

Commodifying Intangible Cultural Heritage in Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

China is one of the few countries in the world which has established a comprehensive protection system of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). In addition to the emphasis on the safeguarding of ICH, China encourages commodifying ICH for economic development, in particular in the fields of cultural tourism and cultural industries. The commodification of ICH in China has become more obvious in recent years in the contexts of the integration of culture and tourism and the revitalization of cultural heritage. This paper illustrates the practices of commodification of ICH in China with cases concerning ethnic minorities ICH tourism in Yunnan Province, shopping ICH on E-commerce platforms and promotion of ICH through digital media. These cases will show that ICH can be mobilized as various kinds of capitals for political, social and economic functions through commodification. At the same time, various uses of ICH by ICH practitioners and social actors not only sustain ICH in contemporary society but also create new values for ICH.

Key Words: Cultural Heritage; China; Commodifying; Tourism; Society; Revitalization;



Mercantilización del Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial en la China Contemporánea

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RESUMEN

China es uno de los pocos países del mundo que ha establecido un sistema de protección integral de su patrimonio cultural inmaterial (PCI). Además de enfatizar en la salvaguardia del PCI, China estimula la mercantilización del PCI para el desarrollo económico, particularmente en los campos del turismo y las industrias culturales. Esta mercantilización del PCI se ha hecho más evidente en los últimos años a través de la integración de la cultura, el turismo y la revitalización del patrimonio cultural. En este trabajo se ilustran algunas prácticas de mercantilización del PCI de carácter turístico en China, de minorías étnicas en la provincia de Yunnan, así como con las estrategias de difusión donde se promueven los valores del PCI en plataformas de comercialización electrónica y otros medios digitales. Estos casos muestran cómo el PCI puede ser dinamizado en diferentes tipos de bienes con funciones políticas, sociales y económicas a través de la mercantilización. Y, al mismo tiempo, como los diversos usos de los cultores del patrimonio inmaterial y otros actores sociales, no sólo sustentan estos valores inmateriales propios de la sociedad contemporánea, sino que, a su vez, crean otros nuevos.

Palabras clave: Patrimonio Cultural; China; Mercantilización; Turismo; Sociedad; Revitalización;



La Marchandisation du Patrimoine Culturel Immatériel en Chine Contemporaine

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RÉSUMÉ

La Chine est l'un des rares pays au monde à avoir mis en place un système complet de protection du patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI). Outre l'accent mis sur la sauvegarde du PCI, la Chine encourage la marchandisation du PCI pour le développement économique, en particulier dans les domaines du tourisme culturel et des industries culturelles. La marchandisation du PCI en Chine est devenue plus évidente ces dernières années dans le contexte de l'intégration de la culture et du tourisme et de la revitalisation du patrimoine culturel. Cet article illustre les pratiques de marchandisation du PCI en Chine avec des cas concernant les minorités ethniques, le tourisme du PCI dans la province du Yunnan, l'achat du PCI sur des plateformes de commerce électronique et la promotion du PCI par le biais des médias numériques. Ces cas montreront que le PCI peut être mobilisé en tant que divers types de capitaux pour des fonctions politiques, sociales et économiques grâce à la marchandisation. Dans le même temps, diverses utilisations du PCI par les praticiens et les acteurs sociaux du PCI soutiennent non seulement le PCI dans la société contemporaine, mais créent également de nouvelles valeurs pour le PCI.

Mots clés: Héritage Culturel; Chine; Marchandisation; Tourisme; Société; Revitalisation;



Die Vermarktung des Immateriellen Kulturerbes im Heutigen China

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

China ist eines der wenigen Länder der Welt, das ein umfassendes Schutzsystem für immaterielles Kulturerbe (ICH) eingerichtet hat. Neben der Betonung des Schutzes von ICH fördert China die Vermarktung von ICH für die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung, insbesondere in den Bereichen Kulturtourismus und Kulturindustrie. Die Vermarktung von ICH in China ist in den letzten Jahren im Zusammenhang mit der Integration von Kultur und Tourismus und der Wiederbelebung des kulturellen Erbes offensichtlicher geworden. Dieses Papier veranschaulicht die Praktiken der Vermarktung von ICH in China anhand von Fällen, die den ICH-Tourismus ethnischer Minderheiten in der Provinz Yunnan betreffen, das Einkaufen von ICH auf E-Commerce-Plattformen und die Förderung von ICH durch digitale Medien. Diese Fälle werden zeigen, dass ICH als verschiedene Arten von Hauptstädten für politische, soziale und wirtschaftliche Funktionen durch Kommodifizierung mobilisiert werden kann. Gleichzeitig unterstützen verschiedene Anwendungen von ICH durch ICH-Praktiker und soziale Akteure nicht nur ICH in der heutigen Gesellschaft, sondern schaffen auch neue Werte für ICH.

