



Research on the Sustainable Development of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. As society continues to develop and urbanization accelerates, the nation has undergone profound changes. Many intangible cultural heritages are struggling to survive and are at risk of disappearing, with the possibility of having no successors. It is therefore of great significance to conduct research on the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage to address these challenges.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Development, Preservation

1 Introduction

China, as the third-largest country by land area and the second-most populous nation in the world, is home to over 50 ethnic groups and boasts a history spanning more than 5,000 years. Throughout its extensive history, a rich array of intangible cultural heritage has been transmitted and preserved. These intangible cultural assets are concrete manifestations of the Chinese national spirit and are considered invaluable cultural treasures.

In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly prioritized the protection of intangible cultural heritage. On November 29, 2022, the "Traditional Tea Processing Techniques and Associated Social Practices in China" was successfully inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity during a session held in Rabat, Morocco. This marked China's 43rd entry into UNESCO's lists of intangible cultural heritage ^[1]. However, with continuous social development and rapid urbanization, the country has undergone significant transformations, putting many intangible cultural heritage elements at risk. These cultural traditions face challenges in survival and preservation, with some even at risk of disappearing due to a lack of successors. Addressing these issues through research on the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage is of critical importance.

2 The Conceptual Connotations of Sustainable Development of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage: According to the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," intangible cultural heritage is defined as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage."^[2] The "Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China" defines intangible cultural heritage as "various traditional cultural expressions passed down from generation to generation by all ethnic groups and recognized as part of their cultural heritage, including the objects and spaces associated with these traditional cultural expressions."^[3]

The Concept of Sustainable Development: Sustainable development is a model focused on long-term growth, originally introduced in 1972. It refers to development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept primarily emphasizes balancing the relationship between society, environment, and economy, ensuring that they mutually support each other. This involves the rational use of resources to promote economic growth while effectively protecting the environment, achieving interdependence among the three, sustainable or even perpetual resource utilization, a well-functioning ecological system, and prosperous economic and social development. In this context, sustainable development refers to the comprehensive management of intangible cultural heritage protection. It involves effectively exploring and utilizing intangible cultural heritage by expanding its dissemination channels, increasing its influence, and innovating transmission methods. This aims to achieve sustainable development in the protection of intangible cultural heritage across cultural, economic, and management dimensions.

3 The Significance of Intangible Cultural Heritage Transmission

General Secretary Xi Jinping stated: "We must earnestly work on the systematic protection of intangible cultural heritage to better satisfy the people's growing spiritual and cultural needs and to promote cultural confidence and self-reliance. It is essential to facilitate the creative transformation and innovative development of China's outstanding traditional culture, continuously enhance the cohesion of the Chinese nation and the influence of Chinese culture, deepen exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, effectively tell the story of China's rich traditional culture, and promote Chinese culture to the world ^[4]."

The enduring presence of the Chinese nation among the world's peoples is inseparable from the profound national culture that has been cultivated and enriched over its 5,000-year history. Chinese culture is a broad concept, gradually constructed through the interaction of natural and social forces, and through production and daily life over

millennia. It encompasses both material and intangible cultural elements, with intangible culture being an invisible yet crucial embodiment of national culture, spirit, and cohesion. Among these, intangible cultural heritage stands out as the most representative and enduring aspect. It carries distinct national memories and is rich in cultural significance, representing the essence of traditional culture refined over time. Intangible cultural heritage holds immense research value, offering historical insight, artistic merit, scientific interest, social significance, and genetic transmission value [5].

As economic globalization progresses and Western cultural influences continuously permeate, the development of our traditional culture faces significant challenges. Intangible cultural heritage, as the cultural and historical memory of our nation, acts as the soul of our national spirit—intangible and irreplaceable. Protecting and transmitting this heritage can spiritually unite people of Chinese descent both domestically and globally, continually fortifying national spirit, enhancing cultural confidence, and boosting cultural soft power [6]. Moreover, integrating cultural tourism with intangible cultural heritage can further drive the development and advancement of the cultural tourism industry, allowing the economic value of intangible cultural heritage to be fully realized. This integration helps the public gain deeper insight into national culture, fostering a conscious effort to protect and explore outstanding intangible cultural assets, and further advancing the cause of intangible cultural heritage preservation.

