

# Heritage on the margins: paper-cutting, commodification and intangible cultural heritage in Shanghai

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the dynamics of intangible cultural heritage (hereafter 'ICH') commodification through a case study of paper-cutting in the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City. While large-scale state and corporate investments initially sought to transform heritage into a cultural theme park, the project ultimately collapsed, leaving practitioners at the margins to navigate survival without institutional support. Drawing on fieldwork, including participant observation in workshops and in-depth interviews with paper-cutting inheritors and enthusiasts, the study highlights how new materials, technologies and market strategies are mobilised to sustain creative practices outside official frameworks.

Rather than treating commodification solely as a threat or failure,

the paper conceptualises it as a complex, double-edged process of decontextualisation and recontextualisation. By foregrounding the agency of marginal actors, it demonstrates that unofficial and often overlooked practices reveal how heritage domains are continuously reshaped through negotiation, resilience and creativity. In a context characterised by an 'abundance' of heritage, the Chinese case further illustrates how UNESCO's ICH framework is appropriated in a state-driven context, offering insights of global relevance for rethinking the future of heritage studies.

## Keywords

Paper-cutting, commodification, heritage-making, marginal actors, China

## Introduction

As Rodney Harrison has observed, we live in an age characterised by an 'abundance' of heritage relating to the past (Harrison 2013, 1). Since the adoption of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter 'the 2003 Convention') by UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage (hereafter 'ICH') has been institutionalised as a matter of global concern and has expanded rapidly on a worldwide scale.

Scholars have conceptualised this institutionalisation of traditional culture through a range of analytical frameworks, including 'metacultural production'

(Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004), 'folklorisation' (Hafstein 2018) and 'decontextualisation' (Bortolotto and Demgenski 2023). Despite their terminological differences, these approaches converge on a shared concern: the ways in which cultural practices are reconstituted as objects of governance, representation and intervention within heritage regimes.

One significant dimension that has become increasingly prominent as a consequence of this institutionalisation is the commercialisation of ICH. The incorporation of ICH into market systems as an economic resource has become increasingly commonplace. In this process, many

elements of ICH are progressively detached from their original social and cultural contexts through processes of heritagisation and reconfigured as commodities through production, circulation and use.

At the same time, the commercialisation of ICH remains a subject of ongoing debate. International normative frameworks emphasise that such transformations should not undermine the social and cultural contexts from which heritage practices emerge. The Operational Directives for the Implementation of the 2003 Convention stress that safeguarding must be compatible with sustainable development, while explicitly cautioning against decontextualisation or denaturalisation of heritage (UNESCO 2024, 81). In addition, the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted in 2015 underline that forms of 'decontextualisation, commodification and misrepresentation' that fail to benefit the communities concerned may pose significant risks to the sustainable development of ICH (UNESCO 2024, 144). This concern may be understood as reflecting an implicit emphasis on preserving the 'authentic' value and meaning of cultural practices, particularly in contexts where such practices are undergoing transformation or decline. As Bortolotto and Demgenski argue, however, while UNESCO discourse often frames decontextualisation – particularly in relation to 'over-commercialisation' – as producing negative outcomes, the commodification accompanying such processes is, in practice, difficult to avoid and may even be intrinsic to the implementation of the 2003 Convention itself (Bortolotto and Demgenski 2023, 162–163).

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a fundamental tension between the practical inevitability of commodification and the normative imperative to safeguard the social integrity of heritage practices. Within institutionalised safeguarding regimes, local cultural practitioners are often positioned as subjects in need of protection, yet not necessarily as beneficiaries of these processes. In some cases, safeguarding practices may even contribute to the exclusion of practitioners and communities from the production and interpretation of heritage, resulting in forms of disempowerment (You 2015, 264). Concurrently, however, the expansion of heritage regimes has been accompanied by the growth of heritage-related markets, potentially opening up new spaces for participation and negotiation.

This tension points to a central analytical question: to what extent, and under what conditions, might bottom-up heritage practices be transformed into processes of empowerment, enabling practitioners to move from passive recipients to active agents in the production and negotiation of heritage? This article argues that the commodification of heritage should not be understood solely as a process controlled by institutional authorities. Rather, in practice, decontextualisation also entails forms of creative negotiation and transformation, through which heritage may be reintegrated into contemporary social life in new ways, giving rise to processes of recontextualisation.

Particularly within governance frameworks centred on institutional recognition, many practitioners who lack formal certification are positioned at the margins of the heritage system. Yet these actors are not merely passive recipients of institutional arrangements; rather, they actively respond to and negotiate such conditions in practice. Their role in the ongoing construction and reinterpretation of heritage, however, remains insufficiently theorised and empirically examined, especially in relation to everyday processes of commodification.

To address this gap, this paper shifts attention to practitioners operating outside formal systems of recognition and certification, examining the possibilities for bottom-up participation in heritage-making under conditions of institutional constraint. China provides a particularly significant empirical context for exploring these dynamics. As the country with the largest number of UNESCO inscriptions worldwide, and one in which ICH has increasingly been integrated into state-led cultural and economic strategies (Gao 2021, 19), China makes these tensions particularly visible, as the large-scale implementation of UNESCO's ICH framework within a state-led system intensifies the interaction between institutional governance, market expansion and everyday heritage practice.

