

FROM PROTECTION TO GOVERNANCE: THE EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE POLICY SINCE THE REFORM AND OPENING-UP

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Abstract: Since the Reform and Opening-up, China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policy has undergone a profound transformation, moving from the rescue of endangered cultural practices to institutionalised protection, from alignment with international heritage norms to more autonomous forms of cultural governance. Focusing on national-level policy documents issued between 1978 and 2024, this article identifies four stages in the evolution of China's ICH policy: an exploratory period of protecting ethnic and folk culture (1978–2000); a period of rescue-oriented protection and institutional foundation-building shaped by the UNESCO heritage framework (2001–2010); a period of legal institutionalisation and the reassertion of cultural subjectivity marked by the adoption of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law (2011–2016); and a period of governance transformation centred on systematic protection and creative transformation (2017–2024). Three characteristics are particularly evident in this trajectory. First, the policy orientation has shifted from externally driven intervention towards governance grounded more firmly in cultural agency and participation. Second, the policy system has moved from a predominantly rescue-oriented approach towards multi-actor and systematic governance. Third, China has evolved from a relatively passive learner of international heritage norms into a more active participant in global cultural governance. The article argues that future ICH policy should seek a dynamic balance between state leadership and people-centred participation, and between national cultural agency and global engagement. Such a balance would enable ICH protection to move beyond administrative and policy-driven governance towards culturally grounded good governance.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage; Cultural governance; Policy evolution; Cultural subjectivity

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection has evolved from a specialised area of cultural policy and practice into an important domain of national cultural governance in China. In 2021, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage, elevating ICH protection to a strategic level associated with “building a modern civilisation of the Chinese nation” [1]. This policy discourse differs markedly from that of the early reform period and the beginning of the twenty-first century, when ICH was primarily conceptualised as an endangered cultural resource requiring rescue and preservation. At that time, the legitimacy of ICH protection was largely articulated in terms of “the common heritage of humanity” and “cultural diversity”. The shift from “protection” to “governance” and from “rescue” to “transformation” therefore reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of the underlying logic of China's ICH policy.

Existing scholarship provides an important foundation for understanding this transformation. Huang Yonglin and Li Yuanyuan divide the development of China's ICH policies since the beginning of the new century into two broad phases: a pre-18th National Congress phase characterised primarily by “rescue-oriented protection” and “protection and transmission”, and a post-18th National Congress phase characterised by “productive protection” and “active utilisation” [2]. Dai Qinquan et al. identify a structural imbalance in which supply-oriented policy instruments are overrepresented while demand-oriented instruments remain underdeveloped [3]. Qiu Bingkui and Xu Zichan distinguish between two models of ICH protection: autonomous transmission by “insiders” and external intervention by “outsiders” [4]. These studies have made important contributions to our understanding of China's ICH policy. However, they tend to focus on specific policy instruments or implementation mechanisms, while offering less systematic theoretical analysis of the broader paradigm shift from “protection” to “governance” that runs through the evolution of China's ICH policy.

The transformation of China's ICH policy is more than an adjustment of administrative techniques. It involves a broader reconfiguration of the ownership and attribution of cultural values, the configuration of governance actors, and China's position within the global heritage regime. In this sense, the evolution of ICH policy constitutes a process through which the relationship between the state, communities, cultural practitioners, and international heritage institutions has been progressively renegotiated.

Building upon existing scholarship, this article addresses three interrelated questions.

What stages has China's ICH policy undergone since 1978, and what have been the defining characteristics and major institutional outcomes of each stage?

What internal dynamics and underlying logics have driven the transition from “protection” towards “governance”? How can a dynamic balance be established between state leadership and people-centred participation, and between national cultural agency and global engagement, so that ICH protection can move beyond policy-driven governance?

2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Data Sources and Sample Selection

This study examines national-level policy documents concerning ICH issued in China between 1978 and 2024. The sources include laws, administrative regulations, departmental rules, normative policy documents, strategic plans, planning outlines, and major policy speeches publicly released by the State Council, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, the General Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (formerly the Ministry of Culture), the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Ministry of Finance, and other relevant government departments. Following the selection criteria, 34 policy documents were identified, including 5 from 1978–2000, 7 from 2001–2010, 7 from 2011–2016, and 15 from 2017–2024. Documents were included if they directly addressed intangible cultural heritage, ethnic and folk culture, or the transmission and protection of traditional culture, and if they had nationwide applicability or significant national-level policy relevance.

