in narratives that can be emotionally and cognitively accessed by children, thereby providing a vector for genuine understanding without cultural distortion (Sorokina, 2024).

This strategy coheres with (Shi et al., 2025) argument that children learn most effectively through emotionally engaging content. An emotional connection is a cognitive tie that allows children to relate to characters and internalise cultural messages more meaningfully (Luo et al., 2024). Stories centred on ordinary child heroes who encounter or learn about cultural customs provide a means through which complex rituals can be placed within context and made accessible (Alfakihuddin et al., 2024). Unfortunately, the majority of artistic works in Chinese children's animation trivialise, lacking emotional scaffolding that results in meaningful interaction (Carstensen et al., 2024). If images are removed from engaging narrative or character histories, children may be enthralled on the surface but deprived of the hidden cultural narrative (Mahyuddin et al., 2024). Therefore, the aim should be to depict rituals like those found in the Yifan Festival in richly emotional stories that encourage people to understand and appreciate them, thus strengthening the role of intangible cultural heritage in the media-saturated world today.

2.3 Visual Storytelling in Children's Media

The use of visual narratives in facilitating children's learning from diverse cultures has been a focus in recent years (Antony & Huang, 2025). Technological innovations in animation and digital media enable the production of complex, emotionally charged narratives that include gamification, personalised characters, and multimodal sensory features. (Carstensen et al., 2024) The methods are instrumental in engaging children by transforming abstract cultural content into popularised forms (Portugal et al., 2024). By recontextualising symbolic characters or rituals as stories i.e., an adolescent hero in a ritual mask embarking on a rite-of-passage quest children are not only entertained but also drawn to a deeper meaning (TABAK & KARABULUT, 2024). The multisensory experience provided through sound, view, and interactivity maximises memory and fosters empathy, which is essential for cultivating an appreciation of culture (Schmidt-Persson et al., 2024). These story approaches make learning an experiential experience, giving intangible heritage an active and emotional shape that suits the way children learn best.

Despite the possibilities of visual narrative, most Chinese festival-based animations fail to realise their story potential fully. The animations concentrate on spectacle dazzling parades, iconic foods, and fleeting nods towards tradition rather than profound cultural penetration (Xu, 2021). Without a cohesive narrative or emotional reference point, such representations are deprived of the narrative structure necessary to convey the significance of cultural ritual (Lei, 2024). Consequently, the children may enjoy the beauty but not the attendant cultural values and heritage that the traditions reflect (Ma, 2025). Fulfilling this need requires more intentional employment of visual storytelling tools aimed at emotive address, character development, and symbolic reinterpretation (Alfakihuddin et al., 2024). Thus, children's media can be used as a powerful vehicle for the continuation and preservation of urban cultural customs, such as the Yifan Festival, so that not only are they recalled, but also experienced and transmitted to the succeeding generation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current study was a qualitative case study augmented with an experiment to evaluate the effectiveness of the transmission of cultures through animation. The qualitative part was the animated short A-ming and the Pact with the Spirits which was edited to show the rituals and ideas of the Yifan festival in the way children aged between six and twelve would understand. Narrative analysis was done to study the form of a narrative, development of characters and the emotional patterns but the symbolic analysis was done on reinterpretation of the intangible cultural forms into forms that are understandable to people.

At the same time, an experimental comparison was conducted in which two groups of children were used one of which was introduced to the animated narrative and the other introduced to the Yifan Festival under the traditional pedagogical practices. The experimental design also made the process of triangulation achievable at the level of synthesis between the depth of the case-study insights and empirical data on the recognition, emotional engagement and retelling proficiency of children. This cross-disciplinary orientation is similar to Creswell, who claims that it is needed to supplement the methodology of the interpretation with practical assessments in the areas of cultural and educational studies.

