

From Wedding Ritual to Screen Viewing: Context and Interpretation in Short Videos of Tujia Bridal Lamentation

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Abstract

Short videos can make bridal lamentation emotionally accessible while leaving its sung words and ritual relationships difficult to follow. This article examines that problem through Tujia heritage documentation, the recorded biography of singer Peng Zuxiu, and English-language scholarship on performance, bridal laments, heritage, and digital media. A comparative reading of Pan Cailian's Nanhui lament repertoire shows how a visible refusal of food becomes a blessing through the sung addresses that follow; published Douyin examples show how video can distinguish a finished performance from the process of teaching it. These materials inform an account of contextual legibility: the availability of relationships, verbal expression, and attributed explanation within a presentation. The analysis considers what is lost when a reply is cut, a phrase is shortened, or editorial interpretation substitutes for translation. It argues that digital heritage should be assessed through the understanding its presentation makes possible, alongside the attention it attracts. The article develops a source-based conceptual argument and outlines a practical approach to analysing public video without physical fieldwork.

Keywords: Tujia Bridal Lamentation; Short Video; Digital Folklore; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Performance; Contextual Legibility

1. Introduction

A bride's lament can be encountered as an expression of separation, a skilled vocal performance, or part of a wedding exchange. These readings overlap, but they do not draw attention to the same things. Someone attending the wedding may know who is being addressed and what has happened immediately beforehand. Someone watching an excerpt later must reconstruct that setting from the recording and its accompanying explanation. The distance between these positions is not simply geographical. It is also a difference in access to relationships, sequence, and local knowledge.

The national heritage record places Tujia bridal lament songs in the category of folk literature and records their listing in 2011. Its account of Guzhang County names successive addresses to parents, brothers and their wives, sisters, and other relatives. Mother-daughter lamenting runs through the wedding sequence; other named occasions include dressing, the departure meal, being carried away, and entering the bridal sedan (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, n.d.-b). This is a locally documented repertoire of speech and action, rather than a single emotional scene. The present discussion uses that record as a point of reference, without assuming that it describes all contemporary Tujia weddings.

The problem addressed here is how that relational practice can remain intelligible when it is presented in a short, separately circulated video. The question differs from asking whether heritage content attracts attention. A recording can be moving without explaining the exchange it depicts. Conversely, an excerpt can be brief yet preserve enough information for a viewer to identify the speakers and follow their interaction. Duration and popularity therefore offer incomplete accounts of what a video communicates.

The distinction already has a practical counterpart in research on Douyin. Wang et al. (2024) collected 25,501 heritage-related videos after cleaning and qualitatively examined 200. Their classification distinguishes

Recording, Community, Innovation, and Commercialization. Within Recording, showing a performance is different from showing how it is taught or explaining its history. One published example presents a grandmother teaching her grandson to make Wenxi crispy noodles; another shows Miao students rehearsing Panhuang Dance with a practitioner's spoken instructions (Section 4.2.2, Figure 3). The examples concern other heritage practices, but establish a useful comparison: a screen can show either a finished performance or the relationships through which a skill is passed on. For bridal lamentation, the corresponding question is whether viewers encounter a crying face alone or can also follow an address, a response, and an explanation of the song.

Its contribution is the concept of contextual legibility: the degree to which a presentation gives viewers usable information about the relationships, words, and circumstances that make a performance meaningful. Legibility does not mean a complete reconstruction of the wedding, nor does it require viewers to accept a single authorized interpretation. It concerns whether the available material allows an interpretation to be grounded, questioned, and revised. The article develops this argument through a focused literature synthesis and documented contextual information. It then considers editing, sound, subtitles, and comments as distinct sites of interpretation.

2. Ritual Knowledge on Screen

Ben-Amos (1971) placed artistic communication and its social setting at the centre of his definition of folklore. Bauman (1975) developed a performance approach that attends to genres, roles, events, and the emergent character of verbal art. Together, these perspectives shift attention from a song as an isolated text to a communicative occasion. Applied here, they direct inquiry toward the relationship between an utterance, its addressee, and the responses that follow.

McLaren's (2008) study of Chinese bridal laments places women's ritual skills at the centre of interpretation. That emphasis is valuable here because a convincing expression of grief can also be an accomplished performance. Feeling and technique need not cancel each other out. A singer may draw on a learned repertoire precisely when expressing something personally significant.

