

Questioning Cultural Exemplarity: Two Decades of Intangible Heritage Practices

I GUILLAUME DUTOURNIER

is Associate Professor at the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFO), currently in charge of the EFO Beijing Centre. EFO, 22 avenue du Président Wilson, 75116, Paris, France (guillaume.dutournier@efeo.net).

I FLORENCE PADOVANI

is Associate Professor at Paris 1-Sorbonne University, and a member of the PRODIG research unit. PRODIG, Campus Condorcet, Bâtiment recherche sud, 5 cours des Humanités, 93322 Aubervilliers Cedex, France (florence.padovani@univ-paris1.fr).

Nearly 20 years ago, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was one of the very first states to ratify the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Since then, Chinese legislation has incorporated a new set of globally oriented standards with the aim of identifying, inventorying, and ideally *safeguarding* hundreds of traditional skills, craftsmanship techniques, and performing arts that had long suffered under the regime's cultural policies. Safeguarding is a key term of the 2003 Convention translated interchangeably as safeguarding (*baohu* 保護) and preserving (*baocun* 保存) in the Chinese law adopted in 2011, in contrast with the conceptual distinction made between the two by UNESCO.¹ After undergoing a gradual rehabilitation starting from the 1980s, this set of practices presented as traditional has been promoted, under the label of intangible cultural heritage or ICH (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物質文化遺產, abbreviated as *feiyi* 非遺), to an embodiment of traditional culture's "excellence."² This new evaluative space, characterised by a degree of normative experimentation, has opened up a more or less flexible framework in which new prerogatives and accreditations are awarded on the basis of not fully fixed criteria. Within this framework, several types of actors gain access to a coveted label, and often also to direct and indirect resources. These beneficiaries can be government officials at various levels, practitioners officially recognised or not as transmitters of their practices, knowledge mediators (academics or local experts) regularly involved in the selection process, as well as companies transforming the symbolic value emanating from these initiatives into financial profit. These groups have all become engaged in a process of valuing traditional practices that is often presented as being of general interest, even though the operating principles are based on competition.

In Issue 126 of *China Perspectives*, entitled "Cultural Values in the Making: Governing through Intangible Heritage," we highlighted the striking vitality of the *feiyi* phenomenon and its remarkable hybridity compared to its UNESCO model. These two constitutive elements of Chinese ICH were particularly evident under the process-based perspective we took. This approach made it possible to show, with several case studies as evidence, that each

new item of *feiyi* led to the gradual emergence of a resource for a range of actors thus empowered to justify, on the basis of evaluation grids that could not necessarily be superposed, various kinds of involvement with this renewed heritage scene. Tensions inherent to the process appeared on several levels. Some were expressed directly by the participants, in particular on the contradiction between the values of transmission attributed to the practice of ICH items and the commercial exploitation of them. But others seemed to be less readily acknowledged. Such was the case of the differences that could appear between the standardisation of practices aimed at promoting heritage on the national level and the diverse historical or local lines of transmission (Rollins 2019). Another example was the gap between the massive efforts deployed to promote national ICH on the international stage – turning it into an instrument of Chinese soft power – and the multiple uses of its implementation in different types of domestic contexts (Ludwig, Walton, and Wang 2020; Kehoe and Wielander 2021).

What made a second special feature devoted to ICH necessary is that these tensions remain far from satisfactorily explored. Numerous recent research endeavours have delved into this ever-evolving phenomenon, highlighting the large scale of fields and actors impacted by it (You 2015; Bodoiec and Obringer 2020; Evans and Rowlands 2021) as well as its historical significance

1. 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 21 March 2023). With regard to the lexical distinction between "safeguarding" and "preserving," one can compare the wording of the Chinese law with the care with which the UNESCO Convention makes the distinction, for reasons of principle, between the two concepts: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (accessed on 21 March 2023).
2. The link between ICH and this all-purpose "excellence" (as strongly exalted as it remains vague in its criteria) is explicit in the "Opinions on strengthening the conservation of intangible cultural heritage" (*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) published by the General Office of the State Council: www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2008-03/28/content_5937.htm (accessed on 21 March 2023).