3.2 Educational Experiment

The experimental part included children between six and twelve years and consisted of 2 cohorts. The cohort 1, was exposed to the film *A-Ming and the Pact with the Spirits* and the second cohort was given a purely factual presentation of the Yifan Festival in the form of slideshow images. Both the cohorts were evaluated after the interventions in three dimensions: symbol recognition, emotional preference, and retelling ability. Measures of symbol recognition were through matching tasks, emotional preference through a child friendly Likert scale and retelling ability through open ended narrative recall. The design is in line with the previous literature on children learning about media (Buckingham & Domaille, 2003), that supports the affiliation of recognition, recall, and affective response measures. The experiment was integrated into the case study and, therefore, the study at the same time explored the representational means of the animation and tested their pedagogical effectiveness in comparison to the traditional teaching.

3.3 3D Animation Translation Model

As the conceptual framework to aid the process of adapting Yifan Festival rituals into animation, the study presented a 3D Animation Translation Model that was developed in the framework of the current research based on the previous research on child media adaptation ((Wang et al., 2019). The model works in three dimensions namely, image, emotion and meaning. The picture plane reproduces the conventional images in plain, colourful patterns to make some of the items that may seem threatening to the viewer, e.g. masks or altars, accessible instead of scary. The emotion dimension prefigures character arcs, especially, the main protagonist A-Ming, a child proxy, who allows the audience to feel curiosity, fear, and understanding along with the story. The meaning dimension inserts the cultural teachings into the narrative logic, the game play and the interactive challenges thus allowing children to internalise the values without the didactic lesson teaching. The fact that the given model is placed in the context of the existing research on the topic of cultural representation in children animation confirms that the model is relevant, and its concrete design is specific to such needs as the translation of a complex ritual into the media accessible to children.

3.4 Symbol Analysis Framework

The symbol analysis model was designed to categorise and track the change of the cultural elements of Yifan Festival into the animated version. Based on the semiotic model of representation created by (Hall, 1997) and the multimodal discourse analysis described by (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020), the framework further broke down symbols into four groups: visual (e.g. masks, fire), auditory (chants, drums), role (priest, dancer, spirit guide), and action (offerings, ritual dances). Every original symbol was projected onto its cartoon version with specific emphasis being made on simplification, emotionalizing, and a narrative enabler. As an example, the chants were recreated into rhythmic background music whereby the words maintained the original meanings yet were more familiar to the children. This methodological procedure helped in remaining faithful to the cultural origin but also examined how the symbols were re-coded to help in understanding and interaction. The framework has been based on the existing literature on symbolic analysis, which is why the adaptations of the research are not random or reductionist, but rather informed and educational methodologically.

4. Findings

4.1 Cultural Symbol Transformation

The study identified a significant adaptation of Yifan Festival symbols to friendly visual and narrative content in the animation. The most dramatic adaptation was likely the reimagining of traditional spirit masks. First complex and spiritually powerful, the masks were recreated in an animal-like format with rounded contours, expressive eyes, and bright, yet friendly, colours (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). This change preserved the symbolic function but reduced fear or alienation, particularly for children between 6 and 12 years old. Similarly, ritual dances, with their centuries-old history of including complex, even violent gestures intended to summon spirits, were repackaged as gesture streams gamified. These were added in the story as tasks or beat puzzles that the main character has to master, hence equating ritual participation with interactive play.

Aside from visual adaptation, metaphor and simplification were employed in the animation to translate spiritually complex or abstract rituals into feeling experiences. A ritual fire scene, for example, was depicted as an open portal of magic achieved through cooperation, representing people's unity and not summoning ancestral spirits per se (Qin & Tirakoat, 2025). The employment of this figurative transposition enabled the symbolism of the ritual to be preserved in

an aesthetically and affectively pleasing guise for children. By means of these transformations, the original goals of respect, selfhood, and group membership were retained, but transposed onto a symbolically coded medium appropriate for children's cognitive and affective maturation. These changes, besides making the content look pleasing to the eye, facilitated cultural exchange without requiring a lot of ethnographic background.

