

Varying Discourse and Use of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Shaanxi Huaxian Shadow Puppets

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ABSTRACT: Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as an administrative category has been used in Chinese official discourse since the early twenty-first century. It tends to standardise in a systemic vision what practices should or should not be included in the updated definition of Chinese tradition. The role played by the central government is of utter importance, drawing on China's administrative and legal framework. However, local dynamics and reasoning sometimes occur off the beaten track. Shadow puppet troupes are a good example of a long tradition all over China that almost disappeared during the Maoist era, but which was resurrected during the 1980s, and is now listed internationally as a form of ICH. In Hua County (Huaxian), Shaanxi Province, one of the practitioners discussed in this article belongs to a family renowned for its puppets, and he has participated in the revival of shadow puppet performances. The second case examined here is of a troupe performing in the Yongxing Fang tourist area in Xi'an. The leader of the troupe is registered on the list of heritage transmitters at the provincial level. The discourse and practice of these two troupes exemplify different attitudes towards official recognition. Analysing the Huaxian shadow puppets, I will try to find out if ICH is only a new label stuck on an older tradition or if it has a deeper influence on the survival of living traditions.

KEYWORDS: shadow puppets, Xi'an, labelling process, intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO.

Introduction

In the last decade of the twentieth century, Chinese from Taiwan, the diaspora, and the Mainland became interested in puppets, rediscovering a tradition¹ on the verge of extinction. The climax of this trend came in 1993, when *The Puppetmaster* (戲夢人生 *Ximeng rensheng*) by Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝賢 earned international success and won the Jury Prize at the 46th Cannes Film Festival. Hou's film tells the story of Taiwan's famous puppeteer, Li Tien-lu 李天祿, who played himself in the film. The film is a metaphor for the disappearance of Taiwan's traditional culture. One year later, director Zhang Yimou 張藝謀 won three awards at the 47th Cannes Film Festival for *To Live* (活着 *Huozhe*). The director added shadow puppets, which are not part of Yu Hua's 余華 eponymous novel. They play an important role in the film by expressing the protagonists' feelings and giving an artistic touch, but contrary to Hou's film, the puppet shows were only an aesthetic element added to the film. Zhang Yimou had the help of Wang Tianwen 汪天穩 and

Pan Jingle 潘京樂, two masters from Hua County (hereafter Huaxian), Shaanxi Province, in filming the shows.² The revival of the Huaxian puppet tradition can be traced back to these two films, which thrust them into the spotlight after a long period in the dark. As such, this practice represents an interesting case of a living tradition that was resurrected before the category of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物質文化遺產, thereafter abbreviated to *feiyi*) was introduced in China. They exemplify what UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter the Convention) intends to protect when defining ICH as "the expression of ways of living developed by a community and passed on to successive generations: this includes customs, practices,

1. As the official discourse about ICH and most of my interviewees used the word "tradition," I have decided to retain it in this article, also for reasons of convenience. For an in-depth discussion of the ambiguous usage of the word and the concept of "tradition," refer to Noyes (2009), as well as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).
2. The four male inheritors in the category of traditional drama at the national level are Wang Tianwen born in 1950, Pan Jingle born in 1929, Wei Jinquan 魏金全 born in 1964, and Liu Hua 劉華 born in 1943.

places, objects, artistic expressions, and values.⁷³ ICH is an official classification that was adopted in 2003. To this day, 180 states have ratified the Convention. China was one of the early ones, ratifying the text in 2004. The Convention is now widely used as a normative model, or at least as a reference, by international agencies, national authorities, and some practitioners. Until the early 2000s in China, the notion of folk (*minjian* 民間) tradition prevailed, providing a repertoire of categories mobilised in scientific discourse (Oakes 2013; Wu 2015; Svensson 2016). A new vocabulary was slowly implemented within the legal framework inspired by UNESCO, but as some Chinese scholars have explained, the concept of intangibility or immateriality is not easy to understand in Chinese (Liu 2015). The understanding is different depending on who is using it and in what context. The arrival of this new term has allowed the Chinese authorities to make a new inventory of traditional culture, to define new cultural policies, and to create a new label providing official recognition (Wang 2006; Maags 2018). At the same time, while categorising a social object, the authorities transform an item from a specific community into a showcase (Bortolotto 2011).

The term ICH has also created a new image of the relationships between the Chinese Communist Party and the arts. To be sure, the Party-state, as the defender of official Chinese cultural heritage, remains the ultimate authority in deciding what items will be accepted or rejected (Hung 1994). Even so, under Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 in the 1980s, artists did not have to adhere to the official line, and some adaptations were possible. Traditional culture, which had been widely blacklisted during the 1960s and 1970s, became an object of academic and artistic interest (Siu 1989; You 2020) with the frenetic search for cultural roots (*xungen* 尋根) (Thoraval 2021). The ICH fever (*fei yi re* 非遺熱) and hyper folk trend (Wu 2015) have caused a proliferation of the groups involved, and tradition as both reference and practice has been increasingly mobilised as a resource for various agendas and interests (Overmyer 2001). More recently, President Xi Jinping 習近平

emphasised the need to promote the creative transformation and development of the best of traditional Chinese culture, enhance the cohesion of the Chinese nation and the appeal of Chinese culture, deepen exchanges and mutual learning with other civilisations, better tell the stories of China's fine traditional culture, and better present Chinese culture to the world.⁴

