Onstage:

Exhibiting Intangible Cultural Heritage in China

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ABSTRACT: The intangible cultural heritage (ICH) concept has been operational in China for almost 20 years. One integral part of China's ICH landscape is a range of exhibition spaces and museums that specialise in the display, performance, and transmission of ICH. Based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork at different exhibition sites, this paper provides insights into what these exhibition spaces look like, how they function, how ICH is exhibited within them, and what exhibitions mean to different heritage actors. The article shows how ICH exhibitions have themselves become a sociocultural phenomenon, bringing together a variety of actors who experiment with different forms of display and types of exhibitions in an *ad hoc*, spontaneous, and unregulated way. The paper also contributes to the broader discussion on ICH as a political intervention that transforms the cultural practices and expressions it normatively sets out to safeguard.

KEYWORDS: China, UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage (ICH), exhibition, safeguarding.

Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (hereafter the 2003 Convention) has been operational in China for almost 20 years and intangible cultural heritage (ICH), or what is domestically known as 非遗 (*feiyi*), has become a well-known and established concept. Many elements have been identified, inventories compiled, and legal texts devised, and the ICH concept has found much resonance in the media, among officials, the general public, and particularly among cultural practitioners (Chang 2017; Gao 2017). Along with the nationwide rise and spread of ICH, a vast number of exhibition premises have emerged across the country that specialise in the display, performance, and transmission of ICH. These entities have become an important and integral part of China's heritage landscape, serving as spaces through which cultural practices and expressions designated as ICH are made public and visible. While museums (Denton 2014; Lu 2014; Varutti 2014), cultural theme parks (Oakes 2005; Su and Teo 2011; Massing 2018; Ludwig and Wang 2020), ethnic minority villages (Oakes 1993, 2013; Nitzky 2013), and, more broadly, the heritagisation and museumification of old inner city areas across the country (Broudehoux 2004; Ren 2008; Su 2015; Demgenski 2018; Law and Qin 2018) have been extensively discussed in the literature, exhibition premises specifically intended for ICH have – with a few notable exceptions (Massing 2018; Zhu and Maags 2020; Maags 2021) – remained understudied in the English language literature. This article fills this gap by focusing a much-needed ethnographic lens on the phenomenon of making intangible heritage tangible through exhibitions, performance, and display premises. I explore what ICH exhibition spaces look like, how they function, how ICH is exhibited within them and what exhibitions mean to different heritage actors. Unlike the above-mentioned works that focus attention on one specific type of exhibition, this article considers a wide range of different exhibition premises and discusses the showcasing of ICH as a broader sociocultural phenomenon and in the context of China's ongoing political project to revive but also regulate cultural traditions under the label of ICH (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013; Maags and Svensson 2018; Zhu and Maags 2020).

The question of what constitutes an ICH exhibition is contingent upon the definition of ICH. On the one hand, there is the internationally authoritative text, the 2003 Convention, which famously defines ICH as the "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (Article 2).[1] The 2003 Convention emphasises "community participation" (Article 15) and heritage self-determination (Bortolotto 2015, 2017), and many members of its epistemic community (Jacobs and Neyrinck 2020) view ICH safeguarding first and foremost as an exercise in "good governance."[2]

1. UNESCO, 2003, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention (accessed on 13 February 2023).
2. Chiara Bortolotto, Philipp Demgenski, Panas Karampampas, and Simone Toji. *UNESCO Frictions: Community Participation across Global Governance*. Book manuscript in preparation.

On the other hand, there is China's indigenous understandings of ICH, including legal definitions of it, which divert from the ideas of the 2003 Convention (Wang 2013). China's ICH Law from 2011, for instance, repeatedly refers to terms such as "excellence" and "authenticity" (Bodolec 2012; An 2017; Song and He 2018; Maags 2020; Su 2020, 2021), thereby making it conceptually closer to the 1972 World Heritage Convention.[3] The law is also largely void of the term "community," with "participation" appearing several times, but mostly in the sense of Article 9, which stipulates that "the state shall encourage and support its citizens, legal persons and other organizations to participate in the work concerning the protection of intangible cultural heritage."[4] Furthermore, there is a greater focus on individual representative ICH transmitters, officially-endorsed masters who can make claims on authenticity and exert authority in their respective fields (Maags 2019), instead of entire practising communities.

The following discussion will show that while exemplifying China's own ICH policies and framings, ICH exhibitions divert quite significantly from normative ideas of safeguarding as put forward in the 2003 Convention. They can even be regarded as examples of misappropriation and decontextualisation, both of which are, among international ICH scholars, considered adverse outcomes of over-commercialisation (Bortolotto 2020) and even natural enemies of heritage (Lixinski 2020). But I will argue that ICH exhibitions have themselves become a specific sociocultural phenomenon, bringing together a variety of actors who experiment with different forms of display and types of exhibitions in an *ad hoc*, spontaneous, and unregulated way. I particularly underline how these exhibition premises represent an important platform for some selected ICH transmitters[5] to benefit economically and make a livelihood from their respective cultural practices. In this sense, ICH exhibitions conform to some of the key tenets of ICH safeguarding. In recent years, however, they have gained increasing attention from the state, with Chinese officials and experts expressing the need to regulate them and with standardised national guidelines being drafted (as of May 2021). Even though this process is ongoing and any conclusive analysis would be premature, ICH exhibitions provide a good example of how policies become manifest in practice; but in their manifestations, they elicit the need for new sets of policies that try to superscribe and regulate existing ones.

