



Neglected Digital Cultural Diplomacy: Transnational Dissemination Challenges and Strategic Pathways for China's Intangible Cultural Heritage Micro-Short Dramas in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

As globalization becomes increasingly mediated by digital technologies, cultural diplomacy increasingly relies on online audiovisual formats to communicate national identity, cultural memory, and heritage to transnational audiences. This paper examines the dissemination challenges and potential of Chinese intangible cultural heritage (ICH) micro-short dramas in Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country with deep historical and cultural ties to China. Adopting an exploratory qualitative design, the study draws on eight semi-structured interviews and a supplementary qualitative content analysis of selected ICH-related micro-short dramas. It examines how these productions may function as instruments of digital cultural and heritage diplomacy and why their wider circulation remains limited. The findings suggest that, despite their cultural significance and visual appeal, their dissemination is constrained by low visibility, insufficient localization, weak emotional and narrative resonance among the interviewed participants, language barriers, inadequate cultural translation, and fragmented institutional support. Drawing on soft power theory, cultural proximity theory, and a heritage diplomacy perspective, the study highlights the need for audience-centered, platform-specific, and collaborative approaches. It contributes context-specific insights into China-Malaysia digital media dynamics and offers practical recommendations for strengthening cross-cultural communication, policy coordination, and the transnational dissemination of Chinese digital heritage.

Keywords: Digital Cultural Diplomacy; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Micro-Short Dramas; China-Malaysia Cultural Communication; Cultural Localization.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Digital technologies have reshaped diplomatic communication by extending it across social media, mobile applications, and other networked platforms (Bjola & Manor, 2024). Within this broader transformation, digital cultural diplomacy has moved beyond the dissemination of cultural content toward more interactive forms of public engagement and influence (Grincheva, 2024). In China, micro-short dramas have developed as a distinct form of platform-based audiovisual production and distribution (Jiang & Wang, 2022; Liu & Bexci, 2025).

In this study, micro-short dramas are understood as serialized audiovisual fiction characterized by short episodes, compact storytelling, and platform-based circulation (Jiang & Wang, 2022). Although many productions are designed

for mobile, vertical-screen, and algorithmic distribution, neither screen orientation nor a particular platform is treated as a defining criterion. Relevant examples include *The Beauty of Glaze* (blue-and-white porcelain craftsmanship), *Zan Hua Nu Wang* (Quanzhou zanhua headdress), *The Renewal of Ink Art* (ancient painting restoration), *Beyond! A Juan* (lion dance), *A Dream Pillowing the Milky Way* (Suzhou fan and Pingtan) and *The War for a Stolen Tradition* (Nuo opera masks and ritual movements). Such productions circulate through a mixed platform ecology comprising long- and short-video services, dedicated short-drama applications, and mini-programs rather than any single platform. The present study focuses specifically on dramatic narratives that incorporate identifiable ICH elements, thereby distinguishing them from stand-alone short videos and other non-serial forms of heritage communication (Handi & Noordin, 2024; Kang, 2025; Li, 2024; Li, 2025).

Against this backdrop, micro-short dramas have emerged as a potential medium of China's digital cultural diplomacy. Characterized by compact storytelling and fast-paced narratives (Chen, 2025), they can be readily adapted to different digital platforms and circulated rapidly across media environments (Liu & Bexci, 2025). According to DataEye, China's micro-short drama user base reached 696 million by June 2025, representing nearly 70% of the country's internet users (DataEye Research Institute, 2025). Interest is also evident in Malaysia, where minute-long Chinese micro-dramas have become part of some viewers' daily media consumption (Sipalan, 2025).

More specifically, ICH-themed micro-short dramas have been used to present and reinterpret traditional Chinese culture through narratives incorporating traditional crafts, folklore, music, and performing arts. Such productions can support the living transmission of intangible cultural heritage (Dai & Wei, 2025) while providing audiences with culturally meaningful content that may foster identification with the heritage represented (Wang, 2025). They have therefore emerged as a potential vehicle for digital cultural diplomacy, expanding the channels through which Chinese ICH can be disseminated internationally (Liu & Bexci, 2025; Kang, 2025).

In this context, Li et al (2026) have observed that, due to the extensive reach of streaming platforms and the powerful algorithm-driven content distribution model, the micro-drama industry featuring Chinese original content is increasingly penetrating the Southeast Asian market, a region with deep historical and diasporic ties to Chinese culture. Hu (2025) also highlights that Southeast Asia, with its cultural proximity to China and an established audience base for Chinese films and TV shows, plays a crucial role in the successful international expansion of Chinese micro-short dramas. Among these, Malaysia, with its diverse population, large ethnic Chinese community, and dynamic digital media landscape, provides a relevant setting for China's cultural outreach (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024; Min & Mai, 2024).

However, despite technological accessibility and a degree of cultural proximity, the transnational circulation of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia remains underexamined in academic research and policy discussions. This gap reflects broader challenges involved in adapting heritage content to new digital formats and culturally diverse audiences. Language barriers, insufficient localization, inadequate cultural translation, and fragmented institutional coordination can constrain the cross-border circulation of such media (Tahat et al., 2025). More broadly, China's expanded international media production has not always resulted in corresponding levels of overseas acceptance or visibility (Petrů, 2020). A systematic examination of the circulation of Chinese ICH micro-short dramas in Malaysia is therefore warranted. By identifying existing barriers and potential strategic responses, this study examines how Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas can function more effectively as instruments of digital cultural diplomacy. In doing so, it clarifies the opportunities and limitations of Chinese cultural diplomacy at the intersection of media globalization, cultural representation, and soft-power politics.

Problem Statement

Although Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas have potential as instruments of digital cultural diplomacy, their dissemination and reception in Malaysia remain underexamined. Existing studies have examined China's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia (Hrubý & Petrů, 2019; Tien & Bing, 2021) and the international dissemination and localization of Chinese micro-short dramas (Hu, 2025; Zhang, 2025; Li et al., 2026). However, limited attention has been paid to the visibility, cultural relevance, and localization of ICH-themed productions in the Malaysian context. This study addresses this gap by examining their dissemination challenges and identifying strategies to strengthen their transnational reach.

Research Objectives

- To examine the current status and challenges of disseminating China's ICH micro-short dramas in Malaysia.
- To explore how selected ICH-themed micro-short dramas are perceived in relation to Malaysian audience expectations and cultural contexts.
- To identify strategic pathways to enhance the effectiveness of these dramas in China's digital cultural diplomacy efforts.

