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Digital Communication of Rural Cultural Heritage in Southern Hunan Driven by AI-Generated Content

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Abstract: Southern Hunan has densely populated rural heritage and many sites are not known on short videos due to their historical and cultural significance. Based on a five-day field study at 17 sites in Chenzhou and Yongzhou, this study analyses the digital dissemination of rural heritage and tests AIGC tools for heritage visual communication. The results show a structural mismatch between heritage resources and platform visibility due to uneven digital infrastructure, lack of creative talent and narrative formats not suitable for short video. This study develops a three-part model of AIGC + heritage narrative + rural settings and identifies practical paths involving data infrastructure, university-community collaboration and ethical governance. It offers an exploratory framework for AIGC-assisted heritage dissemination in non-urban contexts.

Keywords: AIGC; Short-Video Dissemination; Traditional Villages; Cultural Heritage; Heritage Education

1. Introduction

Southern Hunan (Xiangnan) has large rural cultural heritage. The project inventory identified 209 ancient villages listed on the Traditional Chinese Villages List, 21 folk art items on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, 16 National Key Cultural Relic Protection Units, 8 villages identified with distinctive ethnic minorities, and 13 historic towns and villages. Ningyuan County in Yongzhou alone contains 17 villages on the Traditional Chinese Villages List. These include Xiaguan Village, locally promoted as the "First Village of Jiangnan" and associated with more than 1,500 years of history; Pipagang Village, a former commercial hub on the Ming-Qing salt and horse route that retains numerous blue-brick residences with horse-head walls; Luojia Village, known for its fortress-like lanes, courtyard residences, and a Qing-dynasty wooden opera stage; and Jiu'anbei Village, whose Hanlin Ancestral Hall reflects a long-established clan settlement. Farther north, in Suxian District of Chenzhou, the former state-owned 711 Mine was one of China's early large-scale uranium mines and contributed to the "Two Bombs, One Satellite" program. The site was redeveloped as a cultural-tourism destination in 2023 and retains more than 300 buildings associated with the 1960s. Several of these sites are protected through national cultural-relic or traditional-village programs and have substantial value for the study of architecture, clan culture, and industrial heritage.

However, this heritage abundance is not matched by comparable visibility on short-video platforms, which are widely used by young adults in China. During the July 2026 Douyin audit, a search for Pipagang Ancient Village found only five user-generated short videos, with an average of approximately 134 views, despite the village's 30,000-square-meter historic area and its municipally protected opera stage. The problem is not just cultural material but also a gap in “narrative translation”: heritage stories from academic papers, conservation plans, and tourism brochures are rarely translated into short video stories suitable for platforms [1,2].

Generative AI can help bridge this gap. Text-to-image, image-to-video, style-transfer tools (Doubao, Jimeng, Lovart) can reduce some technical barriers to reconstructing historical scenes, animated presentation of intangible cultural heritage, stylized architectural tours. They may help rural communities and grassroots cultural institutions with limited production capacity to participate more effectively in

platform-based dissemination [3,4]. However, empirical research of their use in Chinese rural heritage settings is limited. Most studies focus on general AI applications, digital heritage platforms, urban and architectural heritage cases [5-9], while community-embedded, non-urban heritage cases are less investigated.

A motivation for this work came from a teaching experiment conducted in July 2026 with Zhou Suian and Du Zexu of Xiangnan University using AI tools to create a three minute popular science animation entitled Mailbox No. 41: The 711 Underground Nuclear City. Mailbox No. 41 was formerly a confidential communication channel between 711 Mine workers and the outside world. It depicts underground work under waterlogged high temperature conditions described in local historical documents and describes mine's confidentiality system in language suitable for children. On July 2, teachers Chen Xia and Huang Riyong screened the film for approximately 350 second-grade pupils at the primary school affiliated with Xiangnan University and organized a discussion afterward. When the old mailbox appeared, pupils asked how letters could be delivered without an address; the teacher compared the process to a game in which only people who know the secret code can find the destination. When the film represented occupational harm caused by prolonged dust exposure, the classroom became noticeably quiet. Hunan Education News Network and Chenzhou News Network subsequently reported the activity on July 4 and July 6 under the title "AI Empowering Historical Narration: Xiangnan University Students Bring 'Mailbox No. 41' into Primary School Classrooms." From field documentation on July 1 to AIGC-assisted production and classroom screening on July 2, the case provided an exploratory test of the sequence "field study - AIGC creation - audience dissemination."