Taylor's (2003) discussion of the archive and the repertoire offers a related distinction between records and embodied ways of transmitting knowledge. A video can preserve movements and sound, but a recording does not provide the same experience as participating in an exchange. This does not make digital documentation inherently deficient. It identifies the specific problem that documentation must address: how to explain relationships that participants may understand without saying them aloud.

Heritage studies cautions against treating cultural value as a property that a recording merely carries from one location to another. Smith (2006) understands heritage as meaning-making shaped by competing discourses. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) examines heritage as metacultural production, drawing attention to the additional work through which practices are identified and displayed as heritage. These approaches make a caption identifying a performance as heritage analytically important. Such a label is part of a presentation, not a substitute for explaining what its participants are doing.

Hjarvard (2008) distinguishes communication through media from broader changes associated with the growing influence of media on social institutions. That distinction prevents a premature conclusion: recording a wedding does not by itself demonstrate that the wedding ritual has been reorganized around a platform. Here, mediatization is a sensitizing perspective for examining possible changes in presentation. Claims about changes to wedding organization would require different evidence.

Platform studies identifies pressures that may bear on cultural production. Nieborg and Poell (2018) describe cultural commodities as increasingly subject to platform infrastructures and data-informed revision. Bucher (2017) distinguishes users' understandings of algorithms from the workings that those understandings attempt to explain.

For lament videos, this suggests separating an observed editing choice, a creator's explanation of that choice, and a claim about recommendation systems. These are related questions, but they are not interchangeable kinds of evidence.

Zulli and Zulli (2022) analyse imitation and replication in TikTok's design and cultures of use. Their work suggests questions about reusable audiovisual conventions, including the possibility that different events may be presented through similar formats. It is not direct evidence about Douyin bridal lamentation. Douyin and TikTok must be treated as distinct research settings, and the extent of any shared convention has to be established rather than assumed.

Blank's (2009) edited collection treats the internet as a setting in which folklore is generated, circulated, documented, and preserved. Howard (2008) examines participatory media through a vernacular web in which institutional and noninstitutional agencies interact. These approaches allow comments and replies to be considered part of a video's interpretive environment. The posted recording need not be the last word on what a performance means.

Circulation brings a wedding recording before people with different expectations, changing what has to be explained. Marwick and boyd (2011) describe context collapse and imagined audiences in Twitter communication. Their concepts help formulate questions about a wedding excerpt reaching people with different assumptions, without making Twitter and Douyin equivalent. Emotional connection and cultural knowledge should be distinguished. Papacharissi (2015) examines affective engagement through networked storytelling in political contexts. The analogy used here is limited to the question of how shared feeling can organize attention; it does not establish a particular audience response to lamentation.

The argument brings these perspectives into a close reading of documented ritual features and published examples of heritage video. The material is a purposive selection, not a systematic review or a newly collected Douyin corpus. The distinction matters: the sources establish particular procedures and forms of presentation, while the following discussion asks what those details enable a viewer to understand. Editing comparisons are identified as analytical illustrations rather than reported posts.

Peng Zuxiu's official practitioner profile gives a more personal view of the work behind lamenting. Born in Guzhang in 1931, she learned from her maternal grandmother, mother, and other senior singers. The profile records more than 400 occasions of assisting or leading bridal lamentation and over 30 pupils, without specifying a reporting date for these totals. It also describes repeated melodies, flexible line lengths, and the use of extended or compressed phrases to fit the vocal line (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, n.d.-a). These details bring a skilled singer into view where a generic description of wedding tears would leave only emotion.

A recording identified only as a bride crying would tell us little about the kind of labour represented by Peng's career. If an experienced singer assists a performance, a voice heard from outside the frame could belong to someone guiding the song, rather than to an incidental guest. Establishing that role would require the recording's own documentation. The biography nonetheless gives a reason to ask the question. It shifts attention toward competence: who knows when to begin, who can sustain a phrase, and who helps another participant continue? A teaching clip could make such work particularly clear by keeping a learner's first attempt, a correction, and the repeated phrase together. These are observable actions that an online researcher could analyse, without claiming to know the learner's private emotions.

For video interpretation, the relational positions are consequential. A viewer who can identify an addressee can distinguish a lament addressed to a mother from a general expression of distress. A viewer who sees a response can recognize an exchange rather than a solitary performance. Sequence matters for similar reasons. An utterance made before departure may be understood differently from the same words presented without any indication of their position in the wedding.