Schlüsselwörter: Kulturelles Erbe; China; Kommodifizierung; Tourismus; Gesellschaft; Revitalisierung;



La Mercificazione del Patrimonio Culturale Immateriale nella Cina Contemporanea

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SOMARIO

La Cina è uno dei pochi paesi al mondo ad avere un sistema completo per la protezione del patrimonio culturale immateriale (ICH). Oltre all'enfasi sulla salvaguardia di ICH, la Cina incoraggia la mercificazione di ICH per lo sviluppo economico, in particolare nelle aree del turismo culturale e delle industrie culturali. La mercificazione di ICH in Cina è diventata più evidente negli ultimi anni nel contesto dell'integrazione della cultura e del turismo e della rivitalizzazione del patrimonio culturale. Questo articolo illustra le pratiche di mercificazione di ICH in Cina con casi riguardanti minoranze etniche, turismo ICH nella provincia dello Yunnan, acquisto di ICH su piattaforme di e-commerce e promozione di ICH attraverso i media digitali. Questi casi mostreranno che ICH può essere mobilitato come vari tipi di capitale per funzioni politiche, sociali ed economiche attraverso la mercificazione. Allo stesso tempo, vari usi di ICH da parte di professionisti e attori sociali di ICH non solo supportano ICH nella società contemporanea, ma creano anche nuovi valori per ICH.

Parole chiave: Patrimonio Culturale; Cina; Mercificazione; Turismo; Società; Rivitalizzazione;



A Mercantilização do Patrimônio Cultural Imaterial na China Contemporânea

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RESUMO

A China é um dos poucos países do mundo a ter um sistema abrangente de proteção do patrimônio cultural imaterial (ICH) em vigor. Além da ênfase na proteção do ICH, a China incentiva a mercantilização do ICH para o desenvolvimento econômico, especialmente nas áreas de turismo cultural e indústrias culturais. A mercantilização do ICH na China tornou-se mais evidente nos últimos anos no contexto da integração da cultura e do turismo e da revitalização do patrimônio cultural. Este artigo ilustra as práticas de mercantilização da ICH na China com casos relativos a minorias étnicas, turismo ICH na província de Yunnan, compra da ICH em plataformas de comércio eletrônico e promoção da ICH por meio da mídia digital. Esses casos mostrarão que o ICH pode ser mobilizado como vários tipos de capital para funções políticas, sociais e econômicas por meio da mercantilização. Ao mesmo tempo, vários usos do ICH por profissionais e atores sociais do ICH não apenas apóiam o ICH na sociedade contemporânea, mas também criam novos valores para o ICH.

Palavras-chave: Patrimônio Cultural; China; Commodificação; Turismo; Sociedade; Revitalização;



Commodifying Intangible Cultural Heritage in Contemporary China.*

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INTRODUCTION

China is among the earliest Party Members to ratify UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (ICH hereafter). As of 2019, China has the largest number of listed ICH elements on UNESCO's *Representative ICH List*, with 32 elements listed on the *Representative List*, seven elements on the *List of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding* and one element on the *Register of Good Safeguarding Practices* (1).

On the one hand, China has been very active in inventorying, nominating and implementing protective measures for ICH elements. According to an official survey, there are over 870,000 ICH elements in China (2).

On the other hand, commodification of ICH is encouraged by Chinese governments at various levels and participated by various social actors. In recent years, under the national policy of "Revitalization of Cultural Heritage", as well as the integration of cultural and tourism sectors of Chinese government agencies, commodification and creative use of ICH are developing fast in China. Not only governments but also many non-officials stakeholders are engaging with the commodification of ICH.