in the Chinese trajectory on state-society relations (Wu 2015; Gao, Zhang, and Long 2017; Zhu and Maags 2020; Zheng 2023). By placing research gathered here under the banner of cultural exemplarity, the special feature questions how various registers of appreciation are mobilised to construct the exemplarity of *feiyi*, both at the level of its various items and as a normative category at the national level. ICH is, now more than ever, an issue that matters in today's China (Zhao, Ponzini, and Zhang 2020). However, after two decades of heritage enthusiasm for ICH implementation, some observers are questioning the future of the phenomenon, and some criticisms have emerged. Hence, it is with the benefit of hindsight that we can assess the depth of the changes that have accompanied the development of *feiyi*. While it seems beyond dispute that the various elements constituting China's ICH have become – or were designed to be from the start – a vast “governmentality tool” (Maags 2019), does the myriad of social initiatives surrounding this heritage label not also somehow extend the cultural introspection that seized the 1980s generation (Thoraval 2021)? The matter at heart would then be to determine under which of these two aspects *feiyi* has marked a significant step. On the one hand, the new heritage scene, with its consensual references, conveniently resolves the ideological impasses of the state's antitraditionalism bequeathed by the Maoist era. It does so not only by granting the PRC a new cultural respectability on the international stage, sometimes with a technicist approach to cultural influence (as seen in the digitalised *feiyi* projects of the Belt and Road Initiative),³ but also by providing, among other outlets, a convenient lever to rethink the relationship between state and society around the motto of “co-construction.”⁴ On the other hand, the question of what constitutes tradition, a question that has repeatedly been reformulated since the death of Mao, acquires a new intensity with the multiple activities around the theme of intangible heritage. Administrative constraints and the vagueness of directives leave some space open for reflexivity on what conditions make a true cultural vitality possible.

At the international level, the reformulation of the concept of cultural heritage signalled an awakening to the limits of the heritage definition that had prevailed until then. Without turning its back on the normative foundations assembled since the postwar years on human rights and, starting from the 1980s, on cultural diversity, UNESCO has sought to launch a reorientation of the heritage process by including collective voices thus far insufficiently represented in existing frameworks. Hence the distinction made, within the notion of heritage, between two interdependent aspects: the “material” (which includes natural heritage) and the “intangible,” defined less by the delimitation of a given domain and more by its internal recognition by the communities that have carried – even recreated – this heritage over multiple generations (Freland 2009). In UNESCO's formulations, the “living” dimension of ICH openly allows for a new process of identification and listing. The definition given at the outset stipulates:

The “intangible cultural heritage” means 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.⁵

From this definition, a new series of categories can be created with no limitation a priori, the sole condition being a degree of convergence of viewpoints. Groups or individuals must be recognised *from the outside* as keepers of inherited skills; they also must consider *from within* the maintenance of these skills as a core element of their own sustainability as a community. This “recognition policy” (Taylor 1992) started by UNESCO has brought a gain in terms of agency: in order to continue to exist, communities are encouraged to represent themselves through a set of specific practices.

On the global scale, this new direction has opened up a wide manoeuvring space for member states, which has led to strong variations in regional appropriations of the new concept (Bortolotto et al. 2020). It should be emphasised that, in the case of UNESCO, the normative innovation is not only deliberate but also consistent with the missions undertaken by the organisation. The primacy given to communities in the promotion of ICH items takes place in a theoretical synthesis that seeks to articulate the respect for collective belonging and autonomy of individuals. Additional explanations by UNESCO state that “ICH does not rise to questions of whether or not certain practices are specific to a culture”; this means that by encouraging a “sense of identity and responsibility” by promoting ICH, the aim is to “help individuals to feel part of one or different communities and to feel part of society at large.”⁶ ICH as it is defined by UNESCO facilitates an equilibrium between valuing communities that transmit cultural practices and empowering individuals who are never reduced to their place in the community. The “we” put forward by the United Nations agency refers to the ideal of a generic humankind, inseparable from a landscape of diversity, while this ideal celebrates traditional practices less as identity markers than as contributors to the enrichment of human society.