This shows that the Party-state considers traditional culture a resource and an important item to be used in official storytelling about the Chinese nation. The local communities that have kept the traditions alive are not even mentioned, however, although their role is essential in transforming tradition into national heritage. Underneath the boilerplate of Chinese official jargon, diverse dynamics and local reasoning still exist. Through two case studies of shadow puppet art in Huaxian, I seek to examine how the defenders of China's puppet show tradition are struggling to keep it alive at the grassroots level.

Shaanxi has been the focus of many campaigns to protect what is considered the birthplace of Chinese civilisation (Cheung 2018; Zhu and Maags 2020). Serving as the political capital for several dynasties since antiquity, Xi'an has become the cultural capital of China. Since 1987, the year when the Mausoleum of the First Qin

Emperor was added to the UNESCO world heritage list, the city has pinpointed culture and heritage as major aspects of its urban development and has placed them at the core of its politics. Tangible heritage in the early stage of heritage conservation, and eventually intangible heritage as well, have been included in urban planning as key elements for the development of Xi'an (Zhao, Ponzini, and Zhang 2020). As protecting the past has a long tradition in Shaanxi, one would expect the implementation of ICH labelling to have been easy. In order to test this hypothesis and gain an in-depth understanding of the local situation, I conducted fieldwork in Xi'an and its surrounding rural towns and counties in 2020 and 2021.⁵ I first interviewed nine musicians, one local specialist scholar of music transcripts, five experts in local government (town and county level), and one businessman (the director of Yongxing Fang 永興坊, a touristic area in downtown Xi'an). I was also able to visit some museums and galleries exhibiting ICH items, and I met with one linguistic specialist in the local dialect, as well as academics from Xi'an Jiaotong University and from Tsinghua University in Beijing. I chose two individuals among 25 people linked with shadow puppets (as musicians, singers, and puppet designers) as being representative of different cases. Their common characteristic is that they are both natives of Huaxian. This county was at the forefront of reviving China's puppet show tradition in the 1980s, before it was noticed by Zhang Yimou.

After some contextualisation of Chinese management of ICH and the historical background of the Huaxian puppet tradition, I have sought to understand how actors in puppetry in Huaxian react and compromise with cultural preservation projects that are imposed upon them (Adell et al. 2015; Chen 2015). Are they mere hostages to official policy, as Fayolle Lussac (2000) argues, or do they make use of a common language element? To what extent do attempts to gain ICH recognition derive from opportunities offered by various actors such as officials, commercial enterprises, and tourism stakeholders, as opposed to inner or long-term motivations? These are the questions I try to answer through these two cases.

Chinese management of ICH

There is no clear guideline given to UNESCO member states about how to implement ICH referencing in their country. As a result, ICH management varies greatly from one country to another. In China, the top-down administrative process is especially long (Byrne 2009; Ye and Zhou 2012; Evans and Rowlands 2021). After ratification of the Convention in 2004, the Chinese government issued many regulations and even one national law concerning ICH in 2011.⁶ In order to gain more systemic knowledge of China's ICH, the Chinese

3. ICOMOS, 2002, *International Cultural Tourism Charter: Principles and Guidelines for Managing Tourism at Places of Cultural and Heritage Significance*, ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee.

4. State Council, "Xi Stresses Systematic Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage," 12 December 2022, http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2022-12/12/content_85008462.htm (accessed on 9 March 2023).

5. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I was living in Beijing; although my travels were constrained, I managed to carry out a few fieldtrips in Xi'an.

6. Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 全國人民代表大會常務委員會, 2011, 中華人民共和國非物質文化遺產法 (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan fa*, Intangible cultural heritage law of the People's Republic of China), 25 February 2011, www.lawinfochina.com/Display.aspx?lib=law&Cgid=145721 (accessed on 10 June 2022).

government first held a countrywide census from 2007 to 2010. Then in 2019, in order to improve the management of ICH items and activities as well as their inheritors, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (hereafter MCT) issued a new regulation to “identify representative inheritors, including their skills, representativeness, social influence and moral standing.”⁷ The importance placed on good management of ICH can now be observed at the highest level of the government: in January 2022, the State Council decided to hold regular interministerial meetings at the vice-ministerial level about ICH.⁸

At the lowest administrative level, civil servants were also mobilised to identify practices likely to be labelled as ICH in their districts. Each administrative body is responsible for issuing lists of items and activities to be preserved, but also to select some inheritors and provide them with subsidies⁹ (Huang, Zhao, and Wu 2013). Article 6 of the 2011 law on ICH specified that “All governments at and above the county level should include ICH expenses in their budgets.” As consequence, local governments not only have to identify and promote local traditions but also have to finance them from their budgets. The law also puts a heavy responsibility on civil servants, stressing that:

the focus shall be placed on [ICH’s] authenticity, integrity, and inheritance, and such protection shall be conducive to strengthening the recognition of the culture of the Chinese nation, maintaining the unification of the country and the unity of the nation, and promoting social harmony and sustainable development. (Article 4)

A three-tiered administrative process is conducted – first at the county or city level, then at the provincial, and lastly at the national level – before a practice can be officially listed as part of China’s ICH. The MCT later proposed some items and activities for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, meaning at the UNESCO level.¹⁰ Few items get through the internal selection process, however, and even fewer achieve international recognition.