Empirically, the paper focuses on Chinese paper-cutting (*jian zhi*, 剪纸), a traditional art form inscribed on UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (hereafter 'the Representative List') in 2009. As of 2026, data from the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network indicate that a total of 56 paper-cutting-related items have been inscribed on the national representative list across 22 provinces.<sup>1</sup> Widely practised across China, paper-cutting involves a large number of

practitioners, many of whom remain unrecognised within official ICH frameworks or occupy marginal positions within them. Although these practitioners often lack institutional legitimacy and access to state support, their activities remain deeply embedded in local social life and may offer alternative pathways for the transmission and transformation of heritage.

Based on fieldwork conducted in 2023 at the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with artisans and relevant stakeholders, this study examines how marginal paper-cutting practitioners navigate the pressures of commercialisation. It argues that their engagement with new materials, technologies and markets constitutes not only a strategy of livelihood, but also a form of cultural recontextualisation that challenges dominant understandings of heritage and offers new insights into the dynamic transformation of ICH under conditions of commercialisation.

## Background literature: opportunity or crisis?

### *Commercialisation of ICH in China*

In the Chinese context, the commercialisation of ICH is embedded within a distinctive configuration of state-led governance and rapidly expanding heritage markets. According to data released by the Ministry of Finance of the People's Republic of China, the special fund established for the management and safeguarding of national ICH increased from CNY6.6077 billion (approximately US\$0.96 billion) in 2016 to CNY8.2598 billion (approximately US\$1.20 billion) in 2025.<sup>2</sup> This increase reflects the high level of state attention and resource allocation directed towards ICH safeguarding.

Supported by this strong financial commitment, the system of ICH safeguarding has become increasingly institutionalised, drawing diverse actors into processes of production, circulation and use. For instance, the 2023 Report on E-commerce Consumption of Intangible Cultural Heritage notes that the transaction value of ICH-related products exceeded CNY100 billion for the first time in 2023, reaching CNY107.32 billion (approximately US\$15.5 billion).<sup>3</sup> Such figures indicate the significant economic value generated by ICH in contemporary China.

Within this context, the Chinese heritage-making process is closely entangled with both local and central governmental organisations. Heritage is legitimised and authorised only after undergoing official review and modification. The Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan fa*, 中华人民共和国非物质文化遗产法), enacted in 2011, explicitly states that the state shall make use of ICH resources and support the development of cultural products and services.<sup>4</sup> In other words, through legislation and institutional management, the central government has gradually legitimised a policy of treating ICH as a resource for economic development. With the deepening of this system, the commercial value of ICH has been increasingly emphasised.

According to Yujie Zhu and Christina Maags, the heritage-making process in China can be divided into five major stages: institutionalisation, authentication, recognition, museumification and commercialisation (Zhu and Maags 2020, 128). Following legislative codification, state agencies establish criteria for heritage recognition and compile official lists. Once inscribed, heritage is framed as socially and educationally valuable, promoted to the public, and subsequently incorporated into museum display and market-oriented activities (Zhu and Maags 2020, 128). In this sense, heritage is brought into visibility under the banner of safeguarding, while simultaneously being transformed into a commodity with exchange value.

Empirical studies further illustrate how these processes reshape local cultural practices. Drawing on fieldwork in Nanjing, Zhu and Maags identify the 'dilemma' inherent in redefining traditional culture as ICH, particularly in relation to cultural bearers (Zhu and Maags 2020, 103). Official recognition enables certain designated inheritors to demonstrate their skills and sell their products in state-supported venues, thereby facilitating their incorporation into market systems.

At the same time, however, the expansion of commercialisation has, in some cases, encouraged the proliferation of so-called fake ICH products, which undermines the interests of practitioners – especially those operating outside state sponsorship – and raises concerns about the regulation of heritage markets. Local governments, while actively promoting heritage industries for economic development, may at times adopt a permissive stance towards such practices, further complicating

the governance of heritage commercialisation (Zhu and Maags 2020, 95–102).

This tension highlights the uneven distribution of opportunities and risks within heritage economies. While some practitioners benefit from institutional recognition and market integration, others – particularly those excluded from official systems – face precarious conditions and limited access to resources.

Taken together, existing studies, particularly those by Zhu and Maags, demonstrate that the commercialisation of ICH in China is closely shaped by state-led institutional frameworks, which both enable and constrain cultural practices. While these studies do acknowledge the presence of practitioners operating beyond formal systems of recognition, their analyses tend to focus more extensively on officially recognised actors and institutional processes. Consequently, the everyday practices and strategies of marginal actors remain relatively underexplored. This suggests the need for further empirically grounded and theoretically informed investigations into how such actors negotiate heritage practices in everyday contexts.

### ***Research gap: marginal actors and negotiation***

Existing studies on ICH commercialisation in China have primarily focused on institutional frameworks and macro-level transformations. Paper-cutting, the focus of this paper, exemplifies the decontextualisation of a cultural practice that is reorganised and transformed through heritage institutions. Among the most influential studies, Caroline Bodolec analyses the nomination process for inscription on the Representative List through a case study of paper-cutting practices in Shaanxi province. While demonstrating how UNESCO's ICH principles stimulated the localisation of cultural policy and legal frameworks in China, Bodolec also highlights the political choices made at each stage of the process, as well as the limited and often superficial involvement of local residents and practitioners (Bodolec 2012, 261).

Taking a broader analytical perspective, Tomoko Niwa examines a diverse range of actors involved in the heritagisation of paper-cutting, including intellectuals and artists who intervene as institutional experts, local women participating in folk art groups, and villagers who become marginalised in the course of heritage-making. Her detailed ethnography of Yan'an prefecture in Shaanxi province provides a nuanced account of how paper-cutting

practices are transformed under heritage regimes (Niwa 2016). What these studies collectively reveal is that, within the context of heritage institutions, paper-cutting practices have largely been shaped through top-down interventions led by governments and experts.

