

## Book Review

# Intangible Cultural Heritage: Cognition and Reconstruction—The Interplay of Knowledge, Power, and Modernity

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**Abstract:** This article reviews the book *Intangible Cultural Heritage, A Common Stage for Scholars and Government*, and, drawing on both domestic and international theories and research, systematically explores the cognition and reconstruction of intangible cultural heritage within the intertwined contexts of knowledge, power, and modernity. The discussion analyzes the theoretical frameworks and philosophical significance of intangible heritage, the interaction between cultural identity and social memory, the collaborative logic between scholars and government, and the tension between productive conservation and modern transformation. Through these perspectives, the review examines the practical dilemmas and innovative pathways

for safeguarding intangible heritage in China. The study argues that the protection of intangible heritage is not only about preserving cultural forms but also about reconstructing social identity and cultural value through the participation of diverse stakeholders. Only by maintaining community subjectivity, balancing economic benefits with cultural integrity, and promoting the interplay between theory and practice, can intangible cultural heritage achieve sustainable development and innovative transformation in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** intangible cultural heritage; cultural identity; social memory; productive conservation; modern transformation

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, the safeguarding and development of what might be characterized as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has seemingly become a central topic, especially at the intersection of knowledge, power, and modernity. Within this broader analytical framework, a growing body of both international and domestic studies appears to provide evidence that may support the notion that the recognition and protection practices for ICH often seem to be marked by substantial power imbalances and the predominance of elite discourses. What seems to emerge from these findings is a pattern of ostensibly limited participation from marginalized groups—an issue that, in light of these methodological considerations, appears to have been critically examined by several scholars [1].

When it comes to safeguarding ICH in China, what the evidence appears to reveal is that matters are rarely as straightforward as policy documents or initial academic analyses might suggest. Over the years, state authorities and expert groups have become what appears to represent predominantly central players. What also appears significant in this context, and seems to complicate traditional interpretations, is how they seem to be shaping the ways in which ICH is managed, in some cases turning it into what appears to be a vehicle for forging national identity and advancing modern governance agendas [2]. What the analysis tends to support, however, is a more complicated picture when international rules come into play. For instance, frameworks like the UNESCO Convention have ostensibly put ICH on the global map, making protection what seems to constitute a worldwide priority. At the same time, what appears to be a common feature of these mechanisms is that they typically seem to rely on “top-down” management styles. What appears to follow from this analysis, therefore, is that local uniqueness and cultural diversity can sometimes be largely squeezed out in the course of actual implementation [3]. A substantial number of practitioners at the grassroots level have seemingly found themselves grappling with what appear to be these very challenges firsthand.

What also appears to warrant further interpretive consideration is how scholars are rethinking the conceptual boundaries of ICH. Instead of focusing predominantly on local traditions, researchers are beginning to draw links between ICH and urgent global issues—for instance, climate change, the state of cultural ecosystems, and what



may be the survival of minority languages. What seems to distinguish this pattern from conventional understanding is how this approach appears to have lent ICH what seems to be a new, much broader significance in the modern world [4]. Given the multifaceted nature of this evidence, ICH is seemingly no longer just about honoring the past; it appears to be emerging as what might be considered a critical lens for understanding contemporary social and environmental change.

Turning to the book *Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Common Stage for Scholars and Government*, which appears to be the central focus of this review, the author does not seem to simply tell a neat, linear story. Instead, what the book appears to do is invite readers to look more closely at what might be characterized as the tangled reality of China's efforts to protect ICH. What seems to emerge as particularly significant is the book's apparent willingness to delve into the often subtle—and sometimes seemingly tense—negotiations between government officials and academic experts. Rather than presenting a dry catalogue of policies or a rundown of academic trends, the text appears to dive deep into long-standing problems: heritage nomination battles, what could be seen as productive conservation dilemmas, and ecological protection challenges. Throughout this analysis, it tends to question what terms like “primitivism,” “local identity,” and “folk literature” actually appear to mean, sometimes pushing back against conventional wisdom and shining a light on areas that seem full of ambiguity and creative potential. What this appears to suggest, therefore, is that protecting ICH is rarely, if ever, a simple or one-sided process. Rather, what it seems to constitute is a seemingly ongoing negotiation, typically involving compromise and even disagreement among policymakers, scholars, and the communities that actually live with and carry these traditions.

