

Challenges and Strategies for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Modern China

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Abstract:

Intangible cultural heritage encompasses a nation's traditional culture and wisdom, offering a profound reflection of the lives and thoughts of its predecessors. This heritage manifests in diverse forms, including artistic performances, music, handicrafts, and festivals. Despite its cultural significance, the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage face numerous challenges in modern society. These challenges are exacerbated by rapid urbanization, globalization, and the decline of traditional practices. Previous studies have predominantly explored these issues from cultural and historical perspectives, often overlooking the critical economic factors that influence heritage preservation. This article seeks to fill this gap by examining the difficulties and problems faced by intangible cultural heritage through a comprehensive lens that includes cultural, economic, and social aspects. By analyzing these multifaceted challenges, we aim to uncover the underlying economic dynamics that hinder effective heritage preservation. Moreover, this research will propose innovative solutions to address economic challenges and enhance the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. Ultimately, this article aims to provide new perspectives and positive impacts on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, highlighting the importance of an economic approach to its preservation and transmission to future generations.

Keywords: Chinese Intangible cultural heritage, Inheritance Challenges, Urbanization, Digitalization of ICH

Thesis

Intangible cultural heritage is a vital aspect of traditional Chinese culture, yet its inheritance and protection face significant challenges. This article examines common difficulties such as the scarcity of inheritors due to high technical and talent demands, below-average income for practitioners, and traditional sales models. Beyond these issues, it explores deeper obstacles like rapid urbanization and globalization. The integration of intangible cultural heritage with modern culture is also discussed to enhance public awareness and protection efforts. Despite these challenges, innovative measures are proposed, including incorporating intangible cultural heritage into cultural activities, local tourism, and online promotion through social media. Additionally, integrating intangible cultural heritage into school curricula is suggested to improve its preservation and transmission among younger generations.

Challenges of Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance in China

The explicit challenges facing the inheritance of intangi-

ble cultural heritage include high technical requirements, low income for inheritors, and traditional promotional methods. In my project, I visited various intangible cultural heritage inheritors and their workshops across China, gaining insight into the handmade production processes. I observed that even seemingly simple and ordinary intangible cultural heritage artworks demand exquisite skills and high technical proficiency. For instance, hollow noodles, a traditional food in Guizhou, China, appear similar to regular noodles but are hollow and have good toughness, preventing them from breaking easily. This seemingly simple craft requires years of experience and precision. Additionally, some intangible cultural heritage works, such as Paper Cuttings, require innate talent and intricate skills for both fine production and compelling design. Under the guidance of a master, I attempted Paper Cuttings and found that designing even a simple animal like a mouse was challenging. A poor design could ruin the paper and fail to achieve the desired effect. In essence, the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage relies heavily on skills and talents that cannot be replicated by machines. Without suitable successors, it becomes difficult to pass

these traditions to the next generation.

Beyond technical challenges, the income of these heirs is generally low. In China, the revenue from intangible cultural heritage products is relatively meager, with half of the inheritors earning an average annual income of less than 50,000 RMB, making it hard to sustain a livelihood from these crafts. A survey of Chinese inheritors revealed that the majority, 245 individuals (73.80%), reported a personal monthly income between 3,000 and 7,000 RMB (Su et al.). This low income is because producing these items is time-consuming and hard to mass-produce, making it difficult for craftsmen to earn a higher income. Even those who manage to earn a decent income through their skills are often exploited by local industries, further reducing their actual earnings. They struggle to sell through their own channels and rely on local tourism industries for sales, leading to a significant portion of their profits being diluted.

The reliance on the local tourism industry is due to traditional promotion models and a lack of emphasis on modern promotion. These inheritors are usually older, live far from cities, and are not adept at using the internet for publicity, making their works hard to find. Consequently, they depend on traditional methods such as tourism associations and word-of-mouth recommendations. In the era of big data, online shopping is preferred by many, with around 90% of South Korea's population using e-commerce platforms ("Santander Trade Portal"). Many other countries, including China, the United States, and Australia, also have a significant proportion of their population opting for online shopping due to its convenience. However, intangible cultural heritage lacks access to these online channels, limiting its visibility and demand. The presence of cheaper substitutes further diminishes the demand for these heritage products, exacerbating the decline in their sales.