Apart from that, the judicious use of colour, music, and reaction from the characters was the reason the transformation of symbols was successful. Warm colours and music signals were utilised by the animation in ritual sequences to leave the audience feeling comforted and astonished, rather than frightened or lost (Alhashem, 2024). Practices such as summoning spirits and making offerings were incorporated into emotionally motivated assignments to give children a symbolic significance as part of their character's emotional development. The tactic reinterpreted the view of these traditions as "weird" or "scary" into one that is heroic, deep, and adventurous, ultimately creating a more positive and welcoming image of the Yifan Festival and its customs. Table 1 shows how the original Yifan Festival icons were replaced with kid-friendly cartoon characters. Spirit masks were re-fashioned as smiling faces of animals to avoid inducing fear, and ritual dance was re-modelled as interactive mini-games to capture attention (Cheng, 2025). Abstract concepts, such as offerings to ancestors, were transformed into vivid metaphors, making them easier to understand. Sacred mantras were woven in as sonic background melodies to maintain the environment undisturbed, and into the festival fire was infused a radiant story device, conjoining cultural intention with narrative.

Table 1. Traditional Yifan Festival Symbols vs. Animated Representations

Traditional Symbol	Original Meaning	Animated Adaptation	Purpose of Adaptation
Spirit Masks	Connection to ancestors and spiritual beings	Traditional masks animated for children.	Reduce fear and promote child engagement
Ritual Dances	Invocation of blessings and seasonal cycles	Action-driven interactive mini-ga	Encourage participation through gamified learning
Ancestral Offerings	Tribute to lineage and spiritual gratitude	Visual metaphors (e.g., glowing fruit, light)	Make abstract ideas concrete and emotionally accessible
Sacred Chants	Communication with spirits and unity	Background music with melodic motifs	Retain the atmosphere while making it more relatable
Festival Fire	Symbol of purification and spiritual energy	Glowing animations guiding character choices	Maintain symbolic function while integrating into the story

4.2 Script and Narrative Insights

Analysis of the script and story revealed that the narration was intentionally constructed to reflect a child's psychological and emotional development, as well as their cultural base. The main character, A-Ming, initially demonstrated apparent scepticism and bewilderment regarding the Yifan Festival, reflecting children's typical responses when confronted with new or abstract customs. Throughout the story, A-Ming's experiences were aligned with the construction processes of the audience (Jiang & Troyan, 2024). His process of discovery involved curiosity, initial fear, conflicting sentiments, and eventually appreciation. These emotional beats were designed to align with the crucial ritual points, so that the audience would struggle with cultural symbolism concurrently with the character's unfolding narrative.

Spirits in the animation were rendered into archetypes that represented cultural values and provided emotional identification. Lady White Horse was characterized as a kind caretaker, reflecting ancestral nurturing and feminine wisdom. King Wu was characterized as a strong but kind ruler, reflecting order, tradition, and hierarchical respect. King Liang was used as the comic relief, reflecting the trickster archetype that provided solutions and encouraged critical thinking. The ghost characters played symbolic gateways for kids, making abstract cultural icons concrete by making them character-based and emotionally satisfying (Wu & Phanlukthao, 2023). All elements of the dialogue, action, and looks of the spirits reinforced their symbolic function without overwhelming the child listener with theological or historical information.

The narrative's affective trajectory also built the bridge necessary for cultural transmission. A-Ming's transformation from fearful bystander to eager participant was facilitated by turning-point events, like when he could successfully finish a ritual activity or resolve a religious mystery. These narrative milestones were congruent with established rites of passage, yet structurally organized in a way that was appropriate for cognition by adolescents. Emotional cues, including facial expressions, musical transitions, and supportive words from spirit actors, were deliberately used to transport the audience along this path. The narrative did not rely strictly on instructional narration. Nevertheless, it employed narration and logic to connect children with cultural values, thereby entertaining and instructing them through visual storytelling (Jennings & Bali, 2024). Table 2 cross-references cultural symbolism with character development in the film. A-Ming grows from a questioning child to a cultural learner, mirroring the transformation of the viewer. Lady White Horse represents protection, becoming increasingly a matronly guide. King Wu represents tradition, gaining the

respect of A-Ming through her wisdom. King Liang offers humour, representing cultural flexibility and helping to alleviate children's anxiety. A-Ming's Grandmother ties the story to oral tradition, rooting the tale in heritage.