In what seems to be an effort to weave together theory and real-world practice, the book tends to point toward what appear to be the positive effects of recent innovations—such as tiered nomination systems and the creation of cultural brands—in helping ICH adapt to modern circumstances. And yet, what also appears significant in this context is how it seemingly pulls no punches in describing a range of apparently persistent issues: the struggle for local voices to be heard, the sometimes-rigid standards for what counts as “authentic,” and the friction that tends to emerge both within and between different stakeholders. Within this broader analytical framework, *Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Common Stage for Scholars and Government* does not just seem to offer high-level analysis; what the analysis



tends to support is how it grounds its insights in policy and practice, appearing to show how China's experience adds something arguably unique to global conversations about knowledge, power, and modernity in the ICH field.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Philosophical Significance of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

In contemporary discourse, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) appears to occupy a unique and often highly contested space, particularly within the broader analytical framework of cultural policy. Rather than representing what might be characterized as a straightforward continuation of past traditions, ICH seems to be situated at a complex intersection where questions of power, knowledge, and what appears to be a collective search for identity tend to converge. What seems to constitute ICH in the present moment did not, it would appear, simply emerge organically from the past. Instead, it seems to be largely the product of ongoing choices, deliberate classifications, and what appear to be repeated redefinitions that reflect shifting societal priorities and political dynamics.

Given the multifaceted nature of this evidence, ongoing debates surrounding ICH—whether in academic institutions, governmental bodies, or local communities—seem to continually reshape its meaning, appearing to suggest what seems to be a complicated tension between pressures toward modernity and the sometimes-rigid application of state authority. In practice, it typically seems to be government agencies and select experts who are positioned to determine which cultural elements might be deemed worthy of recognition, a process that ostensibly spotlights some while quietly sidelining others. What appears particularly significant about these findings, as Melis and Chambers [2] seem to suggest, is the idea that behind such official decisions lies a continuous negotiation of power. What this tends to indicate is that each time officials and scholars appear to revise the rules or reinterpret heritage, they are not merely preserving memories. What this pattern seems to suggest, therefore, is that they are also deciding whose stories are perceived to matter and who is included in what seems to constitute the ongoing cultural narrative. Consequently, from this particular interpretive perspective, the preservation of ICH



rarely seems to be only about saving the past; it appears to be just as much about drawing new boundaries for culture and society.

Within this broader analytical framework, the global context appears to add further layers of complexity. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) now seems to stand as what might be characterized as both a marker of national identity and an active force in shaping how societies appear to modernize. Official ICH lists, for example, don't only seem to possess symbolic value—they also tend to affect which communities receive resources, whose prestige is ostensibly raised, and how traditional practices evolve or are, in some cases, reinvented. Over time, the relationship between government and academia has become substantially more complex: there is a considerable degree of cooperation, but also what appears to be a quiet competition, particularly in setting policies and theories. What appears to follow from this analysis is that while government-led efforts, like hierarchical nomination processes, give a certain structure to heritage protection, scholars frequently step back to critique whether these models tend to flatten diversity or ignore the voices of tradition-bearers. What the book *\*Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Common Stage for Scholars and Government\** appears to do is explore this very landscape, seeming to generally indicate how policymakers and academics, despite sometimes clashing agendas, together shape China's approach to ICH. What seems especially noteworthy in this analytical context is that the book does not fall into the trap of presenting the entire dynamic as a battle between bureaucrats and scholars; instead, it tends to push for broader participation, recognizing the value of including the communities themselves. Drawing from both theory and practical case studies, what the book seems to suggest is not just persistent problems but also the inventive ways people are finding solutions on the ground.

At its core, what appears to emerge as the real philosophical power of ICH seems to lie in its role as a tool for what could be described as the continual (re)making of shared memory and group identity. Given the multifaceted nature of this evidence, nearly every attempt to protect or revive an ICH element appears to be intertwined with people's lived experiences, memories, and sense of place. What this tends to indicate is that heritage is not meant to sit behind museum glass—it seemingly needs to be reinterpreted, brought to life again and again, and threaded through modern existence. What this pattern seems to suggest, therefore, is that it is not solely top-down policies or academic stamps of approval that appear to keep ICH alive, but



rather the enthusiasm and imagination of the people and communities who inherit, practice, and adapt these traditions. This seemingly ongoing renewal appears to help ICH break free from the apparent limits of time and geography, making it a living part of everyday life. From this particular interpretive perspective, ICH appears to provide evidence that may support just how adaptable and inventive culture can be. What appears to warrant further interpretive consideration is that it is not about merely copying the past or putting on empty performances; instead, it seems to constitute a constant, creative response to changing times, helping people navigate shifting values and social realities.