2.2 Analytical Methods

The study combines policy document analysis with critical discourse analysis. First, the 34 policy documents were coded according to four dimensions: date of publication, key concepts, governance actors, and policy instruments. This coding process identified the distinctive characteristics of each period. Second, drawing on policy instrument theory, the policy instruments were classified into three categories: supply-oriented instruments, including financial investment, talent development, and infrastructure construction; demand-oriented instruments, including government procurement, international promotion, and the incorporation of ICH into education; and environmental policy instruments, including legislation and standards, strategic planning, and fiscal and financial measures. Changes in the structure and balance of these instruments were then examined. Third, drawing on critical heritage studies, the analysis examines how policy discourse defines the value and ownership of ICH, the legitimate bearers and transmitters of heritage, and the distribution of governance authority. This approach makes it possible to identify the power relations and institutional assumptions embedded in policy discourse.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework consists of three interrelated perspectives.

Cultural governance theory conceptualises ICH protection as a process through which the state participates in the reconstruction of cultural order by allocating cultural resources, producing meanings, and shaping cultural identities and forms of participation.

Critical heritage studies emphasises that heritage is not a fixed “thing” but a socially constructed practice embedded in contemporary relations of power. It therefore draws attention to questions such as whose heritage is represented, who has the authority to define it, and who benefits from its protection and use [5].

Policy paradigm theory, particularly Peter Hall’s concept of policy paradigms, suggests that major policy change involves more than adjustments to policy instruments. It may also entail fundamental changes in policy objectives, problem definitions, and normative assumptions [6].

Drawing these perspectives together, this article adopts “protection–governance” as its central analytical axis and conceptualises the evolution of China’s ICH policy as a gradual paradigm shift from externally driven intervention towards governance grounded in cultural agency, participation, and institutional coordination.

3 STAGES IN THE EVOLUTION OF CHINA’S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE POLICY

3.1 1978–2000: Policy Origins and Early Exploration

The institutional origins of China’s ICH policy can be traced to the early years of the reform and opening-up. Before this period, folk culture had long occupied a marginal position within the officially recognised cultural sphere. Gao Bingzhong argues that from the May Fourth Movement to 1978, folk culture was frequently associated with labels such as “feudal”, “superstitious”, and “backward”, and was consequently excluded from the boundaries of legitimate culture for an extended period [7]. The reform and opening-up created new space for the reassessment of folk cultural traditions. Beginning in 1979, the Ministry of Culture and the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, together with the China Musicians Association, China Dancers Association, China Theatre Association, China Folk Literature and Art Association, and China Quyi Artists Association, successively issued joint notices concerning the compilation of the “Ten Major Collections of Chinese Folk Literature and Art”. For the first time, the state mobilised its institutional capacity to conduct systematic surveys, documentation, and preservation of endangered folk cultural traditions. At the international level, UNESCO adopted the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore in 1989 and launched the Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity programme in

1997. These developments provided an important conceptual basis for China's subsequent engagement with the international heritage regime. Nevertheless, policy experimentation during this period largely remained within the sphere of cultural administration and cultural work. It lacked dedicated legislation, stable financial mechanisms, and a systematic governance perspective. The broader framework of cultural governance had yet to emerge.

3.2 2001–2010: International Alignment and Rescue-Oriented Protection

3.2.1 *The international recognition of Kunqu and the emergence of rescue-oriented protection*

In May 2001, Kunqu Opera was included in UNESCO's first Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. This recognition significantly raised awareness in China that intangible cultural practices without tangible material forms could also be recognised as part of the "common heritage of humanity". In 2003, the Ministry of Culture issued the Notice on Implementing the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Culture Protection Project, adopting the term "ethnic and folk culture" and emphasising that the "living environment was undergoing rapid deterioration", thus requiring "rescue-oriented protection". In the same year, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. China ratified the Convention in 2004, formally entering the international ICH regime.

3.2.2 *Institutional adoption and system building*

The year 2005 represented a landmark in the institutionalisation of ICH protection. The General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage, which comprehensively adopted the term "intangible cultural heritage" at the national policy level. The State Council's Notice on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage subsequently proposed the establishment of a four-tier system of representative ICH inventories at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels.