Research Questions

- What are the principal challenges affecting the dissemination of China's ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia?
- How are selected ICH-themed micro-short dramas perceived in relation to Malaysian audience expectations and cultural contexts?
- What strategies could enhance the transnational reach and impact of these dramas within the framework of digital cultural diplomacy?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the emerging field of digital cultural diplomacy by examining ICH-themed micro-short dramas as an under-studied media format. It offers context-specific insights for policymakers, media producers, and cultural institutions seeking to strengthen cultural exchange between China and Malaysia. By identifying dissemination barriers and possible strategic responses, the study clarifies both the potential and limitations of digital media as a vehicle for soft power and cross-cultural exchange in Southeast Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The growing convergence of media, culture, and diplomacy has transformed how states pursue soft power internationally. China has increasingly incorporated digital audiovisual content into its cultural diplomacy to communicate national narratives and intangible cultural heritage (Zhang, 2025). Within this context, micro-short dramas have emerged as a compact, platform-oriented storytelling format with potential relevance to international cultural communication. This section reviews scholarship on digital cultural diplomacy, the media representation of Chinese ICH, micro-short dramas and digital soft power, and the challenges of transnational dissemination and localization, with particular attention to Malaysia. It concludes by outlining the theoretical framework and identifying the research gap addressed by this study.

Digital Cultural Diplomacy

Grincheva (2024) describes cultural diplomacy as the use of cultural resources to communicate a nation's values and promote goodwill abroad. In its digital form, this practice increasingly relies on digital platforms and communication tools. Researchers emphasize the significant role of digitalization in reshaping traditional diplomacy by expanding its accessibility, speed, and reach, with considerable potential to foster global communication and cultural understanding (Feng et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the expansion of digital platforms may also intensify competition over international discourse power (Chen & Liu, 2024). Without effective localization and cross-cultural adaptation, digitally circulated cultural content may have limited impact in particular countries or regions (Feng et al., 2025).

Within this broader field, this study regards heritage diplomacy as a more specific form of cultural diplomacy in which heritage resources are mobilized to develop international relationships, symbolic legitimacy, and cross-cultural recognition. Heritage diplomacy is not conducted exclusively by states. Heritage is also interpreted, circulated, and sometimes contested across borders by cultural institutions, digital platforms, creators, communities, and audiences (Winter, 2015; McClelland, 2019). This distinction is important because ICH-themed micro-short dramas can operate at several levels: the macro level of state soft power projection, the meso level of media platforms and cultural institutions, and the micro level of audience interpretation and grassroots sharing.

Studies have shown that China's approach to digital cultural diplomacy has changed substantially in recent years, with the internet and social media increasingly used to expand its international cultural influence (Luo, 2024; Qiu & Mu, 2024). China's online cultural communication includes digital content relating to intangible cultural heritage, traditional arts, and everyday cultural practices (Li, 2025). Recent research also suggests that China has adopted a multi-platform strategy, using platforms such as WeChat, TikTok, and YouTube to engage international audiences (Luo, 2024; Qiu & Mu, 2024; Qiu & Zeng, 2025). Short-form audiovisual content has consequently become an increasingly relevant channel for the international communication of Chinese culture and ICH (Kang, 2025; Li, 2025).

However, previous studies have identified several limitations in China's international digital cultural communication. Keane and Yu (2019) show that the overseas expansion of Chinese digital platforms involves interrelated questions of communication, culture, and governance. More broadly, digitalization alone does not guarantee effective cultural engagement, particularly when communication remains predominantly top-down or insufficiently adapted to particular platforms and audiences (Feng et al., 2025; Uyun, 2024). These limitations are especially relevant in Southeast Asia, where linguistic differences, cultural familiarity, and varying audience expectations can influence the reception of

externally produced cultural content (Straubhaar, 1991; Han et al., 2024). In Malaysia, previous research has similarly indicated that Chinese cultural diplomacy does not always align effectively with the country's local social and media environment (Hrubý & Petrů, 2019). This literature provides an important basis for examining whether ICH-themed micro-short dramas can move beyond the digital transmission of cultural content and generate meaningful engagement among Malaysian audiences.

China's Intangible Cultural Heritage and Media Representation

Intangible cultural heritage comprises living practices, knowledge, skills, and cultural expressions transmitted across generations. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), identifies five broad domains: oral traditions and expressions; performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003). As of December 2025, China had 45 entries on UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage Lists and Register, including 40 elements on the Representative List, three on the Urgent Safeguarding List, and two programmes on the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (UNESCO, 2025). Since the two safeguarding practices are programmes rather than heritage elements, Figure 1 classifies the remaining 43 elements according to their principal domains.

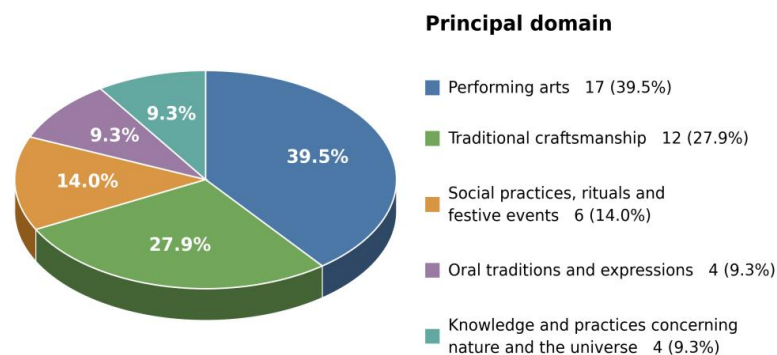


Figure 1. Categories of China's UNESCO-Recognized ICH

Note. The figure covers 43 heritage elements and excludes two safeguarding programmes.

Source: Authors' compilation based on UNESCO (2003, 2025)

Digital media have expanded the ways in which ICH is documented, represented, and circulated. In China, traditional cultural practices are increasingly presented through short videos, micro-documentaries, television dramas, and other audiovisual formats. Existing studies suggest that these formats can improve the accessibility of ICH and connect traditional practices with contemporary cultural consumption (Cai, 2026; You & Hardwick, 2020; Lan et al., 2025). However, media representation is selective rather than neutral. When complex cultural practices are compressed into short audiovisual content, their historical context, community meanings, and regional particularities may not always be fully conveyed.