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in July 2026 by the "AI Vision: Southern Hunan" social-practice service team, this paper combines on-site documentation, stakeholder interviews, a Douyin content audit, and experimental AIGC production to address three research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the types, preservation status, and digital dissemination of Southern Xiang's rural cultural heritage resources?

Research Question 2: What are the main obstacles to disseminating these resources through short videos aimed at young audiences?

Research Question 3: What role can AIGC tools play in addressing these obstacles, and what limitations exist for their practical use in the rural heritage context?

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Short Video Dissemination of Rural Cultural Heritage

The growing role of short-video platforms in the creation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage has attracted increasing attention [1]. Zhang argues that short-video formats can broaden participation and translate cultural practices into more accessible audiovisual narratives. This potential also places a premium on preserving historical context when complex cultural practices are compressed into brief platform formats. Digital cultural tourism research shows that digital platforms can help rural revitalization [2,10] when cultural resources, local industries, and visitor experiences are matched in a suitable development model [11]. Research on rural digital divide shows that new technologies reproduce inequalities when connectivity, skill sets and institutional capacities are not evenly distributed [11]. Together these studies suggest that the key challenge is not only cultural value of rural heritage but also technical, human and narrative infrastructure needed to translate it into platform-appropriate formats.

2.2 Application of AIGC in Cultural Heritage Dissemination

Research on AI and cultural heritage presents both opportunities and risks. Generative AI can support visualization, interpretation, interactive learning but can also produce historically inaccurate or decontextualized content [3,8,12]. Spennemann [3] stresses that human agency remains a key to responsible heritage practice, while his analysis of generative models' interpretation of heritage values shows how apparently authoritative outputs may flatten or distort cultural meanings [12]. Ming and Xia [8] also note reliability, expert oversight and transparent governance when generative AI is used to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.

A middle point between technological optimism and rejection is therefore: AIGC tools should

serve as amplifiers of human curatorial intent rather than autonomous cultural authorities. They should be useful depending on the quality of heritage data, the cultural knowledge of human operators, and the alignment between narrative and target audiences [3,12].

2.3 Analytical Framework

We consider AIGC assisted rural heritage dissemination in three dimensions: (a) resource dimension: type of heritage, digital documentation, visual-narrative potential; (b) capacity dimension: digital infrastructure, technical skills, institution support for content creation; and (c) translation dimension: ability to translate heritage meanings from source material and symbolic context into short videos for platform audiences.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1 Survey Sites and Selection Criteria

The study covered 17 sites in Suxian District of Chenzhou and Ningyuan County of Yongzhou. Sites were selected in order to maximize typological diversity.Sites were selected purposively to maximize typological diversity. The sample included (a) industrial heritage (the 711 Mine Town); (b) sites associated with early twentieth-century historical events (the Li Family Mansion historical-event exhibition hall and the Chen Family Mansion former-government site); (c) Long March-related heritage in Dajie Village, including a historic well, tomb, and alley; (d) traditional clan settlements containing nationally protected cultural relics, including Xiaguan, Jiu'anbei, Dongantou, Shenxia, Luojia, Baimei, and Xiaotaoyuan villages; and (e) Ningyuan Confucian Temple, a major Confucian complex in south-central China known for its dragon-and-phoenix column-stone carvings.

3.2 Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted from July 1 to 5, 2026. At each site, the team (a) photographed and filmed architectural features, exhibition displays, and the surrounding environment; (b) conducted unstructured interviews with site managers, village officials, older residents, and tourists (30 participants in total); and (c) collected local promotional materials, exhibition labels, and interpretive texts. The team also conducted a rapid audit of Douyin content. Using each site name as a keyword, we reviewed the first 20 results and recorded the number of relevant videos, content format, and visible view counts.

On July 1, we investigated 711 Mine site and Lilac Flower Theater to document mine development and its less known history. We collected primary visual material such as mining lamps, old mailboxes and underground tunnels for AIGC-aided creative process.

3.3 Experimental AIGC Content Creation

As a complement to observation and interviews, we created experimental content for the 711 Mine, Xiaguan Village and Pipagang Village, not to produce finished promotional material, but to test whether sites with limited digital assets can be converted into visually coherent short video content in two hours, for example. We used Doubao for architectural style transfer and Jimeng for AI-assisted animation synthesizer, and field footage for the source material.

