MUSIC, MEDIA, AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE: EXPLORING THE CREATIVE MOTIVES BEHIND THE ADAPTATION OF DONG GRAND CHOIRS

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Abstract

Dong Grand Choirs, recognized as a masterpiece of intangible cultural heritage, embody both the communal wisdom and cultural memory of the Dong people. In recent years, media technologies have created new opportunities and challenges for its communication and transformation. This study explores the adaptation motives, strategies, and governance implications of creative subjects across three fields—film, documentary, and concert—by employing a qualitative case study approach. Findings show that motives diverge: filmmakers either emphasize authenticity to preserve cultural subjectivity or adopt symbolic borrowing to enhance cinematic aesthetics; documentary and concert creators prioritize cross-cultural dialogue and globalization–localization experiments. Despite these differences, a shared recognition of the artistic value of Dong Grand Choirs emerges, with adaptation strategies ranging from authenticity-first approaches to creative transformations. The research highlights a governance logic of dynamic balance—between cultural core and form expression, subject stance and audience needs, and traditional heritage genes and modern technologies. Limitations include the absence of analysis of emerging media forms and systematic audience data, which future research should address. Overall, the case of Dong Grand Choirs demonstrates how intangible cultural heritage can evolve from static preservation to a dynamic governance pathway that links cultural protection, media innovation, and local development.

Keywords: Dong Grand Choirs; Intangible cultural heritage; Local governance; Media adaptation; Cultural sustainability

1. Introduction

As an outstanding representative of Chinese multipart folk music, the Dong Grand Choirs are renowned for their artistic features of "no conductor, no accompaniment, and natural harmony." Originating from the everyday life and labor practices of the Dong people, these choirs embody not only the community's cultural memory and collective wisdom but also serve as a globally recognized model of intangible cultural heritage. Their repertoire spans legends, daily life, and rituals of the Dong community, functioning as a living archive of emotions, traditions, and social values.

With the rapid development of media technologies—from print, radio, and television to digital platforms, mobile terminals, and social media—the boundaries of traditional performance contexts have been transcended. Dong Grand Choirs, once rooted in local communities, are now widely disseminated through films, documentaries, concerts, and multimedia performances. In this process, creative subjects from diverse fields have adopted differentiated adaptation strategies: some emphasize "original ecological" performance to preserve authenticity, others pursue cultural hybridization by grafting cross-cultural symbols, while still others employ digital and multimedia techniques to construct globalized yet localized dialogue spaces. These practices have greatly expanded the visibility of Dong Grand Choirs but have also raised critical debates concerning cultural authenticity, communication effectiveness, and the modern transformation of heritage.

Such debates reveal underlying governance challenges: how to prevent cultural dilution when pursuing wider dissemination; how to balance cultural differences in cross-cultural adaptation; and how to maintain traditional artistic essence while employing advanced media technologies. These questions situate the adaptation of Dong Grand Choirs not only as an artistic issue but also as a matter of local cultural governance, where community actors, creative

industries, and state heritage policies intersect to negotiate the preservation, transformation, and promotion of intangible heritage.

This study therefore examines the motives and intentions of creative subjects in adapting Dong Grand Choirs for media platforms, placing them at the center of the analysis rather than treating them as peripheral transmitters. By combining iconographic analysis with governance perspectives, the research seeks to illuminate the communicative logic behind intangible musical heritage in different media contexts, thereby addressing a gap in existing scholarship, which has tended to privilege textual content or audience reception. Theoretically, this "creator-centered" approach enriches the study of intangible heritage communication by highlighting the agency and decision-making of cultural producers. Practically, by analyzing both successful experiences and encountered dilemmas, the study provides methodological references for the sustainable transmission of intangible cultural heritage, offering insights into how local cultural governance can balance authenticity, innovation, and development in the modern communication environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 From "Protection-Oriented" to "Communication-Oriented" Paradigms in Intangible Heritage Research

Early studies on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) emphasized static preservation, focusing on rescue recording and the safeguarding of "authentic" forms (Wang, 2012). Archival documentation, sound recordings, and image collections delayed the extinction of many traditions but often isolated heritage from contemporary social life. With the expansion of modern media, scholars began to shift from protection to communication, arguing that heritage must be dynamically integrated into everyday life to achieve sustainable transmission (Xiang, 2015). The role of creative subjects has since gained attention, with scholars noting that the motives, positions, and strategies of cultural producers shape how heritage is adapted and received (Chen, 2020). Yet, for specific traditions such as Dong Grand Choirs, existing work remains fragmented, largely analyzing musical ontology or single media cases rather than systematically examining adaptation across multiple fields.