Based on the situations and analyses presented in this special feature, one may doubt that such a vision has been prioritised

3. Wang Xuemei 王雪梅 and Xu Zhiqiang 許志強, “整合與融合：一帶一路視域下非遺文化傳承與發展” (Zhenghe yu ronghe: Yi dai yi lu shiyu xia feiyi wenhua chuancheng yu fazhan, Integration and fusion: Inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage from the perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative), *China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network* (中國非物質文化遺產網), 10 May 2021, https://www.ihchina.cn/luntan_details/22842.html (accessed on 21 March 2023).
4. “要點問答：如何認識共建共治共享的社會治理制度” (Yaodian wenda: Ruhe renshi gongjian gongzhi gongxiang de shehui zhili zhidu, Q&A key points: How to understand the social governance system of co-construction, co-governance and sharing), *People.cn* (人民網), 3 December 2019, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/12/03/c40531-31486561.html> (accessed on 21 March 2023). See the linkage made between the threefold slogan of “shared social governance” (gongjian gongzhi gongxiang de shehui zhili 共建共治共享的社會治理): “紮根社區，非遺添彩美好生活” (Zhagen shequ, feiyi tiancai meihao shenghuo, Rooted in the community, intangible cultural heritage adds colour to a better life), *China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network* (中國非物質文化遺產網), 28 February 2023, https://www.ihchina.cn/news_1_details/26669.html (accessed on 21 March 2023); and “南園‘非遺在社區’優秀作品在流動美術館開展” (Nanyuan “feiyi zai shequ” youxiu zuopin zai liudong meishu guan kaizhan, The excellent works of Nanyuan “intangible cultural heritage in the community” were launched in the Mobile Art Museum), *Shenzhen shangbao* (深圳商報), 26 October 2021, http://duchuang.sznews.com/content/2021-10/26/content_24680203.html (accessed on 21 March 2023).
5. UNESCO website, “Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,” Article 2, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (accessed on 22 March 2023).
6. UNESCO website, “What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?,” <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> (accessed on 22 March 2023).

by the Chinese update of ICH over the past two decades. On the contrary, by giving special importance to idiosyncratic mechanisms such as the individualisation of transmission and the systematisation of lists, the Chinese state has certainly made it possible to share vocabulary with the global discourse on the surface, but it seems to have pursued first and foremost its own objectives and an endogenous narrative, compounded by its own ambiguities.

With the category of “representative transmitters” (*daibiaoxing chuanchengren* 代表性傳承人), the Chinese Party-state opted to individualise the transmission of ICH, unlike what has been done in South Korea and Japan, where this transmission, in line with the recommendations made by UNESCO regarding “Living Human Treasures,” can be attributed to groups as well as to individuals. In any case, the procedures aimed at identifying practices deemed to be representative of a collective can only be selective in nature. However, as Maags points out, in the case of Chinese ICH, this selective nature is compounded by significant disparities in the status categories reserved for transmitters depending on the location and the administrative levels involved, as well as opacity surrounding the rules that determine the attribution and renewal of these statuses. This intensifies the competition between candidates, who are often attracted by the profits that can be derived from obtaining the ICH label; it also increases the constraints of accountability (Maags 2019) for the selected candidates. As for the lists, recognised by UNESCO as a convenient means of constructing a representative heritage, they have become a real tool of mobilisation and governance in the PRC. By joining four levels of lists (*minglu* 名錄), the PRC follows UNESCO’s inclusivist recommendations. But in doing so, it acquires an extremely effective vector to neutralise painful memories. Practices once targeted by ideological attacks find in the listing process a space for promotion that is certainly competitive but also conducive to cultural mosaics where they coexist with practices less scarred by the wounds of history (Zhang 2017). The production of these lists, which lack a regular periodicity, provides the government with a convenient means of supervising the dynamism of the reevaluation of practices at each level. Through the lists, the Party-state moves away from the rigid model of political control of cultural matters first formulated in Yan’an in 1943 (McDougall 1980), without radically transforming it. Like intellectuals as defined by Mao (whose writings remain the undisputed reference in this field), the transmitters integrated into the *feiyi* lists – even those who simply seek to be included – devote their time and effort to shaping the image of a greater China, for both domestic and international audiences. Such a role does not give transmitters a voice regarding the relevance criteria of selected items: these generally remain at the discretion of local authorities interested in the commercial and touristic potential of a particular label (Kehoe and Wielander 2021).