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- 1) See http://www.ihchina.cn/news_1_details/19280.html
- 2) See http://www.ihchina.cn/news_1_details/19280.html

Commodification of ICH entails debate on the tension between authenticity and commodification. Internationally, some scholars argue that authenticity is an issue relating to the ICH commodified in tourism (Schipani 2008, Lloyd 2009, Kim, Whitford et al. 2019) while UNESCO clearly dismisses the concept of authenticity in the field of ICH (UNESCO 2004, UNESCO 2015). China is a typical case where the tension between authenticity and commodification is extremely concerned by not only the national law of ICH but also mainstream experts and scholars.

In the national law of ICH, it is stated that, on the one hand, authenticity is a principal that the ICH safeguarding should abide by; on the other hand, use of ICH for tourism and cultural industries is encouraged by the state (3). Meanwhile, the majority of Chinese experts and scholars are worried about the threat of commodification on the authenticity of ICH situated in tourism and cultural industries (Liu 2004, Liu 2004, Jiang and Li 2012, Gao 2016). On a comprehensive examination of the idea of authenticity of ICH in China and the world, I argue that a materialist or objective perspective of authenticity predominates the Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006) of ICH in China, so that the notion of authenticity has to be re-conceptualized into a subjective perspective to be appropriate for ICH and the practicing inheritors (Su 2018).

Along with the re-conceptualization of authenticity is the re-conceptualization of commodification. While commodification of indigenous culture of the host community has been widely discussed in past literature of tourism, the focus was more on positive or negative implications of commodification on the host community than on the authority and participation of the cultural practitioners (Wall and Xie 2005). Furthermore, scholars suggest examining commodification of culture as an ongoing temporal process rather than a static result (Cohen 1988, Su 2011, Su 2019). In accordance with the re-conceptualization of authenticity and commodification, it is therefore meaningful to look at the ways and expectations the ICH practitioners engage with the process of commodification to inherit, maintain and creation ICH values (Su 2019).

As ICH is a living heritage that is not static and past-oriented, the inheritance, creation and re-creation of ICH by present practitioners for present audiences are meaningful ways of making ICH values.

3) See the English version of the law on http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=336567

Moving beyond the judgement of the positive or negative implications of commodification of ICH, it is significant to examine the processes of commodification of ICH in contemporary China so as to understand the meanings and functions of ICH. This paper, through examination of the content of the internet and smartphone APP, documents and publications on ICH commodification, as well as fieldworks in Yunnan Province, China, in recent years, illustrates the background, discourses, practices and implications of the commodification of ICH in China in three cases, namely tourism, product trade and digital promotion.

Background and Contexts

ICH is not a common term used in China before 2001 when Chinese ICH element, such as Kunqu Opera and Guqin art were listed on UNESCO's ICH *Representative List*. In general, the development of ICH safeguarding in the history of the People's Republic of China can be divided into three stages. The first stage is from the founding of the People's Republic of China until 2001. During this period, what is now called as ICH was regarded as folk and ethnic cultures. Safeguarding of ICH, or folk and ethnic culture, was not possible during the Cultural Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s, and many ICH elements, especially folk religious activities, were only allowed to recover until the late 1970s and 1980s.

Regional documentation and preservation of certain ICH elements, such as folk arts (i.e. music, dance, arts, and handicraft), were seen in some provinces in China, such as Yunnan, where ethnic minorities' culture was rich. A pilot governmental endeavor on the protection of ICH can be seen in the enactment of the *Protection Ordinance on Yunnan Ethnic Traditional Culture and Folklore* in 2000. These initiatives later led to nation-wide investigation and study of ICH, in particular the National Project of Safeguarding Chinese Ethnic Culture and Folklore began in 2003. Although led by the government, these works were dominantly operated by scholars and experts.

The second stage began around 2001 when the government gradually became a leader in the safeguarding of ICH in China (Kang 2011) as the term ICH was introduced from UNESCO into Chinese academic and official discourses. Along with the ratification of Chinese government of UNESCO's ICH Convention in 2004, a series of governmental measures have been taken to establish the comprehensive legislative and administrative system of ICH administration in China.