2.2 Media Presentation of Ethnic Music: Between Symbolization and Authenticity

Research on ethnic music in media contexts often highlights tensions between symbolic appropriation and authentic preservation. Some scholars critique media practices that reduce ethnic music to decorative symbols, stripping away historical and cultural depth (Li, 2018). Others recognize the potential of adaptation to revitalize traditional music, making it relevant to contemporary audiences through integration with popular or symphonic forms (Zhang, 2019). Studies of Dong Grand Choirs have mirrored this duality: some emphasize authentic ecological singing, while others explore its staged or mediated forms, such as televised performances (Yang, 2005). However, most analyses remain limited to single platforms, without comparing how different media fields and creative agents negotiate the balance between authenticity, innovation, and governance in heritage transmission.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Cross-cultural adaptation theories provide a useful framework for understanding how Dong Grand Choirs are reinterpreted in globalized media. Hall's (1989) theory of high- and low-context communication emphasizes the need to adapt symbolic systems to different cultural contexts for effective transmission. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space" highlights how cultural hybridity generates new forms and meanings, rather than reproducing binary oppositions. While these theories have been widely applied to literature and visual arts, their application to music—especially intangible musical heritage like Dong Grand Choirs—remains underexplored. This gap underscores the need to investigate how musical adaptation

in film, animation, and multimedia performance both enables and complicates intercultural dialogue, and how governance actors mediate these exchanges.

2.4 Research Gaps

In summary, three gaps emerge in the existing literature. First, there is a lack of comparative analysis of how creative subjects in different media fields (e.g., film directors, composers, cultural institutions) adapt and communicate Dong Grand Choirs. Second, the relationship between adaptation motives and chosen strategies remains insufficiently theorized. Third, although cross-cultural adaptation theories offer useful concepts, empirical studies applying them to intangible musical heritage are limited, particularly in assessing outcomes for governance, policy, and local development. Addressing these gaps, this study examines the creative motives and adaptation practices of diverse media actors, situating them within the broader framework of local cultural governance, and thereby contributes both to ICH communication research and to policy debates on sustainable cultural development.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Case Selection

This study adopts a purposive sampling approach to examine representative cases of Dong Grand Choirs adaptation across three media fields: film, documentary, and concert performance. The selection is guided by three criteria: (a) significant social influence and public visibility, (b) clear adaptation intentions that reveal creative motives, and (c) availability of sufficient textual and discursive materials.

In the film field, two contrasting cases are selected: Dong Grand Choirs (dir. Ou Chouchou), which presents the choir in its "original ecological" form to highlight cultural authenticity, and Nezha: Chaos in the Sea of Devils (scored by Yang Rui), which integrates Dong music into a symphonic soundtrack, reflecting cross-cultural borrowing and hybridization. In the documentary field, China in Intangible Cultural Heritage (scored by Jean-François Maljean) represents cross-cultural aesthetic reconstruction, combining Dong Grand Choirs with Western musical elements to facilitate global dialogue. In the concert field, Tan Dun's multimedia cello concerto Map exemplifies experimental "globalization + localization," blending Dong Grand Choirs with symphonic music and digital technologies. These cases capture diverse adaptation strategies, offering a comparative basis for analyzing the governance dynamics of authenticity, innovation, and sustainability.