Within these institutionalised processes, traditional cultural practices are often reconstructed as manageable and governable objects, and the authority to interpret their meaning is concentrated in the hands of institutional actors. This phenomenon is closely related to the mechanisms described in the concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (hereafter 'AHD'), whereby the state and experts define and represent what counts as 'heritage' (Smith 2006). Under this framework, practitioners and communities not formally recognised by the system are often marginalised or excluded from the production, interpretation and negotiation of heritage.

Nevertheless, recent scholarship has increasingly complicated AHD and state-centred narratives, highlighting bottom-up perspectives that foreground the agency of cultural practitioners (Zhu 2015; Maags 2018). These studies suggest that practitioners are not merely passive recipients of institutional 'treatment' but are active participants in the production and interpretation of heritage. In other words, although heritage regimes constitute a top-down governance structure, they also leave space for individuals to negotiate, reinterpret and adapt practices according to their own strategies and circumstances.

From this perspective, it becomes particularly important to examine how marginal actors – those operating at the margins of formal heritage recognition systems – negotiate heritage practices in everyday contexts. This paper conceptualises these actors as occupying the 'margins' of heritage and focuses on how they engage creatively with heritage practices. By studying the concrete practices of these marginal groups, the paper explores the ways in which actors participate from the bottom up in heritage production, negotiate meanings, and actively mobilise heritage for their own social and cultural purposes.

### ***Case context: Disneyised heritage spaces and marginal practitioners***

The uneven distribution of recognition and resources within heritage regimes becomes particularly visible in

commercialised heritage spaces in China. Heritage theme parks and large exhibition spaces provide an illustrative lens through which to observe the commercialisation of ICH.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett famously described heritage and tourism as 'collaborative industries' in which cultural practices are transformed into consumable experiences (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 371). Building on this insight, scholars have analysed how heritage sites increasingly resemble themed environments designed for consumption. In China, the rapid expansion of heritage markets has led to the emergence of large-scale exhibition spaces, such as heritage parks and museums, where diverse ICH elements are assembled, displayed and performed for tourists. These sites often reconfigure dynamic cultural practices into staged spectacles, further intensifying processes of decontextualisation (Bortolotto and Demgenski 2023, 164–165; Zhu and Maags 2020, 132). Shisei Kimura draws on Bryman's concept of 'Disneyisation' to describe these developments, emphasising the standardisation, theming and commodification of heritage (Kimura 2020, 174–175). However, rather than treating Disneyisation solely as a theoretical critique, this study approaches such spaces as an empirical context in which commercialisation processes become particularly visible.

Importantly, Disneyised heritage spaces are not always sustainable. The case of an early intangible cultural heritage-themed development in Chengdu, the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Theme Park (*Zhongguo Feiwuzhi Wenhua Yichan Zhuti Gongyuan*, 中国非物质文化遗产主题公园),<sup>5</sup> which was abandoned only a few years after its opening,<sup>6</sup> illustrates the fragility of large-scale commercial heritage projects. While existing research has focused on the spectacularisation of heritage, less attention has been paid to what happens when such projects decline or fail.

This context is especially relevant for understanding the position of marginal practitioners, who operate at the intersection of institutional frameworks and unstable market environments. By situating this study within such spaces, the paper examines how marginal practitioners negotiate market pressures, reinterpret cultural practices, and engage creatively with heritage under conditions of uncertainty. This perspective enables the paper to move beyond analyses of spectacle and to foreground the lived experiences of practitioners operating within and beyond

such commercialised environments.

## Research aims and approaches

Building on the above problematisation, this paper examines the case of the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City, focusing on how heritage bearers and associated actors, positioned at the margins of institutional frameworks and without large-scale capital investment or government support, confronted challenges and sought to sustain their practices. Particular attention is given to how these actors, even when displaced from their original contexts, created new practices of paper-cutting through commodification, experimented with new materials and techniques, and turned these practices into viable livelihoods. The study does not aim to make normative judgements about ICH commercialisation but seeks to understand the processes and impacts of commercialisation from the perspective of peripheral actors.

This section outlines the methods and approaches applied in this study, describing how empirical data were collected and analysed. Empirical data are drawn from long-term fieldwork on folk art paper-cutting in Shanghai, conducted in August–September 2017, August–September 2019, October–December 2022 and February 2023–March 2024. During this period, the author conducted interviews with state-, municipal- and district-level inheritors and participated in community workshops and local events, which provided a broad understanding of the transmission and practice of Shanghai paper-cutting.

Within this larger research context, the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City serves as a focused case study. Although fieldwork at the site was brief, conducted from 10 to 12 August 2023, it employed a multi-method approach combining immersive participant observation, semi-structured interviews, follow-up tracking, and consultation of media reports and policy documents.<sup>7</sup> With the facilitation of workshop participants and local enthusiasts, the author attended workshops, lived and trained alongside participants, and observed how paper-cutting techniques were taught, adapted and commodified (Figure 1). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two core instructors and two participants, focusing on daily practices, engagement with heritage policies, interactions with market opportunities, and reflections on the tensions between tradition and commercialisation. Follow-up



**Figure 1**  
A tote bag created by the author during the workshop using new paper-cutting materials, intended for everyday use.  
Source: Photo by the author.

interviews with two participants were conducted on 19 September 2023 and 27 January 2024 to track changes in their practices over time. Media reports and publicly available information were consulted to contextualise the workshop activities and the trajectory of the site.