4 Issues in the Protection and Sustainable Development of Intangible Cultural Heritage

With the growing emphasis on the protection of intangible cultural heritage, China has implemented numerous measures aimed at safeguarding such heritage, achieving certain successes. Currently, China has 43 items inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage lists and over 100,000 representative items recognized at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels. Despite these efforts, there remain numerous challenges within this complex and systematic undertaking.

4.1 Issues in the Protection of Cultural Heritage

Insufficient Awareness of Heritage Protection: At present, the protection of intangible cultural heritage often focuses on applying for heritage status, with an emphasis on its commercial attributes and economic value. The aim is to boost local cultural tourism and generate greater economic benefits, leading to a phenomenon where application takes precedence over actual protection. However, if the focus is solely on economic value while neglecting the cultural significance, the true purpose of protecting intangible cultural heritage is undermined. Additionally, some heritage that does not readily translate into economic value faces challenges due to the limited educational background and advanced age of its inheritors, who often lack the proactive awareness needed for protection and cannot independently complete the application process, resulting in a passive stance toward heritage protection.

Lack of Systematic Protection: The definitions provided in the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" and the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China" illustrate that intangible cultural heritage encompasses a collection of cultural expressions, objects, and places. As vibrant cultural remnants from ancestral practices, they are rich in regional and historical elements and are inherently systematic. In practice, however, there is a tendency to protect only the "core skills" or elements, neglecting other aspects, and to focus protection efforts solely on "representative inheritors," overlooking other bearers.

Inadequate Review and Supervision Mechanisms: The current application process for intangible cultural heritage lacks thorough examination and scrutiny of specific project details. Some regions apply for heritage status merely for the sake of it, even to the extent of fabricating intangible cultural heritage. The evaluation process often follows only the procedural guidelines without rigorous verification, lacking necessary on-site investigations, resulting in a superficial and impractical approach to protection. Moreover, there is insufficient oversight of errors and omissions by public officials during the application process, increasing the likelihood of mistakes.

4.2 Issues in the Sustainable Development of Cultural Heritage

Lack of Successors: The primary carriers of intangible cultural heritage are individuals. As global economic integration progresses and societies evolve, cultural interpenetration occurs among different ethnic groups. Young people tend to favor foreign trends and urban culture, showing limited interest in traditional folk culture. Only a small number of young people are willing to engage with and learn about traditional culture. The aging of existing cultural inheritors, coupled with the reluctance of many to take on these roles, and adverse factors such as environmental and demographic changes, make the transmission of intangible cultural heritage increasingly difficult. This situation risks breaking the transmission chain and losing successors, which would lead to the disappearance of intangible cultural heritage.

Inadequate Transmission Protection Mechanisms: Although there is growing recognition of the importance of intangible cultural heritage protection, the mechanisms for ensuring its transmission remain inadequate. There is a lack of effective frameworks to guide the successful transmission and preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

Lack of Innovation in Dissemination Methods and Channels: With the continuous development of communication technologies, new media is thriving. However, the current channels for disseminating intangible cultural heritage are relatively limited, relying mostly on traditional media. There is insufficient use of online and emerging media platforms, and the dissemination methods are often dull and fail to capture attention effectively.

