

# Indigenising Intangible Cultural Heritage: Comparison and Interpretation of the Concept of ICH in China

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### ABSTRACT

Understanding the concept of intangible cultural heritage is a theme currently attracting a lot of attention in academic circles. Based on the definitions in UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* and on the *Interim Measures for Applying for the National Representative Works of Intangible Cultural Heritage* issued by the Chinese State Council, this article attempts to give an in-depth interpretation of the primary meaning and localised transformation of intangible cultural heritage. On the basis of this analysis, the concept of intangible cultural heritage is placed in a Chinese context and a comparison is made with the present academic conceptual framework so as to facilitate an understanding of the validity of the ICH concept for the Chinese.

### Keywords

*Interim Measures for Applying for the National Representative Works of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Chinese ICH, 'intangible' in Chinese, indigenisation, China 无形文化财

The study of intangible cultural heritage has become a focus of research in the field of cultural study, particularly since the adoption by UNESCO of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in October, 2003. However, these theories are not well understood in Chinese academic

circles: literature study in China started late and no basic concept or theoretical system has been established. The construction of theoretical systems should be based on an accurate understanding of concepts. Therefore, the meaning of intangible cultural heritage is worthy of discussion.

## I. Introduction: the internal confusion of an exogenous concept

Academically, a concept is put forward after adequate discussion of what it means. The concept, meaning, and spread of intangible cultural heritage are defined through the UNESCO 2003 *Convention*. From this perspective, the concept of intangible cultural heritage is not fully understood by Chinese academics. It is an exogenous prescriptive concept originating from a non-academic path, which makes its existence difficult for the Chinese to accept.

On the face of it, the concept of intangible cultural heritage derives from the Chinese version of the *Convention* issued by UNESCO, which means it should have a clear definition in a Chinese context. According to Chinese word formation, the expression 'intangible cultural heritage' is an attributive structure; it can be divided into 'intangible' and 'cultural heritage'. 'Cultural heritage' is widely used by Chinese academics and there is no difficulty in understanding it. What is difficult however, is the understanding of 'intangible'. 'Intangible' is an adjective which defines and modifies 'cultural heritage'. 'Intangible' is a negative word as it is the opposite of the word 'tangible'. The prefix 'in-' adds to the adjective 'tangible' and thus forms a negative word. This type of word formation is not Chinese but English. 'Intangible', therefore, is the negative form of 'tangible'. In Chinese, an opposite word rather than a prefix is used while dealing with similar situations. Therefore, in Chinese the opposite of 'tangible' should be 'spiritual' or 'conscious'. That is the reason why some scholars, when they first encountered the concept, believed that 'intangible cultural' means 'spiritual cultural'. We must be aware that the expression 'intangible cultural heritage' is not generated originally from Chinese, but published by UNESCO as a regulation. Therefore, a satisfactory understanding cannot be found in the Chinese language system. While the two interpretations above are reasonable, they have their own biases and shortcomings.

Chinese is one of the working languages of UNESCO. This determined that the Chinese version of the convention has the same legal power as the English one. Some scholars have examined the differences between the two versions and focused on the inaccuracy of the translation. As a matter of fact, the two versions were issued at the same time. The differences existing

between the two versions are not caused by translation, but by different habits of expressing ideas in the two languages. However, the English version's influence on the Chinese one cannot be completely avoided due to the powerful position of English in the context of UNESCO's conventions. We could say that 非物质文化遗产 is a Chinese concept but influenced by English ways of thinking. We cannot find its literal meaning since it is a foreign word in Chinese. It requires us to define and even verify it if possible, according to the *Convention*, if we want to place it within our own conceptual framework.

