

# “Cultural Healing” in Virtual Spaces: A Netnographic Study of Generation Z's Participation in the Transformation of Tongcheng School Culture's Therapeutic Value—Based on Anqing's Online Revitalization Practices of Intangible Cultural Heritage



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**Abstract:** This study centers on transforming the cultural healing value of the Tongcheng School into contemporary practice, integrating intangible cultural heritage (ICH) revitalization initiatives in Anqing. Using a netnographic approach, it systematically examines how Generation Z participates in, interprets, and reconstructs the “literature–healing–industry” model within virtual spaces. Based on 12 months of immersive observation, in-depth interviews, and digital text analysis, the study reveals how Gen Z converts traditional literary resources into forms of “digital healing” that align with their health needs and patterns of cultural consumption through short-video creation, interactive communities, and transmedia storytelling. The findings identify three defining characteristics of Gen Z engagement: “lightweight experiential participation,” “circle-based dissemination,” and “technology-enabled co-creation.” These practices are driven not only by the rise of “national trend” culture, but also by mental health needs and processes of digital identity construction. This research offers an interdisciplinary perspective for ICH revitalization, literary healing theory, and youth culture studies, and proposes a theoretical framework of “digital literary healing,” providing practical pathways for the youth-oriented transformation of traditional cultural resources.

**Keywords:** generation Z, cultural healing, netnography, Tongcheng school, intangible cultural heritage revitalization

## 1. Introduction: An Overview of “Literary Healing” Research in Virtual Spaces

### 1.1 Research context and core questions

The digital wave has propelled traditional culture into a transformative era. Particularly against the backdrop of the “Healthy China 2030” initiative, the wellness value of literary works has garnered increasing attention. As a profoundly influential prose school in Chinese literary history, the Tongcheng School embodies rich spiritual healing value through its core tenets of “ethical principles,

textual scholarship, and literary style.” Concurrently, Generation Z, as representatives of the “digital native generation,” exhibit distinctly digital characteristics in their cultural consumption behaviors, leading to fundamental shifts in how they engage with traditional literature.

This study centers on a core question: How can the wellness value of Tongcheng School literature be effectively transformed through digital pathways within virtual spaces, thereby gaining acceptance and dissemination among Generation Z? This question

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not only concerns the modern inheritance of traditional culture but also involves the innovative development of literature's therapeutic function in the digital age. To this end, we conducted a 12-month research project.

### **1.2 Research significance and innovation points**

The theoretical significance of this study lies in: expanding the online dimension of literary healing theory; validating the applicability of netnography in cultural studies, providing methodological support for related research; deepening understanding of Generation Z's cultural dissemination mechanisms; and constructing a theoretical model for the transformation of "literary healing" value.

The practical significance of this study lies in: providing a feasible pathway for the digital preservation and inheritance of Tongcheng School culture; offering theoretical guidance for the innovative development of cultural industries; offers novel solutions for mental health services targeting Generation Z; and supports online revitalization practices for Anqing's intangible cultural heritage.

The study's innovations are manifested in three key aspects: a cross-disciplinary perspective bridging traditional literature and digital culture research; a 12-month immersive Netnography methodology; and the proposal of an online conversion logic centered on "visual traffic generation – lightweight experiential engagement – community-driven co-creation."

## **2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review**

### **2.1 Evolutionary trajectory of literary healing theory**

Literary healing traces its origins to the ancient Greek concept of "catharsis." The formal establishment of "reading therapy" in 1916 marked its emergence as an independent discipline, evolving through medical, psychological, and cultural paradigms (Crothers, 1916). The digital era has propelled literary healing into online spaces. Research indicates that digital platforms not only provide new vehicles for literary healing but also establish unique therapeutic mechanisms. Canada's

"Writing New Body Worlds" project applies interactive digital narrative technology to reading therapy, demonstrating the empowering value of digital media for literary healing (Mou & Yu, 2024).

### **2.2 Core values and wellness functions of Tongcheng school literature**

Centered on "ethical principles, textual scholarship, and literary composition," the Tongcheng School aligns with modern values education through its emphasis on ethical principles. Its focus on textual scholarship promotes truth-seeking and pragmatism, fostering rational thinking and critical analysis while alleviating modern anxieties (Sun, 2006). The aesthetic experience of literary composition regulates emotions (Zhang, 2016). Moreover, Tongcheng School works convey profound insights into life, nature, and society, offering vital spiritual nourishment for contemporary readers. While existing research emphasizes its literary achievements, modern studies exploring its wellness value remain scarce.