The academic sphere was not left behind. Its involvement started with Wang Wenzhang’s publication of an *Introduction to intangible cultural heritage* (2006). Wang Wenzhang is President of the Chinese National Academy of Arts and Director of the China Centre for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (*Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin* 中國非物質文化遺產保護中心). Actions aimed at improving the understanding of ICH were in high demand.¹¹ The first national training course for ICH teachers in colleges and universities opened in 2014. Since then, regular training sessions have been held in Beijing. The fourth teacher training course for colleges and universities was jointly held in 2020. In March 2021, the Ministry of Education officially included ICH protection in the curriculum of colleges and universities.

The administrative and academic organisation described above shows a process of centralising all decision-making on ICH. The heritage structures that were split before 2003 have been united under the authority of the central government. In 2006, the China Centre for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage was established in Beijing. This policy shift had the effect of shrinking local initiative and standardising the definition of what is and what is

not related to heritage (Chen 2015; Maags and Holbig 2016). Under the new definition provided by the 2011 law, contradictions and conflicts have arisen between communities and the political powers that are supposed to guarantee the validity of the practices chosen (de Cesari 2012; Sha 2022).

In addition to the regulatory changes that frame the practice of traditional puppetry today, some innovative measures were implemented in everyday life to give better visibility to ICH. In 2005, a Cultural and Natural Heritage Day (held on the second Saturday of June) was established. Echoing this event, a nationwide World Puppetry Day was organised on 21 March 2014 to enhance the visibility of puppetry. In 2020, the ICH Department of the MCT launched the ICH Shopping Festival with the stated purpose of establishing “close contact with traditions.” According to *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日報), as of June 2021, the number of videos related to national ICH projects had exceeded 140 million, and the total turnover of ICH products had increased 15 times year-on-year, while the post-1980s generation had become the main pillar of ICH consumption.¹² Some shadow puppeteers have benefitted from this trend. For example, some participated in the Fourth International Conference on Training in the Arts of Puppetry: “The Place of Tradition in Contemporary Puppetry: Bridges, not Borders,” held in Beijing on September 2020. Others participated in Cultural and Natural Heritage Day and performed in schools or commercial centres. All the people I interviewed are using social media to post some of their new shows, newspaper articles, photos, and videos. Special events such as Cultural and Natural Heritage Day are widely followed on social media. Some heritage performers have millions of followers. In order to insert the new term ICH into the Chinese cultural landscape, the government has created a new reference framework. This was experienced by some puppeteers as an additional administrative burden and by others as a mere new element of language.

7. State Council, 2019, “China to Improve Identification, Management of Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritors,” http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/201912/10/content_WS5def9637c6d0bcf8c4c18ac7.html (accessed on 10 June 2022).
8. State Council 國務院, 2022, “國務院辦公廳關於同意調整完善非物質文化遺產保護工作部際聯席會議制度的函” (*Guowuyuan bangongting guanyu tongyi tiaozheng wanshan feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu gongzuobu jilianxi huiyi zhidu de han*, The General Office of the State Council: Letter from the interministerial joint meeting system for the protection of ICH), www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2022-02/17/content_5674176.htm (accessed on 10 June 2022).
9. Ministry of Culture 文化部, 2008, “國家級非物質文化遺產專案代表性傳承人認定與管理暫行辦法” (*Guojia ji feiwuzhi wenhua yichan zhuan’an daibiao xing chuanchengren rending yu guanli zhanxing banfa*, Interim measures of the designation and administration of representative transmitters of national-level intangible cultural heritage elements), www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2008/content_1157918.htm (accessed 10 June 2022).
10. UNESCO, 2011, “Browse the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices,” [https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?text=&country\[\]=00045&multinational=3&display1=inscriptionID#tabs](https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?text=&country[]=00045&multinational=3&display1=inscriptionID#tabs) (accessed on 9 March 2023).
11. Yuan Li 苑利 and Gu Jun 顧軍, “非物質文化遺產學科建設需要回答的幾個問題” (*Feiwuzhi wenhua yichan xue xueke jianshe xuyao huida de jige wenti*, Several questions to be answered about the construction of a discipline of intangible cultural heritage), *China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network* (中國非物質文化遺產網), 29 April 2022, https://www.ihchina.cn/luntan_details/24919.html (accessed on 10 June 2022).
12. Zheng Hai’ou 鄭海鷗, “非遺觸網活力增(新時代新作)” (*Feiyi chu wang huoli zeng (xin shidai xin zuowei)*, Intangible cultural heritage network vitality increases (new era, new deed)), *People’s Daily Online* (人民網), 19 May 2022, <http://hb.people.com.cn/n2/2022/0519/c194063-35275230.html> (accessed on 10 June 2022).

