

Challenges in the Transmission of Local Intangible Cultural Heritage and Pathways for Its Safeguarding

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Abstract: Local intangible cultural heritage is sustained through particular regions, communities of bearers, and ways of life and is therefore characterized by its living and place-based nature. At present, some intangible cultural heritage practices face challenges such as the aging of bearers, the contraction of spaces for cultural practice, insufficient youth participation, imbalanced commercial development, and fragmented digital documentation. This article proposes conducting ongoing surveys, developing a multilevel talent pipeline, restoring spaces for cultural practice, implementing differentiated safeguarding measures, and promoting appropriate productive adaptation. It further recommends improving support mechanisms through local-level coordination, targeted funding, and outcome evaluation. These measures are intended to preserve the cultural meanings of intangible cultural heritage practices and strengthen their capacity for sustainable transmission.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage; local culture; living transmission; heritage bearers; holistic safeguarding

Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) encompasses cultural expressions and practices developed by regions, communities, and cultural groups through long-term processes of production and everyday life and transmitted across generations. It primarily includes oral traditions, traditional music, dance, drama, narrative and performing arts, traditional craftsmanship, traditional medicine, and folk customs. Unlike historic buildings and archaeological sites, ICH exists mainly in people's knowledge, memories, skills, and practices. If bearers cease practicing, cultural communities lose the conditions necessary for participation, or established ways of life undergo drastic changes, the content of an ICH practice may diminish or its transmission may be interrupted altogether.

China has established a four-tier system of representative ICH inventories at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels. As of 2025, the State Council had announced five groups comprising 1,557 representative items of national ICH, involving 3,610 responsible safeguarding organizations or regions. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism had recognized six groups totaling 3,997 representative bearers of national ICH, designated 23 national cultural ecology conservation areas, and supported the documentation of 2,290 representative national-level bearers^[1].

Table 1. Selected Data on China's Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding System

Category	Number	Principal safeguarding function
Representative items of national ICH	1,557	Recognizing representative practices of significant cultural value
Responsible safeguarding organizations or regions	3,610	Assigning specific safeguarding responsibilities
Representative bearers of national ICH	3,997	Supporting the transmission of core skills and knowledge
National cultural ecology conservation areas	23	Implementing regional and holistic safeguarding
National-level bearers receiving documentation support	2,290	Preserving technical processes and personal cultural memories

Representative inventories provide an institutional foundation for the identification, recognition, and safeguarding of ICH. Local safeguarding efforts must nevertheless address the specific conditions necessary for

the continued viability of individual practices. ICH practices differ considerably in their modes of transmission, settings of practice, market foundations, and cultural restrictions. Traditional craftsmanship may be sustained through productive activity; folk customs depend on collective community participation; and traditional performing arts require stable performance spaces and audiences. The safeguarding of local ICH should therefore extend beyond inclusion in official inventories and the number of public presentations to focus on the actual state of transmission within local society.

1. Fundamental Characteristics of Local Intangible Cultural Heritage

1.1 Dependence on Place and Collective Ownership

Local ICH consists of cultural practices formed within particular natural environments, social relationships, and conditions of production and everyday life. Local climate, natural resources, topography, and modes of production influence the selection of materials and methods used in traditional craftsmanship. Festivals, rituals, oral traditions, and performing arts are closely connected with local historical memory, dialects, beliefs, and community relationships. Once a practice becomes detached from its original region and community, its outward form may be retained, but its social significance and cultural functions can easily be weakened.

The local nature of ICH does not mean that a practice must remain isolated within its place of origin. Population mobility, media dissemination, and cultural exchange can expand the influence of ICH. Transmission activities must, however, maintain a connection with the source community. When a traditional performance is relocated to a tourism venue and its timing, relationships among participants, and ritual procedures are entirely reorganized in response to market demand, its cultural nature may shift from a community practice to a generic performance.

ICH is also not the personal property of an individual representative bearer. Bearers possess essential knowledge and skills and are central to the continuation of a practice, but the cultural expressions concerned have generally been created over long periods by communities, families, occupational groups, or ethnic groups. Safeguarding efforts must respect the knowledge and labor of bearers while also protecting the rights of relevant communities to interpret, practice, and share their culture.

1.2 Living Transmission and Continuous Re-creation

Its living nature is a defining feature that distinguishes local ICH from static cultural remains. Traditional craftsmanship must be taught through repeated practice; folk music and drama must be sustained through singing, playing, and performance; and folk customs depend on the collective participation of community members. Written descriptions, photographs, and videos can preserve relevant information, but they cannot replace direct interpersonal transmission.