3.2 Data Collection

Three categories of data were collected to support analysis. First, primary audio-visual texts, including films, documentary segments, and concert recordings, served as the direct objects of study. These were repeatedly viewed and annotated to identify representations of Dong Grand Choirs. Second, creators' discourses, including interviews, creation notes, and media reports, provided insight into the motives, intentions, and cultural positions of creative subjects. A total of 23 relevant texts (approximately 50,000 words) were compiled. Third, secondary materials, including academic articles, reviews, and policy documents, supplemented contextual understanding and evaluation. Special attention was given to authoritative literature and cultural policy documents to link artistic adaptation with local governance frameworks.

3.3 Analysis Framework

The study applies a qualitative content analysis structured around a three-dimensional framework of motive–strategy–effect.

Motive level: identifies the cultural concepts, communication goals, and value orientations of creative subjects. For example, whether the emphasis is on cultural authenticity, commercial dissemination, or cross-cultural dialogue.

Strategy level: examines adaptation methods, including symbolic processing, media application, and cultural integration. This highlights how creative subjects reframe Dong Grand Choirs through different artistic and technological approaches.

Effect level: evaluates the communicative and governance outcomes by triangulating audience responses, critical reviews, and academic assessments. This includes cultural cognition, aesthetic acceptance, and contributions to local cultural sustainability.

The analysis proceeded through systematic coding of collected materials, followed by thematic extraction to identify recurring patterns. Coding reliability was ensured through repeated cross-checking and supervisory discussion. By mapping the motives, strategies, and effects of different creative subjects, the study reveals not only artistic adaptation processes but also their governance implications, showing how media-based transformations of Dong Grand Choirs shape cultural authenticity, policy practices, and local development pathways.

4. Research Results

4.1 Adaptation Practices and Motives in the Film Field

4.1.1 Dong Grand Choirs: Pursuit of Authenticity and Adherence to Cultural Standards

Director Ou Chouchou's adaptation is deeply rooted in the defense of ethnic cultural subjectivity. Her guiding motive is to present Dong Grand Choirs not as a staged performance for external consumption, but as a lived expression of the Dong people's cultural world. In the broader context of globalization—where minority cultures are often marginalized or absorbed into mainstream narratives—her approach seeks to affirm the Dong community's agency in representing itself. In this sense, the film functions not only as a cultural product but also as a governance practice of cultural authenticity, aligning with policy concerns about preserving heritage "as lived" rather than as a touristic commodity.

The strategies employed reflect this orientation. Spatial authenticity is realized by filming exclusively in Dong villages in Qiandongnan, with 90 percent of the footage captured under natural light. Drum towers, rice fields, and wooden dwellings are presented as cultural spaces where music, labor, and ritual interweave. By refusing artificial lighting and studio sets, the film emphasizes continuity between environment and culture, offering audiences a "thick description" of the Dong lifeworld. Original sound ecology strengthens this effect by recording 24 endangered traditional songs performed by local villagers themselves. Their voices, though not technically polished, carry what Ou describes as "the warmth of life"—a quality that professionalization would risk erasing. Finally, the de-dramatized narrative links the choir to marriage customs, agricultural rhythms, and festival rituals through a half-century love story. By avoiding conflict-driven plot devices, the narrative underscores the natural integration of the choir into daily life.

The film's outcome is instructive. While it did not generate commercial success, it has been described in academic circles as a "standard model of ethnic cultural communication" (Wu, 2025). For the Dong community, the film enhanced cultural identity by affirming their music as integral to their way of life. For cultural governance, the case illustrates the tension between economic viability and cultural integrity: it demonstrates that authentic representation can reinforce community pride but may not align with market logics.

4.1.2 Nezha: Chaos in the Sea of Devils: Cross-Cultural Symbol Borrowing and Modern Integration

In contrast, composer Yang Rui approaches adaptation with the motive of constructing an Oriental epic temperament. Whereas Ou sought to preserve authenticity, Yang strategically positions Dong Grand Choirs as a symbolic resource within a commercial fantasy film. His goal is to integrate the choir's unique tonal qualities into a broader cinematic soundscape, thereby demonstrating how intangible heritage can serve contemporary cultural industries.