ICH-themed micro-short dramas represent a further development in this process. By incorporating traditional crafts, folklore, music, rituals, and performing arts into serialized dramatic narratives, these productions combine cultural representation with entertainment and emotional storytelling (Chen & Li, 2025; Dai & Wei, 2025). Their short duration and platform-based circulation may extend the spatial and temporal reach of heritage communication and attract audiences who might not otherwise encounter such cultural practices (Wang, 2025). Nevertheless, existing research has focused mainly on domestic production, narrative innovation, and platform dissemination. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how these dramas circulate across national borders, how their cultural meanings are translated, or how they are interpreted by non-Chinese audiences (Lan et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025). This limitation is particularly relevant to the present study of the dissemination and reception of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia.

Micro-Short Dramas and Digital Soft Power

Li (2024) found that micro-short dramas have gained widespread popularity in China since 2020. They are generally characterized by short episodes, often lasting less than five minutes, serialized presentation, and adaptation to platform-based distribution. Handi and Noordin (2024) argue that, within the soft-power paradigm, these dramas are becoming cultural assets by integrating traditional Chinese values and aesthetics into new narrative forms. Shi and Liang (2024)

recognize the developmental potential of emerging Chinese micro-short drama platforms such as ReelShort. They suggest that the “micro-short drama model” may help diversify a global platform market largely dominated by Western media companies while promoting the overseas dissemination of contemporary Chinese culture.

Existing research also indicates that the overseas circulation of micro-short dramas involves more than the distribution of finished content. Chen and Chen (2025) identify the coordinated participation of communication institutions, digital platforms, production companies, and local distributors in supporting international dissemination and localized production. Focusing on ReelShort, Han & Zhang (2025) further show that shared values, community interaction, and affective communication can strengthen connections among overseas viewers. These studies suggest that the international influence of micro-short dramas depends not only on platform access but also on localized distribution, audience interaction, and the formation of affective communities.

Despite this growing international presence, the overseas dissemination of Chinese micro-short dramas remains uneven. Chen (2025) finds that relatively few productions provide subtitles or translations suitable for international audiences and that inadequate cross-cultural translation may weaken emotional resonance. Fu and Jia (2026) further highlight the role of algorithms in translating and distributing the emotional content of Chinese micro-short dramas. They argue that algorithms, as technological intermediaries, classify and regulate audience preferences, thereby influencing how these dramas are communicated and received across cultures. Together, these studies indicate that technological reach alone does not necessarily produce cultural influence. Translation, localization, platform distribution, and audience engagement remain important conditions for converting the international circulation of micro-short dramas into digital soft power.

Transnational Dissemination and Localization Challenges

As a member of the ASEAN region, Malaysia’s historical and cultural connections with China make it a strategically relevant site for cultural diplomacy (Chin, 2025). It also has a strong digital media environment, mobile penetration, and a large ethnic Chinese population (Yang & Chow, 2024).

Nonetheless, the presence of Chinese media products such as ICH-themed dramas remains narrow (Ouyang et al., 2025). Existing research identifies several barriers to their transnational dissemination, including language differences, insufficient localization, uneven access to distribution platforms, and differences in narrative conventions and audience preferences (Thussu et al., 2018; Tien & Bing, 2021; Kang, 2025). Malaysian audiences also encounter Chinese cultural products within a diverse media environment in which Korean and Western productions have established a substantial presence (Hrubý, 2020).

Cultural reception may also be constrained when communication is perceived as overly state-led or provides limited opportunities for local dialogue and participation (Keane & Yu, 2019). Studies of Chinese cultural practices in Malaysia further indicate that cultural meanings are not transferred unchanged but are negotiated and adapted through diasporic networks, local institutions, and the surrounding social environment (Hu et al., 2025). At the regional level, Wu (2025) identifies continuing difficulties in communicating the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind” in ASEAN countries, particularly in relation to contextual adaptation and empathetic expression. Taken together, these studies suggest that Chinese cultural products may lack the flexibility and cultural sensitivity required for effective integration into different regional contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Two interrelated theoretical views influence this study: Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004) and Cultural Proximity Theory (Straubhaar, 1991). These theories are complemented by a heritage diplomacy lens, which helps explain how intangible cultural heritage is transformed from a cultural resource into a form of diplomatic media practice through interactions among state institutions, cultural organizations, digital platforms, producers, and audiences.

Soft Power Theory

According to Nye’s Soft Power Theory, countries can gain international influence not only through military or economic strength but also through the attractiveness of their culture, values, and policies (Nye, 2004). In digital media environments, soft power may operate through storytelling, imagery, and cultural symbols that shape international perceptions. China’s use of micro-short dramas to disseminate intangible cultural heritage can therefore be examined as a potential form of soft-power practice intended to enhance cultural attraction, particularly in regions such as Southeast Asia (Li et al., 2026). However, the international circulation of cultural content does not automatically generate soft power. Its effectiveness depends on whether overseas audiences perceive the content as credible, attractive, and relevant to their own cultural experiences. Soft Power Theory therefore provides a framework for examining the diplomatic potential of ICH-themed micro-short dramas while recognizing that their influence ultimately depends on audience reception rather than dissemination alone.

Cultural Proximity Theory

Cultural Proximity Theory, originally proposed by Joseph Straubhaar, suggests that audiences tend to prefer media content that is familiar in terms of language, cultural codes, values, and identity (Straubhaar, 1991). Straubhaar (2021) further describes cultural proximity in relation to regional, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and other elements that reinforce traditional identities. However, cultural proximity extends beyond language and ethnicity. La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) identify additional elements, including dress, gestures, body language, humour, narrative pacing, and musical traditions, which may also influence audience preferences. These dimensions are particularly relevant to audiovisual media because cultural familiarity can be communicated through narrative, performance, sound, and visual representation. Cultural proximity also involves affective and experiential dimensions. Research suggests that cultural familiarity may strengthen audiences' sense of belonging, emotional identification, and receptiveness to foreign media content (Sūna, 2018; Yoo et al., 2014). At the same time, audience responses are influenced by cultural capital, education, personal experience, and exposure to multiple media cultures (Straubhaar, 2021). Cultural proximity should therefore not be treated as a fixed relationship between two culturally homogeneous countries. This consideration is especially important in Malaysia, where ethnic, religious, linguistic, and national identities intersect in shaping media preferences.