The most complete output was a three-minute popular-science animation titled "Mailbox No. 41: The 711 Underground Nuclear City," created by Zhou Suian and Du Zexu under the authors' guidance. Production involved four stages: (1) collecting on-site materials at the 711 Mine on July 1, including the coded mailbox that inspired the title; (2) designing a storyboard and writing a child-oriented script based on institutional historical records; (3) using Doubao and Jimeng to generate and refine animated sequences representing underground mining, high-temperature working conditions, and the confidential mail system; and (4) compositing the sequences, recording the voice-over, and adjusting the pacing for classroom use. The film explained that mail addressed to "Mailbox No. 41" followed a controlled internal route and that outgoing correspondence was reviewed for confidentiality before dispatch. On July 2, the completed film was screened in a second-grade classroom at the primary school affiliated with Xiangnan University. Teachers Chen Xia and Huang Riyong organized viewing, discussion, and follow-up creative activities. Pupils' spontaneous questions about how mail could be delivered without an address were recorded as qualitative indications that the object-centered narrative stimulated historical curiosity; they were not treated as a formal measure of learning outcomes.

3.4 Analytical Methods

Since this study was exploratory and field-based, we proceeded thematically. Field notes, interviews, and visual documents were triangulated to identify repeated patterns across all three dimensions. The Douyin content audit provides a descriptive and not representative benchmark for measuring dissemination gaps between heritage sites.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Heritage Resource Characteristics: Coexistence of Abundance and Archival Gaps

The 17 sites are densely populated with large rural heritage, but their digital documentation and platform visibility vary drastically. At one end, the 711 Mine has received a significant amount of money in the 2023 Hunan Tourism Development Conference, professional promotional videos and a visitor experience, while Jiu'anbei Hanlin Ancestral Hall - a 1.756 sqm timber complex, built in the Song period, and expanded during Ming and Qing eras - does not have access to high resolution digital records. The rapid Douyin audit shows the opposite way: content related to the 711 Mine had more than 190000 views, content related to Xiaguan Village generally had less than 100,000 views and content related to Pipagang Village had less than 10,000 views. Since the audit took one time point and did not account size or upload date, these figures should be considered descriptive rather than static measures of popularity.

4.2 Dissemination Barriers: Infrastructure, Capacity, and Narrative Frameworks

Three difficulties emerged from interviews and field observations.

Digital infrastructure gap. Several traditional villages had poor connectivity to upload high-definition video, and many had no staff for content management. Baimei Village official: "We have more than 60 Ming and Qing houses, ancestral halls and an old stone arch bridge, but no one can put them online. The young people have left to work elsewhere" (interview July 4, 2026).

Talent discontinuity. Even if basic network access was available, local human resources were not adequate to produce content that could compete with major platforms. Village cultural stations employed staff who had no training in visual storytelling, video editing, or platform specific communication. Short videos were typically leisure tourist videos with limited camera planning, little voice-over narration and weak potential for algorithm discovery.

Narrative-framework misalignment. A subtle but equally important barrier was the mismatch between institutional heritage narratives and short-video storytelling. Exhibition texts, government plaques and tourism brochures focussed chronology, size, protection status while less attention was given to human stories, sensory details, and emotional entry points. Pipagang Village illustrates this problem: Qing-dynasty opera stage built by Shanxi and Shaanxi salt merchants features intricate wood carvings, a sound-reflecting caisson referred locally to as "Water Moon, Mirror Flower" and carvings associated to "Eight Immortals" On-site interpretation contains only brief descriptions. Salt route history, interprovincial merchant networks, acoustic design and continuing Qiju Opera tradition all have strong narrative potential for digital communication.

4.3 AIGC Feasibility Exploration: Potential and Constraints

The experimental creation phase yielded insightful results across four dimensions.

Historical-scene reconstruction (711 Mine). Jimeng was used to create three sets of visual scenes for mine establishment in 1958, mine closure in 2004, mine redevelopment in 2023 and combine them into a narrative sequence. Design trained team members considered the sequence visually logical for an exploratory prototype, but finer historical details such as clothes and equipment could not be independently verified and would need expert review before public release. This is consistent with research warning that generative systems can produce culturally plausible but historically unreliable representations [3,12].