### **2.3 Cultural consumption characteristics and mental health needs of generation Z**

As digital natives born between 1995 and 2010, Generation Z exhibits four defining traits in cultural consumption: fragmented reading, social sharing, interactive participation, and personalized demands. Regarding mental health, they prioritize self-awareness and spiritual nourishment, seeking literary healing through "emotional companionship" rather than professional psychological intervention (Li & Tan, 2025).

Generation Z's networked existence is defined by five traits: strong connectivity, community segmentation, visual orientation, high interactivity, and pursuit of experiences and identity. Their cultural consumption fundamentally revolves around "experiential consumption" and "identity consumption." Through diverse platforms like short videos and live streaming, they produce and disseminate information, becoming a core force in traditional cultural transmission. However, existing research has yet to fully elucidate their acceptance

logic and conversion pathways regarding the therapeutic value of traditional literature.

#### **2.4 Application of netnography in cultural studies**

Netnography is a qualitative interpretive research method that adapts traditional ethnographic face-to-face fieldwork to computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments, studying online cultures, virtual communities, and network group behaviors (Bu, 2012). It features high authenticity, strong anonymity, sustainability, and relatively low cost. According to the 56th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development, China's internet user base has reached 1.123 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 79.7% (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2025). This vast online population has spawned a wealth of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) short video content, cultural exchange communities, cultural dissemination media, and individual or platform-based ICH promoters. Within these intangible cultural heritage-related online communities, diverse users form distinct online interest-based or professional groups based on personal interests and needs (Liu, Lin, & Zhao, 2025). This facilitates our ability to immerse ourselves within these communities for a year-long observation.

### **3. Research Design and Implementation**

#### **3.1 Research domains**

Mainstream social platforms: Including Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, Douyin, Weibo, etc.

Interest-based communities: Including Douban groups, Zhihu columns, WeChat reading groups, etc.

Professional cultural platforms: Including digital reading platforms such as Tencent Literature and Qidian Chinese Network, as well as official websites and public accounts of various cultural institutions.

#### **3.2 Data collection methods**

This study employs diverse data collection methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews, online text analysis, and data mining to ensure comprehensiveness and reliability.

#### **3.3 Research ethics and quality control**

Regarding research ethics, this study strictly adheres to principles. Informed consent was obtained from interviewees prior to interviews, and all participants were anonymized. User privacy is rigorously protected, with data used solely for research purposes. All platform community rules were followed, and no violations occurred.

For quality control, this study employed multi-source validation, cross-verifying data through observation, interviews, and text analysis; a 12-month long-term observation period minimized short-term biases; and peer review was incorporated to continuously refine the research design and analytical methods.

### **4. Research Findings and Analysis**

#### **4.1 Generation Z's "Literary Healing" participation characteristics in virtual spaces**

##### **4.1.1 Cognitive entry points: driven by visualization and narratives**

Generation Z's engagement with Tongcheng School literature primarily enters through visual content and narrative expressions. On Xiaohongshu, users transformed Yao Nai's "Ascending Mount Tai" into a "hand-drawn hiking map," garnering over 100,000 views. On Bilibili and Douyin, creators adapted the biographies of the Tongcheng School's three founders into "workplace story" short videos, humorously interpreting literary concepts to lower comprehension barriers. Generation Z favors personalized narratives. The "story-for-story" exchange model in Douban groups transforms Tongcheng School literature from "classic texts" into "life wisdom." Traditional pure-text content struggles to capture initial attention due to its perceived "obscurity."

##### **4.1.2 Experience preferences: prioritizing lightweight and interactive formats**

Gen Z favors short-form, fast-paced lightweight content. Low participation barriers make simple actions like liking, commenting, and sharing the primary engagement methods.

Interactive experiences significantly boost participation willingness. Bilibili's bullet comments

foster a “collective reading” atmosphere, while Xiaohongshu's comment sections for intellectual exchange and WeChat Reading groups' “shared reading activities” are highly favored. Gamified interactions prove especially compelling. Formats like “Tongcheng School Literature Quizzes” and “Classical Chinese Translation Relay” effectively boost engagement, demonstrating the viability of blending traditional culture with game mechanics. One developer noted: “We found Gen Z engagement surges significantly when traditional culture is integrated with game-like elements.”