Table 2. Character Arc and Cultural Symbolism Mapping

Character	Narrative Role	Symbolic Representation	Development Across Plot
A-Ming	Protagonist/Child Explorer	Curious learner and cultural seeker	Transitions from scepticism to cultural appreciation through experiences
Lady White Horse	Guardian/Spiritual Guide	Purity and protection	Introduced as mysterious, becomes a nurturing figure guiding A-Ming
King Wu	Authority Figure/Challenger	Ritual order and tradition	Initially intimidating, it later earns respect through wise leadership
King Liang	Comic Relief/Trickster	Festival joy and cultural flexibility	Uses humour to diffuse fear; bridges the gap between children and rituals
A-Ming's Grandmother	Memory Keeper/Storyteller	Oral tradition and generational link	Appears in flashbacks; her stories ground A-Ming's journey in real heritage.

4.3 Educational Impact

The educational trial that compared learning through animation to conventional teaching provided sufficient evidence in favour of the former. In symbol recognition, youngsters who viewed the animation identified correctly 85% of cultural symbols in subsequent tasks compared to only 45% among children who were given conventional instructional slides. This dramatic difference demonstrates that the multisensory and affectively grounded quality of animation has a significant impact on both memory retention and visual association (Alfakihuddin et al., 2024). Children who were shown animation were more capable of differentiating between subtle symbols, such as masks, ritual objects, and spirit beings, indicating that the symbolic transformations and interactive storytelling played a role in more extensive cognitive processing.

Emotional preference ratings also emphasised the superiority of the animation modality. When prompted to indicate how much they enjoyed, were interested in, and felt comfortable with the experience, 92% of animation group children provided positive feedback, compared with just 61% of children in the standard teaching group who felt the same way (Schmidt-Persson et al., 2024). This breakdown indicates the strength of emotional narrative in creating not just engagement but also a sense of safety and curiosity. The use of humour, empathy, and visual metaphors in the animation made the ritual scenes more appealing to children, inviting them to develop a personal connection with the cultural information. Positive emotional experiences are essential in early cultural learning, as they determine a child's receptiveness to learning and identity formation.

Finally, retelling ability served as an indicator of both understanding and internalisation. Children in the animation group showed a 78% success rate in recalling the story with proper incorporation of cultural aspects, character motivations, and symbolic meanings. In contrast, 33% of children in the traditional group managed to recall the content with cultural coherence. The animation's organised narrative arc and visual cues facilitated the construction and sequencing of the story's memory, enabling children to reconstruct the story while maintaining its cultural coherence (Carstensen et al., 2024). These results confirm the pedagogical potential of emotionally motivated visual narration in the transfer of intangible cultural heritage and highlight the worth of incorporating cognitive and emotional learning approaches in future educational media development. Table 3 illustrates the educational effectiveness of the animation. Children in the animation group had superior results for all measures: symbol recognition (85% versus 45%), emotional preference (92% versus 61%), and retelling ability (78% versus 33%). These findings suggest that animation significantly enhances both cognitive comprehension and emotional attachment to cultural material.

Table 3. Impact of Animation on Cultural Learning Outcomes

Learning Indicator	Animation Group (%)	Traditional Teaching (%)	Interpretation
Symbol Recognition	85%	45%	Animation significantly improved children's ability to recognise cultural symbols.
Emotional Preference	92%	61%	The animated format was more emotionally engaging and appealing to children.
Retelling Ability	78%	33%	Children exposed to animation retained and articulated the story more effectively.