In 2007, the first group of national-level representative ICH bearers was officially recognised, establishing a system of government identification and financial support. In the same year, the first national-level pilot cultural ecological conservation zone was established. By 2010, a basic protection system resting on three pillars—ICH inventories, representative bearers, and cultural ecological conservation zones—had been established. This period can therefore be characterised as a foundational stage of "rescue-oriented protection and institutional construction". Environmental policy instruments, particularly legislation and strategic planning, expanded rapidly, while supply-oriented instruments were continuously strengthened. Demand-oriented instruments, however, remained significantly underdeveloped.

3.2.3 *The internal tensions of international alignment*

The adoption of international institutional frameworks was accompanied by tensions between international norms and local practices. These tensions became an important internal driver of subsequent policy transformation. First, the conceptual mismatch surrounding "communities". The UNESCO Convention calls for the participation of communities, groups, and individuals. In Chinese practice, however, government agencies played a dominant role throughout the processes of nomination, recognition, and financial support, leaving heritage bearers in a relatively passive position. This resulted in a model characterised by externally driven intervention. Second, the persistence of an authenticity-centred approach. Early policy discourse frequently invoked the notion of *yuanshengtai*, or "original ecology", which tended to imagine ICH as a relatively stable and bounded cultural form. Such an understanding was in tension with the dynamic and adaptive nature of living transmission. Third, developmentalist pressures. The rapid expansion of heritage nomination and inscription encouraged some local governments to regard ICH inventories as a pathway to tourism development and local economic growth. As a result, the intrinsic cultural value of transmission was sometimes subordinated to instrumental economic objectives. These tensions provided important conditions for the subsequent turn towards legal institutionalisation, adaptive transmission, and the reassertion of cultural subjectivity.

3.3 2011–2016: Legal Institutionalisation and the Reassertion of Cultural Subjectivity

3.3.1 *The Intangible Cultural Heritage Law as a legal anchor*

The adoption of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China in 2011 marked a decisive turn towards legal institutionalisation. Article 1 explicitly states that the purpose of the law is to "inherit and carry forward the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation", while Article 4 stipulates that ICH protection should contribute to "strengthening cultural identification with the Chinese nation, safeguarding national unity and ethnic solidarity, and promoting social harmony and sustainable development". Compared with the UNESCO Convention, which places respect for cultural diversity and the participation of communities at the centre of safeguarding, the Chinese legal framework situates ICH more explicitly within the broader cultural and political framework of the nation-state. At the same time, the law incorporates substantial international experience at the level of legislative design. It therefore represents a strategy of formal alignment combined with substantive reconstruction: China maintained its engagement with the international heritage regime while simultaneously reconfiguring the value framework of heritage through a national and civilisational lens.

3.3.2 *From "original ecology" to "Chinese cultural genes"*

The text of the ICH Law does not employ the term *yuanshengtai*. Instead, it emphasises the principles of authenticity, integrity, and continuity of transmission. Subsequently, expressions such as "Chinese cultural genes" and "the lifeblood of the national spirit" became increasingly prominent in official discourse. The 2017 Opinions on Implementing the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture described ICH as "a rich source

of nourishment for the enduring vitality and development of the Chinese nation". The 2021 Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage further emphasised its significance for "continuing the historical and cultural lineage" and "strengthening cultural confidence".

This terminological transformation reflects a deeper reconstruction of meaning. ICH was increasingly understood not as a "living fossil" awaiting external rescue, but as a living cultural resource embedded in the historical and cultural life of the Chinese nation. Its primary value reference consequently shifted from the universal category of "common heritage of humanity" towards the historical and cultural framework of the Chinese nation.

3.3.3 Creative transformation and innovative development

In 2013, China's national leadership introduced the principle of pursuing the "creative transformation and innovative development" of China's traditional virtues. The 2017 Opinions on Implementing the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture systematically elaborated this approach, calling for the continuous attribution of new contemporary meanings and modern forms of expression to excellent traditional Chinese culture. This marked a fundamental reconceptualisation of the question of authenticity. Cultural transmission came to be understood as an ongoing process of creative practice in which heritage bearers and practitioners possess the capacity to select, adapt, transform, and recreate cultural practices in response to changing social conditions. This conceptual shift provided an important foundation for moving from "protection" towards "governance".