Forced standardisation versus local particularities

The art of puppetry is widely distributed throughout 11 provinces of China (out of 34 administrative divisions of provincial rank), and a third of these are listed with a high concentration of communities involved in puppetry. Traditions differ considerably, however: some puppets may be taller than others, and may be manipulated by strings, rods, fingers, etc. The repertoire of operas, the number of singers, their singing techniques, and the number of musicians varies from one place to another (Broman 1981; Kronthal 1997). This is why for practitioners, it does not make sense to place all these traditions under the general label of “shadow puppetry.” But the administrative logic is different: it is about maximising chances of listing success at the UNESCO level. So the Ministry of Culture chose to group all these activities under one denomination when submitting its technical file for international consideration, as one can see in the China Centre for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage document of 2006. In the UNESCO text presenting the practice, this formatting resulted in the following definition:

Chinese shadow puppetry is a form of theatre acted by colourful silhouette figures made from leather or paper, accompanied by music and singing. (...) The figures create the illusion of moving images on a translucent cloth screen illuminated from behind. Many elder shadow puppetry artists can perform dozens of traditional plays, which are orally transmitted (...). Chinese shadow puppetry also passes on information such as cultural history, social beliefs, oral traditions and local customs.¹³

As we can see in this text, which tries to fill in the key elements required by the UNESCO secretariat, particularities have been erased in favour of a very general presentation. By contrast, practitioners generally advocate the existence of local specificities. They put emphasis on linguistic and repertoire specificities, and do not recognise themselves in this generalised definition. According to local tradition in Shaanxi, the origins of shadow puppets can be traced back to the Eastern Han (25-220 AD) in Chang'an, the then capital (close to present-day Xi'an). First created for the imperial court, the shows spread progressively to other strata of society. While spreading throughout China, the repertoires were modified and enriched. During the nineteenth century, they were a popular entertainment in urban and rural areas alike before they were undermined by modern media such as cinema and television (Li 2020). But just as this traditional art was on the verge of complete disappearance, it returned to fame (Evans and Rowlands 2021).

One reason that puppeteers themselves give for this longevity is that a shadow play is easy to operate and easy to carry, requiring only a piece of white cloth and a lamp from the back with some puppets placed flat against the cloth. The troupe is usually rather small: a typical Shaanxi shadow puppet troupe is composed of five or six people who handle the entire show behind the screen. Troupes travel from one village to the next for weddings, religious festivals, birthdays, etc. Some rich families even have their own troupe with puppeteers, musicians, and puppet cutters. The tasks are

well assigned: the puppeteer (*qianshou* 牽手) sits close behind the cloth to manipulate the prepared puppets. During some dialogues, the *qianshou* joins in. The first vocalist (*qiansheng* 前聲) mainly sings (opera tunes) and tells the story. Additionally, he plays a four-stringed plucked instrument with a full-moon-shaped sound box (*yueqin* 月琴). The third person, sitting in the back row, is known as the sitter (*zuodang* 坐檔) and plays larger percussion instruments such as gongs and bells. The side sitter (*shangdang* 上檔) plays the horn (*suona* 嗩呐) or trombone and joins in the dialogues. The second side sitter (*xiadang* 下檔) plays a two-stringed instrument with a thin wooden soundboard (*banhu* 板胡) and prepares the puppets. The success of the show basically depends on the dexterity of the puppeteer and the skill of the first vocalist acting as singer and conductor (Li 2020; Sha 2022).

The shows performed are taken from religious or traditional folk stories that are familiar to villagers. The repertoire is quite different from one county to the next. As transmission has been mainly oral in rural areas, each family involved in puppet shows has had its own repertoire. As a result, there are myriad localised versions of similar stories. So, there is a plurality of performances, but all shows and troupes are rooted in the Shaanxi identity. In Huaxian, practitioners I met told me about the importance of transmission to the next generation. This is a central issue for a performative tradition. “Apprenticeship is the irreplaceable way in which learning *in situ* transmits skills and collective cultural knowledge through prolonged proximity, presence and practice with a senior practitioner” (Rollins 2019: 10). Sun Zan 孫贊, a puppeteer interviewed in Xi'an, points to this transmission problem. Most shadow play singers are now over 50, and they struggle to recruit young people. He underlined that at present, only four complete Huaxian shadow troupes remain in the county. A troupe is composed of five or six members, usually retired people. In a Huaxian shadow show, members of a troupe are interchangeable, which means that they have to learn how to play different instruments and singing repertoires. Sun Zan recalls how he learned his skills: “I did not get real training; at the beginning I was singing Qin opera (*qinqiang* 秦腔). We were all farmers from the same village in Huaxian and did not get much education. We memorised a couple of plays and we performed them.” (Interview in Yongxing Fang, 7 June 2021)