During intergenerational transmission, ICH changes in response to developments in materials, tools, aesthetics, and everyday needs. Appropriate change is part of cultural continuity. Wang argues that ICH safeguarding encompasses the practice itself, its bearers, cultural spaces, and relevant institutions and must recognize the continuously transmitted and re-created nature of ICH ^[2]. Safeguarding should neither establish the form of one historical period as the sole standard nor permit arbitrary alteration of core skills and cultural meanings in the name of innovation.

Determining whether change is appropriate requires consideration of whether core knowledge has been maintained, whether the relevant cultural community accepts the change, and whether the transmission chain remains intact. The substitution of materials, adjustment of product dimensions, and modernization of communication methods may allow a practice to adapt to contemporary life. If, however, only commercially attractive patterns and symbols are retained while complex processes and cultural rules are removed, the practice may be reduced to an ordinary commodity marketed under the label of ICH.

2. Challenges in the Transmission of Local Intangible Cultural Heritage

2.1 Aging Bearers and Discontinuities in the Transmission Pipeline

Some local ICH practices depend on a small number of elderly bearers, while the number of people capable of fully mastering technical processes, ritual rules, and oral traditions continues to decline. Learning a traditional practice often requires a lengthy period of training and substantial time investment, without necessarily providing a stable income. Young people have more choices in employment, residence, and lifestyle and may therefore be reluctant to remain in their local communities to study traditional skills over an extended period.

The recognition of representative bearers has played a positive role in increasing public awareness and improving the conditions for transmission. It may, however, result in safeguarding resources becoming excessively concentrated on a small number of representative individuals. The complete continuation of a practice usually depends on the combined efforts of material suppliers, craftspeople, performers, organizers, and community participants. Supporting only individual representative bearers cannot adequately address the contraction of the broader community of transmission.

Some training programs emphasize enrollment figures while neglecting sustained learning. Participants may be able to produce simple works after a short course but remain unable to master material preparation, technical judgment, and cultural conventions. Without subsequent opportunities for practice, continued mentor–apprentice relationships, or channels through which the outcomes of training can be applied, participation in training is unlikely to develop into stable transmission.

2.2 Changes in the Cultural Environment and the Contraction of Spaces for Practice

Local ICH is closely connected with traditional environments of production and everyday life. Urbanization, population outflow, industrial restructuring, and the redevelopment of village spaces have transformed these cultural environments. Traditional festivals may lack stable groups of participants, local operas may lose their customary performance venues, handicrafts may face shortages of raw materials, and oral traditions may gradually weaken as local dialects are used less frequently.

Some safeguarding initiatives emphasize finished products, repertoires, and forms of performance while paying insufficient attention to the underlying social relationships. Liu argues that ICH safeguarding must adhere to the principle of holism by connecting individual practices with their bearers, communities, cultural spaces, and living environments ^[3]. If a folk custom is no longer collectively organized by the community and is presented only by a professional troupe at a festival or exhibition, its participatory structure and local function have already changed.

Cultural spaces are not limited to permanent buildings. Village streets, marketplaces, temple fairs, family workshops, and traditional waterways may all serve as spaces in which ICH is practiced. When cultural surveys are

absent from local construction and spatial redevelopment projects, the spatial relationships on which ICH depends may easily be damaged.

2.3 Distortion of Cultural Content through Commercial Development

Market-oriented adaptation can improve bearers' incomes and expand the use of ICH products. Excessive commercialization, however, may compress production time, simplify technical processes, and reduce complex cultural content to a small number of symbols. Some commercial operators use only the name of an ICH practice and its representative patterns, while the manufacture of their products has little connection with the original skills. Consumers may consequently find it difficult to distinguish authentically transmitted products from generic imitations.

Tourism performances are often constrained by duration, frequency, and venue. To accommodate audiences, some programs shorten ritual procedures or introduce performance elements that do not belong to the local tradition. As a practice gains greater public exposure, community participants may paradoxically lose their authority to interpret it, while commercial organizations increasingly control content selection and modes of communication.

Digital communication is similarly vulnerable to fragmentation. Short videos are useful for presenting technical details and the stories of bearers, but they can also emphasize visual spectacle while overlooking historical context, cultural rules, and complete technical processes. When metrics of online traffic replace cultural evaluation, a substantial gap may emerge between the popularity of online content and the practice's actual capacity for transmission.