This article thus also contributes to the broader discussion on ICH as a political intervention that transforms the cultural practices and expressions it normatively sets out to safeguard. Laws and legislations, lists and inventories, labels and certificates provide a distinct value framework to the state and other involved actors, enabling them to conceive, define, and appraise existing cultural practices and, if deemed appropriate, designate them as ICH (Hafstein 2015: 281-2). This, in turn, has real consequences for the individuals and communities whose cultural expressions are at stake. In China, for example, the introduction of ICH legitimised many cultural practices and traditions previously discarded as "superstitions" (Oakes 2013; Gao 2014; An and Yang 2015; Chen 2015; You 2015; Chang 2017; Xiao 2017). Once designated as ICH, however, the same practices often turn into performances for tourists or government officials at designated festivals (Su 2019). Yet, rather than seeing this as a form of cultural estrangement, it is an inherent part of ICH interventions (Hafstein 2018). As Heidy Geismar (2015: 72) argues, ICH includes governance and politics rather than being defined simply as an entity upon which governance may be wielded. ICH exhibition premises in China illustrate not only how policies legitimised and thus superscribed and transformed (Liang 2013) many cultural practices and traditions under the label of ICH, they also illustrate how 15 years after the ICH concept was first introduced to China, the already "heritagised" practices are now being superscribed by a new set of policies to regulate them. This will quite possibly activate new practices, which may then again be subject to new political interventions. I return to this point in the conclusion.

After providing a section on methodology, I place China's domestic discourse on ICH exhibitions into the broader international debate, highlighting in particular the two perspectives from which ICH exhibitions have been approached: that of museology and that of ICH safeguarding. I then move on to the specific case of China's ICH exhibitions. I give an overview of what kinds of different exhibition spaces we find, highlighting the difficulties in generating any meaningful categorisations. This is followed by examples on how ICH is exhibited and performed within them. I particularly highlight how they allow ICH transmitters to benefit economically. The concluding discussion revisits the idea of ICH exhibitions as a sociocultural phenomenon and places them into the recent attempts to standardise and regulate them.

Methodology

The research for this paper was carried out during one long-term (six months) and two short-term fieldtrips (one and two months, respectively) to China between 2017 and 2019. During this period, I visited a total of 12 different ICH exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Weifang, Jinan, Nanjing, and Chengdu, ranging from large-scale exposition parks to very small-scale exhibitions revolving around one particular ICH element. I elaborate below why it is impossible to categorise ICH exhibition premises in any meaningful way, but I tried to visit a wide range of different kinds of premises. I conducted unstructured interviews with a total of 25 transmitters present at these exhibitions, some lasting only a few minutes, others several hours. I also interviewed three museum curators and four scholars working on cooperation with government departments on the planning, design, and standardisation of ICH exhibition halls. Lastly, I interviewed staff of companies that were investing in or setting up ICH exhibitions. Moreover, in my capacity as a researcher

3. The current leadership under Xi Jinping 習近平 has made cultural revival a particularly important part of its policy, with the focus resting largely on the revitalisation and development of China's *excellent* traditional culture. "習近平談中華優秀傳統文化: 善於繼承才能善於創新" (*Xi Jinping tan Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua: Shanyu jicheng cai neng shanyu chuangxin*, Xi Jinping discusses Chinese outstanding traditional culture: Only if we inherit will we innovate), *Renmin wang* (人民網), 13 February 2017, http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n1/2017/0213/c385476-29075643.html (accessed on 26 September 2020).
4. State Council 國務院, 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), www.ihchina.cn/3/10377.html (accessed on 29 December 2017).
5. It is, of course, not my intention to deny the structural power imbalances that exist within China's ICH system or the fact that ICH, as it is currently implemented, clearly prioritises and empowers some and excludes others (Maags 2018).

in China, I sat in meetings with government officials and ICH experts and attended the Chengdu ICH festival during China's Cultural and Natural Heritage Day in 2017 as part of a UNESCO meeting. All interlocutors and some of the mentioned places or exhibition sites have been anonymised.

ICH exhibitions: Towards a definition

What exactly may an ICH exhibition look like? This question loomed large during fieldwork in China. Once, an anthropologist probed during an official meeting about ICH exhibitions: "What is their purpose? Do we actually need them? If so, how are they different from traditional museums?" A curator concluded after a long discussion about how to represent ICH within the confines of a museum: "ICH exhibitions are paradoxical!" This conclusion stems from the fact that ICH is commonly regarded as a dynamic social practice embodied in living human beings (Smeets 2004; Kuutma 2019). Museums, in contrast, are primarily adept at dealing with the fossilised dimension of human existence, namely with objects that are "preserved, conserved, exhibited, repatriated and de-associated."[6] In a private conversation, the above-quoted anthropologist critically remarked: "If ICH is about everyday life, are ICH exhibitions about putting everyday life on stage?" How to exhibit ICH, how to define ICH exhibitions or, indeed, whether there is or should be such an entity called ICH exhibition, depends on the perspective from which we approach the topic (Stefano 2009): that of museology or that of ICH safeguarding, the term used within ICH to refer to "ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage."[7]