In contrast with the openly dirigist past of cultural authorities in China, what gives a universally legitimate concept such as ICH its superiority is that it allows for a dilution of the principle of cultural representativeness across administrative levels without laying bare the discontinuities of the system. An article available online thus claims: “At present, China has 100,000 items of ICH on the Representative List of ICH at all levels, including 1,372 items at the national level and 39 items on the UN’s Representative List

of ICH (...).”⁷ The fictional nature of the continuum rests here on the recurrence of a selection format (the list) and an inclusion criterion (representativeness) that change radically in nature when going from one level to another. UNESCO painstakingly tries to make full participants of the communities involved in the heritage process. In the PRC, the state’s interlocutor is simply designated in the 2011 law as “people of all nationalities” (*gezu renmin* 各族人民), leaving a wide margin of interpretation as to the definition of relevant groups. On each side, the definition of ICH appears to hold a certain ambiguity; however, the logic of this ambiguity is not the same. Conceived by UNESCO as the opening of a space of *empowerment* for new heritage actors, ICH in China has turned into a lever of dual-use incentive: first as a consensual slogan encouraging initiatives meant to contribute to a new cultural vitality, but also, because of its very malleability, as a guarantee that the authorities are solely in charge of drawing the acceptable conditions under which this vitality can be expressed.

Four articles in this special feature focus on case studies conducted in mainland China. Philipp Demgenski investigates the promotion outlets of *feiyi* through the use of exhibition halls designed to make intangible cultural heritage tangible at various levels of its implementation – that is, to display continuity in cultural vitality throughout the territory. Demgenski highlights a process of sinicization of heritage practices not without risks for the proclaimed goal of “authenticity” of practices that are given visibility. He also emphasises the doubts expressed on the ground about the relevance of a mechanism that is without a real equivalent on the international stage.

In the case analysed by Laurent Chircop-Reyes, the listing of martial arts used by escorts of merchant caravans in Shanxi Province is a way to grant legitimacy to an art often viewed with suspicion. The modes of transmission from master to disciple through secret initiations have gradually given way to more modern means of promotion (courses in schools, exhibitions in museums in cities such as Pingyao). The “authenticity” of the transmitted element and the survival of “hidden” techniques are issues raised in this article.

In her article, Ju Xi looks into a traditional festival that takes place in the northern suburbs of Beijing around the New Year. The village where the festival originated has been deserted by its inhabitants who have left to find work and better living conditions in the capital. To what extent can the notion of “living heritage” be used when there is no longer a community onsite to continue the festival? Should the concept of community be defined differently, especially when the current form of the festival (its music, costumes, and rituals) has been shaped in a restorative goal by experts involved in organising the event?

In the fourth article, Florence Padovani delves into the survival of shadow puppeteers in Shaanxi Province. This ancient tradition has endured through the vicissitudes of history, morphing from

7. Miao Chun 苗春, “數字化傳播, 讓非遺更‘潮’” (*Shuzihua chuanbo, rang feiyi geng “chao,”* Digital communication makes intangible cultural heritage more “fashionable”), *People’s Daily – Overseas version* (人民日報海外版), 20 August 2018, <https://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/page/2018-08/20/07/rmrbhwb2018082007.pdf> (accessed on 22 March 2023).

its previous incarnation as an imperial pastime into a tool of governmental propaganda, before it was superseded by cinema and then by social media. Puppeteers of Huaxian have reacted in various ways to the challenge of the survival of their art. Some have accepted performing in a tourist attraction, while others have opted to keep their independence and creativity. While the recognition of this art at the national and even international level has certainly brought a sense of healing to practitioners who had long been neglected and sometimes targeted by authorities, can it remain alive if it finds itself too constrained by tourist marketing concerns?