Urbanization and Globalization: Effects on Intangible Cultural Heritage

China's urbanization rate has surged, exceeding 65 percent in 2023 compared to below 20 percent in 1980 ("Urbanization in China 1980-2022"). While urbanization can economically benefit intangible cultural heritage, its adverse impacts are more pronounced. Traditional villages are declining as young people relocate to cities, causing the loss of cultural heritage. The passing down of knowledge and skills is at risk as young people move to cities, leaving fewer individuals to maintain these traditions. Urbanization's growth and modernization can also turn cultural heritage into commercial products, reducing their

original meaning and value. I have observed that many intangible cultural heritages are located in rural areas, and the gradual extinction of these villages also leads to the decline and loss of cultural heritage. Based on a case study conducted in Huangshan City, Anhui Province, China, researchers find that "with the rapid development of urbanization and economy, many rural towns in Huangshan City have undergone land resource adjustment and policy relocation, and carried out a large number of mergers and reconstruction of administrative villages and natural villages, resulting in the gradual disappearance of many traditional villages" (Qiao et al.). Although the reconstruction of traditional villages is considered a necessary part of "rural revitalization," it leads to profound changes in rural landscapes, thereby damaging the intangible cultural heritages that originated and thrived in those environments. Although urbanization can offer economic benefits, it poses a serious threat to preserving intangible cultural heritage in China. The key challenge is balancing development with the conservation of cultural traditions, ensuring that these valuable heritages are not lost during rapid urban growth. In addition to urbanization, the impact of globalization on intangible cultural heritage is significant. Globalization encourages cultural diversity and inclusiveness, but it also presents challenges in preserving local cultures. The influx of foreign cultural influences can lead to a reduced focus among domestic populations on their own intangible cultural heritage. This shift in attention may cause traditional practices and knowledge to be undervalued or forgotten. Therefore, it is essential to balance the benefits of globalization with efforts to protect and promote local cultural heritage.

Although the physical form of intangible cultural heritage may be fixed, the culture behind it is dynamic and evolves over time, acquiring different meanings in different eras. The true value of intangible cultural heritage lies in its representation of the wisdom and way of life of past generations, offering valuable insights for people today. This is why the preservation of intangible cultural heritage is crucial. Our goal is not only to safeguard the physical manifestations, such as specific handicrafts, but more importantly, to ensure the transmission of the underlying culture. Unfortunately, there are misconceptions about the protection of intangible cultural heritage. Some people believe that it must be something exceedingly complex or profound. In reality, intangible cultural heritage is all around us, woven into the fabric of our daily lives. These stereotypical views can cause people to overlook the cultural heritage present in their everyday surroundings, leading to inadequate protection efforts. To effectively

preserve our intangible cultural heritage, it is essential to broaden our understanding and appreciation of its presence and significance in everyday life, ensuring that these cultural treasures are recognized, valued, and maintained for future generations.

Digitalization and Promotion: Ensuring the Future of Intangible Cultural Heritage

A significant challenge in preserving intangible cultural heritage is finding new inheritors, as the traditional mentorship model still dominates. Ensuring proper inheritance is crucial for the protection of intangible cultural heritage. To address this, we can introduce courses related to intangible cultural heritage in schools, allowing younger generations to experience and learn the production techniques of cultural products, thereby stimulating their interest. Additionally, incorporating intangible cultural heritage into the curriculum of specific technical schools can help identify and train suitable inheritors. By formalizing the transmission of these skills through education, we can ensure that the knowledge and techniques are passed down effectively. This approach not only secures the future of intangible cultural heritage but also enriches cultural awareness and appreciation among the younger generation. Furthermore, fostering a deeper connection to their cultural roots can inspire pride and a sense of responsibility in preserving their heritage, ensuring that these traditions continue to thrive for future generations.