Internationally, earlier debates tended to take the former as their starting point (Alivizatou 2012). In 2002, the Shanghai Charter devised by participants of the 7th Asia Pacific Regional Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) recommended museums as important facilitators in the safeguarding of ICH.[8] In 2004, ICOM held their general conference in Seoul with the key theme being "Museums and Intangible Heritage." Several subsequently published keynote speeches addressed this theme and particularly reflected upon the need for museums to rethink their remits and review their *raison d'être*.[9] Notably, more questions were raised than answers provided. Speakers were, however, united in their claim that traditional curation methods were inadequate in handling the living dimension of ICH. Also, unified calls for the incorporation of new media as well as community involvement and community museums were raised as important ways in which museums can move away from objectification and instead share authority pertaining to the representation of culture. What we see here are attempts to redefine the museum so as to make it more compatible with the notion of ICH. It is also in this context that ICOM updated its definition of the museum in 2007, explicitly adding the intangible heritage of humanity, and is currently (as of Spring 2021) holding consultations for another overhauled definition.[10]

More recent debates, especially among ICH scholars and practitioners as well as within the epistemic community of the 2003 Convention, have shifted towards making ICH itself the starting point of discussion. Kreps (2009: 194), for instance, notes that "if the intention is to more fully integrate ICH into museums rather than merely add it on to existing curatorial activities, greater attention needs to be given not only to what is curated, but also to how it is curated." She then elaborates on the idea of indigenous curation. This term treats the act of curation not as an end in itself, but as a cultural process. Curation and the act of making local culture public is itself seen as part of the ICH safeguarding process. Jacobs and Neyrinck (2020) also discuss the need to particularly focus on safeguarding in the considerations and debates about the role of museums and exhibitions. Reminiscent of the idea of indigenous curation, the authors put forward the notion of cocreation, which refers to a form of curation where local communities themselves take the initiative and are at best facilitated by experts and scholars. This model "is the one most compatible with what 'safeguarding' is about," the authors state (ibid.: 501). In these cases, it is not the museum that is reformed to become more compatible with the living and dynamic dimension of ICH, but the museum is seen as part of a broader process of ICH safeguarding. The focus is thus not on what and how ICH is exhibited, but whether or not those whose heritage is exhibited have ownership and agency and are key players in the curation process.

According to international understandings and debates on ICH, there is no such entity called ICH exhibition. On the contrary, a publication produced by international ICH experts (Đerić et al. 2020: 74-5), an outcome of a three-year-long ICH and Museums Project (Neyrinck, Seghers, and Tsakiridis 2020), identifies the following risks that the ICH-museum collaboration may generate: decontextualisation, over-commercialisation, and a focus on authenticity and the tangible artefacts of ICH. The authors explicitly state that:

> Any specific craft and skill should be practised at the place where they are actually developed and transmitted. In a museum setting they risk being isolated from their context. Museums are wonderful partners for showing and understanding (...) ICH, but not as final resting places (Đerić et al. 2020: 106).

Overcommercialisation is demarcated as being "closely connected with loss of meaning, especially when its only purpose becomes the generation of economic benefit for a very restricted part of the community" (ibid.: 107). Finally, one of the authors, Jacobs, states in the same volume (ibid.: 46) that tangible items do always have an intangible dimension, adding, however, that "hopefully none of the collected or exhibited items, in particular if they are human, are really breathing and alive." Otherwise, ICH exhibits would run the risk of turning into "cultural zoos" (Baron 2010). The important overall message that the publication (and the 2003 Convention) conveys is that it should neither be the objects nor its (traditional and authentic)

6. Richard Kurin, 2004, "Museums and Intangible Heritage: Culture Dead or Alive?", *ICOM News* 57(4).
7. UNESCO, 2003, "Convention for the Safeguarding (…)," op. cit., Article 2.
8. ICOM, 2002, 7th Regional Assembly: "Museum, Intangible Heritage, and Globalisation," http://icom.museum/shanghai.html (accessed on 12 April 2019).
9. Hongnam Kim, 2004, "Intangible Heritage and Museum Actions," *ICOM News* 57(4); Richard Kurin, 2004, "Museums and Intangible Heritage (…)," op. cit.; Makio Matsuzono, 2004, "Museums, Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Spirit of Humanity," *ICOM News* 57(4).
10. ICOM, 2021, "Museum Definition," https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition (accessed on 22 May 2022).

production techniques that are important, but the livelihoods of the people to whom the making of these objects matter.

The understanding in China is quite different. First, scholars in folklore, ethnology, or anthropology who assume an important role within the governance and management of ICH are often more concerned about "the cultural value of ICH," as a scholar and interlocutor of mine phrased it. Traditional and authentic production techniques are key criteria and often placed above livelihoods. Second, the debate about ICH exhibitions continues to be largely dominated by the museology perspective. Many Chinese language publications on the topic start from the definition of the museum as a space for the conservation and display of static objects, which is then deemed inappropriate for the incorporation of ICH. Subsequently the need for rethinking the definitional contours of the museum is called upon to make it more inclusive and participatory and to allow culture to become "alive" (*huotai* 活態) (Hu 2018; Zhu 2019; Du 2020; Huo 2020). Discussions with interlocutors from China often unfolded based on the assumption that there is (or ought to be) such an entity called ICH exhibition hall (*feiyi guan* 非遺館), and it was merely a matter of defining it appropriately. At the end of 2019, for example, I attended a dinner with several provincial government officials and scholars who were advising the government on matters related to ICH exhibitions. The official who was sitting next to me suddenly lowered his voice and asked: "Tell me, what do ICH exhibitions look like abroad?" Aware of the above-described international debates, I hesitated for a moment. He probed: "The 2003 Convention clearly states that museums are to play an important role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, but how do other countries do it? There seem to be no examples." Over the course of the dinner, the ICH exhibition question would come up again and again. "We have no model to go by. This makes the undertaking very difficult," the head of the provincial ICH department lamented. The need to have a clear-cut model and also the assumption that there should be an entity called ICH exhibition can be partially explained by the fact that according to China's own framing, ICH is less about people's livelihoods than about specific techniques, practices, or performance styles and, as such, can more easily become a specific resource that enters exhibition premises. Also, China already has a vast array of ICH exhibitions, which have emerged as a result of specific policies that encourage them, but which, in their manifestation, are not regulated by any administrative framework.