The strategies illustrate this recontextualization. Symbol selection focuses on the choir's restrained yet powerful harmonies, which are used in the sacred "blooming of treasure lotus" scene. This selective borrowing reframes Dong Grand Choirs as a sonic emblem of sacredness, detached from its local social context but infused with new narrative power. Form integration merges human voices with orchestral and metallic percussion, enhancing grandeur while retaining the choir's natural harmonic balance. In this way, Yang bridges folk tradition and modern cinematic expectations. Finally, functional adaptation weakens the semantic meaning of lyrics to foreground timbre and rhythm. By transforming the choir into a "borderless emotional medium," Yang ensures that the music transcends linguistic boundaries, resonating with global audiences unfamiliar with the Dong language.

The effect has been remarkable. As part of the film's climactic soundtrack, the adapted choir received widespread acclaim from audiences and critics alike. Scholars describe it as a case of "breakthrough communication" (Zhou et al., 2025), since it introduced Dong Grand Choirs to a broad demographic beyond its traditional community. From a governance perspective, this adaptation illustrates the trade-off between cultural authenticity and cultural mobility: while semantic depth is sacrificed, symbolic accessibility is enhanced, allowing Dong Grand Choirs to circulate within global popular culture.

4.2 Aesthetic Reconstruction in the Documentary Field: Two-Way Decoding from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

The documentary China in Intangible Cultural Heritage, scored by Jean-François Maljean, exemplifies a third adaptation trajectory. His central motive is to build a bridge for Sino-Western aesthetic dialogue, making Dong Grand Choirs resonate across cultural boundaries. Unlike Yang Rui's selective borrowing for narrative spectacle, Maljean's approach seeks a balance between fidelity to tradition and accessibility to global audiences.

The adaptation strategy is based on logical complementarity. Antiphonal singing—an essential structural feature of Dong Grand Choirs—is retained in its natural form, ensuring continuity with local practice. At moments of emotional climax, however, Western harmonic structures are introduced to amplify tension and make the music legible to audiences trained in Western listening habits. This dual approach respects cultural authenticity while promoting intercultural resonance.

The reception of these adaptations has been positive and instructive. Performances in Paris, Prague, and other European cultural centers elicited enthusiastic responses. Critics noted that the documentary "transformed aesthetic differences into aesthetic resonance" (Maljean interview, 2024). From a governance perspective, this case demonstrates how cross-cultural adaptation can serve as cultural diplomacy, enabling intangible heritage to circulate globally without being stripped of its internal logics. It highlights the role of international collaboration in advancing both cultural preservation and cultural soft power.

4.3 Experimental Exploration in the Concert Field: Dialectical Unity of Globalization and Localization

Tan Dun's multimedia cello concerto Map represents perhaps the most radical adaptation, motivated by the desire to make local voices part of the world's language. His work illustrates how media technology can be mobilized to transform "small voices in villages" into global cultural resources, demonstrating a governance model that links local authenticity with global circulation.

Tan's strategies operate on two levels. First, a time–space dialogue is established by projecting images of Dong villagers singing onto a large screen, while a live symphony orchestra performs simultaneously. This creates a "remote duet" between field recordings and concert performance, collapsing temporal and spatial boundaries. The Dong singers embody historical and local continuity, while the orchestra represents modernity and universality.

Together, they form a dynamic space of cultural negotiation. Second, media integration combines high-definition video, field audio, and live performance into a single immersive event. This layered approach provides audiences with both sensory immersion and cultural education, turning a localized tradition into a globally accessible experience.

The outcomes are notable. Map has toured internationally, generating wide discussion and being hailed as an "experimental model for the modern transformation of ethnic music" (Tan, 2023). Audiences described the performance as simultaneously moving and educational, while scholars praised its ability to challenge the dichotomy of "local vs. global." From a governance standpoint, Tan's experiment illustrates how technological mediation can support cultural sustainability, enabling intangible heritage to enter global circuits without severing ties to its local origins. It also raises important policy questions: how can communities retain ownership over their cultural expressions once they circulate globally?