These include nation-wide investigation and inventorying of ICH elements at various governmental levels, nomination of ICH elements and ICH inheritors at four administrative levels (national, provincial, municipal and county), establishment of ICH offices, ICH Protection Centers and the Expert Committees at four administrative levels, and so on. These culminated to 2011 in which year China enacted the *National Law on Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

This is usually regarded as the accomplishment that China has established its comprehensive administrative ICH system (Su 2020). It is also in this stage that commodification of ICH for tourism and cultural industries is promoted and encouraged by the government (Su 2019), in addition to the “protection” of it.

Commodification of ICH has been experimented by various social players in the 2010s and this is further advanced in the third stage, which is from 2013 onward, following Chinese President Xi Jinping’s remarks on the use of cultural heritage for present social, cultural and economic construction in the “New Era” of Chinese society.

These remarks concern the “Revitalization of Cultural Heritage” in 2013 and “Creative Transformation and Innovative Development of Traditional Chinese Culture” in 2014. As argued by some scholars, Chinese government has to recognize, inherit and transform the traditional culture for its current social development (Sofield and Li 1998, Ai 2012). Therefore, the creative transformation and innovative development of ICH is to “select the essence and discard the obsolete” so as to “make the basic Chinese cultural characteristics comparable with contemporary culture and modern society” (Song 2019).

Understanding the current goal and context of Chinese society therefore is key to understand why commodification of ICH becomes significant. In the *Report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China* issued in 2017, the central government stated that the social principal contradiction of Chinese society has changed to the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life.

This means that Chinese people would like to have better spiritual and cultural life, including leisure and entertainment, after the most of them have had a well-off material life. Therefore, it is understandable that creative and innovation use of ICH, in particular commodification of ICH, is an effective way to suffice the diverse and ever-growing needs of Chinese people for cultural products and services.

Traditionally, cultural heritage was mainly administrated by the government in China for ideological reasons. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Reform and Opening-up policies weakened the centralized role of government during the process of decentralization (Zan 2014) and encouraged more social players to participate in the governance of cultural heritage, including tangible and intangible heritage. This trend becomes obvious after 2018 when the tourism and cultural sectors of Chinese government were integrated.

As a result, protection and commodification of ICH for tourism and cultural industries is not only blurred by governmental agencies but also is participated with many non-official social players who inherit, commodify, create and consume ICH simultaneously.

In the next section, the paper will use three cases to illustrate the practice of various social players in current use of ICH in commodification in China.

Commodifying ICH in Tourism

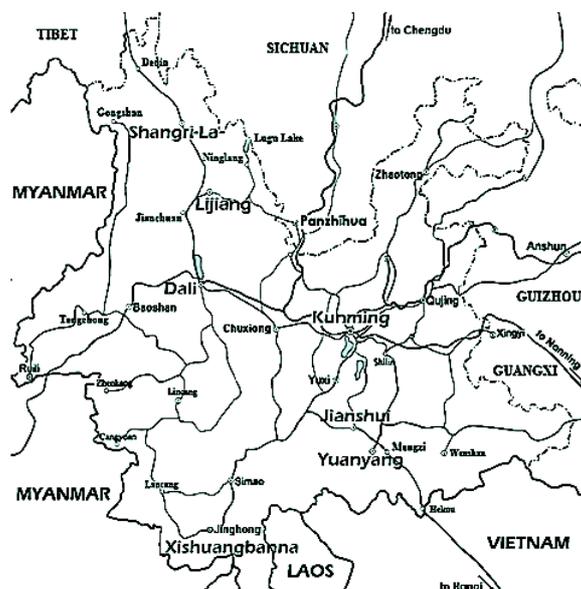
Along with the fast economic development in China, as well as the increase of people's income and educational level, cultural demand has been both extended and intensified. ICH tourism as a relatively innovative form of tourism emerges in various form in China.

Chinese government has been active in encouraging and initiating ICH tourism, after the integration of tourism and culture sectors in 2018. According to a report concerning the understanding and demand of Chinese netizens conducted by DIICH in 2018, ICH tourism is the most popular form of ICH commodification (4). ICH tourism, therefore, becomes an important vehicle for Chinese people to pursue their “better life” regarding cultural and spiritual aspects.

While ICH tourism is observed across China, Yunnan Province in Southwest of China (Figure 1) is a typical region to examine how local ethnic ICH elements are commodified for tourism.