3. Principles for Safeguarding Local Intangible Cultural Heritage

3.1 The Central Role of Bearers and Cultural Communities

The safeguarding of local ICH should respect the central role of bearers and relevant cultural communities. Before conducting surveys, organizing presentations, adapting content, or developing products, safeguarding organizations should consult the cultural practitioners concerned. Content subject to ritual restrictions, confidentiality requirements, or limitations based on group identity should not be disclosed without authorization merely to facilitate exhibition or dissemination.

Support for bearers should encompass teaching,

continued practice, and basic livelihood needs. Subsidies may be used to purchase materials, organize tools, and provide instruction. Safeguarding organizations should also provide training spaces, opportunities for practice, and connections with prospective learners. When bearers are elderly, systematic documentation should be completed promptly, and learners with an appropriate foundation should participate in the entire process.

The participation of cultural communities can reduce distortions caused by externally directed safeguarding. Villagers, industry organizations, and local cultural workers can jointly discuss the scope of safeguarding, the timing of activities, and the boundaries of dissemination. When relevant stakeholders participate in decision-making, safeguarding initiatives are more likely to remain connected with local life.

3.2 Holistic Safeguarding and Appropriate Utilization

Holistic safeguarding requires simultaneous attention to the content of a practice, its bearers, spaces of practice, raw materials, dialects, and social relationships. These elements are interdependent, and the prolonged absence of any one of them can weaken the foundations of transmission. Safeguarding traditional craftsmanship requires attention to sources of raw materials and the production of tools. Safeguarding traditional drama requires coordinated support for scripts, music, costumes, stages, and audience development.

Appropriate utilization must be premised on sustainable transmission. Traditional crafts with an established market foundation may be suitable for productive safeguarding. Folk customs that depend on particular rituals and community relationships should not be developed directly as generic tourism products. Endangered practices should first receive emergency documentation and support for the transmission of their core knowledge rather than being rapidly expanded for commercial purposes.

In their review of ICH research, Tao and Cai identify transmission and institutional reflection, as well as development and community agency, as major research themes^[4]. This indicates that safeguarding, utilization, and community participation must be considered together. Economic returns cannot replace cultural value, but the complete rejection of appropriate utilization may also weaken the practical conditions available to bearers.

4. Pathways for Safeguarding Local Intangible Cultural Heritage

4.1 Establishing Mechanisms for Ongoing Surveys and Dynamic Documentation

Surveys of local ICH should not end when an application for inventory inclusion has been completed. Cultural authorities and safeguarding organizations should regularly examine the circumstances of bearers, the number of active learners, the frequency of practice, the supply of raw materials, and changes in cultural spaces. Separate records should be established for practices with stable transmission chains, those experiencing transmission difficulties, and those at risk of disappearance. Safeguarding measures should then be adjusted in response to changing conditions.

Documentation should cover the complete process of practice. For traditional craftsmanship, it should record material selection, tool use, operating sequences, quality assessment, and specialized terminology. For performing arts, it should record vocal styles, movements, repertoires, accompaniment, and performance customs. Documentation of folk customs should additionally include participating groups, activity spaces, and organizational rules. Recording only finished products or fragments of staged performances is insufficient to preserve the core knowledge of a practice.

Digital archives should use standardized information on names, dates, locations, individuals, and rights ownership. Clear relationships should be established among audiovisual materials, photographs, interview records, and physical objects. When personal knowledge or content intended only for members of a community is involved, access rights must be clearly defined to prevent unrestricted use after digitization.

4.2 Developing a Multilevel System for Cultivating Transmission Talent

The cultivation of talent for ICH transmission can be organized at three levels: core transmission, general education, and professional support. Core transmission should target individuals willing to undertake sustained study and should involve systematic instruction from representative bearers. General education should target primary and secondary school students and community residents, focusing on cultural interest and basic understanding. Professional support should involve researchers, documentarians, designers, managers, and

communication specialists who can assist with safeguarding.

Mentor–apprentice transmission requires stable time commitments and conditions for practice. Local governments can support training centers, workshops, and performance groups in providing regular instruction. Learning outcomes should be evaluated through stage-based achievements, actual works, and the ability to perform techniques independently. Learner subsidies can be linked to study time, technical progress, and participation in transmission activities, reducing the occurrence of nominal registration without substantive learning.