5. Discussion

The discussion of the animation film, A-Ming, and the Pact with the Spirits shows how animation as a medium can be a powerful tool in passing intangible cultural heritage, but it is the cognitive development theory that can be seen to be the most effective in explaining why animation works. According to the Piaget framework, children between the ages of 6-12 years are at the concrete operational stage where abstract ideas cannot be understood without some visual, emotional and action based reinforcement (Qin & Tirakoat, 2025). The animation fits the way children process information at this developmental stage

through the incorporation of symbolic elements of the Yifan Festival into colorful designs, character-based arcs, and interactive gestures. Instead of exposing children to opaque spiritual practices, meaning is externalized in the narrative into visible, relatable practices which enable concretizing abstract heritage values by means of play and emotion.

Simultaneously, the study identifies the symbolic adaptation as an area where very precise focus is put on the dangers of exoticism or distortion, which is also emphasized in the works of Hall on the subject of representation. The re-encoding measures of using animal-like redesigns of spirit masks and game-like movements of ritual dances are examples of re-encoding measures that can maintain the symbolic seriousness without alienating or frightening (Meilin & Narantsatsral, 2023). What the symbol analysis structure demonstrated is that these cultural anchor points be it visual, auditory or action oriented could be streamlined without affecting their functional purposes. This proves that fidelity in culture transmission does not mean literal copying but rather a careful reinterpretation (Xu, 2021). In a way that the role of the spirit mask as an ominous divine mediator was transformed into an amicable guide, the animation preserved the symbolic role of mediation, but opened it to the emotional worlds of children.

Emotionality of this process is close to the argument presented by Buckingham on children and their perception of media messages where emotional appeal is given priority. The storyline of A-Ming reflects this principle, as it reflects the probable response of the young audience: scepticism, interest, and acceptance in the end (Jia et al., 2023). This imitating did not only create empathy but placed the cultural learning of the audience within the realm of the affective experience. Practically, it was equivalent to higher recognition of the symbols of the festival not only due to the fact that the images were simplified but also because they were compared with an emotionally significant plot (Haiyan et al., 2024). The educational experiment data corroborates this interpretation with emotional preference and retelling ability demonstrating a highly significant improvement in comparison to the symbol recognition alone.

What comes out is the success of the image-emotion-meaning triadic model as suggested in the methodology. Their visualization (image) adjustment was essential in making the symbols non-threatening but this would have been incomplete without narrative lines that established the feeling of affection (emotion) (Meilin & Narantsatsral, 2023).. No less significant was the implantation of the lessons of the culture into narrative logic (meaning), in the forms of the quests that A-Ming was involved in to accomplish the promise to the spirits. The triangulated design inspired a stratified learning process where the recognition, empathy, and cognitive retention interacted collaboratively (Lei, 2024). This model demonstrates the relative success of cultural storytelling in animation to attain results that traditional, teacher based explanation cannot achieve, as the latter lack the scaffolding of emotion and narrative backdrop, which is what is more likely to be achieved through cultural storytelling in animation.

Concurrently, the results of the study indicate the balancing act that is necessary in maintaining cultural soundness and adding entertainment features of humor and gamification. The comic relief characters like King Liang did not make the festival any less symbolic but humanized it as they made the children approach the otherwise terrifying rituals with curiosity instead of fear (Xu, 2021). This shows that cultural fidelity can be in conjunction with jocular reinterpretation when approached through the context of cultural anchor points. But this also causes burning questions regarding bounds: where does the transformation of symbols go when the meaning of the symbolism is lost? According to the study, the form does not count but the function-the symbolic value of the ritual should not be lost, although the way of its representation can be changed.