Take the named Guzhang sequence as an example. An address to a brother and his wife gives the viewer a different relationship to follow from an address to the mother. If both excerpts receive the same general caption about leaving home, the caption may be emotionally plausible while erasing the change of addressee. A few words identifying the relationship would preserve that difference. Likewise, a lament associated with dressing and one associated with departure belong to different moments of the wedding. The practical loss from removing sequence is therefore quite specific: the viewer loses the connection between the utterance and the action accompanying it. These are implications of the documented sequence, not claims about the frequency of particular editing choices on Douyin.

Contextual legibility is therefore not an instruction to retain everything. It asks what information is necessary for the excerpt's own interpretive claims. A video presented as an example of mother-daughter exchange needs to make both participants and the exchange identifiable. A video presented as a vocal demonstration needs to identify the performer and clarify the performance setting. The appropriate contextual minimum depends on what the presentation asks the viewer to understand.

The profile's description of Peng's flexible phrasing also complicates what might look like repetition to an unfamiliar listener. A sustained syllable may carry the vocal line, and a tightly delivered phrase may accommodate a longer verbal unit. Cutting at the first apparent pause would not necessarily preserve a complete thought. The relevant unit is the sung phrase, which need not fit the editor's preferred visual rhythm. This is where the performance approach becomes useful at a very small scale: it asks the analyst to listen for how an utterance is completed, rather than treating the voice simply as an emotional soundtrack.

The second dimension concerns access to verbal expression. A viewer may hear the original voice yet be unable to understand the words. Another may read a fluent subtitle without knowing whether it transcribes a lyric, translates its meaning, or summarizes the publisher's interpretation. These situations pose different problems and require different responses.

An intelligible presentation should distinguish transcription, translation, and commentary. A transcription attempts to represent the words performed; a translation renders those words in another language; commentary situates or interprets them. None is neutral or effortless, but keeping their roles visible makes it possible to assess a claim. Where a word is uncertain, acknowledging uncertainty is preferable to completing a plausible line and presenting it as the performer's speech.

This dimension also concerns sound relationships. A backing track can provide atmosphere, but if it covers the lament or a relative's answer, the recording makes a different set of meanings accessible. The point is not to prohibit music. It is to ask whether the sound treatment supports the stated purpose of the video. A record of vocal practice and a montage of wedding emotion may reasonably use sound differently, provided that their purposes are clear.

The third dimension concerns attribution. An official description, a practitioner's account, a family member's explanation, and an outside viewer's judgment occupy different positions. Each can contribute useful material, but none should be silently substituted for the others. A creator's caption cannot be assumed to express the bride's experience; a viewer's declaration of local knowledge cannot be assumed to represent a community.

Attribution makes disagreement productive. If two explanations differ, the issue can be investigated in relation to location, purpose, and experience. Without attribution, a disagreement may appear to be a simple contest between truth and error. Knowing who is speaking does not settle that contest, but it makes the basis of the claim available for examination. This is particularly important when a video is used to make broad assertions about ethnicity, gender, or the authenticity of a custom.

3. Editing, Sound, and the Wedding Exchange

A published example from Nanhui makes the stakes of sequence unusually tangible. In Pan Cailian's lament repertoire, analysed by McLaren and Chen (2000, pp. 228–230), a sister-in-law brings a bowl of rice shortly before the bride departs. The bride ritually refuses it and redirects it, in her song, toward relatives: the father is promised renewed vitality, the nephew literacy, and the niece exceptional embroidery. The authors interpret the passage as a blessing. In another segment, an address nominally thanking the matchmaker becomes a forceful curse (pp. 226–227). These are Han Chinese examples from a different region, not evidence of the exact words or procedures used in Guzhang. Their comparative force lies in showing how the direction of an utterance can change its function.

The bowl of rice offers a concrete editing problem. A close-up of a bride turning away from food could readily be read as distress or lack of appetite. Retaining her next sung address would allow a viewer to follow the redirection toward another person. Keeping the sister-in-law in view would make the exchange clearer still. This comparison is an analytical illustration based on the published account, not a description of a video collected for this article. It shows why missing context is more than missing background information: the omitted action or line can alter what the visible gesture appears to do.

A caption explaining that the passage confers a blessing would offer one route into the episode. A translated phrase showing whom the bride addresses would offer another, allowing the viewer to examine the interpretation rather than simply accept it. Neither requires the entire wedding to be uploaded. What matters is retaining the point at which the apparent refusal becomes part of a verbal exchange. The lesson for Tujia video analysis is a question to pursue in the actual material: which line or response connects the visible gesture to its ritual purpose?