Figure 2 applies these theoretical dimensions to the present study. It proposes that the reception of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia is jointly shaped by four interrelated dimensions of cultural proximity: linguistic familiarity, shared cultural references, narrative and aesthetic familiarity, and Malaysia's multicultural context. Cultural Proximity Theory is particularly relevant to the examination of ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia, where media preferences are shaped by the interaction of multiple ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities (Wang & Bexci, 2026). Ethnic Chinese audiences may possess certain linguistic, historical, or cultural connections with China, but they should not be regarded as a homogeneous group. Their media preferences are also shaped by Malaysian national identity, local experience, cultural hybridity, and sustained exposure to Chinese, Korean, Western, and other media cultures.

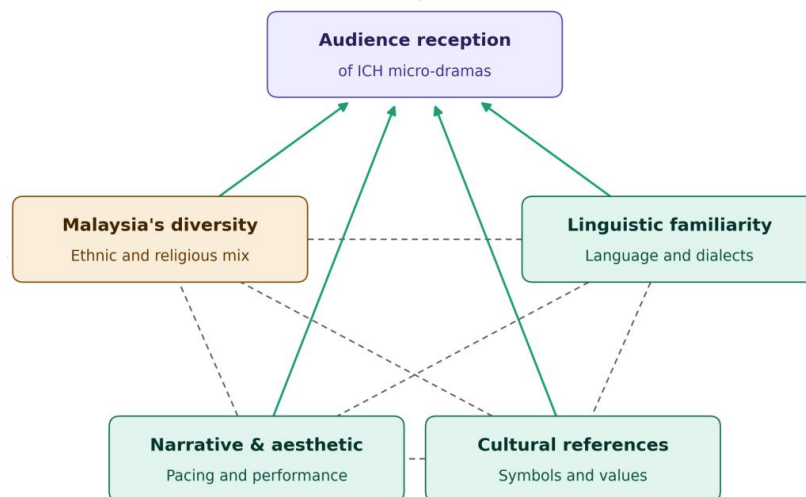


Figure 2. Application of Cultural Proximity Theory to the Present Study

Source: Authors' conceptualization based on Straubhaar (1991, 2021) and La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005)

Together, the two theories provide a complementary analytical framework. Soft Power Theory explains the potential of ICH-themed micro-short dramas to contribute to China's international cultural influence, whereas Cultural Proximity Theory explains how their meanings may be understood, negotiated, or rejected by Malaysian audiences. The heritage diplomacy lens further connects these processes by drawing attention to the roles of institutions, platforms, producers, and audiences in transforming heritage into a transnational media practice.

Literature Gap

As literature on China continues to expand in the broader fields of digital diplomacy and soft power policies, there is a significant gap in knowledge regarding the role of micro-short dramas, particularly those centred on ICH, in specific international contexts. Most of the studies are on domestic Chinese audiences or platform-based analyses in general. Very few empirical studies have been conducted on audience reception in a multicultural environment such as Malaysia or on the practical challenges involved in the cross-border dissemination of such content. Furthermore, the literature tends to give only limited attention to narrative framing, linguistic accessibility, and cultural translation, which are crucial components of successful cross-border media communication. The present study addresses this gap by examining the dissemination and reception of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia at the intersection of digital

media, cultural diplomacy, and audience reception.

Conclusion

This literature review has examined the development of digital cultural diplomacy, the media representation of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, the emergence of ICH-themed micro-short dramas, and the challenges associated with their transnational dissemination. Although digital media have created new opportunities for China to communicate its cultural heritage internationally, the effectiveness of such communication may be constrained by language barriers, insufficient localization, differences in narrative and aesthetic preferences, and limited audience engagement. Guided by Soft Power Theory and Cultural Proximity Theory, and supplemented by a heritage diplomacy lens, the present study examines how Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas are disseminated and received in Malaysia. It also identifies the barriers affecting their cross-cultural communication and considers strategies through which these productions may become more accessible and culturally relevant within Malaysia's multicultural digital media environment.

METHODOLOGY

Overview

This section describes the qualitative approach used to examine the dissemination challenges and strategic pathways of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia. The study combines semi-structured interviews with a focused analysis of selected cases.

Research Design

The present research adopted a qualitative interpretivist design with a two-fold approach: semi-structured interviews served as the main source of empirical data, while a supplementary content analysis of the selected ICH micro-short dramas provided secondary data. This design was appropriate for investigating a complex social and cultural phenomenon, as it allowed the study to relate participants' perceptions to the concrete media texts themselves, rather than relying on interview accounts alone. The study was exploratory in nature, making no claim to statistical representativeness; instead, it aimed to build interpretive understanding of how Chinese ICH micro-short dramas were disseminated, interpreted, and constrained within the Malaysian digital media landscape.

To ensure that participants responded to specific cultural texts rather than general impressions, five Chinese ICH-related micro-short dramas were purposively selected as reference texts for the interviews. Rather than relying on convenience selection, the cases followed the logic of purposive maximum-variation sampling commonly used in qualitative case study research (Patton, 2015), based on four criteria:

- the clear use of nationally or provincially registered elements of intangible cultural heritage, corresponding to the domains identified in Figure 1,
- the presence on the key Chinese online platforms, such as Douyin, Bilibili, WeTV, and Hongguo, which are among the leading platforms for micro-short drama distribution in China (China Netcasting Services Association, 2025; DataEye Research Institute, 2025),
- independently verifiable domestic popularity, established through industry market-intelligence data (DataEye Research Institute, 2025) or official recognition under the National Radio and Television Administration's ICH-themed recommendation track (National Radio and Television Administration, 2024);
- relevance to cultural diplomacy, localization, or international dissemination.

The cases analysed were *A Dream Pillowing the Milky Way*, *The Datong Code*, *The War for a Stolen Tradition*, *Beyond! A Juan*, and *The Wind of My Way Home*. Details of each case's platform, viewership evidence, and basis for selection are summarized in Table 1.

In order to establish a common frame of reference, all participants were shown the same materials prior to the interviews: the opening and final episodes of each selected drama, presented in their English-subtitled versions. This process minimized ambiguity and allowed participants to talk about particular narrative, aesthetic, localization and dissemination characteristics. Where participants reported prior exposure to a given drama, their pre-existing impressions were recorded separately from their responses to the screened material, allowing the analysis to distinguish organic reception from prompted evaluation. The cases represented diverse forms of ICH communication such as performing arts, craftsmanship, folklore, ritual culture, and grassroots heritage transmission, enabling the analysis to compare how various forms of heritage impact viewers and their perceptions of Chinese digital cultural diplomacy in Malaysia.