Tie-dyeing in Dali Prefecture in the west of Yunnan Province is one of the characteristic ICH tourism program. Tie-dyeing is a handicraft skill which uses natural herb dye, such as indigo blue, to dye the cloth after it being tied by needle-working with unique patters, such as plants, insects and geometric patterns.

4) See the report by Tencent on <https://xw.qq.com/tech/20180806026699/TEC2018080602669900>



Location of Dali in Yunnan Province, China: <http://yunnantravelguide.com/Travel/show.asp?id=2789>

Figure 1

Location of Dali in Yunnan Province, China

This skill was listed as the first group of China National ICH Element in 2006. Zhoucheng Village in Dali is regarded as the most famous place to see and learn tie-dyeing skills and it has attracted many tourists from the Old Town of Dali, a popular tourist attraction in Yunnan, (Figure 2).



Photo taken by Junjie Su, October, 2018,

Figure 2

Foreign tourists are practicing tie-dyeing at
Puzhen Tie-dyeing Museum Zhoucheng, Dali, Yunnan

According to a recent survey, there are over 18 tie-dyeing workshops and one museum in Zhoucheng. Over 6,000 people, most women, are engaging with tie-dyeing related works to produce over 250 kinds of products. The economic benefit is obvious as the annual sales is over 70 million RMB and over 80% of the products are sold overseas, including Japan, UK, US, Canada and so on.

ICH based tourism activates the protection and transmission of tie-dyeing in Zhoucheng. In the past, tie-dyeing was mainly used for decoration on Bai people's head and costume, and the patterns were restricted to butterfly, flowers, insects and other simple ones. Furthermore, tie-dyeing craft was only inherited among certain artisan families. However, this inheritance group is aging and decreasing along with the shrinking of the tie-dyeing market.

Along with the tourism development in Dali, tourists and visitors have been gradually involved in the inheritance and dissemination, since the 2000s (Figure 3).



Photo taken by Junjie Su, August, 2020

Figure 3
Parents and children are experiencing and learning the tie-dyeing
crafts with instructors in Lanxu Eco-culture Development Centre, Zhoucheng, Dali

During the visiting, participation, consumption and experiencing of tie-dyeing handicrafts in Zhoucheng, audiences, including visitors, tourists and resident artists, communicate their ideas, thoughts and feedbacks to the local tie-dyeing practitioners, who, then, make adjustment and innovation in terms of design, color, forms, etc, to better suit for the outside market.

As a result, creation of new tie-dyeing product is crafted based on traditional tie-dyeing skills, such as coaster, scarf, hanging, T-shirt, beddings, furnishings and so on.

Innovative patterns and colors are also seen, not only ethnic minorities' patterns but also modern and abstract decorative patterns, which diversify the cultural expression and values of tie-dyeing (Figure 4).



Photo taken by Junjie Su), August, 2020,

Figure 4
Some of the current tie-dyed textile products showcased
in Puzhen Tie-dyeing Museum, Zhoucheng, Dali

While commodification leads to change of design, color, forms of the ICH to a modern way, it also helps other aspects of the ICH to resume to a traditional way. During the 1990s and 2000s, for example, some local workshops used imported chemical dyes to increase the productivity.

Later, along with the listing of tie-dyeing and the fast development of ICH tourism in Dali, these workshops began to return to the traditional dyeing process with natural plant dyes extracted from isatis roots. Nowadays, many workshops brand their ICH with “authentic” making process, including the natural plant dyeing (Figure 5).



Photo taken by Junjie Su, August, 2020,

Figure 5

Traditional herb dyes are commonly seen in tie-dyeing workshops in Zhoucheng, Dali

While tie-dyeing ICH as an experiencing tourism program is welcomed by tourists and tie-dyed products as cultural creative commodity is purchased in the outside market, local practitioners' cultural pride and identity of being Bai people are enhanced.

Tie-dyeing has been revitalized by tourism and cultural creative industry, through which, new values and meanings are generated by the collaboration between local practitioner and outside audiences.

While the audiences are active to participate with the experiencing and making of ICH with the ICH practitioners, they become practitioners who help with sustaining the ICH. Thus, the commodification of ICH in tourism is blurred with the protection (e.g. inheritance and creation) of ICH, during which processes new values and relations of ICH will emerge.