Architectural style transfer (Xiaguan Village and Pipagang Village). Field footage processed with style transfer tools to create artistic renderings like "Ink-Wash Southern Hunan" and "Gongbi Ancient Village." Compared with the unprocessed footage used in the trial, the transformed materials were more visually distinct. Each minute of usable output needed about 90 minutes of skilled work. In this experiment, this labor was not available to untrained village staff.

Narrative-framework reconstruction (Ningyuan

Confucian Temple). The team tested AI-assisted script generation by entering verified historical information about the temple into a large language model and requesting a three-minute script in the conversational style common to cultural-explanation accounts on Douyin. The draft required substantial manual editing and fact-checking, but it foregrounded the temple's history and architectural features in a tone that differed markedly from the institutional style of existing site materials.

4.4 AIGC Educational Short-Film Production and Classroom Dissemination ("Mailbox No. 41")

The "Mailbox No. 41" project was the study's most complete demonstration of the sequence "field investigation - AIGC creation - audience dissemination." Four features merit attention. First, less than 36 hours elapsed between the collection of materials on the morning of July 1 and the classroom screening on the afternoon of July 2. This schedule was substantially shorter than a conventional hand-drawn animation workflow, although no controlled production-time comparison was conducted. Second, the film used a concrete object - the coded mailbox - as an entry point to the broader history of the mine. This approach supports the fieldwork-based observation that platform-oriented heritage narratives benefit from anchoring abstract historical significance in tangible details. Third, classroom reactions provided suggestive, but not conclusive, evidence of age-appropriate engagement. Pupils asked how an unadressed mailbox worked, the teacher gave the “secret code” analogy to the secret communication system. The quiet response of the pupils to occupational harm was very emotional, but it was not enough to determine learning effectiveness. Fourth, Hunan Education News Network and Chenzhou News Network show that AIGC-aided heritage projects can attract attention beyond immediate educational setting and generate secondary dissemination.

The project had some other problems: Production was done by undergraduate design students who had been trained in AIGC tools, working under direct supervision by faculty. Transferring the same workflow to village cultural centers would require additional training and support. The film was also longer than a typical Douyin video, and platform distribution would probably require editing it into 60- to 90-second segments. Finally, although teachers documented classroom reactions, the study did not conduct pre- and post-viewing knowledge assessments or compare the film with non-AIGC heritage-education materials.

4.5 Summary of Research Findings

The findings correspond to the three research questions. First (RQ1), southern Hunan has a dense and diverse heritage-resource base, but digital documentation is fragmented and platform visibility is concentrated in a small number of externally promoted sites. Second (RQ2), the principal barriers to effective short-video dissemination are uneven connectivity, limited production capacity, and a mismatch between institutional narrative styles and platform conventions. Third (RQ3), the trials suggest that AIGC tools can support historical visualization, aesthetic differentiation, narrative restructuring, and the adaptation of industrial heritage for young learners. The "Mailbox No. 41" case also indicates that a single AIGC-assisted asset may serve both platform communication and classroom use. These conclusions remain exploratory because the study did not include controlled audience testing or a representative platform sample.

5. Discussion

5.1 The "Heritage Abundance-Dissemination Scarcity" Paradox

The central contradiction identified in this study is that heritage sites of comparable cultural significance can have very different levels of platform visibility. Research on digital cultural tourism and rural development has shown that infrastructure, institutional coordination, and local capacity shape whether cultural resources translate into broader development outcomes [2,10,11]. The present fieldwork shows how those differences appear at the level of individual sites: the externally funded 711 mine is highly visible, while several traditional villages of substantial heritage value remain difficult to find online. Market-driven dissemination may thus leave existing visibility inequality unchanged or even reinforce them unless less documented sites are supported.

5.2 AIGC as Amplifier Rather Than Substitute

The experimental results are consistent with

studies showing that AIGC can support stylized heritage presentation [6] and new media dissemination [13]. In this paper, tools filled visual gaps by creating provisional representations of poorly documented historical scenes; distinguishing heritage content by carefully supervised style transfer; and translating institutional language into more conversational platform narratives. The "Mailbox No. 41" case adds a fourth function: adapting heritage content for structured educational settings so that one digital asset can support both platform dissemination and classroom instruction.

However, the findings also reinforce the cautions identified in the literature [3,8,12]. AIGC tools are not self-sufficient solutions; they depend on reliable data, skilled human operators, expert review, and context-sensitive narrative judgment. Where these conditions are absent, as they were in many of the villages studied, introducing AIGC tools without sustained capacity building is unlikely to produce durable improvements in heritage dissemination.