Table 1. Selected ICH Micro-Short Drama Samples Used for Supplementary Content Analysis.

Selected Drama	ICH Element	Basis for Selection	Analytical Focus
A Dream Pillowing the Milky Way	Fan-making craftsmanship, embroidery, Pingtan	NRTA official ICH recommendation; high domestic viewership	Visual aesthetics and heritage commercialization
The Datong Code	Bronzeware making, paper-cutting, stone carving, vinegar brewing	Official international-dissemination project	Institutional heritage diplomacy and international framing
The War for a Stolen Tradition	Nuo opera masks and ritual movements	Reported domestic platform visibility (DataEye)	Cultural translation and narrative reception
Beyond! A Juan	Lion dance heritage	High domestic viewership (DataEye)	Heritage transmission and cultural symbolism
The Wind of My Way Home	Regional ICH food culture	NRTA official recommendation; high domestic viewership	Localization and audience accessibility

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants based on their direct relevance to the research topic. The sample included three stakeholder groups:

- Media and cultural professionals (involved in producing, distributing, or promoting Chinese cultural content)
- Malaysian consumers who have been exposed to Chinese digital content (especially ethnic Chinese and multicultural youth)
- Academic and industry experts (specialising in digital diplomacy, soft power, or Sino-Malaysian cultural relations) (Table 2).

Table 2. Participant Profiles

ID	Stakeholder Group	Role/Background	Age Range	Gender
Participant 1	Academic/industry expert	Academic specialising in media studies at a Malaysian university	40s	Male
Participant 2	Media and cultural professional	Representative involved in China-Malaysia cultural exchange work	30s	Female
Participant 3	Academic/industry expert	Digital media strategist based in Malaysia	40s	Female
Participant 4	Media and cultural professional	Producer at a major Chinese short-drama platform	30s	Female
Participant 5	Academic/industry expert	Media consultant based in Malaysia	40s	Male
Participant 6	Malaysian consumer	Malaysian-Chinese restaurant owner and long-time viewer of Chinese micro-short dramas (4 years)	30s	Female
Participant 7	Malaysian consumer	Malaysian-Chinese university student majoring in media/communications	20s	Female
Participant 8	Media and cultural professional	Retired television producer with a long career in Malaysian broadcasting, now an occasional viewer of Chinese micro-short dramas	60s	Male

Eight participants formed the final sample. The study does not claim thematic saturation in a representative sense, given the small and heterogeneous composition of the sample- including only two Malaysian consumer participants. Rather, the sample size was appropriate for exploratory qualitative research aiming to surface shared concerns, interpretive patterns, and strategic issues across the domains of media, cultural diplomacy, and audience reception. This limitation is acknowledged in the conclusion and should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings.

Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted between 15 and 24 January 2026 using a combination of methods appropriate to participants' location and availability. Six interviews were carried out via video-conferencing software, including Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Two interviews, with a Malaysian-Chinese restaurant owner and a retired Malaysian-Chinese television producer, were conducted in person during fieldwork in Malaysia. Each interview took about 16-20 minutes and followed a semi-structured guide organised around six thematic areas, each explored through open-ended questions that allowed participants to raise issues they found important. Interviews were conducted in either Mandarin or English, according to each participant's preference, rather than assumed on the basis of ethnicity. Responses given in Mandarin were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher, who subsequently checked the translations against the original transcripts to preserve idiomatic and culturally specific meaning. Quotations in this study reflect participants' original phrasing as closely as possible, though some nuance may not fully carry over in translation. Findings were reported confidentially and participant identifiers (Participant 1-8) were used in place of names.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data and is well suited to identifying common meanings and patterns of interpretation across qualitative datasets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: repeated reading of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data; generation of initial codes relating to dissemination, localisation, cultural relevance, audience reception, and policy coordination; searching for themes by collating related codes across the dataset; reviewing themes against the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole; defining and naming themes with reference to Soft Power Theory, Cultural Proximity Theory, and Heritage Diplomacy; and producing the final thematic account presented in the Findings section. Coding was conducted by the researcher, with reflexive memos kept throughout to document interpretive decisions and to guard against premature closure around the study's theoretical framework. The content analysis of the drama cases followed the same coding categories, with particular attention to narrative pacing, emotional framing, subtitling quality, visual symbolism, and the extent to which cultural references were contextualised for international audiences.

The supplementary content analysis complemented the interview findings by identifying recurring representational patterns within the selected micro-short dramas. *A Dream Pillowing the Milky Way* was examined for craft aesthetics and heritage commercialization; *The Datong Code* was examined for its explicit institutional framing as a state-university-led international dissemination project; *The War for a Stolen Tradition* was examined for ritual performance, cultural translation, and narrative reception; *Beyond! A Juan* was examined for its portrayal of lion dance heritage and grassroots cultural symbolism; and *The Wind of My Way Home* was examined for regional food culture and audience accessibility. These cases were not treated as statistically representative of all Chinese ICH micro-short dramas, but as purposively selected texts, anchored in verifiable official and popularity-based evidence, that enabled closer interpretation of the interview data.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided with clear information about the study and gave written informed consent prior to participation. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Data were stored securely, and participants' identities were kept confidential.

DATA ANALYSIS

Overview

This section presents an integrated thematic analysis of interviews with eight participants who were connected to digital cultural diplomacy, media production, cultural policy, digital strategy, or Malaysian audience reception. The analysis was supported by a focused qualitative reading of the selected ICH micro-short drama cases identified in the methodology. Therefore, the findings should be read as exploratory interpretive evidence reflecting the perceptions of the interviewed stakeholders and viewers, rather than as representative claims about Malaysian audiences more broadly. Data were examined manually following the thematic analysis approach of Braun & Clarke (2006), through repeated reading, coding, comparison with selected media texts, and theme refinement. Six main themes were identified:

- Limited Awareness and Visibility in Malaysia.
- Language and Cultural Translation Barriers.
- Audience Disconnection with Narrative and Aesthetic Style.
- Weak Localization and Platform Strategy.
- Competition from Korean and Western Media.