To situate these practices within broader governance frameworks, relevant policy documents and regulations were consulted, including the Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage, municipal heritage management plans, and reports issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. In this way, the study was able to examine how top-down institutional frameworks and political strategies shape the opportunities, constraints and recognition of paper-cutting practices.

This combined approach, integrating long-term fieldwork, focused short-term observation, follow-up interviews, media analysis and policy review, enables a detailed understanding of how marginal actors navigate the intersections of heritage, market pressures and institutional frameworks, while highlighting the experiences of actors often excluded from formal recognition.

## Case study

### *The Disneyisation of heritage and its collapse: the emergence of the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City*

In 2015, Zhongfa Holdings Group Co., Ltd, a company primarily engaged in industrial investment, announced

plans to redevelop an outlet complex of approximately 400,000 square metres in Fengjing town, Jinshan district, Shanghai, into the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City. With an investment totalling CNY3 billion (approximately US\$0.43 billion), the project envisioned a cultural tourism hub integrating intangible heritage experiences, exhibitions and trade, alongside themed restaurants and accommodation facilities (Wang 2016, 62).

Among these initiatives, the China Paper-Cutting Museum (*Zhongguo Jianzhi bowuguan*, 中国剪纸博物馆), with a total floor area exceeding 5,000 square metres, was positioned as one of the core projects.<sup>8</sup> Designed as a multifunctional cultural venue, it combined a Paper-Cutting Experience Hall (Hall A), a Paper-Cutting Museum (Hall B) and a Paper-Cutting Training Center (Hall C). This integrated space not only served as a museum to collect and display paper-cuttings but also functioned as a consumption site, where visitors could participate in workshops and purchase products. Unlike standardised souvenir shops in Shanghai's tourist districts, the museum explicitly showcased features that resonated with Alan Bryman's four dimensions of Disneyisation – namely, theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising, and performative labour (Bryman 2004).

Interestingly, the establishment and operation of the China Paper-Cutting Museum in Shanghai did not primarily involve local paper-cutting inheritors from the Shanghai region, but rather practitioners brought in from other areas. In other words, the museum itself can be understood as a product of decontextualisation, representing cultural practices removed from their original geographic and social contexts. This observation is consistent with insights from this author's long-term fieldwork on Shanghai paper-cutting, conducted between 2017 and 2024, which reveals how paper-cutting practices have been increasingly transformed and adapted within urban and institutional spaces.

According to UNESCO's official ICH website, paper-cutting as heritage is primarily described as a technique transmitted by women, typically from mothers to daughters over extended periods, and historically practised most intensively within rural households.<sup>9</sup> However, in the context of rapid urbanisation and the consolidation of heritage regimes, paper-cutting in Shanghai can no longer be understood solely through this rural, domestic model of transmission. Instead, contemporary Shanghai

paper-cutting exemplifies the ways in which heritage is recontextualised and made legible to new audiences, as inheritors, administrators and commercial actors negotiate between tradition, artistic innovation and urban market logics.

Today, within the heritage regime, officially recognised 'Shanghai-style Paper-Cutting (*Shanghai Jianzhi*, 上海剪纸)' encompasses a range of cultural practices that were nominated between 2007 and 2019 by seven district-level transmission sites and subsequently inscribed as municipal-level ICH.<sup>10</sup> These transmission sites include professional institutions, subdistrict administrative offices, and privately operated cultural companies founded by artists. This configuration demonstrates how paper-cutting practices within Shanghai's metropolitan space have been endowed with artistic, public and commercial value, in contrast to their historically domestic and localised forms. Insights from long-term fieldwork indicate that this urban and institutional embedding reshapes daily practices, teaching methods and transmission strategies, exemplifying broader patterns of heritage decontextualisation and the reconfiguration of traditional skills within metropolitan contexts.

The China Paper-Cutting Museum exemplifies these dynamics in practice. Ambitious inheritor You Cai, originally from rural Suzhou in Anhui province, together with her commercial partner, paper-cutting entrepreneur Wang Lang, occupies central roles in the museum's activities. You Cai, formerly a factory worker, began her professional engagement with paper-cutting after meeting Wang Lang in Yiwu, Zhejiang, in 2007. 'After meeting Wang Lang, I no longer wished to return to the monotonous factory line. Paper-cutting gave my life a true sense of meaning,' You recalled.<sup>11</sup>

Yiwu is globally recognised as a hub for inexpensive commodities. There, You, with Wang's support, came to understand the commercial potential of paper-cutting. In 2009, she established the Anhui Suzhou You Cai Paper-Cutting Art Co., Ltd, with backing from local authorities, employing rural women and people with disabilities in the production and sale of paper-cuttings. In 2014, she was officially recognised as a municipal-level bearer of Yongqiao Paper-Cutting (*Yongqiao Jianzhi*, 埭桥剪纸),<sup>12</sup> which further enhanced her commitment to commercialisation. When the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City project was launched in 2016, You



**Figure 2**  
Poster of the 'First Ten Masters Paper-Cutting Exhibition', held in 2016 at the China Paper-Cutting Museum.  
Source: [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/F2lVnDFLS\\_mZ7wzmC71ljQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/F2lVnDFLS_mZ7wzmC71ljQ).

and Wang seized the opportunity to establish the China Paper-Cutting Museum.