ICH exhibitions in China: An overview

China's existing administrative frameworks and legal texts facilitate and encourage various endeavours to exhibit or perform ICH. In China's national ICH Law (Article 36), for example, "the state encourages and supports the citizens, legal persons, and other organisations to set up display premises and inheritance premises for intangible cultural heritage and exhibit and inherit the representative items of intangible cultural heritage in accordance with the law."[11] Any organisation that is deemed legal can therefore in theory set up an ICH exhibition space. Furthermore, in article 37, the state specifically animates and supports the usage of "heritage resources and the reasonable utilisation of the representative items of intangible cultural heritage to develop cultural products and cultural services with local and ethnical features and market potential on the basis of effective protection of those items." In recent years, ICH practitioners have been urged to innovate and tailor their respective products to market demands, thus opening the doors for commercial use of ICH-related artefacts (Maags 2021). As I discuss below, ICH exhibitions and commercialisation are closely interlinked. In addition, a series of other legal documents facilitates and provides a framework for setting up ICH exhibitions. For example, even before the enactment of the ICH Law, in 2009, the Ministry of Culture issued the "Guiding Opinions on the Joint Promotion of Culture and Tourism Development" (*cujin wenhua yu lüyou jiehe fazhan de zhidao yijian* 促進文化與旅遊結合發展的指導意見), in which the usage of ICH for tourism was made explicit.[12] Interesting in this context is also that in 2021, the National-level Expert Committee for the Safeguarding of ICH (*guojia feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu gongzuo zhuanjia weiyuanhui* 國家非物質文化遺產保護工作專家委員會). was renamed the ICH Exhibition Research Centre Expert Committee (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan zhanlan zhanshi yanjiu zhongxin zhuanjia weiyuanhui* 非物質文化遺產展覽展示研究中心專家委員會).

Table 1. Opening year of city- and provincial-level ICH exhibition halls

ICH exhibition halls	Opening year	Size
Fujian	2009	2,321 m²
Shaoxing	2011	4,300 m²
Wenzhou	2012	7,000 m²
Xi'an	2012	4,000 m²
Sichuan	2013	9,800 m²
Nanjing	2013	2,300 m²
Shandong	2014	1,200 m²
Guizhou	2015	5,000 m²
Suzhou	2016	6,500 m²
Xiangxi (Jishou city)	2017	3,500 m²
Guangdong	2017	530 m²

Source: China ICH Safeguarding Centre.

Over the past decade, ICH exhibitions have steadily increased in number (Table 1).[13] The encouragement to set up ICH display premises paired with the more general political project of cultural revival under the label of ICH unleashed an extraordinary enthusiasm and creative spirit among a variety of actors. In the summer of 2017, a scholar and expert serving on the former national-level ICH committee told me rather bluntly, "There was a policy and so they decided to build ICH expos." He referred to the many private businesses and local governments that jumped on the ICH

11. State Council 國務院, 2011, "中華人民 (…)" (*Zhonghua renmin (…)*, Intangible cultural heritage (…)), ibid.
12. Along the same line, in 2018, the ministries of culture and tourism were joined together under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China.
13. In early 2019, a new Zhejiang provincial ICH exhibition hall started construction, envisioned to open at the end of 2022. It covers a usable area of 14,942 m². Other cities and provinces are also in the process of establishing their own ICH exhibition halls. Some, like Wenzhou, have already refurbished or rebuilt their ICH exhibition halls.

bandwagon and began experimenting with different forms of ICH exhibits. The result is a heterogeneous range of ICH display premises, some officially established by state departments, others not. While museums in China are organised and managed according to an official classification and standardisation system established and supervised by China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage (Lu 2014: 206), ICH exhibitions are only loosely defined entities. "Just having something vaguely related to ICH is enough to call yourself an ICH exhibition;" this is how a university professor described the situation of ICH exhibition premises in China during a conversation in late 2019. There is no administrative management structure and no definitional and classificatory system. Table 2 provides some examples of ICH exhibits that I came across during fieldwork.

Table 2. Different ICH exhibition premises in China

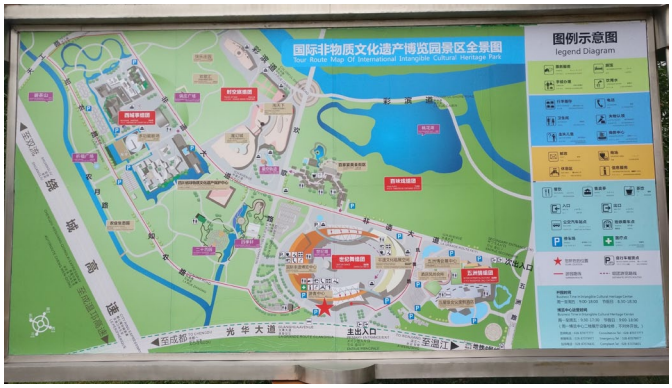
ICH exposition parks (*feiyi bolanyuan* 非遺博覽園)
ICH exhibition halls (*feiyi chenlieguan* 非遺陳列館 / *feiyi guan* 非遺館)
ICH museums (*feiyi bowuguan* 非遺博物館)
ICH experience centres (*feiyi tiyan zhongxin* 非遺體驗中心)
ICH transmission bases (*feiyi chuancheng jidi* 非遺傳承基地)
ICH production-oriented safeguarding demonstration bases (*feiyi shengchanxing baohu shifan jidi* 非遺生產性保護示範基地)

Source: fieldwork data.