An emotional opening can be valuable because it offers an accessible point of entry. The problem arises when the presentation's interpretation becomes more expansive than its evidence. If an embrace is described as demonstrating the entire meaning of a tradition, an individual moment is made to carry a claim it cannot establish. A better question is whether the excerpt offers a route from recognizable feeling to the specific activity being shown.

That route can be brief. Identifying the relationship between the speakers, retaining a short response, or explaining the position of the song may be enough to change what a viewer can ask. The relevant comparison is not between an unedited event and a supposedly corrupt fragment. It is between different selections of information within the unavoidable limits of representation.

Close-ups make small expressions and movements visible. In a relational ritual, however, repeated close-ups of one person may remove the addressee from the frame. The recording then foregrounds an individual emotional display while leaving its communicative direction uncertain. This is a representational possibility, not evidence that creators generally prefer such a style.

A performance-centred reading asks how a camera position makes interaction recognizable. Are viewers able to identify who answers? Does the edit preserve the relation between an address and a response? Are surrounding participants treated as incidental background even when they take part in the exchange? These questions extend Bauman's (1975) attention to roles and events into the analysis of audiovisual selection. They do not prescribe a single camera technique.

Relational framing also limits overinterpretation of facial expression. Crying, smiling, or pausing cannot independently establish willingness, resistance, or coercion. The expression belongs to a particular moment, and the recording may not disclose its circumstances. Analysis should therefore separate what is visible from what is inferred about an individual's attitude.

Reusable formats can make an unfamiliar event easier to follow. They may also encourage different

practices to be presented through the same emotional sequence. The conceptual concern is whether a format retains the details that distinguish one practice from another. A recognizable narrative of family separation can offer accessibility while still requiring information about the particular song and its participants.

Platform scholarship provides reasons to investigate this possibility, not permission to presume its cause. A dramatic opening might reflect a creator's artistic choice, an imagined audience, a commercial objective, or expectations about recommendation. Bucher's (2017) distinction between algorithmic imaginaries and algorithmic workings is useful precisely because these explanations can diverge. Establishing a platform effect would require evidence beyond the appearance of the finished clip.

Similarly, circulation and cultural learning should be assessed separately. A video receiving many interactions can demonstrate attention within a particular collection context. It does not establish that viewers understood the words, learned the ritual sequence, or began participating in the practice. Those are different outcomes that require their own indicators.

4. Interpretation and Participation

Separation from family offers an understandable entry point into bridal lamentation. Yet a presentation organized entirely around that feeling can leave learned vocal form and relational exchange unexplained. The challenge is to connect a broadly recognizable experience to the local details through which it is expressed.

An explanation can accomplish this without becoming a lecture. It can name the person addressed, identify the wedding stage, and clarify one translated line. Such additions give the audience something to follow beyond an immediate emotional reaction. They also permit a different response: a viewer may appreciate the expression without accepting every social expectation associated with the practice.

This distinction keeps cultural appreciation from becoming an obligation to endorse a ritual. Understanding how a practice works and deciding whether one would participate in it are separate judgments. An effective explanation makes the former possible without pre-empting the latter.

The Nanhui passages discussed above also caution against reading every sung lament as the same kind of statement. Blessing relatives and cursing a matchmaker are different verbal acts even when both belong to a lament repertoire. If their words disappear beneath a sad instrumental track, the distinction becomes difficult to recover. The resulting clip can remain moving while making its speaker less articulate to the distant viewer. Preserving women's expression therefore entails preserving what they say and whom they address, alongside the feeling visible on their faces.

A critical interpretation can ask whether lyrics reproduce unequal expectations and whether participation is freely chosen. A heritage interpretation can ask how vocal knowledge is learned and valued. Neither should erase the other, and neither can determine the experience of a particular bride from a fragment of footage. The analysis must distinguish the description of a genre from testimony about an individual event.

This distinction also avoids treating women as interchangeable representatives of tradition. People can participate for different reasons and hold mixed views. A meaningful account would leave room for those differences rather than turning an emotional excerpt into proof of either unanimous attachment or collective rejection.

Comments can extend explanation by naming a location, questioning a subtitle, or describing another version of the practice. Following Howard's (2008) account of participatory media, such contributions can be studied as encounters between different sources of authority. Their existence does not guarantee a balanced conversation. Wang et al. (2024, Section 6.3) observed repetitive expressions of approval and limited sustained

negotiation in their heritage-video material. A busy comment section is therefore not necessarily a discussion that helps explain a practice.

