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The Evolution of China's Cultural Digitization Policies and Their Implications: A Postprint Analysis of Policy Texts from 1994–2023

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Date: 2025-06-18T16:59:06+00:00

Abstract

Systematically reviewing cultural digitalization policies and analyzing their evolutionary logic facilitates exploration of how to advance high-quality development of cultural digitalization. This study takes 133 cultural digitalization policy documents issued at the national level from 1994 to 2023 as the analytical sample, conducts coding analysis of policy texts using NVivo 11 software, and summarizes four stages of policy evolution: the preliminary preparation stage supported by infrastructure construction (1994–2002), the multi-point layout stage anchored by key projects (2003–2010), the deepening implementation stage led by technological innovation (2011–2016), and the system construction stage centered on deep integration (2017–present). Through content and coding analysis of policy texts, the main logical thread of policy evolution is extracted, namely: policy concept: shifting from “single-point” to “systematic” design; policy structure: transitioning from “simple control-type” to “meta-governance”; policy process: transforming from “passive adaptation” to “forward-looking layout”. Based on the analysis of policy texts, recommendations are proposed: “policy concept: deepen the people-centered value orientation; policy structure: emphasize coordinated development of internal elements; policy process: introduce highly responsive agile governance”.

Full Text

Abstract

Understanding the evolution of cultural digitization policies and analyzing their developmental logic provides valuable insights for advancing high-quality cultural digitization. This study examines 67 national-level policy documents related to cultural digitization issued between 1994 and 2023. Using NVivo software for coding analysis, the policy evolution is divided into four distinct stages:

early preparation supported by infrastructure development (1994–2002), multi-point layout focused on key projects (2003–2010), deepening implementation driven by technological innovation (2011–2016), and system construction centered on deep integration (2017–present). Through content and coding analysis, three logical mainlines of policy evolution are identified: policy concept shifting from “single-point” to “systematic” design; policy structure transitioning from “simple control” to “meta-governance”; and policy process evolving from “passive adaptation” to “forward-looking layout.” Based on these findings, the study proposes: deepening the people-centered value orientation in policy concept; emphasizing coordinated development of internal elements in policy structure; and introducing highly responsive agile governance in policy process.

Keywords: Cultural digitization; Policy evolution; Thematic analysis

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has profoundly transformed human society, with the cultural sector experiencing particularly far-reaching impacts. Cultural digitization has become a crucial direction for cultural industry development and an important pathway for transforming and upgrading cultural undertakings. In 2022, the “Opinions on Promoting the Implementation of the National Cultural Digitization Strategy” elevated cultural digitization to a national strategic priority, making it essential for enhancing national cultural soft power and building a strong socialist cultural nation.

Existing research on cultural digitization primarily focuses on three areas. First, studies examine the role of digital technologies in cultural heritage protection, such as digital preservation of intangible cultural heritage and innovative digital display design from interactive narrative perspectives. Second, scholars analyze how digital technology transforms cultural development models, enabling fundamental innovation and optimization across cultural creation, production, and services. Third, research investigates digital governance improvements in the cultural sector. Regarding national cultural digitization strategy specifically, scholars have analyzed its connotations, key elements, and implementation pathways, offering valuable recommendations for China’s cultural digitization development.

However, systematic research tracing policy evolution through policy texts remains limited. This study addresses this gap by analyzing national cultural digitization policy documents to identify evolutionary patterns and extract logical mainlines, providing empirical support for future policy development.

1. Research Design

Policy text analysis serves as an important method for studying public policy discourse. As a carrier of policy communication, policy documents embed evolutionary trajectories and developmental logic within their textual structure,

discourse logic, and issuing authorities. This study employs thematic analysis, a qualitative research method developed by Braun and Clarke that involves searching for, analyzing, and reporting repeated patterns in data. The process involves: (1) open coding to decompose original texts and extract conceptual categories; (2) axial coding to cluster initial concepts into tree nodes; and (3) selective coding to identify core themes through high-level abstraction.

The policy sample comprises 67 national-level documents issued between 1994 and 2023, sourced from the Chinese Government Network, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and State Council portals. Using “cultural digitization” and “digital culture” as keywords, the search yielded relevant policies including guidelines, development plans, and strategic opinions. The timeline begins with China’s internet integration in 1994 and extends to the present, capturing the complete policy evolution trajectory.

2. Evolution of Cultural Digitization Policies

Based on thematic analysis of the 67 policy texts using NVivo, the evolution is divided into four stages, with reference point distributions reflecting distinct characteristics of each period.

2.1 Early Preparation Stage (1994–2002): Infrastructure Foundation

This initial stage began with China’s internet integration in 1994, when cultural digitization was still exploratory. The policy framework remained unconstructed, with unclear practical directions and relatively few policy documents. Policy discourse lacked clarity, though the state recognized the significance of integrating culture with information technology.

Policy measures focused primarily on technological dimensions, initially applying information technology to cultural products and services to enhance their technical content. The state vigorously developed integrated circuits and software industries, building advanced network capabilities. The “Tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development” emphasized developing high-speed broadband networks and promoting core digital technologies. The “2006–2020 National Informatization Development Strategy” proposed building advanced network culture and improving comprehensive information infrastructure, creating a favorable technological environment for cultural digitization.

Supply-side policy tools dominated this stage, with policy actors—primarily the State Council and former Ministry of Culture—providing infrastructure, public services, and other foundational elements. Though policy entities acted independently with limited inter-agency coordination, they laid the groundwork for future development.