4.4 Comparative Insights

Taken together, these cases illustrate distinct governance pathways for the adaptation of Dong Grand Choirs. Ou Chouchou's film foregrounds authenticity governance, emphasizing cultural integrity and community identity. Yang Rui's Nezha demonstrates symbolic governance, where heritage elements are repurposed for cultural industries and popular consumption. Maljean's documentary advances dialogical governance, enabling cross-cultural resonance through aesthetic reconstruction. Tan Dun's Map represents global-local governance, using media technologies to reposition heritage as both rooted and universal.

These variations highlight the multiple—and sometimes competing—logics of intangible heritage communication. Each adaptation negotiates tensions between preservation and innovation, local identity and global circulation, authenticity and accessibility. For policymakers and cultural institutions, the results underscore the importance of flexible governance models that recognize the agency of creative subjects while safeguarding community ownership and sustainable development.

5. Discussion

5.1 Differences and Commonalities in Adaptation Motives: Cultural Stances and Communication Goals

The adaptation motives of creative subjects demonstrate marked contrasts, reflecting their differing cultural stances and communication objectives. Ou Chouchou positions herself as a cultural guardian, framing her creative practice around safeguarding the subjectivity of Dong culture. Her defense of authenticity can be interpreted as a governance strategy in itself: by privileging the lived practices of the Dong people, she resists homogenizing pressures from both national mainstream and global cultural industries. Her motive is explicitly protective, aimed at strengthening community identity by aligning artistic practice with heritage governance priorities.

By contrast, Yang Rui, operating in the commercial film industry, adopts a more instrumental stance. For him, Dong Grand Choirs serve as a symbolic resource to enhance the Oriental charm of fantasy narratives. His motive aligns less with preservation and more with audience attraction and market recognition. This reflects a communication goal that emphasizes reach and resonance over cultural fidelity. From a governance perspective, his practice illustrates how cultural elements can be mobilized for creative economy development, though not without raising questions of commodification.

Jean-François Maljean and Tan Dun adopt a third type of motive: that of cross-cultural envoys. With international careers and cross-border audiences, both pursue intercultural dialogue as their primary goal. Their adaptation of Dong Grand Choirs is less about local safeguarding or commercial use, and more about creating aesthetic bridges across cultures. In

doing so, they reflect the increasing role of heritage in cultural diplomacy and soft power governance, where the circulation of ethnic voices contributes to global recognition and mutual understanding.

Despite these differences, commonalities emerge. All four creative subjects recognize the artistic and symbolic value of Dong Grand Choirs and employ modern media technologies to expand their reach. Whether through authenticity, symbolism, or cross-cultural mediation, they all respond to the pressing issue of intangible cultural heritage survival in modern society. This shared orientation underscores a collective attempt to reconcile cultural persistence with adaptation to contemporary communicative environments. The "commonality in differences" reflects the central governance challenge of intangible heritage: how to negotiate multiple and sometimes competing interests while sustaining the cultural core.

5.2 The Logic of Adaptation Strategies: From "Authenticity" to "Creative Transformation"

The strategies of media-based adaptation show a spectrum of continuity. At one pole lies Ou Chouchou's authenticity-first strategy, which defends the cultural ontology of Dong Grand Choirs through spatial fidelity, original sound ecology, and narrative naturalism. This approach prioritizes heritage governance through cultural integrity, emphasizing the community's self-representation and resisting dilution.

At the opposite pole lies Yang Rui's symbolic borrowing strategy, in which Dong Grand Choirs are extracted as musical signifiers to serve cinematic spectacle. Here, the governance logic is market-oriented: the heritage element is repositioned to fit the demands of mass entertainment, potentially broadening exposure but risking the erosion of contextual depth.

Between these poles, Maljean and Tan Dun exemplify a middle ground of creative transformation. Their work retains the "genetic core" of Dong Grand Choirs—multi-part harmony, timbral richness—while endowing it with new expressive dimensions through cross-cultural integration or technological mediation. This mode neither confines heritage to static authenticity nor reduces it to decorative symbolism. Instead, it fosters dynamic continuity, whereby heritage is revitalized by engaging new audiences, formats, and platforms.