## II. Definition and interpretation of the *Convention*

In the *International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, intangible cultural heritage is defined as follows:

*The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development. (UNESCO: 2003)*

The definition makes it clear that intangible cultural heritage is a constituent of cultural heritage. Logically, it is therefore necessary to make clear the definition of cultural heritage first. The China Folk Cultural Heritage Rescue Committee defines it as *culture or cultural products people adopt from their forefathers*. Comparing the two definitions, we can attribute *the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills* expressed in the *Convention* to 'culture' in 'cultural heritage' and *the instruments, objects, artefacts and*

*cultural spaces associated therewith* to 'cultural products'. The comparison only shows us the connection between intangible cultural heritage and cultural heritage. The question that remains for us is: how to distinguish intangible cultural heritage from cultural heritage?

### 1. Self-confirmation: confirmation by the Foundation for Intangible Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage is what people inherit from their forefathers, including culture and cultural products. Culture accumulates naturally in this way, and it needs, to a large extent, no confirmation or the agreement of each cultural element (people). Taking the Great Wall of China, for example, many people recognise it as China's cultural heritage even though they have never seen it [Plate 1]. By contrast with cultural heritage, the main bodies for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage are communities, groups and even individuals. In other words, intangible cultural heritage is a very special part of cultural heritage, whose definition is linked specifically to the process of inheritance and transmission far more than other constituents of cultural heritage. What is more important is that such transmission has to be built on the self-confirmation of transmitters. They have to confirm that those to whom an element is to be transmitted are cultural heritage bearers, otherwise, the process of transmission cannot move on and those who inherited it cannot be defined as bearers of intangible cultural heritage. The case of the traditional Chinese view of 'Three Obediences and Four

Virtues' is a good example. In feudal society, this traditional obligation was passed from one generation to another, but today people in China believe it is an old-fashioned, retrograde custom. The custom cannot be confirmed as an intangible cultural heritage since it has almost died out in China.

### 2. Intangible: the form for the existence of ICH

The existing forms of the two elements of cultural heritage: culture and cultural products can also be identified as material and immaterial. While cultural products, such as ancient architecture, instruments, calligraphy, etc., exist in material form, culture itself exists in various forms. For instance, traditional Chinese culture is recorded in books and transmitted in this tangible form, but folk songs and tales are transmitted orally. The so-called 'intangible cultural heritage' is the heritage that is transmitted in non-material form. The *Convention* stresses that *the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills* are important constituents of intangible cultural heritage, that is, ICH exists in the form of practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills. Some elements of intangible cultural heritage can exist solely in non-material form, but other elements like practices and skills can only exist in conjunction with material objects. The intangible cultural heritage as defined, of course, is not the consolidated form but the process of consolidation. This tells us why the *Convention* adds *the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces* as supplementary to practices and skills. What should be



**Plate 1**  
The Great Wall of China.  
Photo: <http://www.tuku.cn/wallpapers/view.aspx?id=6885&type=1440x900> [2015-3-25]



**Plate 2**  
A *Xiushan* lantern.  
Photo: Author.



**Plate 3**  
A *Xiushan* lantern painted with flowers. This is actually the name for a performance that includes songs, music, dance and drama. The performers carry painted lanterns and wear colourful costumes. The tradition dates back to the Tang and Song dynasties and was inscribed on the list of Chinese ICH in 2006.  
Photo: Author.



**Plate 4**  
A *Xiushan* lantern.  
Photo: Author.

recognised is that *the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces* are not intangible cultural heritage in themselves; they are instead necessary media for the presentation, inheritance and transmission of skills and performances that make up ICH. From this perspective, the materiality of them does not influence the immateriality of ICH. For example, while a *Guqin* is material, the art of playing the musical instrument is immaterial. Thus, it is the performing art of the *Guqin*, not the *Guqin* itself which is an element of intangible cultural heritage .