5 Recommendations for the Sustainable Development of Intangible Cultural Heritage

To address the current issues in the protection of intangible cultural heritage in China and to further promote effective and in-depth preservation efforts, thereby achieving sustainable development in the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage, the following recommendations are proposed:

5.1 Enhancing the Proactivity in Protecting Intangible Cultural Heritage

In protecting intangible cultural heritage, beyond the existing proactive application mechanisms, it is essential to further enhance proactive and enthusiastic efforts. Accelerating the survey and exploration of intangible cultural heritage is crucial, especially for heritage with elderly inheritors and those with cultural and historical significance, which require necessary protection and proactive policy advocacy. Providing essential support for their application as intangible cultural heritage is also important. During the recognition process of intangible cultural heritage, the principle of "better to have fewer but better" should be upheld, with a greater focus on the historical and cultural value inherent in the heritage itself. A comprehensive evaluation and selection process should be conducted to strictly adhere to application standards, identifying and recognizing intangible cultural heritage with significant cultural and historical value to enhance its vitality. Inheritors of high-value intangible cultural heritage should receive proactive care and support, fostering ongoing progress in the protection of intangible cultural heritage.

5.2 Enhancing the Systematic Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage

In the transmission and development of intangible cultural heritage, it is crucial to emphasize systematic protection. When identifying inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, it is important to recognize that some heritage items are complex, involving multiple intricate processes and numerous inheritors. Each inheritor is often familiar with only certain aspects or stages. Once designated as an inheritor, they may focus primarily on the segments they know well. If other inheritors are not included in the protection framework, their segments might become marginalized or even lost, ultimately leading to a distorted transmission of the heritage. Therefore, it is essential to protect every aspect of the cultural heritage, ensuring that each stage has an inheritor. It is vital not to limit protection and recognition to only the key stages and their inheritors, which could result in missing links in the cultural transmission process and inadvertently undermine the broader protection efforts. Different inheritors of the same project should be viewed as part of an integrated whole, engaging in regular and effective communication to ensure seamless integration of the various stages of the project. This holistic approach encourages the project to evolve with the times, avoiding a narrow focus that neglects other parts, and continuously infusing it with new vitality.

5.3 Improving the Legal and Regulatory Framework for Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

Enhancing relevant laws and regulations is a crucial approach to protecting intangible cultural heritage. The "Intangible Cultural Heritage Law" should be further refined and expanded to emphasize the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Local governments should develop and improve regulations tailored to their specific circumstances based on this law, forming a comprehensive legal framework. This framework should include establishing a support system for key inheritors, strengthening the reward and punishment mechanisms for heritage protection and transmission, and increasing support efforts. Public participation in heritage protection should be encouraged, with material and spiritual rewards for individuals who make significant contributions. These measures aim to prevent the loss of intangible cultural heritage from an institutional perspective.

5.4 Expanding the Dissemination Channels for Intangible Cultural Heritage

The transmission of intangible cultural heritage primarily relies on people. Only through widespread dissemination can more individuals be encouraged to understand and protect intangible cultural heritage, thereby enhancing public awareness of preservation. It is recommended that various regions introduce intangible cultural heritage skills and culture into schools as part of extracurricular activities^[7], integrating intangible cultural heritage with local cultural courses. This can be achieved through initiatives such as bringing intangible cultural heritage into classrooms and inviting heritage bearers to teach, thereby promoting its dissemination. By combining traditional and new media, intangible cultural heritage can be extensively publicized on official social media accounts and public platforms to mobilize community engagement and foster a societal ethos where everyone feels responsible for its protection. Local personalities with positive public images can be invited as ambassadors for intangible cultural heritage promotion and serve as honorary bearers. Utilizing online platforms, these ambassadors can further enhance the influence of intangible cultural heritage.

6 Conclusion

China has implemented a range of measures for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, achieving some success. However, challenges remain, such as insufficient awareness of cultural heritage protection, inadequate review and supervision mechanisms, and a shortage of successors. To better promote the protection and sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage, it is recommended to enhance the proactivity of heritage protection, conduct comprehensive surveys and proactive exploration of intangible cultural heritage, and provide social security for key cultural heritage inheritors. Additionally, efforts should be made to continuously improve the legal and regulatory framework for intangible cultural heritage protection and to expand the channels for its dissemination.

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