The plasticity of the repertoire and the ease of operating the puppets explain puppetry's ability to adapt to new situations and how it survived the political campaigns of the Maoist era. Even during the Cultural Revolution, some shows were still organised. Of course, the stories changed, and traditional dramas with ghosts, religious beliefs, and romantic elements were condemned for “praising superstitious activities” or as being “decadent.” Accordingly, they were rewritten to fit the new ideological messaging. Traditional shadow puppetry dramas were abandoned in favour of “modern dramas.” For example, during the 1960s, the motto was “delivering performances to support agriculture.” Artists had to spread socialism in the countryside and develop the rural socialist cultural front under the Socialist Education Movement. Some “red operas” such as *The White-haired Girl* (白毛女 *Bai mao nü*) were adapted for puppet performances. The goal

13. UNESCO, 2011, “Chinese Shadow Puppetry,” <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/chinese-shadow-puppetry-00421> (accessed on 9 March 2023).

was to incite hatred against landlords and rich peasants (Rollins 2015; Sha 2022). But when shadow puppets lost their ideological use, they were blacklisted; some masters were killed or arrested and their equipment was burnt, and the tradition almost disappeared. The number of professional and nonprofessional puppeteers gradually declined. The Chinese authorities were conscious of this phenomenon, but the use of puppets for ideological purposes in recent history has been completely erased in the narratives currently displayed from the perspective of ICH. Officials blame only the new forms of entertainment (mentioned above), as shown, for example, in this description of puppetry included in the UNESCO application: “Shadow play is an important traditional folk art in China. In recent years, due to the impact of modern film and television art, the audience and performance market have been decreasing day by day. Many shadow dramas are in danger of extinction and in urgent need of rescue and protection.” The art of puppetry has been able to overcome the vagaries of history thanks to the plasticity of its repertoire and the transmission from master to disciple. Nowadays, however, transmission is the main challenge for this tradition.

The reemergence of a practice through arts and crafts

Following the success of Zhang Yimou’s film in 1994, Huaxian was very quick to pick up the trend. It is a small county east of Xi’an (about three hours’ drive by highway), located at the foot of Shaohua Mountain southeast of the Guanzhong Plain. The population is engaged mainly in farming activities. Sun Zan explained to me that his family could not afford to send him to middle school, and like the other children of his generation (he is now in his early sixties), he had to work in the fields. He began cutting puppets at an early age, however, and this was the beginning of his interest in shadow puppetry. At the end of the twentieth century, even if puppet shows were not that popular anymore, puppets were in high demand for decoration: this is why Ming and Qing puppets became luxury goods bought by rich private collectors (Li 2020).

Farmers such as Sun Zan could supplement their revenue by selling decorative puppets. Puppets that were at first an artistic tool for performance became a commodity for tourists. This process of commodification has been observed elsewhere in China (An and Yang 2015; You 2020; Zhu and Maags 2020), but in the case of Huaxian puppets, it can be said that this phenomenon helped the tradition to survive before it recovered at the end of the twentieth century with more performances. Xue Hongquan 薛宏权, 56 years old, is another practitioner I met in Huaxian who had followed a similar path. He attended compulsory school until he was 14. Like many people in Huaxian at that time, he learned the craft of puppetry from Wang Tianwen. Wang Tianwen was also a peasant who himself studied with a master before the Cultural Revolution and who resumed his practice after 1976 (Sha 2022). In the 1980s, he was so successful in selling the puppets he designed that he asked his brother Wang Tianxi 汪天喜 to help him. In turn, Wang Tianxi taught the carving techniques to his brother-in-law, Xue Hongquan. These skills were thus passing from master to apprentice while staying in the family. Xue Hongquan recalls, “When I started, I was the only apprentice. Life was hard; it was difficult to make a living. Like others of my age, I

Figure 1. Entrance of the exhibition centre created by Xue Hongquan



Credit: photo taken by the author.

went to find a job in a local mine, but after two months I came back. Since then, I have not left Huaxian.” (Interview with Xue Hongquan, June 2021)¹⁴ What sets Xue Hongquan apart from the other farmers is the short time he spent outside the village and his decision to continue creating puppets as his main occupation. Over the years, puppets carved by him became well known. “In 2004, I was the first one to do shadow puppetry before the national policy of intangible heritage was introduced. We didn’t know what this meant at that time; we only knew that shadow puppetry was traditional culture and we wanted to make it better.” He did not see the labelling process as something important, and at first it did not have an impact on his work. Many local people in Huaxian involved in shadow puppet arts also consider their tradition to be cultural heritage and are reluctant to use the official label of ICH. To them, it is a living practice, not a mere administrative category. The idea of safeguarding (*baohu* 保護) puppetry is also awkward to them. They use terms such as “carrying on” (*jicheng* 繼承) and “transmitting” (*zhuanqiao* 轉告) the tradition more than “preserving” it. Xue Hongquan has also heard of this new denomination, but it does not fit his way of transmitting heritage.