### **3. The Tensions between Locality, Primitiveness, and Cultural Diversity**

Within the broader analytical framework of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH), what appear to represent seemingly unavoidable core issues are productive conservation and the transformation of culture under modernity. Productive conservation tends to emphasize what might be characterized as the transformation of traditional cultural resources into potential drivers of contemporary socio-economic and cultural development. From this particular interpretive perspective, its focus appears to be not only on the preservation and transmission of ICH projects, but also on what seem to be their practical roles in industrialization, marketization, and social innovation.

In a critical study of ICH protection mechanisms, Eichler appears to tend to suggest that the impacts of what might be characterized as power structures and resource allocation on cultural diversity during productive conservation and modern transformation should not be underestimated. Within this broader analytical framework, it seems that policy-making and practical operations often tend to favor ICH projects that are ostensibly easier to industrialize, fit mainstream aesthetics, or possess perceived economic potential, while a substantial number of niches, marginalized, or endangered traditional cultural forms may become further marginalized. What appears particularly significant about these findings is that in this process, inequalities in participation and challenges to cultural diversity seemingly become more pronounced. Eichler therefore appears to advocate for greater attention



to community subjects and marginalized groups in productive conservation practices, and for the establishment of more equitable and inclusive participation mechanisms, so that ICH, during its transformation under modernity, is not only an economic resource, but also what seems to constitute an organic component of social identity, cultural diversity, and community development [1].

## 4. Conclusion

Considering the nuanced nature of these findings, China's approach to protecting intangible cultural heritage (ICH) seems to have changed substantially over the years. What used to be a system predominantly run from the top down by the state has apparently opened up to more cooperation and genuine participation from different groups. What this shift appears to indicate is that it has not only helped strengthen a sense of national unity—it has also seemingly played a part in the country's wider development goals. Still, what appears to emerge as a significant hurdle is figuring out how to ensure that local communities and grassroots voices are genuinely included when decisions are made and resources are distributed. What appears to follow from this analysis, therefore, is that ICH governance in China today appears to represent a mix of centralized planning and local creativity—a combination that seems to open up new possibilities but also brings its own set of challenges that appear to need ongoing attention and adjustment [5].

What appears to emerge from an analysis of China's legal frameworks is a developmental trajectory where laws and policies for ICH seem to have evolved from relatively basic rules into substantially more detailed and ostensibly comprehensive systems. Even so, within this broader analytical framework, certain gaps appear to remain—what appears particularly significant about these gaps is their presence in areas like on-the-ground community involvement and the capacity for existing laws to adapt to society's changing needs. What this pattern seems to suggest, therefore, is the importance for new policies to pay closer attention to regional distinctions and the lived realities people face [6]. What also seems to emerge as a noticeable trend is the way ICH appears to be increasingly tied in with the knowledge economy. Considering the nuanced nature of these findings, turning heritage into economic assets—what might be characterized as industry, digital media, and tourism—appears to have the potential to boost local economies and bring ICH into the public spotlight. What





appears to follow from this analysis, however, is that excessive commercialization may risk diluting the authentic meaning and cultural value of these traditions. What this tends to indicate is why, given the complexity of these theoretical relationships, balanced legal protections and smart management seem to be particularly essential, so that economic benefits do not end up largely hollowing out what presumably makes ICH important [7].

What China's layered system of laws and policies seems to generally indicate is what might be characterized as a methodical approach to safeguarding heritage; yet, from this particular interpretive perspective, there still appear to be tensions between what is designed at the national level and what tends to work locally. What tends to emerge as theoretically important here is the disconnect that can arise. In light of these methodological considerations, facilitating greater community involvement and establishing clearer feedback mechanisms seems to be a key consideration for making policies genuinely effective in diverse local contexts [8]. Finally, what appears to be revealed by local case studies is that the most ostensibly successful approach to protecting ICH in China appears to be the building of more authentic partnerships—where government, communities, and even the private sector can collaborate. What appears to emerge from this evidence is that this kind of collaborative model does not just help keep heritage alive and dynamic; it also seems to suggest that ICH can continue to spark creativity and strengthen cultural identity within a rapidly changing society [9].

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