Initially, the museum flourished under their leadership. They collected works from renowned paper-cutting artists across key regions such as Zhejiang, Shaanxi, Hebei and Hunan, ultimately amassing a collection of more than 1000 items.<sup>13</sup> The museum not only fostered exchanges with artists nationwide but also collaborated with local bearers of Shanghai-style Paper-Cutting. For example, in 2016 it hosted a month-long exhibition, the 'First Ten Masters Paper-Cutting Exhibition', which featured nationally acclaimed artists including Shanghai municipal bearers<sup>14</sup> (Figure 2).

Yet this seemingly successful endeavour soon faced financial collapse.<sup>15</sup> As Zhongfa Holdings encountered capital shortages, the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City fell into crisis. According to Wang Lang, 'The Fengjing government wanted to maintain only two projects, the China Folk Shadow Play Museum and the China Paper-Cutting Museum. But with no concrete support, the entire site was seized by the bank, and no buyer has been found.'<sup>16</sup>

Once drawing thousands of participants and visitors,



**Figure 3**  
Interior of the China Paper-Cutting Museum in 2023, showing a large number of paper-cutting works alongside chairs stacked haphazardly on the floor.  
Source: Photo by the author.

the museum now lies largely abandoned (Figure 3). The withdrawal of investment forced practitioners previously operating under state- and capital-supported conditions to explore new strategies for sustaining their work. The collapse of the site thus exemplifies the precarity inherent in the commercialisation of heritage and highlights the vulnerability of actors positioned at the margins of institutional support.

### ***Paper-cutting commercialisation as a strategy for survival: innovation through new materials and technologies***

In contemporary China's market economy, the commodification of folk art has become an unavoidable phenomenon, as noted by many scholars (Wang 2007; Zhang and Zhou 2012; Zhao 2019; Ji and Chen 2019). In 2009, Zhou Heping, then Vice Minister of Culture, formally advanced the concept of 'productive protection (*shengchanxing baohu*, 生产性保护)', thereby legitimising, at the institutional level, the commercialisation of ICH. Within this context, ICH practices in China have been compelled to adapt to market logics. However, in the process of entering this new economic framework, ICH itself has been subject to constant transformation. For example, Shaanxi Fengxiang clay figurines (*Shaanxi fengxiang nisu*, 陕西凤翔泥塑), a national-level ICH item, traditionally suffered from fragility, cracking and fading colours. To meet market demand, producers innovated by mixing cotton and glutinous rice into the clay, creating a new form of figurine that 'does not break when dropped' (Zhang and Zhou 2012, 118). Similarly, in the case of Suzhou embroidery (*Suzhou suxiu*, 苏州苏绣), also recognised as

national-level ICH, the introduction of machine embroidery has led to the diversification of patterns and styles (Ji and Chen 2019, 61). Against this backdrop, paper-cutting, too, has come under the influence of marketisation.

Paper-cutting has similarly been shaped by these processes. As discussed earlier, You Cai, originally from a rural village in Suzhou, Anhui province, began as no more than a paper-cutting enthusiast. During her childhood, she was captivated by elderly village women crafting embroidered cloth shoes, in which paper cutouts served as patterns for embroidery designs. Because of family poverty and the scarcity of materials, You repurposed discarded newspapers, candy wrappers and even torn leather garments as makeshift materials for paper-cutting.<sup>17</sup> This formative experience demonstrates that she never received professional training under master paper-cutters and stood outside the recognised paper-cutting art world. Consequently, she cultivated an unusually flexible approach, viewing almost any paper-like material as suitable for paper-cutting.

You Cai's career took a decisive turn in 2007 when she met the paper-cutting merchant Wang Lang in Yiwu, Zhejiang province, home to one of the world's largest wholesale markets. Exposure to Yiwu's bustling commercial environment revealed the potential of paper-cutting as both a cultural practice and a marketable commodity. Immersed in a context of constant innovation, You began experimenting with new materials and techniques. In around 2016, she applied the then-maturing technique of heat-transfer printing to paper-cutting, creating a silk-like fabric material suitable for paper-cutting adaptations. This hybrid craft was named 'silk paper-cutting (*sibo jianzhi*, 丝帛剪纸)' by her business partner, Wang Lang. Initially, however, silk paper-cutting remained confined to limited uses, being exhibited and sold within the China Paper-Cutting Museum, incorporated into tote bags and T-shirts, or used in live demonstrations – without being scaled into mass-market products.

The financial crisis that impacted the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City dramatically altered this situation. In 2023, You and Wang, together with five paper-cutting enthusiasts, founded the Shanghai Sibole Cultural Creative Co., Ltd (*Shanghai sibo wenhua chuanguyi youxian gongsi*, 上海思帛文化创意有限公司). The company centred its operations on producing and selling do-it-yourself silk paper-cutting material packs, while also



**Figure 4**  
Process of applying silk paper-cutting.  
Source: Photo and digital editing by the author.

offering customised products such as tote bags and garments. In this method, the silk-like fabric produced via heat-transfer serves as the 'paper'; traditional paper-cutting techniques are then used to cut out designs, which are subsequently transferred on to textiles by high-temperature ironing. The resulting products are water-resistant and durable, thereby overcoming the well-known challenges of preservation and limited applicability of paper-based paper cuts (Figure 4). This innovation allowed paper-cutting motifs to be easily adapted for everyday commodities and enabled individuals trained in basic paper-cutting skills to produce marketable goods themselves.