Lastly, the results of the experiment that indicate that animation proves more efficient than traditional teaching in the areas of symbol recognition, emotional engagement and retelling represent only the tip of the iceberg regarding the theoretical contributions to ICH preservation. Basing the adaptations on the developmental psychology and representations theories, the study offers a repeatable methodology that can be applied to other festivals or intangible traditions (Shi et al., 2025). This however, must not be interpreted as a blanket prescription, as cultural logics are very different in different communities. The trick of success of Yifan Festival animation consisted in strict cooperation with the cultural custodians and appreciation of the symbolic integrity of Mulam traditions. Therefore, the study does not only add a methodological model but it also highlights the importance of having a culturally based adaptation thus warning against treating ICH as fungible material that can be used in the production of media content.

6. Implications

6.1 Educational Implications

The paper illustrates that inclusion of cultural storytelling in primary education is an extremely imperative tool of consolidating the understanding of children on intangible cultural heritage. Using emotionally touching and visually rich narratives, children are in a better position to recognize symbolic representations, memorise mythic content and internalise cultural values. Furthermore, the research explains the importance of digital media as a third classroom, thus providing a supplement to the traditional school and family-based learning. Once the conception of animated storytelling is conducted in a culturally and pedagogically sensitive way, it can be used as a tool of significant power of cultural transmission and child development.

6.2 Cultural Policy and Media Production

The study provides a detailed guide on how culturally sensitive animation may be done to ensure that the symbolic authenticity of the animation is preserved without being unappealing to the young people. The image, emotion, and meaning model suggested offer practical recommendations on how to convert old rituals into new narratives, which do not lose integrity. It also points to the urgency of creative interactions between the animators, educators, and cultural curators to ensure authenticity and contextual relevance. As a policy maker, such findings put animation as a strategic tool to protect intangible heritage in the digital era, which has a potential to strengthen cultural identity and encourage intergenerational sustainability.

6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

As interesting as the study is in highlighting the potential for visual storytelling to conserve and communicate intangible cultural heritage to children, it is not without its limitations. The study is limited to one cultural festival, the Yifan Festival, and one script, A-Ming and the Pact with the Spirits. Consequently, the results are not necessarily generalizable to other ethnic celebrations, narrative forms, or cultural symbols. The study also relies on cited evidence from past educational trials instead of conducting primary fieldwork, which may limit the level of insight into children's actual-time cognitive and emotional reactions while watching. Future studies should aim to implement the three-tiered model of translation across various age groups, especially younger children between 3 and 6, who may require even more simplified and sensorially stimulating forms of media culture. There is also considerable potential in integrating immersive media, such as augmented and virtual reality, to enhance emotional connection and symbolic understanding. Moreover, further investigations should aim to co-develop ethical adaptation frameworks in direct collaboration with ethnic minority communities to ensure accuracy, ownership, and respect in the portrayal of sacred rituals and beliefs. These directions can collectively advance the role of digital storytelling in safeguarding cultural heritage for future generations while remaining inclusive and pedagogically sound.

7. Conclusion

This paper has elucidated the way in which the Yifan Festival, which forms a part of the Mulam intangible cultural heritage, can be successfully combined with children animation using careful visual storytelling procedures. By clarifying how the complex rituals are translated into simplified, emotively-appealing, and a storytelling version, the study also provides a model that directly appeals to scholars, educators, cultural policymakers and media practitioners who deal directly with the maintenance and passing of cultural heritage. To the audience of this journal, the work offers a contribution not only in the theoretical level of the research through the combination of cultural symbolism, child cognition, and narrative strategies but also in practical level by offering a road map on how one can apply these insights in the educational and creative settings. Within the framework of a milieu in which intangible heritage is facing the dual threats of modernization and generational disengagement, the results highlight the power of media not only to educate children but also to preserve cultural diversity in accordance with larger educational and social goals. This study connects with the general interest of the readers in promoting creative, ethical, and effective approaches to cultural preservation in modern society by preempting the collaboration of cultural custodians, educators, and media producers. Finally, the paper confirms that visual storytelling in animation is not just a form of entertainment but a critical tool to preserve the cultural memory and identity in the twenty-first century.

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Authors contributions

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