#### **4.1.3 Healing perception: contextual and subjective characteristics**

The “literary healing” effect exhibits pronounced situational dependency. Respondents primarily experienced emotional relief during fragmented relaxation periods like bedtime or class breaks, with limited efficacy under high-stress conditions. While reading “Ascending Mount Tai,” some users felt the heroic spirit of “ascending to the summit,” while others experienced the philosophical contemplation of “unity between heaven and humanity,” highlighting the subjective nature of healing perception.

Gen Z perceives “literary healing” more as “emotional companionship” than traditional “therapy.” One user remarked: “Reading Tongcheng School essays feels like having a wise friend beside you, reminding you that confusion has always existed throughout history—you're not alone.” This reflects their core need for emotional support and spiritual solace.

#### **4.1.4 Behavioral drivers: cultural identity and digital identity expression**

Gen Z's engagement is driven by dual motivations: First, cultural identity—they view understanding and disseminating traditional culture as a “cultural mission,” with Tongcheng School and other traditions becoming key markers of national identity and cultural confidence. Second, digital identity expression—by sharing literary insights and creating derivative content, they showcase personal cultural taste and unique personality, fulfilling social

recognition needs within their circles.

#### **4.2 Online conversion pathways for Tongcheng school literature's wellness value**

This study proposes a conversion logic of “Visual Traffic Acquisition → Lightweight Experience → Community Co-creation”

##### **4.2.1 Visual traffic acquisition: translation from abstract to concrete**

Visualization is the primary gateway to engage Gen Z, achieved through three approaches: - Visual translation: Transforming classic imagery like “snow-capped mountains and bright candles in the south” into wallpapers and comics; - Scenario presentation: Developing “Digital Tongcheng” experiences using VR technology to immerse users in the living environments of Tongcheng School writers; Symbolic refinement distills “ethics, philology, and rhetoric” into minimalist visual icons aligned with Gen Z's preference for simplicity.

##### **4.2.2 Lightweight experiences: transforming complexity into accessibility**

Core transformation occurs through knowledge fragmentation, linguistic modernization, and entertainment-driven formats:

- Deconstructing classical texts into “golden quotes” and “life philosophies” for dissemination, aligning with fragmented reading habits; Interpreting classical texts' essence through modern phrases like “Words are keys to unlocking the soul”; Adapting Tongcheng School literature into entertainment formats like murder mystery games and online games—e.g., the “Tongcheng School Detective Case” game advances plots by deciphering classical text codes, blending education with entertainment.

##### **4.2.3 Community-Driven co-creation: evolution from unidirectional to interactive**

In advanced conversion stages, users transition from passive recipients to active creators: In content co-creation, Bilibili users produce “Tongcheng School Rap,” while Xiaohongshu users share practical applications of “solving modern problems with Tongcheng School philosophy.” In value co-creation, the school is reinterpreted as diverse forms like “career survival guides” and “inspirational

content,” enriching its contemporary relevance. Community operations sustain engagement and creativity by appointing “Cultural Ambassadors,” organizing regular events, and implementing incentive mechanisms.

## 5. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

### 5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study's theoretical contributions are primarily reflected in the following aspects: It expands the online dimension of literary healing theory, revealing the immediacy, interactivity, and community-oriented characteristics of literary healing in virtual spaces. The proposed “emotional companionship”-oriented youth literary healing model addresses the existing research limitation of “overemphasizing offline while underemphasizing online.”

Validated the applicability of netnography in cultural studies. Through 12 months of immersive research, it captured authentic interactions among Generation Z within anonymous communities, demonstrating the method's efficacy in cultural wellness and intangible cultural heritage revitalization studies while providing a replicable methodological framework.

Deepened understanding of Generation Z's cultural transmission mechanisms. The study revealed unique patterns in how Generation Z disseminates and receives traditional culture within virtual spaces, including visual preferences, demand for lightweight experiences, expectations for interactivity, and community-oriented characteristics. These findings enhance our comprehension of cultural inheritance patterns in the digital age.

Constructed a theoretical model for the value transformation of “literary healing.” Through in-depth analysis, this research proposes a transformation model: “Visualization-driven traffic → Lightweight experience → Community-based co-creation.” This model is applicable not only to Tongcheng School literature but also serves as a reference framework for the digital transformation of

other traditional cultures. - Community-Driven Co-Creation" transformation model. This framework is applicable not only to Tongcheng School literature but also provides a reference for the digital transformation of other traditional cultures.