Beyond material innovation, new technologies were also introduced, most notably digital technology. Traditionally, paper-cutting creation requires either mastery of canonical motifs (flowers, birds, fish, landscapes) transmitted by professional artisans, or artistic training that enables an individual to design original patterns. Such requirements create a threshold of

artistic skill and experiential accumulation, distinguishing professional artists from amateurs. To further democratise paper-cutting, Wang Lang combined paper-cutting with photography and advanced computer software, developing what he termed 'image paper-cutting (*yingxiang jianzhi*, 影像剪纸)':

Research has increasingly addressed the use of digital technologies in the preservation of paper-cutting (Peng 2014; see also Song and Wang 2015, 5). Image paper-cutting is a quintessential example of this trend. According to Wang, the technique employs Adobe Photoshop to transform photographs into paper-cutting-like images. These images, as digital data, can be infinitely reproduced, mass-produced, and even repurposed as design templates for silk paper-cutting production.<sup>18</sup> Wang himself was primarily a paper-cutting merchant and amateur photographer rather than a trained paper-cutting artist. His limited manual cutting skills precluded complex paper creations, yet his familiarity with photography and Photoshop enabled him to develop this new hybrid craft (Figure 5). This technological intervention democratises production, lowers skill barriers, and expands the consumer base beyond formally recognised



**Figure 5**  
Process of creating image paper-cutting.  
Source: Photo and digital editing by the author.

bearers, thereby illustrating the recontextualisation and commercialisation of heritage under market pressures.

In sum, faced with the collapse of the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City, You Cai and Wang Lang turned to widely available modern materials and digital tools to reinvent paper-cutting. Their strategy extended paper-cutting beyond official heritage bearers and professional artists, embedding it into the practices of ordinary consumers and everyday life, thereby creating new commercial pathways for survival. This case demonstrates how processes of decontextualisation are not only disruptive but can also enable forms of re-embedding in new social and economic contexts through material innovation, technological mediation and expanded participation.

### **Constructing historical legitimacy in response to emerging technologies**

While material and technological innovations enabled paper-cutting to enter everyday and commercial spaces, the withdrawal of institutional support and limited media exposure presented a new challenge: how to disseminate these novel practices to wider audiences and secure their legitimacy within the heritage framework. In response, You Cai and Wang Lang actively constructed a selective historical narrative to legitimise silk paper-cutting and image paper-cutting, thereby situating their innovations within a broader trajectory of Chinese paper-cutting.

Heritage is generally understood to symbolise the past and to possess historical value; however, there is no clear criterion for how distant a 'past' must be to qualify as heritage. According to the Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICH is defined as 'embodying the outstanding traditional culture of the Chinese nation, with historical, literary, artistic, and scientific value', with historical value placed at the forefront.<sup>19</sup> Today, Chinese paper-cutting that has been designated as heritage is widely regarded as a 'traditional art' with an ostensibly longstanding history, enjoyed by the Chinese people since antiquity. Yet, the historical origins of paper-cutting remain a complex and contested issue. As descriptions by paper-cutting scholars, folk art researchers and folklorists construct this narrative of a 'long history', crafts made from materials other than paper have often been retrospectively classified as paper-cutting (e.g. Zhang 1995; Chen 2007). Within this interpretive framework, You and Wang argue that silk

paper-cutting can trace its historical origins to fine silk fabric (*jianbo*, 缣帛), a material employed in ancient China that resembles the textiles they currently use. In doing so, they mobilise a particular historical interpretation to establish legitimacy for their practice.

Building on this constructed historical foundation, You and Wang and their team seek to expand the very definition of paper-cutting. They move beyond the conventional understanding – 'the act of cutting patterns out of paper with scissors' – and instead redefine paper-cutting as a 'form of hollowed-out decorative art'. On this basis, they extend its scope beyond paper to include thin materials such as silk textiles, as well as digital data and virtual space. By broadening paper-cutting's definition in this way, silk paper-cutting and image paper-cutting are no longer relegated to the status of auxiliary crafts resembling paper-cutting or mere preparatory techniques for design, but are instead positioned as legitimate branches of paper-cutting itself.

Moreover, after redefining paper-cutting, You and Wang have attempted to root these new practices in the local cultural landscape. For instance, they produced silk paper-cutting works depicting historical sites in Fengjing town, Jinshan district – their main base of activity – and sought to integrate these with regional culture. Through



**Figure 6**  
Silk paper-cutting work, 'Fengjing Eight Scenes (*Fengjing bajing*, 枫泾八景)', by You Cai.  
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

this effort, they applied to register ‘Fengjing Paper-Cutting’ (*Fengjing Jianzhi*, 枫泾剪纸) as a district-level item within the Representative Projects of ICH of Jinshan district, Shanghai (Figure 6). This initiative can be understood as an attempt to translate their innovations into the language of the existing heritage system.

Ultimately, however, You and Wang’s application for district-level ICH recognition was rejected. Left outside the institutional framework, they were compelled to shift their strategy towards broader participation by paper-cutting enthusiasts. In 2023, under the leadership of You and Wang, workshops were organised to gather paper-cutting hobbyists and teach both the techniques of silk paper-cutting and the methods of image paper-cutting. These sessions not only transmitted technical skills but also encouraged participants to experiment with new materials, digital tools and hybrid forms, effectively lowering the barriers to creative engagement.

This process illustrates how marginal actors, in the absence of institutional recognition, mobilise technological innovation, material adaptation and historical narrative as complementary strategies to negotiate legitimacy. Rather than relying on state validation, they seek to expand the boundaries of participation by enabling non-professionals to engage in production and reinterpretation. In this sense, paper-cutting is no longer confined to a small group of recognised practitioners but becomes a more accessible and practice-based cultural form embedded in everyday life. The lowering of technical thresholds and the diversification of applications not only broaden participation but also transform the modes through which heritage is reproduced and experienced. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate how decontextualised heritage practices can be recontextualised and sustained through participatory mechanisms within urban market contexts.