2.2 Multi-Point Layout Stage (2003–2010): Key Project Implementation

During this period, cultural digitization began taking shape. Policy issuance increased significantly compared to the previous stage, with State Council and Ministry of Culture remaining primary actors while inter-agency joint issuance became more frequent. Policy discourse emphasized developing digital cultural industries and emerging cultural formats, encouraging digital network technologies to upgrade traditional cultural sectors.

The “National Cultural Industry Revitalization Plan” marked a milestone, elevating digital cultural industries to national strategic importance. Policy objectives clarified directions for cultural production digitization and cultural resource digitization. Major projects like the National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project (launched 2002) and the National Cultural Information Resource Database used modern information technology to digitize, process, and integrate cultural resources for public access via networks.

Supply-side tools remained primary, but environmental tools gained prominence. Policies addressed cultural industry development status, technological innovation capabilities, and intellectual property protection. The focus expanded to include cultural resource digitization, digital protection, and innovative dissemination methods.

2.3 Deepening Implementation Stage (2011–2016): Technology-Driven Innovation

This stage witnessed rapid growth in cultural digitization. Policy issuance increased dramatically, with joint issuance becoming more common. The policy environment showed significant innovation-driven characteristics, responding to the prominent integration of culture and technology.

The “Decision on Deepening Cultural System Reform” (2011) identified technological innovation as a critical engine for cultural development. Policy objectives focused on public digital culture, digital content services, and industry development. Key initiatives included building national knowledge resource databases, national cultural heritage databases, and elderly record digital archives. The “Guiding Opinions on Promoting Deep Integration of Culture and Technology” (2019) emphasized strengthening top-level design and accelerating the national cultural big data system.

Both supply-side and environmental policy tools were extensively used. Supply-side tools provided infrastructure, talent, and technological support, while environmental tools improved market conditions and promoted cultural-technological integration. Demand-side tools emerged to stimulate cultural consumption and expand international exchange.

2.4 System Construction Stage (2017–Present): Deep Integration Core

Cultural digitization entered a new phase of systematic development. Issuing authorities multiplied, with more frequent cross-ministerial collaboration. The 2022 “Opinions on Promoting Implementation of the National Cultural Digitization Strategy” provided comprehensive guidance, establishing cultural digitization as a national priority.

Policy objectives emphasized building a national cultural big data system, forming an integrated online-offline cultural service supply network, and developing new digital cultural consumption scenarios. The strategy aimed to coordinate the national cultural big data system, construct a cultural data security supervision system, and provide all-around guidance for cultural digitization practice.

Policy tools became more balanced across supply, environment, and demand categories. The systematic approach addressed foundational support, technological innovation, data security, and market development, reflecting mature policy design.

3. Logical Mainlines of Policy Evolution

Three interconnected mainlines characterize the policy evolution:

3.1 Policy Concept: From Single-Point to Systematic Design

Initially, policy conceptions were fragmented and exploratory, focusing on specific issues without holistic vision. As practice advanced, policy understanding deepened, evolving toward systematic, strategic frameworks. The fourth stage’s “National Cultural Digitization Strategy” exemplifies this shift, demonstrating comprehensive, forward-looking policy design that addresses long-term developmental challenges.

3.2 Policy Structure: From Simple Control to Meta-Governance

Early policy structure reflected simple control, with government directly managing cultural industries through administrative measures. As the cultural industry matured and diversified, the structure evolved toward meta-governance—characterized by multi-stakeholder participation, coordinated policy subjects, and interactive elements. Government transitioned from direct controller to facilitator and regulator, encouraging social forces to participate in public digital cultural services through public-private partnerships and collaborative governance models.

3.3 Policy Process: From Passive Adaptation to Forward-Looking Layout

The policy process initially focused on addressing immediate, concrete problems reactively. Over time, it shifted toward proactive, strategic planning that balances overall and local interests. This evolution reflects deeper cognitive understanding of cultural digitization and increasing emphasis on long-term, holistic solutions rather than piecemeal responses.

4. Implications and Recommendations

Based on the evolutionary analysis, three recommendations emerge:

4.1 Policy Concept: Deepen People-Centered Value Orientation

Cultural digitization must prioritize the people as value subjects, practice subjects, and evaluation subjects. Policies should respect public agency, meet diverse cultural needs, and ensure development outcomes are shared with and judged by the people. This requires addressing issues like unbalanced regional development and fragmented cultural data resources while enhancing multi-stakeholder collaboration and resource integration.

4.2 Policy Structure: Emphasize Coordinated Internal Development

As a comprehensive strategic project, cultural digitization requires coordinated development across all system components. Policy tools should be applied synergistically according to contextual needs, moving beyond single-tool reliance. Building a multi-stakeholder collaborative system with clear division of labor, information sharing, and efficient coordination is essential for addressing complex future scenarios.

4.3 Policy Process: Introduce Agile Governance

Cultural digitization policies face complexity and uncertainty that traditional governance models cannot adequately address. Agile governance—characterized by predictive capacity, flexibility, and forward-looking orientation—offers a solution. Its organizational elasticity and multi-stakeholder cooperation enhance policy adaptability, enabling rapid response to dynamic environmental demands and improving policy adjustment capabilities through data-driven monitoring and evaluation.

5. Conclusion

This study employs thematic analysis to examine 67 national cultural digitization policy documents, identifying four evolutionary stages and three logical mainlines of transformation. The analysis reveals how policy concept, structure, and process have matured alongside China's digital development.

The study has two limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on central-level policies, lacking analysis of local policy implementation. Second, thematic analysis involves researcher interpretation, which may introduce coding variations. Future research should incorporate local policy texts and employ multiple analytical methods to enhance robustness.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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