I was the first one to set up a personal workplace in our local county, and I registered it under my name (Figure 1). I was wondering how many shadow puppets my wife and I could make. If there was high market demand, it would definitely

14. All interview quotes with Xue Hongquan in this article are from this interview.

be impossible for two people to meet it. Later, we advertised on local TV stations, saying that we would recruit young people and teach them shadow puppetry, with free tuition, food, and accommodation; they would only need to pay for the materials, that is, they have to pay for cowhide and a set of tools, but the rest is free.

After half a year, apprentices have the basic skills. "The first group of young people was 30-strong, then I got four other groups, and even one group in jail with more than 120 convicts. This was reeducation work." Xue Hongquan widely shares his techniques and knowhow, but few apprentices stay over the long term. The family is still very involved, as Xue's son, nephew, and niece are studying carving, which means that the next generation is already trained.

Many puppeteers in Huaxian had to stop puppetry because they could not make a living. Sun Zan and Xue Hongquan belong to the lucky few who could carry on. But as they developed puppet carving, they were transforming their activity into a very profitable business. The problem then became the excessive focus on the tangible aspect of the art (the puppets), which pushed aside the intangible aspect (the performance). Shadow puppets need to be used during performances to be a living heritage. This trap is described by Rollins as "living fossil" (*huohuashi* 活化石): "the term has been co-opted by the cultural reclamation movement to signify ancient but still 'living' cultural practices such as puppetry (2019: 145)."

As Huaxian's shadow puppetry practitioners were active during the last two decades of the twentieth century, the art drew the attention of local authorities. Xue Hongquan was one of the local masters to emerge during this period. Huaxian shadow play was put on the first list drawn up by Shaanxi Province (with 144 other items) in 2006. In May of that same year, the State Council of the People's Republic of China (hereafter the State Council) promulgated the first list of state-level ICH; puppetry was on this list and included 13 relevant groups and communities.¹⁵ Four of these were from rural counties in Shaanxi: Huaxian, Huayin, Qianxian, and Fuping. Two years later, the State Council promulgated an extended national-level list with 14 new communities all over China.¹⁶ In total, Shaanxi has had 361 items listed at the provincial level; among Chinese provinces it ranks seventh in the number of listed ICH projects in China. At the sixth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Bali in 2011, Chinese shadow puppetry was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This marked the last step of a long administrative process for puppetry, from being a local tradition in some remote Chinese villages to attaining a certain level of global visibility.

Different ways of taking advantage of the new label

The Chinese government understood very quickly the benefits it could gain from the new heritage repertoire in revisiting Chinese culture. As for the shadow puppet troupes appearing on a list (be it local, provincial, or national), this has served as official recognition

and a kind of healing for many practitioners who had been forbidden to practice their art for decades. As UNESCO states, "The inscription of an element does not mean it is 'the best' or 'superior' to another or that it has a universal value but only that it has value for the community or individuals who are its practitioners."¹⁷ When mentioning practitioners who were put on ICH lists, Zhang Juwen speaks of "a transition from self-denial to self-confidence" (2017: 203). But persons who are not listed suffer a lack of official recognition that makes it hard to attract disciples and transmit their art to the next generation (Zhang and Zhou 2017). Yet, the distance between the governmental view and the way local practitioners speak of their living tradition is considerable (Gao 2007, 2017; Chen 2015; Kuah and Liu 2017).

The different ways of projecting into the future can be well illustrated by Xue Hongquan when compared with the troupe performing in Yongxing Fang. This is a small area (7,000 m²) located inside the east gate of Xi'an City. The original site was a Tang dynasty residence. At first glance, this place looks like so many nostalgia-toned tourist areas in China, except that a sign on the main entrance reads: "Area where intangible cultural heritage delicacies are collected" (food is one of the items listed by UNESCO). In this area some other intangible heritage items or activities are on display, one of them being the shadow puppet show.

Xue Hongquan is confident about the future and wants to promote his art regardless of the difficulties. He has gained international recognition and has been invited to puppet festivals in Europe, Japan, and Australia. He has also been invited in China, but has not received any ICH label. As for the Huaxian troupe performing in Yongxing Fang, they are experiencing a deep sense of losing the meaning of their art and a loss of confidence in the future. Their difficulty in attracting apprentices to the discipline can be explained in part by the absence of prospects. Even though the leader of the troupe was named a provincial inheritor, meaning official recognition on an ICH list, the troupe hardly performs outside of Xi'an and the future seems dim.

Xue Hongquan understands the administrative logic but opposes it as detrimental to his art. When I asked him about his understanding of protecting intangible heritage, he became upset:

In the past, three or five years ago, a group of experts and professors came to see me and they thought that ICH cannot be changed. (...) Why should some items be protected and not others? For example, what is protected in the case of shadow puppets? It is not the kind of thing you carve that is protected; it is the production skills that are protected. The shadow puppets are protected in the form and method of performance. That does not mean that you cannot make changes. As long as you do not depart from these things, innovation is allowed.

15. "Communities" is the word used in the official application addressed to UNESCO written in English, referring to the text of the Convention. Chinese texts sometimes translate it as reporting local authorities (*shenbao diqu* 申報地區) or work unit (*danwei* 單位).