There are some notable differences between these premises in terms of their size, function, and ways of exhibiting ICH. The ICH exposition parks are the largest spaces, often covering areas of several square kilometres and incorporating different exhibition halls of different ICH elements within them. Several times during fieldwork, I found myself jotting down in my notes how I got lost trying to navigate through the grounds of an ICH expo park. China's very first Chengdu International ICH Exposition Park (*Chengdu guoji feiyi bolanyuan* 成都國際非遺博覽園), which hosts an annual week-long festival during China's Cultural and Natural Heritage Day, covers a total area of 444 hectares (Figure 1). Wang Jun estimates that since its opening in 2011, more than 3,000 similar spaces have emerged across the country.[14] Most of them are semi-private cooperation between local governments and private companies. The World Intangible Cultural Heritage Headquarter Base (*shijie feiwuzhi wenhua yichan zongbu jidi* 世界非物質文化遺產總部基地), located in the outskirts of Shanghai, for example, was set up and financed by a privately registered cultural development company, but land was provided by the local government. These large expos usually exhibit ICH elements from different parts of China, neatly distributed across small workshops or stalls in dedicated sections. The mentioned Headquarter Base, for example, is divided into areas for ICH transmitters, minority art, fine arts, culinary ICH, and traditional medicine ICH.

Some of these expos may be entirely private. A well-known real estate company from Beijing wanted to get into ICH, as a member of staff told me during an interview in 2018. They subsequently set up an ICH experience street in a prime location of the capital city. Moreover, the same company recently signed a contract with a city in an eastern Chinese province to build a brand-new ICH exhibition park, 181,681 m² in size.

Figure 1. Map of the grounds of Chengdu's International ICH Exposition Park



Credit: photo taken by the author.

ICH exhibition halls or ICH museums vary significantly in size and type. They are either standalone venues built for the purpose of exhibiting ICH or they are integrated into city museums. One example of the latter is the widely discussed Nanjing Museum (Zhou 2018; Zhu and Maags 2020). Another one is the living culture exhibition of the Hangzhou Arts and Crafts Museum. These premises are usually officially established by the respective government departments. In the case of ICH, these are the ICH safeguarding centres,[15] which exist at national, provincial, municipal, and district/county levels (Su and Chen 2018). Due to the aforementioned lack of an official administrative structure for ICH exhibitions, it is not uncommon for the head of the respective ICH safeguarding centre to also be head of the ICH exhibition hall.

The ICH transmission bases were established following the Ministry of Culture's 2012 "Guiding Opinions on the Promotion of National ICH Production-oriented Safeguarding Education Bases" (*wenhuabu guanyu jiaqiang feiwuzhi wenhua yichan shengchanxing baohu de zhidao yijian* 文化部關於加強非物質文化遺產生產性保護的指導意見). These are state-owned enterprises that produce cultural goods using traditional techniques. They are not exhibition spaces per definition, but publicity, transmission, and the creation of visibility are all integral elements and defining features of these sites.[16] One example is the Weifang Yangjiabu Folk Art Company (*Weifang Yangjiabu minsu yishu youxian gongsi* 濰坊楊家埠民俗藝術有限公司) located in the north-eastern province of Shandong, which is famous for two ICH elements: kite-making and New Year's woodblock prints. It became an official transmission base in 2014 and also hosts a so-called Grand View Garden in its centre, a park specially dedicated to exhibiting local ICH. I return to this example below.

14. Wang Jun 王軍, "非遺博物館的發展與嬗變" (*Feiyi bowuguan de fazhan yu shanbian*, The transformation of intangible cultural heritage museums), *Zhongguo jingji wang* (中國經濟網), 16 October 2017, http://collection.sina.com.cn/plfx/2017-10-17/doc-ifymvuyt2283893.shtml (accessed on 14 February 2023).
15. The two main bodies that authorise ICH exhibitions at the national level are the China ICH Safeguarding Centre (*Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin* 中國非物質文化遺產保護中心) and the China ICH Safeguarding Association (*Zhongguo feiyi baohu xiehui* 中國非遺保護協會).
16. Ministry of Culture and Tourism 文化和旅遊部, "'十四五'非物質文化遺產保護規劃" (*"Shisiwu" feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu guihua*, Intangible cultural heritage safeguarding plan in the 14th national five-year-plan), www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-06/09/content_5616511.htm (accessed on 21 June 2021).