### **3. Dynamic inheritance and transmission: an approach for the continuity of ICH**

Since tangible cultural heritage is consolidated by

material forms, its inheritance and transmission will not be affected by the subjective wills of the transmitters. The cultural meaning of 'tangible heritage' lies in its material forms as long as those forms exist. In contrast with tangible cultural heritage, the transmission of intangible cultural heritage is only possible when transmitters learn the relevant arts and skills and make the techniques their own. With the improvement and development of societies, people and the cultures they carry have to make relevant changes. As a result, elements of intangible cultural heritage correspondingly have to change. Therefore, the inheritance and transmission of intangible heritage is not a repetition from one generation to another, it requires the absorption of influences from each era to make innovations, and for the process to evolve, and even to

allow some forms of heritage to die out. The determining factors in the whole process are the transmitters. To a degree, intangible cultural heritage is the kind of cultural heritage which is subject to the transmitters' intentions. For example, over time, and with the input of intellectuals, traditional local operas usually begin to incorporate evidence of wider cultural influences. [Plates 2,3,4 *Xiushan Festive Lantern* (秀山花灯)] Those that do not change and develop will die out.

#### 4. Human creativity: the nature of ICH

All forms of cultural heritage represent the productivity and cultural standards of human society at specific periods of time. Intangible cultural heritage, existing dynamically, is the result and evidence of human creativity. Arts, techniques and performances are all achievements tradition bearers have made in a particular field. The benefits of these achievements may still be unclear, but their potential power in promoting human development may be huge. In a general sense, intangible cultural heritage is an important way of confirming each nation's identity. For instance, only by recognising traditional Chinese languages, costumes, architecture, conventions, myths, legends and festivals, etc. can we identify Chinese people. The problem we are facing now is that some elements of intangible cultural heritage are declining, and this is not because of any lack of creativity but because of globalisation. Some cultures are powerful and they are economically strong. Those powerful cultures can do predatory and irretrievable damage to the cultures of relatively weak nations or to backward districts within countries.

*The processes of globalization and social transformation, alongside the conditions they create for renewed dialogue among communities, also give rise, as does the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage...* (UNESCO: 2003)

The cost of high efficiency is the loss of diversity and richness in cultures, and a single model of economic and cultural development could certainly lead to the exhaustion of human creativity and eventually to a lack of productivity in the economy and culture. That is the reason why we have to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.

### III A modification

As mentioned above, UNESCO's definition of ICH is a Chinese definition influenced by an English way of thinking. It is therefore not completely compatible with Chinese understanding in its name and connotation. Moreover, as an official document of UNESCO, the *Convention* is directed at all nations and cultures, which makes it somewhat incompatible with the situation in China. As a necessary response and supplementary to the *Convention*, China's State Council issued the *Interim Measures for the Application and Assessment of National Intangible Cultural Heritage* on March, 26<sup>th</sup>, 2005. The *Measures* redefine ICH as:

*Intangible cultural heritage refers to the various traditional cultural manifestations (such as folk activities, performing arts, traditional knowledge and techniques, instruments, objects and artefacts involved) and cultural spaces that are inherited from one generation to another by people from all ethnic groups in China and are closely related to people's lives.* (China State Council: 2005)

Compared to the *Convention's* definition of ICH, we can see that the *Measures'* definition is quite different in words and expression. Why do so many differences exist between the two definitions of ICH?

#### 1. The definition of 'transmitters'

The *Convention* defines the transmitters of ICH as *communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals*, whereas the *Measures* defines them as *people from all ethnic groups*. The author believes that the difference is based on three factors:

First, as an official document of UNESCO, the *Convention* is suitable for people all over the world. Although it demonstrates its pursuit of cultural diversity, it is unavoidably affected by European ways of thinking because of Europe's powerful economic position in the world. Sovereign countries like China need to revise it to escape the influence of the ideology of those economically powerful cultures. In the expression *communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals*, we can hardly distinguish different nations and cultures. The *Measures* describe the transmitters as *people of all ethnic groups* to emphasise their separate cultural identities. This embodies characteristics of the colonial/anti-colonial discourse in an age of globalisation.