School education is well suited to developing basic awareness and interest but should not replace specialist transmission. School-based ICH programs can select practices connected with local history and students' lives and involve bearers and teachers in joint curriculum design. Courses should include observation, practice, and interviews rather than being limited to one-off lectures or simple craft activities.

4.3 Promoting Transmission through Everyday Life and Appropriate Adaptation

Local ICH can maintain stable demand for practice only when it continues to participate in social life. Traditional craft products may be adjusted in size, function, and packaging to suit contemporary patterns of use while retaining their core materials and techniques. Local opera and music can be incorporated into community cultural activities, small theaters, and public cultural spaces to increase opportunities for regular performance. The safeguarding of festivals and folk customs should remain grounded in the collective participation of local residents.

Product development requires mechanisms for cultural review and benefit sharing. Bearers, cultural communities, designers, and commercial operators should clearly define their respective rights. The use of ICH labels should be linked to authentic techniques, places of origin, and producers, preventing ordinary commodities from misappropriating the ICH designation. A portion of market revenue can be used to train apprentices, document practices, and maintain cultural spaces.

Digital communication should balance accessibility with the integrity of knowledge. Short videos can present a particular technical stage, whereas thematic documentaries and digital courses should explain history, terminology, materials, and relationships of transmission. Bearers should

participate in verifying digital content before publication to reduce inaccurate explanations and excessive adaptation.

5. Support Mechanisms for Safeguarding Local Intangible Cultural Heritage

5.1 Local Collaborative Governance and Differentiated Investment

The safeguarding of local ICH involves multiple policy fields, including culture, education, ethnic affairs, agriculture and rural development, market regulation, and intellectual property. County-level cultural authorities can take the lead in establishing collaborative mechanisms, while museums, cultural centers, schools, industry associations, and village organizations assume responsibilities for surveys, exhibitions, teaching, production, and community mobilization.

Funding should be allocated according to the condition of each practice. Endangered practices require an emphasis on surveys, documentation, support for bearers, and apprentice training. Traditional performing arts require support for repertoire documentation and performance spaces. Traditional crafts require support for raw materials, tools, and production sites. Practices capable of generating market revenue should continue to receive public safeguarding investment so that responsibility for safeguarding is not transferred entirely to commercial enterprises.

Safeguarding organizations should specify annual objectives and the purposes for which funds are used. Funding evaluations should not be limited to the number of activities and attendees. They should also examine the actual duration of training, learner retention, the preservation of core skills, and the participation of cultural communities.

5.2 Evaluating Safeguarding Outcomes and Monitoring Risks

The effectiveness of ICH safeguarding should be evaluated primarily on the basis of the state of transmission. Indicators may include the number of core bearers, the number of committed learners, the annual frequency of practice, the integrity of traditional knowledge, the availability of raw materials, and the extent of community participation. Product sales, online views, and media coverage may be used as indicators of dissemination but cannot replace evaluation of transmission.

Risk monitoring should address the health of bearers, the loss of young learners, the demolition or redevelopment of cultural spaces, shortages of raw materials, and intellectual

property disputes. When an elderly bearer possesses unique skills, documentation and intensive transmission should be initiated promptly. When the intensity of commercial development increases rapidly, safeguarding organizations should examine whether core techniques and cultural meanings have been excessively simplified.

Evaluation findings should inform subsequent safeguarding plans. Practices showing improved transmission may expand their public education and appropriate social use. Practices in decline require adjustments to funding and personnel arrangements. Practices that have remained inactive for an extended period and lack active bearers should be investigated again to determine their current viability, thereby preventing discrepancies between archival records and actual conditions.

Conclusion

Local intangible cultural heritage is embodied in human practice and transmitted across generations through particular cultural communities and living environments. The aging of bearers, insufficient youth participation, the contraction of cultural spaces, and imbalanced commercial development indicate that local ICH safeguarding continues to emphasize official inventories over processes of transmission and public presentation over cultural environments. Digital documentation and market development can expand the reach of dissemination, but they cannot replace authentic technical practice and community participation.

Safeguarding efforts should establish mechanisms for ongoing surveys and dynamic documentation and implement emergency, holistic, or productive safeguarding according to the characteristics of each practice. The cultivation of transmission talent should encompass core apprentices, school education, and professional support personnel. Transmission through everyday life should restore connections between ICH practices and local society. Only through the joint participation of local authorities, safeguarding organizations, bearers, and communities—supported by differentiated investment, benefit coordination, and risk monitoring—can the cultural meanings and sustainable transmission capacity of local ICH be maintained.

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