- Fragmented Institutional and Policy Coordination.

The themes are discussed below using selective interview evidence and content-oriented interpretation. Rather than treating participant statements as isolated quotations, each theme is linked to the selected micro-short drama samples and to the theoretical concerns of soft power, cultural proximity, and heritage diplomacy.

Across the selected samples, the content-oriented analysis showed that the dramas mobilize ICH through different forms of heritage communication. *A Dream Pillowing the Milky Way* foregrounds craft skills through the visual display of Suzhou fan-making, embroidery, and related crafts, demonstrating the commercial potential of ICH but offering limited explanation of why these crafts matter beyond their aesthetic display. *The Datong Code* frames heritage through an explicitly institutional, state-university-led approach intended for international dissemination, which supports a macro-level soft-power message but relies on formal, education-oriented framing rather than character-driven storytelling. *The War for a Stolen Tradition* demonstrates the performative richness of Nuo opera ritual heritage but may require further translation and contextualization for Malaysian viewers unfamiliar with the tradition. *Beyond! A Juan* integrates lion dance heritage into a grassroots narrative of personal struggle, offering a stronger emotional entry point than more ceremonial productions. Its cultural proximity is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where lion dance is actively practised and China and Malaysia submitted a joint nomination to UNESCO in March 2025 (China Daily, 2025). *The Wind of My Way Home* also offers pedagogic and localization potential by presenting regional food culture through accessible and relatable short segments.

Theme 1: Limited Awareness and Visibility in Malaysia

One recurring theme among the participants was the limited awareness and visibility of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia. Although digitally available, these dramas were not widely known within the Malaysian media environment. Participant 1 (a Malaysian media scholar) observed:

"In Malaysia, nobody actually knows these dramas exist unless a person has found him or herself in a Chinese cultural circle. There's no strategic offering, no cross-platform distribution to mainstream Malaysian audiences."

Participant 4 (a producer at a major Chinese short-drama platform) acknowledged an absence of international targeting:

"We are primarily targeting the domestic market. Overseas exposure happens when individuals share it naturally, but it's not a coordinated campaign. Malaysia isn't a main target, and honestly, we don't optimise for it."

Participant 7 (a Malaysian-Chinese university student) provided a personal observation:

"Er... you mean like that fan-making drama set in Suzhou, and the Nuo opera one? The ones that blew up in China? Honestly, I've never heard of them. I mean, unless someone deliberately shares them, I never see this kind of content on my feed. And even if I do come across some clips, I can't really tell whether they're official releases or just fan-edited videos on TikTok."

These responses identify limited visibility from three related perspectives. Participant 1 described the dramas' limited presence outside Chinese cultural circles, Participant 4 acknowledged the absence of intentional overseas targeting, and Participant 7 reported rarely encountering such content through her usual media use. Taken together, the findings establish limited awareness as an existing condition among the participants rather than as evidence of audience disinterest.

Theme 2: Language and Cultural Translation Barriers

Limited linguistic accessibility and cultural translation emerged as major barriers, particularly for non-Mandarin-speaking Malaysian viewers. Participant 2 (a representative at a China-Malaysia cultural exchange organisation) observed limitations she had seen in production practices:

"Most of what we come across is subtitled in Mandarin, sometimes English, but Malay is rarely included, even though it's essential for reaching a broader Malaysian audience. From what I've seen working with different producers, localisation just isn't treated as a priority."

Participant 5 (a Malaysian media consultant) emphasized the cultural dimension of this problem:

"Even with subtitles, underlying cultural clues are lost. A proverb or historical symbolism cannot be translated in one word; it requires a context, which is lacking."

Participant 8 (a retired Malaysian television producer) supported this challenge:

"Sometimes I read the pictures, not the feeling or the ideas. The subtitles are literal and frequently lose the point, particularly with poetic or ritual scenes- like the mask sequences in the Nuo opera drama. Visually stunning, but I had no idea what was actually going on."

These responses distinguish linguistic accessibility from cultural comprehension. Participant 2 emphasized the

limited provision of Malay subtitles, while Participants 5 and 8 pointed to the loss of contextual and symbolic meanings even when subtitles were available. This observation was also supported by the selected drama samples. Ritual and craft scenes, notably in *The War for a Stolen Tradition* and *A Dream Pillowing the Milky Way*, rely on symbolic gestures, historical allusions, and specialized language. Without adequate Malay subtitles, explanatory captions, or adapted cultural framing, these elements may remain aesthetically appealing but difficult to interpret. The translation barrier therefore concerns not only whether viewers can read the dialogue, but also whether they can understand the cultural meanings represented.

Theme 3: Audience Disconnection with Narrative and Aesthetic Style

Some participants perceived a mismatch between the narrative and visual styles of the dramas and the viewing preferences of Malaysian audiences, particularly younger viewers. Participant 3 (a Malaysian digital strategist) said:

"The pacing is achingly slow, and the storytelling is more ceremony than fun. What most Malaysians prefer, especially the youth, is faster, more emotionally-charged storytelling."

Participant 6 (a Malaysian-Chinese restaurant owner and regular viewer of Chinese micro-short dramas) provided a personal answer:

"I don't specifically look for those heritage dramas, lah. I just watch whatever's trending on my feed. If it has some of that traditional stuff, costumes, old buildings, maybe a craft, that's a nice touch, but I'm watching for the story, the romance, the drama. If it's just people doing a ritual for twenty minutes, I'll skip."

By contrast, Participant 7 offered a different response to the lion dance drama, *Beyond! A Juan*:

"Okay, that one hit different, lah. I actually grew up doing lion dance, my uncle's troupe, every Chinese New Year. So watching it wasn't like learning about some far-away tradition, it was more like, I know this. I could tell if the moves were legit or not. It felt closer to home than the other ones, even though it's still a Chinese show."

Participant 1 introduced a media angle:

"The graphics are striking, yet the characters are difficult to relate to. I think most Malaysians do not share a common cultural background, and dramas assume they prepare."

Taken together, these responses suggest that ICH dramas may be visually appealing but emotionally distant when their narratives rely heavily on culturally specific knowledge. Participant 6's viewing habits indicate that heritage content may sustain attention more effectively when embedded in character-driven and emotional narratives. Participant 7's response to *Beyond! A Juan*, however, qualifies this pattern: when lion dance forms part of the lived experience of Malaysia's Chinese community, cultural distance may give way to recognition and critical engagement. The issue identified in this theme is therefore not the visibility or translation of the content, but whether its narrative and aesthetic forms allow viewers to establish an emotional connection with the heritage represented.