16. China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network 中國非物質文化遺產網, 2018, "清單" (Qingdan, List), www.ihchina.cn/directory_list.html (accessed on 8 March 2023).

17. UNESCO website, "Frequently Asked Questions," <https://ich.unesco.org/en/faq-00021> (accessed on 13 March 2023).

As stressed by UNESCO documents, ICH is traditional, contemporary, and living at the same time.¹⁸ Xue Hongquan gained fame because of his incredible skills in making puppets but also because of the new flavour he puts into his shows. Creativity is very important to him. Fifteen years ago, he was invited to lead a professional class production at the Shanghai Theatre Academy for one semester. Back in Huaxian, he decided to create some innovative productions. Afterwards, he was contacted by Flying Sky, a very popular show on Oriental TV, and he performed Michael Jackson's (Figure 2) moonwalk dance to great success.

Figure 2. Michael Jackson puppet created by Xue Hongquan



Credit: photo taken by the author.

Although Xue Hongquan is recognised for his skills, creativity, and teaching, he did not get much help from the government:

I only applied for government funding 19 years ago, when ICH did not exist yet. The provincial government told me I should make it into a cultural industry and then I could get some special funds allocated for cultural industry development.¹⁹ So the provincial Party committee declared publicly that this project was accepted, and later gave me one million *yuan*. It was given for an industry, not for ICH.

Xue Hongquan found his own way to promote his tradition without relying on the state's help. Actually, the funding he gained

is not official recognition of his art, but rather business-oriented. The monthly 5,000 RMB subsidy is a paltry amount. On the one hand, Xue Hongquan's life path is quite common for a Huaxian inhabitant: from a poor family background, going through apprenticeship, learning puppet-carving to earn some money, and making a living selling the puppets as decorative objects. On the other hand, aware that the survival of his art was at stake, he went off the beaten track by becoming the first in Huaxian to build a puppet centre (Figure 1). This led him to put an emphasis on training and innovation to make his art more widely known. To him, ICH is only a label that does not encompass the meaning of the living tradition he represents, although he is using it for the promotion of his centre. He proclaims his right to innovate and integrate new forms into the techniques he inherited. He is fighting to keep his art alive and not to be just a "living fossil."

A completely different approach is illustrated by the Huaxian troupe performing in Yongxing Fang. Xue Hongquan is independent and decides for himself how to develop his activities. As for the troupe of puppeteers performing at Yongxing Fang (Figure 3), they accept implementing the ICH business model decided by Yongxing Fang Culture Industry Group, the private company running the place. They have to wear traditional outfits and give daily performances; in return they are given a lump sum of money, free accommodation, and food. Zhao Jianguo 趙建國, the leader of the troupe (when the former inheritor is not there), appeared quite pessimistic about the future and lacked the self-confidence to start a new project of his own.

Figure 3. National-level intangible cultural heritage transmitters of Huaxian leather puppets: The original shadow puppet show



Credit: photo taken by the author.

18. UNESCO website, "What is Intangible Heritage?," <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> (accessed on 13 March 2023).

19. In 2005, the General Office of the State Council promulgated the "Opinions on strengthening the conservation of ICH" (*Guanyu jiaqiang woguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu gongzuo de yijian* 關於加強我國非物質文化遺產保護工作的意見), and the "Circular on the strengthening of protection for cultural heritage" (*Jiaqiang wenhua yichan baohu de tongzhi* 加強文化遺產保護的通知), which not only urges "governments at all levels to increase the funds for ICH protection," but also "encourages individuals, enterprises, and social groups to financially support ICH protection," www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2008-03/28/content_5937.htm (accessed on 9 March 2023).

Zhao Jianguo is 62 years old. He has been performing at Yongxing Fang for three years.

I am from Huaxian like the other fellows in the troupe. My father was engaged in shadow performances and fell in love with shadow puppetry. I started shadow play at the age of three or four. I first learned from my dad, then I studied for over half a year with some old masters and started performing after graduating from high school. Then I started learning crafting as a means of earning a living. (Interview with Zhao Jianguo in Yongxing Fang, 7 June 2021)²⁰

He left school early and went to work on construction sites; his attempt was not very successful, so he returned to his village after a couple of years. Then he started to learn more about puppets. When he got an offer to work in Yongxing Fang, he thought it was a good opportunity to make a living through performing puppet shows. Today, however, he finds it frustrating to perform the same stories over and over again. "There are many shadow puppet plays in the repertoire, but now we mainly perform abstracts from some easy ones," he says, recalling the long shows lasting three to four hours when he was young. At that time, puppeteers were highly respected, and some troupes were famous. "Everybody in the village wanted to watch the performances; we were very excited. (...) Here, the number of people is usually large on holidays, and some young people who have never seen it before are interested."

In contrast to Xue Hongquan, Zhao Jianguo and his fellow troupe members cannot decide by themselves to change the repertoire. The contract specifies what can be shown.

I would like to innovate, but we are not supposed to do so, and the others in the troupe don't want to make any changes. (...) We play eight shows a day, for a monthly salary of 2,000 yuan, including food and housing. (...) We give two plays in each session of 20 minutes in order to meet the requirements.