Secondly, as a political strategy, *communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals* represents a capitalist concept of society. It seems on the surface that people are distinguished by their culture, whereas, the expression goes beyond the concept of nations and countries and represents liberal political values. While ideologically the above expression intentionally obscures the boundaries between different nations and countries, using culture as a universal value to measure relationships between people does, to some degree, present the idea of *human rights above sovereignty*. Therefore, intangible cultural heritage transmitters in China are made up of members of all ethnic groups, but all are members of the Chinese nation.

From an academic perspective, it is groups, not individuals that have been emphasised in China's history. This is the reality in the development of traditions. It is almost impossible to set a standard that uses culture as the only measurement. Because of the complexity and variety of Chinese culture, it is hard to set an operable standard. A standard using culture as the only measurement would add complex variants to numerous ethnic divisions and the standard would not work. A standard set according to different ethnicities not only reflects the academic way of thinking, but also retains cultural diversity and the specialness of each ethnic group. Furthermore, by identifying and studying under the same standard, ethnic integration will be promoted in the process of transmitting intangible cultural heritage.

## **2. Changes in the methods of confirmation**

In the *Convention*, ICH is described as:

*the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.* (UNESCO: 2003)

*Communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize...* is a subjective way of confirmation. If transmitters cannot be self-confirmed, ICH cannot be confirmed, either. Moreover, the *Convention* rules that all States Parties must make their own lists of intangible cultural heritage. The drawing up of such a list cannot

only depend on transmitters' self-confirmation; it also needs the acknowledgement of a government and specialist academics. What makes the confirmation difficult is that the *Convention* does not set an objective standard for judging between acknowledgement and self-confirmation.

China is a multi-ethnic country. Its social and economic development is very uneven. Taking cognitive levels into consideration, large components of intangible cultural heritage cannot be confirmed by the transmitters alone, nor can they alone ensure that this heritage is protected.

In the *Interim Measures for the Application and Assessment of National Intangible Cultural Heritage*, the application and assessment of elements of intangible cultural heritage are regulated. An objective standard is even more necessary in order for related organisations to confirm and safeguard ICH. As a consequence, two basic standards are clearly set out in the *Measures: inherited from one generation to another and closely related to people's lives* to emphasise the dynamic nature of ICH transmission on the one hand, and its immateriality and the basis for confirming elements of ICH on the other.

What is more valuable is that the standards set by the *Measures* are helpful in recognising and protecting ICH because they effectively avoid the ambiguity in standards caused by the single 'self-confirmation' approach.

## **3. The change from cultural heritage to traditional culture**

In the *Convention*, intangible cultural heritage is defined as part of cultural heritage, while in the *Measures* it is described as *traditional cultural manifestations and cultural spaces*. The author believes that the change in the description of the subject for confirmation is due to the following reasons:

Firstly, the broad concept of cultural heritage makes it difficult for ICH to find its own place in the concept. The concept of traditional culture is comparatively narrow and the recognition of ICH is easier within such a concept. Western ideologies have been introduced into China since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of them have become



**Plate 5**  
Dazu rock carvings.  
Photo: Author.

cultural heritage after they were accepted and modified by the Chinese, but by no means can they be recognised as Chinese intangible cultural heritage.

Secondly, cultures from different countries and nations are developing in a homogenised way because of globalisation. The purpose of the *Convention* is to offer a corrective. However, the uniqueness of different cultures is ignored in the process. Therefore, the *Measures* change the definition from 'cultural heritage' to 'traditional culture' to better identify and protect national uniqueness and to maintain national and cultural diversity in the process of confirming elements of ICH. However, the *Measures'* intentions are generally in accordance with those of the *Convention*.

On the whole, the *Measures'* definition of ICH more vividly expresses the goal of maintaining national uniqueness and protecting cultural diversity, and it is more operable. It is more suitable for the actual situation and the language environment in China compared to the *Convention's* definition. It shows the efforts made by the Chinese government and academics to 'indigenise' the concept of ICH.

#### IV. Some comparisons

If a foreign concept is to be accepted in China it needs to make sense in Chinese and also to fit into the existing conceptual framework – only then can it be

'indigenised'. The following comparisons will illustrate this.