Theme 4: Weak Localization and Platform Strategy

Insufficient localization and unsuitable platform distribution were frequently identified as major constraints on the dissemination of these dramas in Malaysia. Participant 7 described it from a viewer's perspective:

"Why are these shows not on local sites like Viu Malaysia or even YouTube with Malay captions? Most people here don't use Bilibili, Douyin."

Participant 6 offered a different angle on the same issue, speaking from her own regular viewing habits:

"Actually, I do watch on the apps that are made for us overseas, lah, ReelShort or DramaWave. So it's not that I can't find Chinese dramas. But the heritage-themed ones? Very few. Mostly it's romance, revenge, rebirth kind of stories. I don't remember seeing much about things like Nuo opera or traditional crafts on those apps."

Participant 2 echoed the problem diplomatically:

"No formal media collaborations with Malaysian platforms. We are over-relying on the audience to discover the material naturally, which does not work in a competitive media market."

Participant 4 expressed difficulties encountered during production:

"Honestly, I'm probably the closest thing our platform has to an international unit for Southeast Asia, but it's mostly just me. There's no dedicated team, no real strategy sitting above me. Our dissemination plans pretty much stop once content is uploaded to the local platform."

While Theme 1 establishes the limited visibility of the dramas, this theme identifies weaknesses in the distribution mechanisms intended to reach Malaysian viewers. Participant 7 emphasized limited access through locally familiar platforms, Participant 6 noted the scarcity of heritage-themed productions on applications serving overseas audiences, Participant 2 identified the absence of formal platform partnerships, and Participant 4 described the lack of an

international distribution strategy. Although platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, WeTV, and YouTube can technically circulate content internationally, platform availability alone does not ensure discoverability in Malaysia. The central problem is therefore the absence of sustained localization and platform planning rather than audience awareness itself.

Theme 5: Competition from Korean and Western Media

Competition from Korean and Western media was identified by several participants as an important challenge to the promotion of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia. Participant 5 emphasised this competition:

"It's not just drama, it's fashion, language, music too. Malaysians are surrounded by Korean content. Chinese content doesn't promote itself the same way; it's more formal, more institutional."

Participant 6 outlined a contrast in production styles:

"I watch Korean dramas too, actually more than Chinese ones. They just feel more real, lah, the characters fight, fall in love, make mistakes. The heritage dramas feel more like something you'd show in a museum."

Participant 3 concentrated on digital trends:

"In my opinion, Korean and Western dramas go viral because they are relatable and meme-worthy. Chinese ICH content, though not lacking in meaning, does not readily translate into online culture or trends."

These responses show that Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas circulate within a highly competitive entertainment environment. Unlike Theme 3, which concerns viewers' emotional connection with the narratives themselves, this theme concerns the relative position of ICH content within a media market already shaped by established cultural products. The participants' comments suggest that emotional relatability, social-media visibility, and entertainment value influence which content attracts attention. The challenge is therefore to make the cultural value of ICH content competitive within contemporary viewing practices without weakening its heritage substance.

Theme 6: Fragmented Institutional and Policy Coordination

A further theme concerned the lack of coordination among media producers, cultural institutions, diplomatic bodies, and local partners, which participants regarded as a constraint on the long-term effectiveness of digital cultural diplomacy. Participant 8 approached the issue from the standpoint of traditional broadcasting standards:

"Back in my days at the station, everything went through layers of editorial review before it aired. What I see now with these micro-dramas, it's all over the place, lah. Anyone can put out anything. If this is meant to represent a country's culture, it should be more careful, more objective. Right now it just feels chaotic."

Participant 1 described the effects of this disconnection:

"The dramas, even well-done, visibly disappear due to lack of marketing infrastructure or local interest strategy. My rule is this: content in itself is not diplomacy; it must be in a strategy."

Participant 2 acknowledged structural weaknesses she had encountered in cross-institutional coordination:

"The people we work with are quite siloed. Content creators, cultural organisations, and government bodies rarely coordinate on international digital projects. What's missing is proper local partnerships, especially in multicultural countries like Malaysia."

This theme moves beyond the individual problems of visibility, translation, narrative form, platform choice, and media competition by locating them within a wider institutional structure. The participants' accounts indicate that production, cultural policy, international promotion, and local cooperation are often handled separately rather than through a coordinated process. Government agencies may provide general direction, but the diplomatic effect of ICH micro-short dramas also depends on production teams, translators, platforms, educational institutions, cultural associations, and audiences. The absence of coordination among these actors limits the capacity of individual projects to develop into sustained forms of China-Malaysia cultural exchange.

Conclusion

This section presented an exploratory thematic analysis of eight interviews, supported by a content-oriented analysis of five selected ICH-themed micro-short dramas. Given the small and heterogeneous sample, these findings should be understood as recurring concerns among the stakeholders and viewers interviewed rather than as representative conclusions about Malaysian audiences as a whole.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that insufficient awareness and limited localization are key obstacles to the dissemination of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia. Several participants noted that the content was available online

but was not widely promoted through Malaysian media or adapted to local viewing practices. This finding is consistent with Hrubý and Petrů's (2019) argument that China's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia does not always align with the media environment of the host country. It also supports Uyun's (2024) observation that digital cultural diplomacy requires more than online availability and must respond to particular platforms and audiences. Although some of the selected dramas had received official recognition or attracted considerable attention in China, participants reported limited exposure to them in Malaysia. The content-oriented analysis further illustrates this gap. *A Dream Pillowing the Milky Way* foregrounds Suzhou fan-making, embroidery, brocade, and Pingtan through visually appealing scenes, but its cultural presentation has not been accompanied by broad overseas circulation. *The Wind of My Way Home* connects regional food culture with relatively accessible and familiar narratives and attracted considerable domestic attention, but its reach outside China appears to have remained limited. These cases suggest that domestic popularity or official recognition does not necessarily translate into transnational visibility. The overseas influence of ICH-themed micro-short dramas therefore depends not only on production quality, but also on discoverability, localization, and cultural accessibility.