## Discussion

### *Decontextualisation and recontextualisation of heritage in everyday life*

In today’s landscape of heritage saturation, paper-cutting as a form of heritage has undergone significant transformation. No longer confined to everyday rituals or special occasions, paper-cutting has moved beyond its

traditional settings to become an art object displayed in museums, a safeguarded element of community heritage across China and a mass-produced commodity at tourist sites. With the development of new technologies, some practitioners have begun to merge paper-cutting with digital techniques, producing paper-cutting in the form of electronic images without any physical substrate.

Such processes of decontextualisation risk widening the gap between heritage and daily life, potentially alienating heritage from the lived experiences of ordinary people. Yet, at the same time, heritage-making also generates new forms of recontextualisation, through which cultural practices are re-embedded in different social and material environments and made accessible to wider publics. The key question, therefore, is not whether decontextualisation occurs, but how these transformed practices are subsequently reintegrated into everyday life. Central to this process is how practitioners mobilise and reinterpret new technologies in sustaining and reshaping their practices.

In the case examined in this paper, however, recontextualisation does not occur primarily through state-led safeguarding programmes, but through the everyday practices of marginal actors. Following the collapse of the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City, practitioners such as You Cai and Wang Lang reintroduced paper-cutting into daily life through workshops, DIY material kits and digitally mediated designs. These practices relocated paper-cutting from museum-like display spaces to participatory settings, where hobbyists could learn, experiment and produce their own works. In doing so, they transformed paper-cutting from an object of display into a practice of participation.

What is particularly striking is that paper-cutting, even when detached from its cultural contexts and embodied practices, continues to gain support among certain enthusiasts. For instance, one paper-cutting hobbyist in Anhui, after attending a workshop, purchased the new material and opened a local class to promote it. As she explained: ‘Sibo is an excellent material. Honestly, I do not really care about its history. Who said paper-cutting must be on paper?’<sup>20</sup>

This example suggests that, for participants outside institutional frameworks, the value of paper-cutting is no longer anchored in officially sanctioned histories or

material authenticity, but in its usability, accessibility and adaptability within everyday life. In this sense, recontextualisation is achieved not by restoring an 'original context', but by embedding practice into new social and material conditions.

From this perspective, the 'orthodox history' constructed by experts or institutional actors becomes less relevant for hobbyists. Whether paper-cutting is made of paper or silk, by hand or digitally, is less important than the act of recognition itself. If participants consider a practice to be paper-cutting, it becomes meaningful as such. This perspective highlights how the meaning of cultural practice is defined not solely through authoritative validation, but through processes of individual interpretation and reproduction.

The historical construction of folk arts is not unique to paper-cutting; it is observed in other Chinese craft traditions as well. For example, over recent decades, the so-called root arts (*genyi*, 根艺), crafting items from tree roots, have come to be recognised as artistic forms. This recognition has been co-produced by hobbyists, authoritative artists and other actors, who collectively reconstituted the perception of a 'longstanding history'. Through mechanisms such as award systems, exhibitions and scholarly associations, these art forms acquired social legitimacy (Suga 2007).

Similarly, in the present case, the historical narratives constructed by You Cai and Wang Lang to legitimise silk paper-cutting and image paper-cutting can be understood as strategic efforts to reposition their practices within the broader heritage field.

At present, silk paper-cutting and image paper-cutting show little sign of being formally recognised within the established institutional heritage framework of paper-cutting. Nevertheless, these emerging practices are spreading through networks of hobbyists across China. As their products circulate, they point towards the formation of a new, fluid art world still in the making.<sup>21</sup>

### ***A double-edged sword: rethinking heritage commodification***

With the expanding influence of UNESCO, increasing flows of capital have entered the production of ICH, thereby accelerating processes of decontextualisation. In China, supported by both government and corporate initiatives,

many ICH practices have been detached from their original contexts and transformed into market commodities. Yet, when such large-scale and often unstable support is withdrawn, the actors caught within this process often face precarious conditions.

The case of the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City clearly illustrates this dynamic. Initially supported by large-scale investment and institutional backing, the China Paper-Cutting Museum functioned as a highly curated space of display, where paper-cutting was presented as a cultural spectacle for consumption. However, following the financial collapse of the project, this model proved unsustainable, leaving practitioners without stable institutional or economic support. The abrupt transition from a capital-intensive, display-oriented model to conditions marked by the loss of financial and institutional support highlights the fragility of heritage commodification models that depend heavily on external investment.

Under these circumstances, small-scale, self-driven forms of commodification may emerge as vital survival strategies. From the perspective of UNESCO's Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, such practices might be criticised as instances of 'over-commercialisation' or 'commercial misappropriation' (UNESCO 2024, 62, 67). However, rather than relying on abstract normative judgements, it is necessary to examine how such practices function in context, particularly as responses to the withdrawal of institutional support.

Within these practices, the position of actors outside the protective framework of ICH safeguarding regimes becomes far more complex. Marginal tradition-bearers, for instance, are not necessarily vulnerable figures to be rescued; they may also be proactive producers who create new commodities. Merchants, likewise, are not merely providers of capital external to cultural practice but can become embedded participants and co-creators in processes of cultural production.