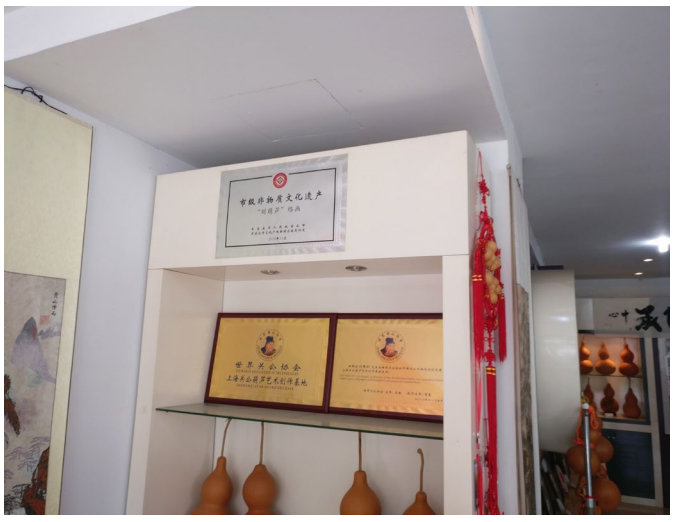
At the local level, in county towns or city districts, we find an even larger number of small-scale museums or exhibitions revolving around specific local cultural expressions. Here, it is often companies and businesses that are eager to use ICH exhibitions to promote and brand their products. For instance, the making of pork knuckle (*ding ti* 丁蹄), a local culinary speciality of suburban Shanghai, was inscribed on the municipal ICH inventory. The state-owned company producing *ding ti* then set up a small ICH museum in a nearby historical village. In other cases, individual ICH transmitters may also run their own private exhibition premises, which they use to display, but also sell their ICH-related products. These are often referred to as experience and transmission centres (*tiyan he chuanxi zhongxin* 體驗和傳習中心). In rural areas, we, furthermore, find an increasing number of ecomuseums, which now also try to capitalise on ICH (Pan 2008; Su 2008; Lu 2014; Nitzky 2014; Yin 2019).

My aim here is not to generate a comprehensive or representative typological inventory of ICH exhibitions across China. ICH exhibits are far too diverse in type, size, and function to be categorised in any meaningful way, and it is impossible to find one generic *modus operandi* that would apply to all of them.[17] In fact, the above examples serve precisely to point out that in the absence of any regulatory framework but with the simultaneous political encouragement to exhibit ICH, a vast number of ICH exhibition venues have emerged, forming a particularly vibrant, even unregulated landscape through which ICH becomes manifest in public. At the same time, this represents one reason why the state sees the need to regulate and standardise them. The comment by a national-level expert in the summer of 2017 is illuminating in this context: "ICH exhibitions have become too chaotic," he said. But it is precisely this "chaos," as I argue, that allows us to understand ICH exhibitions themselves as a sociocultural phenomenon, bringing together a variety of actors: local governments set up ICH exhibitions to show that they are implementing national policies; private businesses and entrepreneurs engage in ICH "because the government is supporting it," as a member of staff of a real estate company phrased it during an informal meeting in Beijing in the summer of 2018; they also hope to benefit from the growing cultural and tourist industry by investing in or directly setting up exhibition themselves; meanwhile, as I discuss in the following section, transmitters who run their own private exhibitions or move into larger expos also benefit from the associated publicity and economic opportunities.

Onstage: Making the intangible tangible

It was a hot and humid summer afternoon in 2017 when I arrived at the aforementioned newly opened ICH exposition park on the outskirts of Shanghai. After glancing at a map that gave me an overview of the broad layout of the grounds, I entered through a large archway and was led onto a long, wide street. There were houses on either side, two or three storeys high, equipped with shop-like glass fronts on the ground floors. Each of them displayed a different ICH element, nicely arranged in window vitrines – jade statues, calligraphy, stone carvings, copper sculptures, paper lanterns, and much more. Western classical music was playing, fading in and out as I walked down the main street, peering through the glass windows. Suddenly, a middle-aged woman waved at me from across the road, signalling me to come over. "Come in" she said happily, "this is all very old, several hundred years of history, have a look." Her husband – I'll call him Mr Wu – was inside. He was a city-level transmitter of an element called calabash pyrography (*hulu laohua* 葫蘆烙畫), which involves burning graphic designs onto the surface of bottle gourds. The shop was about 25 m², with shelves on all four walls exhibiting the transmitter's artefacts – calabashes of all types and sizes. In the middle of the room was a table displaying calligraphy and more of the transmitter's artefacts, and next to it was a small round tea table at which his wife sat down to go back to her cup of tea after having ushered me into the shop. To the left, at the entrance, was a cashier's desk. Alongside it, behind it on the wall, and even in front of it, were photos showing the transmitter and various kinds of certificates detailing his achievements: awards he had won, competitions he had participated in, events he had attended. Glossy posters with lengthy introductions to the handicraft, its long tradition and special skills were provided. Mr Wu was originally from Hebei Province, where he used to have his own workshop. In 2016, he was the fifth person to be invited to this newly opened ICH expo by the park management. "The package (*daiyu* 待遇) is quite good," he told me. His travel and removal had been paid for, his current workshop was rent-free and he was provided with a place to live within the expo grounds, also free of charge. I was given a private tour around the shop. It was a combination of a workshop and a small boutique. Most of the displayed artefacts had price tags attached. I learnt that he was the fifth generation in his family practising and transmitting his trade. His son, who was currently a trainee, would be the sixth generation. "I am here mainly for transmission; I have pupils coming here all the time. But of course, if people want to buy my works, they can as well," Mr Wu told me.