The second finding concerns the incomplete fit between some heritage narratives and the expectations described by the participants. Several participants regarded the dramas as visually appealing but emotionally distant, particularly when the narratives assumed prior knowledge of Chinese history, ritual symbolism, or traditional crafts. This observation is consistent with Keane and Yu's (2019) critique of top-down cultural projection and with Cultural Proximity Theory, which emphasizes the importance of linguistic, emotional, and cultural familiarity in audience reception (Straubhaar, 1991). The contrast between *The War for a Stolen Tradition* and *Beyond! A Juan* is particularly relevant. The ritual elements of Nuo opera in *The War for a Stolen Tradition* required additional cultural explanation, whereas the integration of lion dance into a narrative of personal struggle in *Beyond! A Juan* created a stronger emotional entry point. A participant with direct experience of lion dance expressed particular recognition of the latter drama, showing how lived cultural experience may reduce the distance between heritage representation and audience interpretation. These responses suggest that cultural proximity is not produced automatically by shared historical or ethnic connections, but may be strengthened when heritage is connected with recognizable characters, emotions, family experiences, or contemporary life. This narrative connection is especially important when ICH-themed dramas compete with established Korean and Western media for audience attention.

The third finding is that institutional fragmentation restricts the development of ICH-themed micro-short dramas as sustained instruments of heritage diplomacy. Participants identified limited coordination among producers, cultural agencies, diplomatic institutions, platforms, translators, and Malaysian partners. This result supports Sun's (2015) argument that media internationalization requires strategic alignment between cultural production and broader international communication objectives. It also reflects Winter's (2015) understanding of heritage diplomacy as a process involving multiple institutional and social actors. Among the selected cases, *The Datong Code* provides a partial contrast because its state-university-led production demonstrates a more coordinated institutional approach to international dissemination. However, its formal and education-oriented framing also indicates that institutional participation alone does not ensure localized audience engagement. Without coordination across production, translation, distribution, and local engagement, culturally significant content may remain a symbolic representation of heritage rather than becoming a sustained form of cross-cultural dialogue.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the challenges and strategic pathways associated with the transnational dissemination of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas in Malaysia. Drawing on eight semi-structured interviews and a focused analysis of five selected cases, the findings suggest that these productions have potential as tools of digital cultural and heritage diplomacy, although their current visibility and reach in Malaysia remain limited. Interviewees identified limited platform integration, localization and translation difficulties, limited narrative resonance, competition from established Korean and Western content, and uneven institutional coordination. Due to the small and heterogeneous sample, these results cannot be regarded as representative and should be interpreted only as exploratory. However, they suggest that successful cultural diplomacy involves more than the export of heritage content. It involves emotional bonds, cultural closeness, platform-specific strategies adapted to particular audiences, and coordinated institutional support. These findings offer insights into how Chinese digital heritage media may be adapted to multicultural and digitally connected Southeast Asian markets.

Recommendations

Based on the identified themes during the analysis, it is possible to make the following three recommendations. Each recommendation is associated with specific findings rather than being presented as a general policy recommendation.

Enhance Localization, Subtitling, and Narrative Connection: This recommendation is a direct response to Themes 2 and 3. Participant 2 pointed to a lack of Malay subtitles, while Participants 5 and 8 referred to the loss of cultural meaning through literal translation. Micro-shorts should provide English and Malay subtitles, together with other language versions where necessary. Translation should not be limited to dialogue. Proverbs, rituals, craft techniques, and historical references may also be explained through brief captions or platform notes. Different types of heritage may require different forms of explanation. Traditional crafts may benefit from brief background information, while ritual and performance traditions may require more detailed cultural translation. Where appropriate, Southeast Asian or diasporic Chinese experiences and characters from Malaysia's different communities can also be included. Shared cultural entry points such as Peranakan culture, lion dance, family rituals, food heritage, festivals, or youth identity may make heritage feel lived rather than merely displayed. This would enhance cultural proximity while maintaining the essence of Chinese ICH.

Develop Platform and Local Mediation Partnerships: Participants discussing Themes 1, 4, and 5 repeatedly linked the limited reach of these dramas to weak platform access and low discoverability, particularly in a market where Korean and Western content is already well established. A more practical strategy would connect distribution with promotion. Complete dramas could be placed on short-drama apps and regional streaming services such as ReelShort, DramaBox, Viu Malaysia, and WeTV, while trailers, selected clips, and links to the full content circulate through TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Facebook. Local involvement would also be important. Malaysian media practitioners, educators, community groups, and cultural practitioners could help explain unfamiliar references through bilingual commentary, reaction videos, or behind-the-scenes material. This combination would make the dramas easier to find and understand, directly addressing Participant 7's concern that their circulation currently depends too heavily on accidental audience discovery.

Develop Coordinated Cultural Diplomacy Planning: Theme 6 points to limited coordination rather than a lack of participating institutions. Interviewees described insufficient alignment among producers, cultural agencies, diplomatic organizations, and distribution platforms. A more workable approach would assign responsibilities across the dissemination process. Producers could lead content development and adaptation, while Malaysian cultural and educational partners support translation and cultural contextualization. Platforms could manage distribution and collect audience feedback, and cultural and diplomatic agencies could coordinate resources and maintain institutional partnerships. Co-productions, campus screenings, cultural festivals, and structured feedback sessions could then connect production decisions more closely with audience responses. Clearer responsibilities and sustained cooperation may help ICH-themed micro-short dramas move beyond one-off releases and become part of longer-term heritage-diplomacy initiatives.

Limitations of the Study

This study has limitations, including a small sample size of only eight participants. Though the sample was appropriate for exploratory qualitative research, it cannot reflect the full diversity of Malaysian audiences, Chinese media producers, cultural institutions, and platform stakeholders. The sample also included only two participants recruited primarily as media consumers, while the others mainly provided professional or institutional perspectives. The heterogeneity of the sample also implies that full thematic saturation cannot be strongly claimed. Besides, the research was based primarily on interviews and a limited content-oriented analysis of five cases and did not include large-scale audience surveys or platform analytics. Differences in language could also have affected the manner in which some participants presented their opinions. Lastly, because the research was conducted only in Malaysia, one should not assume that the results apply to all ASEAN contexts. These limitations mean that the findings should be interpreted as indicative and exploratory rather than definitive.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could compare the adaptation and reception of Chinese ICH-themed micro-short dramas across ASEAN countries. Larger and more diverse audience samples, combined with platform analytics, could provide stronger evidence of differences in content reach, engagement, and reception.

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

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