At present, his source of income mainly depends on the shadow puppet performances. Mr Zhao is very clear-headed about his art's future:

We face several problems. There are very few new talents, and no young people to learn shadow play. It is very difficult to pass on. The second problem is that I can hardly support myself with my monthly salary. I hope my ten-year-old granddaughter will carry on the family tradition. She grew up loving it. I intend to let her inherit this, but now the most important thing is school.

Mr Shen, the general manager of Yongxing Fang, has a very different view on ICH. According to him it is tightly linked to government policy:

Although our project is not a governmental one, we have received some support from the municipal authorities. I invited the vice-governor in charge of culture to attend our opening ceremony. Yongxing Fang was established on 30 December 2014. We want to spread this model all over China. Cultural business and tourism are very much in demand. (Interview with Mr Shen at his office, 10 June 2021)

Mr Shen was proud to tell me that the number of visitors coming to the show surpassed those going to Xi'an's Terracotta Army in 2019 (respectively 10 million and 8.6 million).

Yongxing Fang is a good example of the trend in ICH marketisation (Figure 4) that has filled the media and cyberspace (You 2015). Some events have been created to raise popular interest in ICH. In 2013, the Fourth International Festival of Intangible Cultural Heritage was held in Chengdu, and the contract value of ICH projects signed on the spot amounted to over 14 billion RMB. It was reported that the concept of an "ICH industry" was first put forward at this festival (Sha 2022). The government tried to regulate the use of ICH for commercial purposes, and Article 37 of the 2011 law states:

The state encourages (...) *the reasonable utilisation of the representative items of ICH to develop cultural products.* (...) When developing and utilising a representative item of ICH, the representative inheritor shall be supported to carry out inheritance activities and protect the physical objects and premises that are a constituent part of that item" (my emphasis).

Mr Shen is using ICH intensively as a marketing tool, shadow puppets being one of them. He does not see any contradiction in making use of puppets as an economic product.

Figure 4. An advertisement for Yongxing Fang ICH by-products



Credit: photo taken by the author.

"Thanks to us, Chinese traditional culture can be seen by ordinary people in the city. This is good for the society, good for ICH inheritors, good for our company. Why not do it?" (Interview with Mr Shen at his office, 10 June 2021). This decision to show living heritage adapted for modern society to a large public can also be seen elsewhere in Xi'an, for instance in the western market and also in Qujiang District (Rothschild, Ilan, and Fetscherin 2012; Xie and Zhou 2012). Mr Shen's project fits perfectly into Xi'an Municipality's urban planning projects. The interaction between business, politics, and heritage protection is the nexus of this project.

Xue Hongquan and Zhao Jianguo are from the same generation, and both come from poor rural families in Huaxian. They have both also devoted their lives to the art of puppetry. Their paths have greatly diverged, however, as reflected in their views of ICH. For Mr Zhao, ICH is a mere administrative concept that does not help him transmit his tradition or make a living:

20. All interview quotes with Zhao Jianguo in this article are from this interview.

There is basically no relationship between the government's policy and us. National inheritors may benefit from a welfare policy.²¹ But here in Yongxing Fang, none of the old artists are officially national inheritors. Actually, there are no strict criteria for the evaluation of inheritors; it is about who has connections, who can help write an application form. Only then can you be evaluated. There is not even a chance to be selected while performing.

Xue Hongquan, for his part, pays little attention to the ICH label, and puts all his energy into transmitting his art to the next generation as a living tradition.

Conclusion

The Chinese government is translating a social practice into an administrative category (ICH), and it is the final judge of which item will gain official recognition or not. It took advantage of this new denomination to draw up a new list of officially recognised cultural practices. In terms of international soft power and internal policy, ICH is often used to show the world and China's own population the richness of Chinese culture. Even so, the uniformisation of wording imposed by the administration does not prevent the category from being elastic. The definition is vague enough to allow different understandings and usages.

By focusing our analysis on the case of the Huaxian puppets, I have shown that actors have different agencies. The word ICH remains very vague for them, and once it is taken out of the official discourse, it has little consistency. It seems to be an additional layer on top of the

preexisting definition of traditional (*minjian*) culture. The puppeteers feel more comfortable using the *minjian* category not only because it covers a reality that is closer to them, but also because the immateriality of their culture is difficult to grasp. Although each of the puppeteers has a different understanding of the meaning of ICH, they all added a new word to their vocabulary without falling hostage to official discourse. When considered at the level of puppet practice in Huaxian, ICH denomination seems to be an accepted element of the language, but it looks like an empty shell. The Chinese government has carried out a lot of publicity around intangible heritage elements, and mobilisation of the administrative structures has been spectacular. Even after launching many propaganda campaigns, however, the concept has not infused local reality. At this point we may wonder how sustainable it will be as long as local actors do not expect much from it.

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21. In 2008, the central government provided 8,000 RMB per national inheritor per year; in 2011, the subsidy level was raised to 10,000 RMB per person per year, which was still too low to live on (Ye and Zhou 2012).

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