### 5.2 Practical implications

#### 5.2.1 Content strategy: focus on visual narratives and lightweight interpretations

Develop high-quality visual content to concretize abstract cultural concepts, aligning with Gen Z's preference for “high visual appeal”; Implement lightweight dissemination by breaking down complex theories into bite-sized knowledge points. Employ youth-oriented expressions like internet slang and viral memes, demonstrating practical value through modern life scenarios. Strengthen narrative storytelling by exploring the lives of Tongcheng School literati, linking them to contemporary issues like workplace stress. Encourage users to share personal encounters with traditional culture, fostering collective dissemination momentum.

#### 5.2.2 Product design: enhancing interactivity, gamification, and low intervention

Optimize interactive features by developing tools like classical text translators and cultural trivia quizzes. Establish UGC platforms and online discussion forums with personalized recommendations. Integrate gamification through games such as “Tongcheng School Monopoly” and “Classical Text Puzzles,” featuring point systems, levels, and online cultural competitions. Adhere to low-intervention principles by offering diverse content formats, avoiding excessive commercialization, lowering participation barriers, and fulfilling “companion-style relaxation” needs (Tang et al., 2025).

#### 5.2.3 Community operations: cultivating key nodes within target circles

Precisely target cultural circles by developing differentiated strategies for groups like “artsy youth” and “traditional culture enthusiasts,” prioritizing platforms such as Bilibili's National Trend Zone and Xiaohongshu's Lifestyle Zone. Identify active

community members and cultivate “cultural KOCs” through incentives like intangible cultural heritage inheritor exchange programs and cultural product trials, leveraging circle influence for targeted dissemination; Foster a positive atmosphere by establishing community guidelines, organizing online/offline events, and implementing user feedback mechanisms to strengthen cohesion.

#### **5.2.4 Industry synergy: creating a closed-loop “Online Traffic - Offline Conversion - Content Feedback” system**

Online traffic strategies should fully leverage each platform's strengths. Publish differentiated content across platforms to create a matrix effect; utilize algorithmic recommendation systems to boost content visibility; collaborate with platforms on cultural promotion campaigns to secure additional resource support.

Offline conversion pathways are crucial for monetizing cultural value. Develop cultural tourism products such as “Tongcheng School Cultural Tours” and “Classical Literature Study Camps”; Launch cultural merchandise like stationery and apparel to integrate cultural elements into daily life; Third, organize offline cultural events such as book clubs and exhibitions to provide immersive experiences.

The content feedback mechanism is key to creating a virtuous cycle. Transform highlights from offline events into online content for secondary dissemination; Collect user feedback and suggestions to continuously refine products and services; Encourage users to share offline experiences, fostering word-of-mouth effects.

#### **5.3 Building an evaluation metric system**

A multi-dimensional evaluation system is constructed, encompassing four major dimensions: communication effectiveness (page views, shares, user growth rate), participation quality (depth of interaction, user contribution, community cohesion), value transformation (enhancement of cognition, behavioral change, emotional experience), and social impact (cultural inheritance effectiveness, mental health promotion, social recognition). The evaluation adopts a combined quantitative and qualitative

approach.

## **6. Research Limitations and Future Prospects**

### **6.1 Research limitations**

While this study yielded valuable findings, it also has the following limitations:

The sample primarily consists of highly educated Gen Z individuals in first- and second-tier cities, limiting its generalizability; user behavior may deviate from reality, raising questions about the authenticity of online data; a 12-month observation period is insufficient to assess the long-term effects of literary healing; and rapid technological iteration in virtual spaces may necessitate adjustments to some findings as platform features evolve.

### **6.2 Future research directions**

Based on these limitations and academic trends, this study proposes the following future research directions:

Future studies should broaden sample scope to comprehensively cover Generation Z and other age groups; conduct long-term tracking to establish a dynamic evaluation system for “literary healing” effects; innovate research methodologies; expand research to examine value transformation of other traditional cultural forms in virtual spaces and summarize underlying patterns; strengthen collaboration with cultural institutions, educational departments, and enterprises to translate research findings into tangible cultural products and services; and explore the application prospects of the “literary healing” model.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

Through Netnography, this study reveals the core characteristics and value transformation pathways of Generation Z's participation in Tongcheng School “cultural healing” practices within virtual spaces. Generation Z perceives the Tongcheng School through visual and narrative approaches, preferring lightweight, interactive experiences. Their participation is driven by both cultural identification and identity expression, forming a complete transformation logic: “visual traffic acquisition — lightweight experience — Community-Based Co-Creation.” Future research should continuously

monitor technological advancements and evolving Gen Z demands to refine the "literary wellness" model, enabling traditional culture to fully unleash its wellness value in the digital era and contribute to building a culturally strong nation and a healthy China.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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