Currently, the dissemination and promotion of intangible cultural heritage largely rely on traditional methods, limiting people's access to it. To enhance exposure and appreciation, we need innovative approaches that integrate intangible cultural heritage with economic and cultural activities. For example, traditional embroidery is often presented decoratively, with aesthetics as its primary function. However, by making embroidery practical—incorporating it into everyday items such as clothing, hats, pillows, and towels—we can increase people's interaction with these cultural products. This frequent exposure allows individuals to better understand and appreciate the intricacies of intangible cultural heritage, thereby aiding in its promotion and preservation. Moreover, we should integrate intangible cultural heritage with the local tourism industry, as there is a direct and mutually beneficial relationship between the two. Highlighting and promoting intangible cultural heritage can enhance the core competitiveness of local tourism by offering travelers a unique cultural and historical experience. For instance, tourists are more likely to visit regions where they can engage

with authentic cultural practices, such as traditional crafts, performances, and festivals. This engagement not only enriches the tourists' experience but also contributes to the local economy by creating demand for cultural products and services. At the same time, a thriving tourism industry can bring increased attention and resources to intangible cultural heritage. Tourists' interest and spending can support the preservation and revitalization of these cultural practices. Therefore, it is essential to strategically integrate intangible cultural heritage into the local tourism framework. This can be achieved by developing cultural tourism packages, creating workshops and interactive experiences, and marketing these unique cultural assets to a broader audience. By making intangible cultural heritage more practical and closely linked with tourism, we can create a sustainable model that benefits both the preservation of cultural traditions and the local economy.

Moreover, we should take the advantages of the Internet to promote the promotion of intangible cultural heritage. The digitization of intangible cultural heritage is an inevitable trend in this era. Researchers Xiuli Jing, Fang Tan, and Mu Zhang argue that merely digitizing Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) mechanically is insufficient. They propose that digital records should be dynamic, well-organized, and continuously updated to reflect the evolving nature of ICH (41). Given the complexity and fluidity of cultural heritage, flexible digitalization methods are essential. Instead of static recordings, tools such as short videos and social media platforms, particularly TikTok, offer innovative ways to capture and share ICH. These platforms can broaden the audience and enhance the dissemination of cultural heritage, making it more engaging and accessible. By leveraging these modern digital tools, we can ensure that cultural traditions remain vibrant and relevant in the digital age. However, the process of digitizing Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is not without challenges. Issues such as false advertising and the distortion of ICH's inherent meaning may arise. To address these concerns, it is crucial for the government to implement policies that regulate the digitalization process. These policies should aim to preserve the authenticity of ICH while also providing support for its digital promotion. For example, increasing the visibility of digital ICH through various media channels can help ensure its accurate representation and broad dissemination. By establishing clear guidelines and offering policy support, the government can help safeguard the integrity of ICH in the digital age. At times, certain aspects of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) are too niche to easily integrate into popular culture. To address this, we can consider creating an information platform that

compiles these niche elements of ICH and promotes them to the public. While the digitization of ICH presents challenges in terms of dissemination, it also offers significant opportunities. Embracing digital tools can help preserve and share ICH, ensuring it coexists and thrives in the digital era. This approach not only broadens the reach of ICH but also instills hope for its continued relevance and appreciation in contemporary society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the protection of China's intangible cultural heritage faces numerous challenges, both existing and potential. One of the most pressing issues is finding new inheritors, as the traditional mentorship model dominates and does not always provide sufficient income to sustain practitioners. This problem is exacerbated by the outdated sales model for intangible cultural heritage products. In many ways, modern civilization is gradually moving away from these traditional cultural elements. Like many developing countries, China is undergoing rapid urbanization. While urbanization can facilitate the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage through the transition from offline to online sales, it also poses significant threats. The impact of urbanization on cultural heritage must not be overlooked. Additionally, globalization presents subtler challenges to the inheritance and protection of intangible cultural heritage. It is crucial to consider how to protect these cultural elements while also integrating them with modern culture to enhance public awareness and appreciation. We have proposed several innovative measures for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, such as incorporating cultural heritage education in schools and utilizing digital tools for broader dissemination. However, the feasibility and implementation of these methods need careful assessment. Although this article focuses on the protection of China's intangible cultural heritage,

the issues discussed are not unique to China. Many other countries face similar challenges in safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, fostering international exchanges and cooperation on this topic could be highly beneficial. By sharing experiences and strategies, countries can learn from one another and develop more effective ways to protect and promote their cultural heritage. This collaborative approach can help ensure that intangible cultural heritage continues to thrive in the modern era, preserving these valuable cultural assets for future generations.

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