The case further demonstrates that such actors do not passively adapt to market conditions but actively reshape both the material form and the cultural meaning of heritage. Through the combined use of new materials, digital technologies and narrative reconstruction, they expand not only the scope of what counts as paper-cutting, but also the range of actors who are able to participate

in its production. In this sense, commodification operates not only as a process of market incorporation, but also as a mechanism through which cultural practices are reconfigured and redistributed across different social groups.

### ***The importance of a marginal perspective***

As Valdimar Hafstein has argued, the ICH regime functions as a 'mechanism of selection and display': it directs attention and resources towards certain cultural practices while simultaneously marginalising others (Hafstein 2018, 87). Hafstein likens the system to both a 'hospital' that rescues endangered traditions and a 'fund-raising dinner dance party' that stages culture for spectacle (Hafstein 2018, 87). This dual character underscores the need to recognise ICH not merely as a framework for cultural safeguarding, but also as a mechanism that shapes the broader heritage field, restructures domains such as the art world, and redistributes social resources. In this sense, the ICH system does more than classify and evaluate practices; through its promotional activities, it also generates new power relations between heritage and its original contexts.

In practice, media visibility and social resources tend to concentrate on actors positioned at the upper levels of the heritage hierarchy. As a result, peripheral practices and less-recognised practitioners are frequently overlooked, despite their active engagement in heritage production.

The experience of practitioners at the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City demonstrates how such marginalisation operates concretely. Despite their active involvement in heritage production, actors such as You Cai and Wang Lang remained dependent on unstable institutional and market conditions and were ultimately excluded from formal recognition mechanisms, such as district-level ICH inscription. This case therefore highlights the analytical importance of examining practices on the institutional margins, not as peripheral anomalies, but as sites where alternative forms of heritage production and valuation are actively developed.

At the same time, the case also reveals that marginality does not necessarily imply passivity or decline. On the contrary, actors operating at the margins may develop innovative strategies that reshape the field of heritage itself. The workshops, material innovations and community networks described in this study demonstrate how

heritage practices can be sustained through participatory and decentralised forms of engagement, rather than through top-down institutional frameworks alone.

In this sense, the sustainability of heritage does not depend solely on state recognition or formal safeguarding programmes, but also on the capacity of practitioners and communities to actively engage with, reinterpret and reproduce cultural practices under changing social and economic conditions. More broadly, this perspective suggests that marginal actors are not simply positioned outside the heritage system but play an active role in redefining its boundaries and possibilities.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined paper-cutting practices in the Shanghai World Intangible Cultural Heritage City, focusing on how commodification, together with the introduction of new materials and technologies, reshapes contemporary forms of paper-cutting. By tracing the rise and collapse of this large-scale heritage project, as well as the subsequent practices of actors such as You Cai and Wang Lang, the study shows how heritage production continues even after the withdrawal of institutional and financial support. It demonstrates that processes of decontextualisation do not simply result in the loss or distortion of cultural meaning; rather, they can also generate new forms of cultural practice through processes of recontextualisation.

More specifically, the analysis shows that actors positioned at the margins of the heritage field – whether by exclusion from institutional recognition or by deliberate choice – play an active role in redefining what counts as heritage. In this case, such redefinition is not abstract but materially and socially grounded: it is achieved through the use of alternative materials such as silk-like substrates, the incorporation of digital image-processing techniques, and the organisation of workshop-based participation that enables hobbyists to engage directly in production. Through their engagement with markets, technologies and alternative modes of production, these practitioners do not merely adapt to external pressures but actively participate in the making and transformation of heritage. In this sense, commercialisation emerges not only as a potential threat to cultural integrity, but also as a strategy of cultural reconstruction and livelihood.

The findings further suggest that the sustainability of

heritage practices, in this context, is not secured through formal recognition or large-scale cultural projects alone, but through their capacity to be reproduced, circulated and embedded in everyday life. By foregrounding these marginal practices, this study contributes to existing scholarship on ICH by shifting attention away from officially recognised and institutionalised forms towards the diverse and often overlooked practices that exist beyond them.

Rather than treating marginality as a condition of lack, this study shows that it can also serve as a generative position from which new forms of heritage practice emerge. The

case of Shanghai further illustrates how the global framework of ICH is interpreted and transformed within specific socio-political contexts. Rather than operating solely through top-down governance, the heritage regime is shown here to be continually reshaped by bottom-up practices that emerge in response to institutional gaps and market uncertainties. By demonstrating how marginal actors navigate and reconfigure these conditions, this study highlights the importance of attending to peripheral perspectives in developing a more grounded and differentiated understanding of contemporary heritage-making. 

## ENDNOTES

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  16. Interview with Wang Lang, 10 August 2023.
  17. Interview with You Cai, 11 August 2023.
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  20. Interview with Qian (paper-cutting enthusiast), 19 September 2023.
  21. Beyond the Shanghai region and Tongling city in Anhui province, today silk paper-cutting is attracting media attention and gradually gaining popularity in paper-cutting practices across various regions of China, including Zhejiang, Hebei and Henan provinces. For reference, see the official WeChat account of the Pujiang County Education Bureau in Zhejiang province, *Pujiang jiaoyu* 浦江教育 [Pujiang Education], <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/wqs669JH-UaYoagJHwsDAA>; the Hebei provincial mainstream media outlet *Changchengwang* 长城网, 'Great Wall Net', <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1825915879417972152&wfr=spider&for=pc>; and *Zhengzhou feiyi* 郑州非遗 [Zhengzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding and Cultural Tourism & Creative Industry Integration Development Center], [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/6dD\\_oQY4sT0QVcn0XbcDxA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/6dD_oQY4sT0QVcn0XbcDxA).

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