



Safeguarding the Living Cultural Vein: A Policy-Oriented Analysis of Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance and Renewal in China

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Abstract

This paper provides a policy-oriented overview of the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in China, examining it as a living carrier of national identity. While ICH is deeply rooted in China's 5000-year civilization—encompassing everything from Kunqu Opera to traditional tea-making—it currently faces significant dilemmas, including inheritance breakage, shrinking cultural spaces, and the tension between preservation and economic development. Drawing on a narrative review of Chinese laws and national policy reports, this study proposes a multidimensional safeguarding path integrating “productive protection”, school-based education, and the innovative synergy of culture and tourism. The analysis concludes that while creative transformation is essential for ensuring the sustainable vitality of China's cultural essence, careful attention must be paid to the trade-offs between modernization and cultural authenticity.

Subject Areas

Culture, History

Keywords

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Living Inheritance, Cultural Identity, Inheritance Dilemmas, Protection Paths (Creative Transformation and Innovative Development), Cultural Genes, National Spirit, Productive Protection, Integration of Culture and Tourism, Holistic Protection, Cultural Ecology

1. Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage, or ICH for short, is defined by the Law of the Peo-

ple's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage as the various forms of traditional cultural expression inherited by all ethnic groups and regarded as an integral part of their cultural heritage, as well as the relevant physical objects and sites associated with these forms of expression [1]. It covers an extensive range, including traditional oral literature, traditional music, dance, drama, folk art, calligraphy and painting, as well as traditional craftsmanship, medicine, calendars, traditional rituals, festival customs, traditional sports and entertainment, among others [2]. Unlike tangible cultural heritage, the core charm of ICH lies in its living nature. It exists by virtue of human beings, passed down through oral instruction and heart-to-heart transmission, master-apprentice inheritance, and family continuity [3]. It embodies the emotions, wisdom and craftsmanship of inheritors, and is constantly recreated over the years, thus retaining eternal vitality [4]. This article employs a narrative review approach to analyze the current state of ICH in China. The analysis is based on a systematic selection of national laws, such as the 2011 ICH Law, and official government reports from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. A central concept in this discussion is "Productive Protection" (生产性保护), which refers to a safeguarding method where ICH resources are transformed into cultural products through production and circulation, ensuring their vitality within contemporary economic systems. Similarly, "Holistic Protection" emphasizes preserving not only the heritage item itself but also the entire cultural ecology and social environment that sustains it.

2. Intangible Cultural Heritage Carries the History and Culture of Ethnic Groups

The Cultural Significance of ICH in China

Every item of ICH acts as a genetic code of national culture, carrying unique historical memories and values. It is a "living fossil" of history, recording the production and living styles, social features and human feelings of people in different eras and regions [5]. For example, the Kam Grand Choirs, with their unaccompanied polyphonic harmonies, are the most sincere expression of the Kam people's affection for nature formed in their long-term agricultural life. Another example is paper-cutting art, where folk artists create vivid patterns that condense the people's yearning for a better life into simple pieces of red paper. These cultural forms, including the Nadam Fair of the Mongolian people and the Thangka painting of the Tibetan people, form a pattern where multiple elements integrate into a unified whole, fostering national cohesion. These seemingly simple patterns are more than just decorations; they are the people's yearning for a better life and a condensation of folk art in agricultural civilization [6]. These ICH items transcend the barriers of time, allowing us to touch the life tracks of our ancestors, feel the warmth of history, and understand the consistent cultural vein of Chinese civilization [7].

ICH is also an important bond that unites national emotions and maintains cultural identity, serving as the spiritual foundation for forging a strong sense of

community for the Chinese nation [8]. China is a unified multi-ethnic country, and the 56 ethnic groups have created a rich and diverse array of ICH with distinct characteristics in the long course of history, jointly forming a pattern of Chinese culture where a hundred flowers bloom and multiple elements integrate into one whole. The Nadam Fair of the Mongolian people, the Muqam art of the Uyghur people, the Thangka painting of the Tibetan people, the silver ornament forging of the Miao people, the Torch Festival of the Yi people, and every other ethnic ICH item are treasures of national culture and important symbols of ethnic identity [5]. These cultural forms not only enable people of all ethnic groups to find a sense of belonging and identity, but also build a bridge of communication in the exchanges and integration among ethnic groups, promoting mutual understanding and respect, and uniting the centripetal force and cohesion of the Chinese nation [3]. Whether it is the traditional festivals celebrated across the country or the shared traditional virtues and folk rituals, they all endow the Chinese people with common cultural memories, laying a solid foundation for the national community in cultural identity [4].