Commodifying ICH in E-commerce

China now has the largest number of officially recognized ICH elements in the world, however, considerable of them are facing the crisis of losing young inheritors and audiences and many of them are even dying.

A major reason behind it is the disconnection of ICH and contemporary use.

Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the idea of “promoting creative transformation and innovative development of excellent Chinese traditional culture” (5) in the *Reports of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, which triggers nation-wide creative and innovative ideas in the protection and use of ICH.

ICH is greatly impacted by COVID-19 in 2020 and China is no exception. In order to help ICH inheritors, in particular artisans, to sell their products, to disseminate ICH to wider population, and to diversify people’s cultural needs during the pandemic, the Ministry of Cultural and

Tourism, along with the Ministry of Commerce and the Poverty Relief Office of the State Council, China, launched the first “ICH Shopping Festival” on 13th of June, 2020, which is the annual Cultural and Natural Heritage Day of China (Figure 6).

Due to the pandemic, this ICH Shopping Festival was mainly carried out online, as E-commerce in China is well developed and online business is safe and effective for the commodification of ICH.

5) See https://www.mct.gov.cn/whzx/bnsj/zcfgs_bnsj/201512/t20151225_822005.htm

Figure 6
Internet celebrity and ICH inheritor promoting ICH products on one of the ICH Shopping
Festival opening events held in Hunan Province, China.



photo taken from
<http://tmy.changde.gov.cn/zhd/vj/vt/content/741795>, China, 2020.

In particular, the Festival was operated by several well-known Chinese internet companies. For example, special promotional sections are set for ICH based products on online shopping platforms, such as Taobao, Jindong (Figure 7) and Pinduoduo; ICH promotional programs and ICH performances are shown live on short video platforms, such as Douyin (Tik Tok) (Figure 8) and Kuaishou.

Specifically, famous hosts and internet celebrities are advertising ICH related products online, as well as introducing ICH. Over 3,700 promotional events were held in China and 6,500 shops were involved, which relate to 4,500 ICH elements (6).

6) See the news report on <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1669565262885458068&wfr=spider&for=pc>

The source of photo is https://www.sohu.com/a/325882847_639082

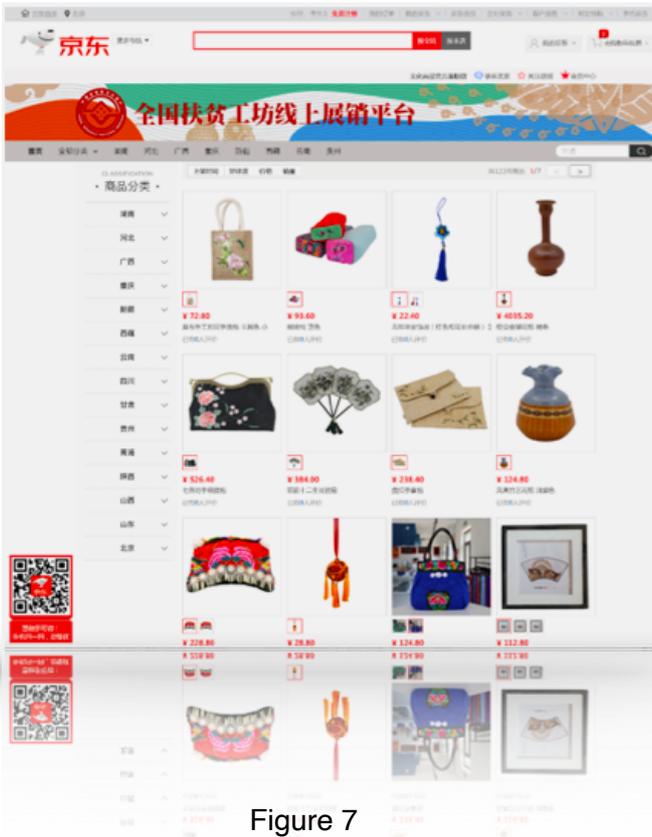


Figure 7

Screen shot of the online exhibition and sales platform of national poverty alleviation ICH workshops on Jingdong Website.