5.3 Toward a "Supportive Co-Creation" Model

Our findings suggest that a "supportive co-creation" model is a feasible approach to AIGC-assisted rural heritage dissemination in southern Hunan. Under this model, universities provide technical training, data-asset development, and quality control; rural communities contribute authentic heritage resources, local knowledge, and community relationships; schools and cultural institutions provide educational contexts; and short-video platforms provide distribution channels.

The "Mailbox No. 41" project offers an initial example of this model through a university-primary-school heritage-education partnership. The authors provided research guidance and instruction in AIGC tools; undergraduate students Zhou Suian and Du Zexu undertook the creative production; and primary-school teachers Chen Xia and Huang Riyong facilitated the screening and discussion. This collaboration brought content from a decommissioned industrial site into a second-grade classroom within 36 hours. The work was supported by the Hunan Provincial Social Science Review Committee project XSP25ZDI024, Li Lizhen Studio at Xiangnan University and Hunan Provincial Education Reform Project 25JGYB0830, which explored the integration of heritage education and subject teaching in primary schools.

Classroom observations during the "Mailbox No. 41" screening also pointed out the importance of audience age. As of yet, AI assisted digital presentation can support interactive learning [14]. In this case, pupils' curiosity about the mailbox mechanism and their emotional reactions to miners occupational risks suggest young learners may be interested in AIGC-assisted heritage materials. During the post-screening reflection, supervising teacher Li Lizhen observed that "younger children have limited ability for abstract reasoning and animation is well suited for their cognitive style". This observation suggests a possible advantage of AIGC-assisted visualization: abstract historical concepts such as confidentiality systems, occupational hazards and collective sacrifice can be represented in forms that are more accessible to learners still developing abstract reasoning. This interpretation requires formal evaluation before it can be generalized.

5.4 Research Limitations

This paper has five main limitations: First, we could survey each site in 5 days, longitudinal observation would provide stronger evidence of changes in dissemination; Second, AIGC trials were proof-of-concept exercises conducted by team members with design training; it could not be applied directly to untrained rural operators; Third, the classroom reception of mail box no. 41 was documented through teacher observation and media reports rather than systematic outcomes; hence, educational value of the film is unknown. Fourth, Douyin audit was a rapid snapshot rather than systematic content analysis and a larger multiplatform study with documented coding is needed. Fifth, the study did not conduct controlled acceptance testing with adult audiences.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper presents an exploratory study of AIGC assisted short video dissemination of rural cultural heritage in southern Hunan. The fieldwork indicates that a dense concentration of important heritage does not automatically translate into digital visibility. The "Mailbox No. 41" case suggests that, when institutional support and skilled operators are available,

AIGC tools can shorten the production cycle and produce materials capable of engaging primary-school pupils. This extends heritage dissemination beyond platform distribution into formal educational settings. AIGC may therefore help narrow heritage-visibility gaps, but effective implementation requires sustained investment in three areas.

First, heritage-data infrastructure: county-level cultural authorities should prioritize the digital documentation of traditional villages and ancestral halls through high-resolution images, 3D models, oral-history recordings, and machine-readable historical records. These assets provide the evidential foundation on which responsible AIGC applications depend.

Second, sustained university-rural community-school partnerships: the short-term "Three to the Countryside" social-practice model should develop into year-round institutional collaboration among universities, rural communities, and primary and secondary schools. The combination of faculty guidance, student-led creative production, and teacher-led classroom facilitation can align AIGC-assisted heritage content with provincial policies for integrated heritage education across school stages.

Third, ethics and quality assurance: The county-level guidelines should set the standards for AIGC-generated heritage content such as obligatory labeling of AI-generated imagery, expert review of historical reconstructions, and community consultation for represented communities. For educational applications, age-appropriate accuracy standards and supplementary teaching materials should be developed alongside the AIGC content.

The southern Hunan case illustrates a broader choice for rural heritage dissemination in China. AIGC tools may reinforce existing visibility inequalities by concentrating capability in already well-documented sites, or they may help reduce those inequalities when embedded in supportive, capacity-building institutions. "Mailbox No. 41," which moved from a decommissioned uranium mine to a second-grade classroom in less than two days, offers preliminary evidence for the latter possibility. Which path prevails will depend less on the technology alone than on the institutional arrangements through which it is used.

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