In the fast-paced modern society, ICH still holds an irreplaceable contemporary value. It is an important source of cultural confidence and also provides spiritual nourishment and motivation for social development [7]. As material life becomes increasingly prosperous, people's demand for spiritual culture grows stronger, and ICH precisely offers a rich spiritual feast [9]. When we calm down to appreciate traditional opera and feel the stories and lingering charm within; when we experience pottery making with our own hands and savor the craftsmanship in our fingertips; when we observe traditional festival customs and spend reunion time with our families, we can all find spiritual consolation and enrichment in traditional culture. At the same time, the wisdom embodied in ICH can also provide enlightenment for the development of modern society: the health preservation concepts of traditional Chinese medicine are in line with the needs of modern healthy living; the astronomical knowledge and agricultural wisdom of the Twenty-Four Solar Terms still have guiding significance for modern agricultural production and ecological protection; the craftsmanship spirit of traditional handicrafts is exactly the value orientation needed in the current era that pursues quality and rejects impetuosity [5]. Protecting and inheriting ICH is to safeguard our cultural roots, ensuring that we always retain the national essence and confidence on the path of modernization and never lose our way [6].

3. Analysis of ICH Safeguarding

3.1. Dilemmas and Corresponding Paths

The Dilemma: Many ICH items rely on master-apprentice or family inheritance. However, younger generations today are more inclined toward modern professions, leaving elderly practitioners without successors. Veteran artists are often advanced in years, and without a new generation of learners, many folk traditions risk disappearing forever.

The Path: To address this, the government has improved the four-level list system (national, provincial, municipal, and county) and provides living subsidies to support representative inheritors. Crucially, ICH knowledge must be incorporated into the national education system. By inviting inheritors into classrooms and offering themed courses in primary and secondary schools, children can cultivate an awareness of cultural inheritance from an early age.

However, with the accelerated pace of modernization, the impact of globalization, and the rapid transformation of production and living styles, the survival and inheritance of ICH are facing unprecedented dilemmas¹. First and foremost is the crisis of inheritance breakage. Many ICH items rely on master-apprentice or family inheritance, yet young people today are more inclined to choose modern professions, and fewer are willing to settle down to learn the tedious and complex traditional craftsmanship [10]. Many veteran artists are advanced in years but struggle to find suitable inheritors, putting numerous ICH items at risk of being lost forever with the passing of their practitioners [11]. If some endangered folk literature and traditional craftsmanship cannot be rescued in a timely manner, they will disappear in the river of history forever, becoming an irreparable cultural regret.

Secondly, the cultural space where ICH thrives is gradually shrinking². Most ICH originated in the traditional agricultural and rural societies, and is closely linked to specific living scenes and cultural ecosystems [8]. Today, the rapid advancement of urbanization has led to a decrease in traditional villages and drastic changes in the rural cultural ecosystem, depriving many folk activities and traditional craftsmanship of their original living soil [7]. For instance, local operas that were regularly performed during festivals in the past now have few fixed performance venues and audiences; some traditional handicrafts have been replaced by mass-produced industrial products and have gradually faded out of daily life, falling into obscurity [10].

3.2. Shrinking Cultural Spaces and Digital Preservation

The Dilemma: Rapid urbanization has destroyed traditional villages, depriving folk activities of their “living soil”. Local operas that were once central to community life now lack fixed venues and audiences, while traditional handicrafts are frequently replaced by mass-produced industrial goods.

The Path: Following the “Holistic Protection” principle, protection must extend to the entire cultural ecosystem. This involves using textual, video, and digital technologies to create comprehensive archives and databases. These digital records preserve the craftsmanship processes and performance forms, ensuring they are not lost even as the physical environment changes.

Furthermore, the imbalance between protection and development is prominent³. Some regions have misunderstandings in ICH protection: either they over-

¹https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2008-03/28/content_5937.htm.

²https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2008-03/28/content_5937.htm.

³https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2008-03/28/content_5937.htm.

develop ICH for economic interests, altering it beyond recognition and eroding its original cultural connotation and essence; or they adopt a rigid protection approach, isolating ICH from modern life, which causes it to lose vitality and fail to adapt to the development of the times [11]. At the same time, the public's understanding of ICH is insufficient. Many people regard ICH as "old antiques" disconnected from modern life, lacking the awareness to take the initiative to understand and participate in its inheritance, which further complicates the path of ICH inheritance [4].

Faced with these numerous dilemmas in ICH inheritance, we cannot stand by and watch the loss of traditional culture. Instead, we must take on the responsibility of protection and inheritance with a respectful heart and pragmatic actions, enabling ICH to bloom with new vitality in the new era [8]. Protection is the prerequisite for ICH inheritance. We must adhere to the principle of "protection as the priority, rescue as the first step, rational utilization, and inheritance and development", and first carry out emergency protection for endangered ICH items [1]. For those endangered items, we should organize professional forces to conduct comprehensive investigations and systematic records, use textual, video, digital and other technical means to fully preserve the craftsmanship processes, performance forms and cultural connotations of ICH, and establish a sound archive and database for ICH to prevent these precious cultural heritages from vanishing [2]. Meanwhile, we should improve the four-level national, provincial, municipal and county ICH list system, strengthen support for representative inheritors by providing living subsidies and assistance for craftsmanship inheritance, and encourage inheritors to accept apprentices and pass on their skills, so as to solve the problem of inheritance breakage.