The useful unit of analysis is a claim and its response, not simply a positive or negative reaction. A question about a lyric, an explanation from the publisher, and a correction by another user may reveal more about cultural interpretation than a count of approving comments. Their order and relationship matter because a later reply can qualify the meaning of the original statement.

Verification remains necessary. A user identifying as local may be knowledgeable, but the account alone does not establish expertise or consensus. Claims should be compared with independently documented material where possible. Different regional versions should not automatically be treated as contradictions, and uncertainty about an explanation should be recorded rather than resolved through its popularity.

Comments also have a sampling boundary. They represent people who chose to respond and whose responses were available under a particular ordering at a particular time. They do not represent everyone who watched the video. A study can examine the kinds of interpretation present in its material without converting that material into a measure of public opinion.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

These examples suggest a workable route for research conducted entirely online. A study would define a platform, publication interval, geographical scope, and set of search terms. It would distinguish wedding recordings, demonstrations, staged performances, and explanatory videos before comparing them. Reposted copies should be traced where possible so that several uploads of one recording are not counted as independent events.

The video record should be detailed enough for another reader to locate the episode being analysed: the public URL or identifier, creator, posting date, capture date, duration, and the relevant time span. A passage beginning with an address to the mother and ending with her answer should be logged as an exchange, rather than split into unrelated emotional moments. The researcher should note when a clip ends before a reply, when a voice continues outside the frame, and when a subtitle supplies information absent from the audible words. For each item, the study could also record whether speaker relationships are identifiable, whether an address and response remain connected, whether the original voice is audible, and whether subtitles distinguish translation from commentary. It could then analyse explanations in captions and reply threads, preserving their attribution. These features would indicate contextual information made available by the presentation. They would not, without additional audience evidence, measure understanding itself.

The collection process needs documentation alongside the video. Light et al. (2018) provide a starting point for analysing how an interface structures available actions. Duguay and Gold-Apel (2023) show why personalized recommendations complicate what a researcher can infer from a walkthrough. Accordingly, a study should record its collection route, account conditions, dates, and comment ordering. It should not describe the researcher's feed as a neutral inventory of the platform.

The framework is deliberately modest about causality. It can identify what a recording retains and how an explanation is offered. It cannot infer creator intention from editing alone, establish recommendation rules from popularity, or demonstrate offline ritual change from online representation. These boundaries allow an online study to make a substantive contribution without pretending to possess access it does not have.

For creators and cultural institutions, the main implication is to make provenance and relationships usable. A short description can identify whether an excerpt comes from a wedding, a teaching demonstration, or a cultural performance. General location and participant roles can be supplied without publishing a family's private details.

If a regional procedure is described, the description should identify its scope rather than present it as a universal ethnic rule.

Sound and translation require similar care. Original voices should remain accessible where a video claims to document lament songs. Translated lyrics and explanatory text should be distinguishable, and uncertain wording should not be silently repaired. Where possible, a practitioner or participant can explain the line or exchange being presented, with their words clearly attributed.

These practices do not require an unchanged or timeless tradition. Smith (2006) and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) both offer ways to understand heritage as active interpretation and production. The relevant question is whether changes in display remain open to explanation. A staged performance can convey knowledge when its purpose is clear; it should not be presented as unqualified evidence of an ordinary wedding.

Finally, public presentation involves people as well as cultural material. Agreement to a family recording does not automatically establish agreement to broad circulation of an intimate moment. Researchers should minimize exposure of ordinary participants and avoid unnecessary reproduction of identifying comments. Preserving context is not a justification for disclosing everything.

Tujia bridal lamentation brings the limits of screen-based interpretation into focus. Its visible emotion can be recognized immediately, while its verbal and relational meanings require further information. Short video therefore raises a question of contextual access: can viewers identify the relationship, follow the sung expression, and know whose explanation they are reading?

The present analysis establishes questions for such a study rather than a distribution of video types or measured audience effects. Its strongest evidence concerns the distinction between a visible emotion and a situated verbal act. A later analysis of identifiable recordings could examine how often the address, response, and explanatory material survive together. Conclusions about lived wedding practice would need evidence beyond the edited recording.

A useful heritage video need not explain an entire tradition. It does need to provide a sound basis for the claims it makes. Preserving an addressee, an audible response, a clearly translated line, or an attributed explanation can give a distant viewer a way to move from feeling toward understanding. That movement is a more specific and defensible aim than visibility alone.

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