Figure 2. ICH certificates on the wall of the transmitter's workshop

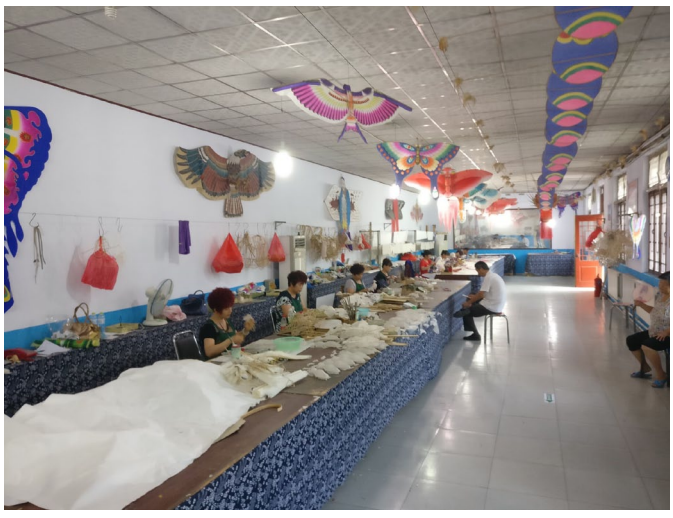


Credit: photo taken by the author.

17. A preliminary report that the Zhejiang provincial ICH safeguarding centre produced on the overall situation of ICH exhibitions in China attempts to classify China's existing ICH exhibits into comprehensive ICH exhibition halls (*zonghexing feiyi guan* 綜合性非遺館), specialised ICH exhibition halls (*zhuantixing feiyi guan* 專題性非遺館), and ICH exposition parks.

This kind of set-up was common in many ICH exhibitions. The presence of ICH transmitters as key representatives of an element is one of the aspects that supposedly distinguishes ICH exhibitions from traditional museums and that is often presented as making exhibitions "alive" (Huo 2020: 76). It is equally common for transmitters to be invited by the management to practise or pursue their trade within the context and confines of the exhibition space. In Hangzhou's Museum of Arts and Crafts, for example, when taking the escalator up to the second floor, one is greeted with workshops hosting transmitters of various local ICH practices. From a curator I learnt that the museum usually signs a two-year contract with the transmitters, who are chosen after consultations with the local government. The workshops are rent-free, but transmitters are obliged to be present at least five days per week, especially during prime-time weekends, clocking in and out when they come and go. If they fail to do so, "they may get fired," the same curator told me. A transmitter explained: "This is a museum after all; visitors come here, and if the workshops are all closed, it would not look good." This form of participation, understood not as "a right but a responsibility" (Nitzky 2013: 17), was common across ICH exhibitions. At the above-mentioned Grand View Garden of Yangjiabu Village, for example, I visited a workshop for New Year's woodblock printing, located at the rear of the park. The transmitters only began working on their prints as I entered the workshop. When they realised that I was doing research and was not a tourist, they relaxed and went back to drinking tea. Later, I found out that the three transmitters were employed by and worked for the officially registered Weifang Yangjiabu Folk Art Company, receiving a monthly basic salary of 2,000 RMB (in 2017) to be present in the park. They did not own the prints that they produced during work hours. These were kept by the park and sold as souvenirs to tourists. There was thus very little incentive for them to work unless tourists showed up.

Figure 3. Transmitters producing kites inside an exhibition park



Credit: photo taken by the author.

Transmitters have to fulfil their responsibility to be present, but in return they get the opportunity to make their practice and name known to a relatively wide audience. This may bring about other opportunities. Apart from getting a salary or selling their products at their workshops, they may be invited to national or even international ICH-related events or attract new apprentices and offer classes to school children or other interested people for money. It may even increase their chances of moving up one level in China's ICH inventory. During temporary, high-profile ICH events organised by the government, ICH transmitters usually have to pay out of their own pockets to exhibit and perform at ICH exhibition spaces. For instance, at the International ICH Exposition Park in Chengdu during a week-long cultural and natural heritage festival in 2017, a transmitter from rural Sichuan Province told me that the local government requested him to be present during the festival, but also that he had to organise and pay the rent for the stall himself, which was around 3,000 RMB for a week, a sum that he did, however, manage to earn back through sales during the festival. In the case of ICH that involves performances, the situation is more complex, as there exists no cultural product that is manufactured in a workshop and that can subsequently be displayed or sold. In such cases, troupes of performers (transmitters and their disciples) work inside the respective park for a salary. At the privately run China Ethnic Park in the centre of Beijing, for example, performers get paid around 4,000 RMB per month (in 2017) to be present in the park and perform their respective practices. Many transmitters considered this to be a form of recognition. "Through ICH we feel more recognised," was an often-heard phrase. Pride and honour were other terms that I would hear frequently. "I am proud to represent my hometown at this exhibition," a performer at the Chengdu International ICH Exposition Park conveyed to me in the summer of 2017, adding that it was not only a source of pride for himself, but also for the people in his home village in rural Yunnan.

Overall, there was a distinct commercial aspect to ICH exhibitions. Larger-scale expos are often designed as market places – their size, layout, and design do indeed show a striking resemblance to urban department stores – in which transmitters' workshops are presented like small boutiques offering shopping shelves, price tags, little brochures, and business cards. Many transmitters, especially those working in arts and crafts, have their own registered companies. They are often "successful business people," as Zhu and Maags (2020: 94) aptly put it, and the ICH label helps them do business. It was very common that when engaging in casual conversations or longer interviews with transmitters inside ICH exhibitions, I would receive a business card and a friendly reminder to "visit our company," typically located elsewhere. This could be a workshop or another private exhibition used to advertise, display, and sell ICH products. Most of the transmitters I interviewed at exhibitions had products, services, or performances that they wanted to exchange for money or which they practised for a regular salary.