##### 1. *Intangible cultural heritage versus spiritual heritage*

In Chinese, the opposite of 'material' is 'spirit', so what is immaterial is spiritual. This leads us to the conclusion that intangible cultural heritage is spiritual heritage. In fact, spiritual heritage covers many things. Take the Dazu Rock Carvings for example. Although the carvings are widely accepted as cultural heritage, the art of carving, the design and Buddhism itself are embodied in the carvings and are all part of our spiritual heritage [Plate 5]. However, we cannot simply identify the Dazu Rock Carvings as both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. On the contrary, intangible cultural heritage is not necessarily limited to the realm of 'spirit'. Intangible cultural heritage encompasses tangible cultural heritage like artefacts and cultural spaces both in the definitions of the *Convention* and the *Measures*. For this reason, we can only conclude that intangible cultural heritage is not necessarily spiritual heritage, and vice versa. But in terms of the immateriality of intangible cultural heritage, its nature is not material but spiritual.

##### 2. *Intangible cultural heritage versus ethnic folklore*

The term 'folklore' originates from the *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* adopted by UNESCO'S 25<sup>th</sup> general conference. 'Tradition-based creations' is the definition of folklore

and it is the foundation of the definition of ICH. ICH can be understood as 'folk culture'. The adding of the attributive 'ethnic' and the emphasis on ethnic ingredients in the *Measures* are made for similar reasons. In Chinese, the concept of ethnic folklore reflects the dualistic thinking of temple/folk, and implies some value judgments. Meanwhile, 'folk' represents a speech locution that is in contrast with 'mainstream'. That makes it different from ICH's cultural judgment.

### **3. ICH versus traditional cultural heritage**

Traditional cultural heritage refers to heritage accumulated in a nation's or a community's history as ways of life, values, cultural creations, etc. The nationalism and stability in tradition change over time. However, the essence of tradition on the whole remains unchanged. In a word, traditional cultural heritage is the core culture that characterises a nation. In China, traditional cultural heritage includes ancient books and records, such as Confucian classics, history, philosophy and *belles-lettres*, as well as festivals, etiquette and customs, architecture and crafts that represent unique aspects of Chinese culture. Compared to ICH, we can find that traditional cultural heritage contains all the factors of ICH, while ICH is only a part of traditional cultural heritage. Meanwhile, traditional cultural heritage shows a cultural conservatism because of its

emphasis on uniqueness and independent value. Commonly used expressions in China that are related to ICH include: 'folk culture', 'folk cultural heritages', 'folk arts' and 'folk traditions'.

## **V. Conclusion**

China is a multi-ethnic country with a long history. China must make an effort to resist the infiltration of powerful foreign cultures, to protect the cultural independence of different ethnic groups and to maintain the cultural diversity of humanity in the face of globalisation. It is a significant historical topic that we are confronting. It is a severe challenge for us to retain cultural subjectivity against the impact of powerful cultures, considering there are more and more frequent exchanges in economic and cultural affairs. To some extent, the identification and safeguarding of ICH is the identification and safeguarding of our own cultural memes and national identity, and the transmission of ICH is the transmission of traditional Chinese culture. Only by understanding the issue on such a level can we fully recognise the importance of safeguarding ICH for the construction of culture, and enhance the protection of ICH in order to bring about the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. 🇨🇳

## ENDNOTES

1. The *Interim Measures for Applying for the National Representative Works of Intangible Cultural Heritage* is an official document from The State Council of the People's Republic of China (2005). It was the first official government document to safeguard ICH. Before the Law of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the People's Republic of China was implemented in 2011, the *Interim Measures for Applying for the National Representative Works of Intangible Cultural Heritage* was the most important rule for creating the national list and system. This document defined the concept of intangible cultural heritage for the first time in China.
2. Japan and Korea have used the concept of 无形文化财 since 1950. In those two countries, 无形文化财 means ICH. But in China, for the researchers and the government, the concept of ICH was translated from English and not from Japanese or Korean.

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