This continuum suggests that authenticity is not absolute but a context-dependent category. For ethnic-themed films, high fidelity to authenticity is central to building cultural identity and maintaining community pride. For commercial or cross-cultural works, however, moderate transformation can enhance communicability and inclusivity, ensuring the tradition survives not only within its origin community but also across cultural and linguistic boundaries. In this light, governance must embrace a pluralistic understanding of authenticity, allowing for adaptive strategies that sustain both cultural persistence and communicative vitality.

5.3 Core Balance in Intangible Cultural Heritage Communication: Persistence and Adaptation

The comparative analysis of adaptation practices reveals a dialectical balance that underpins successful intangible cultural heritage communication. Three governance balances stand out.

First, the balance between cultural core and expressive form. All cases demonstrate that retaining the distinctive features of Dong Grand Choirs—such as multi-part harmony and natural vocal timbre—is non-negotiable. These constitute the "heritage DNA" that differentiates it from other music forms. At the same time, adaptations vary in how they reshape expressive form: from Ou's adherence to traditional village settings, to Tan Dun's multimedia experiments. This balance highlights a governance principle: safeguarding the core while permitting innovation in form.

Second, the balance between subject stance and audience needs. Ou prioritizes the Dong community's identity needs, while Yang Rui, Maljean, and Tan Dun emphasize external audience reception. Governance must therefore recognize both inward-looking and outward-

looking orientations. A rigid focus on one side risks either cultural insularity or cultural dilution. Effective governance requires dynamic adjustment, supporting creators to tailor their strategies according to audience, medium, and context while maintaining cultural legitimacy.

Third, the balance between traditional genes and modern technology. Tan Dun's Map illustrates that technology and tradition are not oppositional but complementary. Through "time-space dialogue" and "media integration," tradition is reactivated in contemporary forms. Governance frameworks must thus move beyond binary oppositions and adopt innovation-oriented safeguarding, encouraging creators to employ technology as a means of revitalization rather than a threat to authenticity.

These balances reveal that intangible heritage communication cannot be governed by a single model. Instead, differentiated strategies—tailored to cultural characteristics, communicative platforms, and target audiences—are necessary. The governance lesson is clear: effective intangible cultural heritage policy must be flexible, inclusive, and multi-level, supporting both local safeguarding and global dissemination. Only then can traditions like Dong Grand Choirs achieve both cultural persistence and living inheritance.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the adaptation of Dong Grand Choirs across films, documentaries, and concerts reflects diverse creative motives shaped by cultural stances and communication goals. Filmmakers oscillate between authenticity and symbolic borrowing, while documentary and concert creators pursue cross-cultural dialogue and globalization–localization experiments. Despite these differences, all practices share a recognition of the artistic value of Dong Grand Choirs and attempt to expand its communication through media technologies. Adaptation strategies reveal a spectrum from authenticity-first approaches to creative transformations, highlighting that the sustainable survival of intangible cultural heritage depends on dynamic translation into new media contexts. The central governance logic that emerges is one of balance—between cultural core and form expression, subject stance and audience needs, as well as traditional heritage genes and modern technologies.

At the same time, this study has limitations. It focuses on a small set of representative cases and relies heavily on secondary materials for assessing communication effects. Emerging media platforms such as short video and social media, which now dominate cultural dissemination, were not analyzed. Nor does the study incorporate systematic audience research to measure reception and long-term impact. Future studies should therefore expand case coverage, integrate empirical audience surveys, and adopt mixed methods to better evaluate how adaptation strategies influence cultural cognition, aesthetic acceptance, and community engagement.

Looking ahead, the findings suggest that the modern communication of traditional arts requires the dual principle of "upholding integrity and promoting innovation." Upholding integrity means safeguarding the spiritual essence of Dong Grand Choirs, while promoting innovation involves flexible adaptation through cross-cultural dialogue and new technologies. Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and other digital tools may further enable immersive cultural experiences and global dialogue fields. Ultimately, the case of Dong Grand Choirs illustrates a governance pathway that connects heritage protection, creative transformation, and local development, offering a model for how intangible cultural heritage can thrive as both a cultural root and a driver of sustainable modern vitality.

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