A fifth article delves into what consequences an inscription on the UNESCO list had for the Yulan Festival in Hong Kong. Selina Ching

Chan shows how important this institutional recognition has been for the Chiu Chow community and highlights the significant role of mutual borrowing between the various communities practising this festival. However, awarding the label to one specific community has had the effect of setting in stone the existing differences with other communities, leading to a standardisation of the ritual that has drawn criticism from a number of practitioners.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the contributors, the anonymous reviewers, and the editors of *China Perspectives* who have made this special feature possible.

References

- BODOLEC, Caroline, and Frédéric OBRINGER. 2020. "L'impact de la Convention sur le patrimoine culturel immatériel en Chine" (The impact of the Convention on intangible cultural heritage in China). In Frédéric OBRINGER, Julia CSERGO, Christian HOTTIN, and Pierre SCHMIT (eds.), *Le patrimoine culturel immatériel au seuil des sciences sociales: Actes du Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle, septembre 2012* (Intangible cultural heritage on the threshold of the social sciences: Proceedings of Cerisy-la-Salle symposium, September 2012). Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme. 155-167.
- BORTOLOTTI, Chiara, Philipp DEMGESKI, Panas KARAMPAMPAS, and Simone TOJL. 2020. "Proving Participation: Vocational Bureaucrats and Bureaucratic Creativity in the Implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage." *Social Anthropology* 28(1): 66-82.
- EVANS, Harriet, and Michael ROWLANDS. 2021. *Grassroots Values and Local Cultural Heritage in China*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- FRELAND, François-Xavier. 2009. *Capturing the Intangible: Perspectives on the Living Heritage*. Paris: UNESCO.
- GAO, Bingzhong, Juwen ZHANG, and Bill LONG (eds.). 2017. "The Social Movement of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and the End of Cultural Revolutions in China." *Western Folklore* 76(2): 167-80.
- KEHOE, Séagha, and Gerda WIELANDER (eds.). 2021. *Cultural China 2020: The Contemporary China Centre Review*. London: University of Westminster Press.
- LUDWIG, Carol, Linda WALTON, and Yi-Wen WANG (eds.). 2020. *The Heritage Turn in China: The Reinvention, Dissemination, and Consumption of Heritage*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- MAAGS, Christina. 2019. "Struggles of Recognition: Adverse Effects of China's Living Human Treasures Program." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25(8): 780-95.
- McDOUGALL, Bonnie S. 1980. *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- ROLLINS, Annie. 2019. *Immaterial Remains: The (Im)possibilities of Preserving China's Shadow Puppet Tradition*. PhD Dissertation. Montréal: Concordia University.
- TAYLOR, Charles. 1992. "The Politics of Recognition." In Amy GUTMAN (ed.), *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 25-73.
- THORAVALL, Joël. 2021. "La 'fièvre culturelle chinoise': De la stratégie à la théorie" ("China's cultural fever": From strategy to theory). In Joël THORAVALL (ed.), *Écrits sur la Chine* (Writings on China). Paris: CNRS Éditions. 431-44.
- WU, Ka-ming. 2015. *Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- YOU, Ziyang. 2015. "Shifting Actors and Power Relations: Contentious Local Responses to the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Contemporary China." *Journal of Folklore Research* 52(2-3): 253-68.
- ZHANG, Juwen. 2017. "Intangible Cultural Heritage and Self-healing Mechanism in Chinese Culture." *Western Folklore* 76(2): 197-226.
- ZHAO, Yiqing, Davide PONZINI, and Rui ZHANG. 2020. "The Policy Networks of Heritage-led Development in Chinese Historic Cities: The Case of Xi'an's Big Wild Goose Pagoda Area." *Habitat International* 96: 102-6.
- ZHENG, Shanshan. 2023. "Safeguarding Food Heritage Through Social Media? Between Heritagization and Commercialization." *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science* 31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2023.100678>
- ZHU, Yujie, and Christiana MAAGS. 2020. *Heritage Politics in China: The Power of the Past*. London: Routledge.