3.3.4 Adjustments to the policy for heritage bearers

The early representative bearer system was criticised for focusing excessively on the protection of individual "representative bearers" while neglecting broader communities of practitioners and bearers [8]. In 2015, the Ministry of Culture launched the "Training and Study Programme for Groups of ICH Bearers in China", extending its focus to a broader range of practitioners. In 2019, the Measures for the Recognition and Administration of National Representative Bearers of Intangible Cultural Heritage were revised to incorporate the notion of "groups of bearers" more explicitly and to place greater emphasis on their responsibilities for transmission. Within cultural ecological conservation zones, the idea of community-led protection also began to receive greater attention. The overall policy direction was therefore towards shifting ICH protection from externally imposed intervention towards more locally grounded and endogenous forms of development.

3.4 2017–2024: Systematic Governance and the Construction of an Autonomous Knowledge Framework

3.4.1 Institutional manifestations of the governance transformation

After 2017, the key vocabulary of China's ICH policy increasingly shifted from "protection" towards "governance" and "development". The 14th Five-Year Plan for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage, issued in 2021, proposed "systematic protection" and called for the integration of ICH protection into major national strategies and the broader process of economic and social development. In 2022, the membership of the inter-ministerial joint conference mechanism for ICH protection was expanded to 20 government departments. ICH protection thus moved beyond the exclusive jurisdiction of cultural authorities and became a comprehensive governance project requiring interdepartmental coordination. The transition from "rescue-oriented protection" to "systematic governance" signifies a transformation in the role of the state: from a reactive rescuer towards a proactive coordinator and institutional architect of the heritage system. Based on an analysis of 276 policy documents from 31 provinces, Dai Qinquan et al. found that supply-oriented instruments accounted for 46.25 per cent, environmental instruments for 28.45 per cent, and demand-oriented instruments for only 25.3 per cent [3]. The structural imbalance therefore remains unresolved. Demand-oriented instruments—including government procurement of ICH-related services, support for bringing ICH into international cultural exchanges, and the incorporation of ICH into educational systems—should be further developed.

3.4.2 The "two integrations" and the deepening of cultural subjectivity

The deeper impetus for this governance transformation derives from an increasing emphasis on cultural subjectivity, theoretically grounded in the principle of the "two integrations", particularly the "second integration". In 2021, China's national leadership first proposed integrating the foundational theories of socialism with Chinese characteristics with China's specific realities and with China's fine traditional culture. At the 2023 Symposium on Cultural Inheritance and Development, this proposition was further elaborated through the argument that the "second integration" represented "another emancipation of the mind". The "second integration" repositions excellent traditional Chinese culture from an object of interpretation into a cultural and intellectual resource capable of contributing to contemporary processes of cultural and ideological development in China [9]. Its implications for ICH policy are substantial. ICH is increasingly framed as a cultural resource through which traditional knowledge and practices can contribute to contemporary cultural development in China. Its value is consequently anchored more firmly in the historical and cultural framework of the Chinese nation rather than solely in the universal category of "humanity". Its mode of protection is redefined from "rescue and preservation" towards "creative transformation", while the legitimacy of governance increasingly derives from a form of civilisational self-consciousness articulated through the "second integration", rather than solely from international conventions. This development should not be understood merely as a change in political rhetoric. Rather, it can be understood as a broader paradigmatic transformation grounded in an increasing emphasis on civilisational self-consciousness. It calls for the principles, standards, and pathways of ICH protection to be derived increasingly from the internal logic of Chinese civilisation and contemporary Chinese practices, rather than from international conventions as the sole source of normative legitimacy.

From the perspective of critical heritage studies, however, this paradigmatic transformation contains an inherent tension. When “cultural subjectivity” is promoted from the top down through national policy documents, national-level cultural subjectivity and community-level cultural agency among local groups and ethnic communities need to be understood as mutually recognising rather than mutually subsuming relationships. Dai Qinquan et al.’s research indicates that, among the indicators measuring multiple actors in provincial-level ICH protection, government agencies account for 43% of implementation actors, while heritage bearers account for only 11.8%. The distribution of governance actors therefore remains characterised by a situation in which “governmental intervention is excessive while the participation of other actors remains weak” [3]. This suggests that the broader discourse of cultural subjectivity has yet to be fully institutionalised through substantive participatory rights at the grassroots level.