3.3. Tensions in Development and Productive Protection

The Dilemma: There is a sharp imbalance between rigid protection and economic utilization. Over-development for short-term profit can erode the original cultural essence, while a purely "museum-style" approach can isolate ICH from modern life, causing it to lose its vitality.

The Path: The solution lies in "Productive Protection"—the creative transformation of ICH into products that fit modern aesthetics. Success cases include integrating Suzhou embroidery into modern fashion or innovating traditional tea-making techniques to appeal to younger consumers. This allows ICH to retain its traditional charm while remaining functionally relevant.

4. Discussion and Limitations

While these safeguarding paths offer a roadmap, they are not without trade-offs. School-based transmission may standardize rituals, potentially stripping them of their social nuances. Similarly, tourism integration risks creating "staged authenticity". State-led digitalization, while essential for archiving, could inadvertently "freeze" a living culture into a static version. Future efforts must balance top-

down policy with bottom-up community autonomy to maintain a resilient cultural ecology.

5. Conclusions

Living inheritance is the core of ICH [3]. We need to let ICH step out of the “boudoir” and integrate into modern life, truly realizing the vision of “seeing the people, the objects and the life” in ICH [8]. ICH is not an exhibit kept on a high shelf; only by integrating into daily life can it maintain lasting vitality [6]. On the one hand, we should promote the integration of ICH into schools and communities, incorporate ICH knowledge into the national education system, offer ICH-themed courses in primary and secondary schools, and invite ICH inheritors to enter the classroom, allowing children to come into contact with and understand traditional culture from an early age and cultivate the awareness of cultural inheritance. We should also hold ICH experience activities and folk customs events in communities, enabling residents to experience the charm of ICH up close and making ICH an integral part of mass cultural life [5]. On the other hand, we should advance the creative transformation and innovative development of ICH [9]. On the basis of adhering to the core connotation of ICH, we should innovate and improve traditional craftsmanship and cultural forms in combination with modern aesthetics and living needs [10]. For example, integrating traditional Suzhou embroidery with modern clothing and home design to create fashionable cultural and creative products; combining traditional tea-making techniques with modern tea culture to develop tea products that cater to the tastes of young people; and infusing modern elements into local operas to adapt new plays that reflect contemporary life [5]. In this way, ICH can retain its traditional charm while fitting in with modern life, and walk back into the public vision [7].

At the same time, we must balance the relationship between protection and utilization to realize the sustainable inheritance of ICH through rational utilization⁴. ICH can be deeply integrated with the cultural and tourism industry: we can create ICH-themed tourist routes and experience scenic spots, allowing tourists to experience ICH craftsmanship and feel folk culture while traveling, which not only boosts local economic development but also expands the influence of ICH [10]. However, such integration and utilization must be based on protecting the authenticity of ICH [2]. We must resolutely put an end to excessive commercialization and vulgar transformation, safeguard the cultural roots and spiritual core of ICH, and avoid damaging its core values for short-term interests [1].

The government should play a leading role by improving the laws, regulations and policy support for ICH protection, increasing financial investment and building inheritance platforms [1]. Inheritors should uphold their craftsmanship, delve into their skills with dedication, actively pass on their knowledge and skills, and shoulder the mission of inheritance [4]. Social organizations and the media should strengthen the publicity of ICH, popularize ICH knowledge and tell good ICH

⁴https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2008-03/28/content_5937.htm.

stories through documentaries, short videos, exhibitions and other forms, changing the public's stereotyped impression of ICH [5]. Every ordinary person can become a guardian and disseminator of ICH, taking the initiative to understand, respect and inherit ICH, and making the protection of ICH a social consensus and conscious action [3].

Intangible cultural heritage is a splendid treasure of Chinese civilization, the root and soul of the nation [6]. It carries the past and connects the future [7]. Protecting ICH does not mean clinging to tradition and standing still, but enabling the ancient culture to find new vitality in the new era, allowing the national cultural vein to continue, and passing on the national spirit from generation to generation [9].

As time flows, the cultural vein endures. On the journey of building a culturally strong country, we must always hold a heart of awe and love for traditional culture, and with the attitude of careful protection, patient inheritance and innovative craftsmanship, let every item of ICH break through difficulties and be passed down from generation to generation [8]. May the cultural genes flowing in the blood of the nation shine more brightly in the new era, and may Chinese civilization remain vibrant and ever-lasting through inheritance and innovation, providing an inexhaustible source of spiritual power for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation [4]. According to the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage" and the authoritative guidance released by Xinhuanet and the Government Network of China, to ensure the continuous transmission of intangible cultural heritage, a systematic protection system needs to be established, and the combination of "upholding tradition and innovation" and "activating and utilizing" should be adhered to [1].

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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