Concluding discussion

ICH exhibitions in China are in many ways a violation of the key purpose of ICH safeguarding and do indeed seem to confirm the risks put forward in the aforementioned publication by members of the epistemic community of the 2003 Convention (Đerić et al. 2020). This is because their focus is on material culture, on the arrangement and presentation of ICH-related objects or products in vitrines, the showcasing of artefacts on shelves and in galleries, and on largely text-based testimonies of the achievements and long tradition of ICH elements. Moreover, ICH is often staged for tourists; practitioners are detached from their original sociocultural environment, and they

become mere human specimens of ICH elements consumed, studied, or simply gazed at by outsiders. ICH is also often appropriated and used for commercial ends. Moreover, it is mainly individual officially recognised transmitters or selected performance troupes, rather than entire communities, that represent a specific ICH element. ICH exhibitions can be regarded as what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2014) famously termed a form of metacultural production. They animate practitioners to engage in front-stage performance (Goffman 1973; Kendall 2014) and even draw them into labour relations. ICH exhibits thus not only redefine cultural practices and expressions; they ultimately change the relationship between people and their culture and therefore also the conditions for cultural production and reproduction (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2014: 169).

At the same time, ICH exhibitions do provide many ICH transmitters with opportunities, in some cases allowing them to make a living from their cultural practice to a degree that they were not able to before the introduction of the ICH concept.

> Since we have the ICH system and these exhibitions, we can do a lot more. There are a lot more opportunities for us. I am glad that I have this platform, which allows me to transmit and propagate my work.

This is how Mr Wu phrased it. And a woodcarver at the Grand View Garden of Yangjiabu Village told me in the summer of 2017:

> We are paid to work inside the park. We do in the park what we would do at home or in our own workshop anyway. So, we are willing to do it. We get a nice workshop and a platform to display our work.

Most transmitters stated that they were financially better off since the introduction of the ICH framework and that in particular, the opportunity to be present at exhibits helped them. So, as Kuutma (2012: 24) rightly points out, the metacultural is inevitably turned into or embraced by the cultural. In other words, ICH exhibitions do transform cultural practices as well as the relationship between practitioners and their practices, but at the same time, they are appropriated by practitioners. As I have epitomised in the examples above, ICH exhibits particularly serve ICH transmitters in that they give them a platform to become known to a wider audience and, most importantly, to participate in and benefit from broader national economic development. But it is not merely the transmitters who benefit. Local governments, private entrepreneurs, and museum curators have all embraced and appropriated ICH and the political mandate to establish display premises for their own ends and in their own ways. It is in this sense that ICH exhibitions can be seen as a social phenomenon in themselves, benefitting the livelihoods of transmitters, but also other actors, and thus conforming to some of the key tenets of safeguarding.

Rather than condemning ICH exhibitions, I see them as an integral part of heritage interventions. In this context, Hafstein (2018: 136) argues that when practices and expressions are reframed as intangible heritage, they are festivalised. In other words, ICH is itself a festival and ICH exhibitions a logical consequence rather than a misappropriation of heritage. Tellingly, however, Chinese officials and scholars now see the need to not only find an appropriate way to define, but also to ultimately regulate ICH exhibitions. Throughout my fieldwork, scholars and (mainly national-level) officials who were familiar with international debates and ideas tended to be sceptical of ICH exhibitions. "Most of them are not doing too well," a national ICH expert said over dinner in the summer of 2017. "Often, they have very little to do with actual ICH," another one told me a year later during a conversation in Beijing. "Too big," "just for commercialisation," or "badly managed;" these were commonly heard statements. Among scholars, there also existed a distinct concern that cultural value is compromised when ICH becomes an economic resource. Another already mentioned key concern was that ICH exhibitions tended to incorporate everything that could somehow pass as ICH into their spaces, making their definitional contours blurry and lacking distinct parameters to distinguish between ICH exhibitions and other traditional museums. In 2017, China's national ICH Department set up a communications office to coordinate and promote the establishment of specialised ICH exhibitions.[18] In December 2019, it initiated a nationwide survey to assess the situation of ICH exhibition spaces on whose basis national unified standards will be drawn up. The establishment of ICH exhibition halls also constitutes one key part of China's 14th national five-year-plan. The specific rationales behind this push for a formalisation of ICH exhibits remain speculative. It may be due to the fact that ICH exhibitions have appeared everywhere and have taken on a life of their own, beyond government control, thus requiring renewed attention and an up-to-date set of guidelines to control them. But the propelled attempts to regulate ICH exhibitions represent another metacultural and political heritage intervention, which will change the already "heritagised" cultural practices and expressions. Based on what is beginning to take shape in China, namely that existing policies are being overwritten and replaced by new ones, we may thus understand ICH as analogous to palimpsests, multilayered policies that are inscribed and reinscribed over time. It will be important and illuminating for future research to not only look at the impacts of new policies, but to also further scrutinise and investigate what happens within the process of redrafting existing policies into new ones.

Acknowledgements

The research leading to the present results received financial support from the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) for the research project "UNESCO Friction: Heritage-making across Global Governance," with a grant generously provided by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (UNESCO Frictions – ANR-14-ACHN-0006-01). I would like to thank Chiara Bortolotto for her helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I also gratefully acknowledge the comments of the anonymous reviewers and thank Florence Padovani and Guillaume Dutournier for the time and great work that they have put into making this special feature possible.

Manuscript received on 11 November 2020. Accepted on 27 June 2022.

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