4 THE LOGIC AND IMPLICATIONS OF POLICY TRANSFORMATION

4.1 Three Dimensions of China's Shift from Protection to Governance

The evolution of China's ICH policy has involved three interrelated transformations. At the conceptual level, policy has shifted from “rescue-oriented protection” towards “creative transformation” and “systematic governance”. The policy focus has consequently moved from preserving the past towards enabling heritage to contribute to the future. At the level of governance actors, the policy system has evolved from a predominantly state-led model towards greater participation by governments, markets, and civil society. The increasing use of demand-oriented policy instruments provides evidence of this transition, although substantive community participation remains insufficient. At the spatial level, ICH has moved from being primarily a domestic cultural concern towards active engagement with global heritage governance. China has gradually shifted from being a relatively passive learner of international rules towards participating more actively in the interpretation, development, and implementation of international heritage norms on the basis of its own cultural and civilisational experience.

4.2 The External Implications of Policy Transformation: Linking the Global Civilization Initiative with International ICH Governance

The acceleration of this spatial turn is closely associated with China's growing engagement in global governance and with a series of major international initiatives advanced in recent years. In March 2023, China's national leadership proposed the Global Civilization Initiative, which advocates respect for the diversity of world civilisations, the common values of humanity, the inheritance and innovation of civilisations, and enhanced international cultural and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. As a living form of cultural transmission, ICH occupies an important position within this agenda. Within the UNESCO framework, China has actively promoted issues linking ICH with sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and the revitalisation of traditional crafts. In substantive terms, these efforts represent an attempt to transform China's experiences of “systematic protection” and “creative transformation” into resources for international agenda-setting and policy discourse. Externally, China has sought to develop an autonomous knowledge framework for Chinese ICH, moving from the one-way transfer of international standards towards dialogue and mutual learning. Domestically, ICH is increasingly mobilised as a cultural resource for strengthening identification with the Chinese nation. The Global Civilization Initiative rejects both civilisational hierarchy and cultural hegemony while avoiding a retreat into cultural isolationism. Instead, it advocates “beauty in diversity” on the basis of mutual respect among civilisations. From this perspective, the national turn in China's ICH policy should not be interpreted as a rejection of global engagement. Rather, it represents an attempt to reconstruct the relationship between national cultural identity and global engagement at a more self-conscious level, thereby creating the possibility of a dynamic relationship between the two.

4.3 From Policy Governance towards Culturally Grounded Good Governance

Since the reform and opening-up, China's ICH policy has followed a distinctive trajectory: from the collection and rescue of folk culture, to engagement with the universal framework represented by UNESCO, and subsequently towards a model grounded in legal institutionalisation, theoretically informed by the “two integrations”, and operationalised through systematic governance. The adoption of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law in 2011 constituted a major legal turning point. Together with the principle of “creative transformation and innovative development”, it repositioned ICH within the civilisational trajectory of the Chinese nation rather than solely within the universal framework of “the common heritage of humanity”. The Global Civilization Initiative has subsequently provided a more inclusive international framework through which this autonomous orientation can be articulated. Significant challenges nevertheless remain.

The current policy instrument structure continues to exhibit an imbalance characterised by excessive government supply and insufficient community-oriented demand, while the institutional implementation of cultural subjectivity remains incomplete. The solution, however, does not lie simply in reducing state intervention. Rather, it requires institutional arrangements capable of dynamically connecting state leadership with people-centred participation, and national cultural identity with global engagement. More specifically, substantive mechanisms for community participation should be established in the formulation and evaluation of ICH protection plans. Peer review and community nomination should be given greater weight in the recognition of representative bearers. In the development and

utilisation of ICH resources, the rights of heritage bearers and practitioner communities to informed consent and benefit sharing should be safeguarded. In international cultural exchanges, China should maintain the interpretive agency of Chinese ICH while remaining open to cultural diversity and shared human values. Only by translating cultural subjectivity from a macro-level discourse into concrete grassroots cultural practices can China complete the paradigm shift from “protection” to “governance” and move towards culturally grounded good governance.

At the same time, this analysis demonstrates that the transformation of the policy paradigm is not yet complete. The central challenge for future policy innovation lies in translating cultural subjectivity from macro-level discourse into grassroots cultural practices, maintaining cultural confidence through intercivilisational dialogue, and preserving an openness to the world while reaffirming national cultural agency. Only under these conditions can the transformation of China’s ICH policy from protection to governance become an important dimension of the contemporary revitalisation and rearticulation of Chinese civilisation.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

FUNDING

Supported by the Special Task Project of Ministry of Education Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences of China (Project No. 24JDSZK184); the Special Task Project of the Guangdong Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project Grants (Project No. 2025GXSZ129).

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