The source of photo is http://d.youth.cn/newtech/202006/120200615_12369821.htm, June, 2020



Figure 8

Wen Shishan, an ICH inheritor of the making of Oil paper Umbrella, is promoting his ICH on Douyin.

Taking Jindong, one of the biggest E-commerce companies in China for example, over 260% year-on-year increase of the trade was seen on 13th of June, 2020, in particular, Hubei Province, where COVID-19 was first reported in China, saw a ten-fold increase of ICH products (7). While dramatic economic revenue was generated, social benefit is also see, such as stimulating ICH practitioners' passion in combating COVID-19 with their ICH products.

7) See http://www.ihchina.cn/fygwj_detail/21169.html

The protection and use of heritage and traditional culture in China has long been entangled with the complicated relations of nationalism, socialism and modernization (Sofield and Li 1998, Ai 2012). The commodification of ICH through E-commerce is a significant way of both promoting the mainstream ideological values of ICH to wider audience and selling ICH related products and service for economic development. Chinese economy suffers in the COVID-19 during 2020 and the majority of ICH in China experienced difficulties in their sustainability. Therefore, the commercial activities of ICH carried out online are safe and effective ways for the recovery of Chinese economy, the simulation of domestic consumption, and the promotion of ICH values.

Commodifying ICH on Digital Media

Digital techniques have been used in various aspects of modern society. In China, it becomes increasingly obvious that digital technologies are involved in protection, dissemination and commodification of ICH. Digital interactive techniques, such as VR (Virtual Reality), AR (Augmented Reality) and MR (Mixed Reality), are adopted in interpretation, sharing, and experiencing of ICH and related products without temporal and spatial limits. In the year 2020 when the pandemic is still ongoing, audiences can access and experience ICH virtually without travel or people-to-people contact. For instance, “Hunan ICH Hall on Cloud” is the first ICH digital museum based on VR techniques in China (8) (Figure 9).



Screen shot, October, 2020

Figure 9
The main page of APP Cloud Hunan ICH Hall.

8) See <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200731/20200731A0T8SV00.html>

VR techniques are used in software to display various images and information of ICH element in Hunan Province, and video and audio techniques are in-built to provide audiences a vivid experience as in a museum.

In addition to digitalization of ICH, more digital techniques are used in commodification and dissemination of ICH online. Among these, commodification of ICH on short video platforms is significant as ICH inheritors can broadcast themselves and sell their products simultaneously.

The case of Douyin (Tik Tok), as a typical example of digital commodification ICH, is illustrated in the following.



Screen shot, October, 2020.

Douyin, whose aim is to help customers to express themselves and record their beautiful life, is one of the well-developed short video platforms in China, as well as in the world (Figure 10). According to the official information of Douyin, it has become the largest dissemination platform of ICH in China, and, as shown by its report, 1,318 ICH elements of 1,372 Chinese National Listed ICH Element are displayed on Douyin as of the end of May, 2020.

Figure 11.

Qiao Xue promoting her leather product on Douyin

Furthermore, there are over 48 million short videos on ICH on Douyin, which are liked 6.4 billion times (9).

While many national listed ICH inheritors and their ICH practices are more likely to be promoted on media, Douyin provides more opportunities and lower threshold for lower level listed and non-listed ICH practitioners to display and promote their ICH, or traditional and ethnic cultures. Thus, the internet becomes a “democratic” space where the marginalized practitioners and amateurs can express their ICH.

Douyin is not just an effective way to promote ICH for ICH practitioners, but also an effective way for young audiences to know ICH. This becomes a new way for both producers and consumers of ICH to interact online.

According to a survey in 2019, the majority of Douyin users are aged between 19 to 35 and the Daily Active users amount to over 400 million (10).

Photo taken from https://www.sohu.com/a/401427700_123753

9) See <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200731/20200731A0T8SV00.html>

10) See <https://www.chinaz.com/2020/0313/1117388.shtml>

As Douyin is relatively popular among young people, it becomes a useful media for young people to learn, like and hopefully engage with ICH. For example, Douyin initiated the “ICH Partner” project, which aims to help five ICH inheritors to earn over one million RMB (\$140,000) in one year through showing their ICH and selling ICH products online. Among these, Qiao Xue (Figure 11), a municipal listed ICH leathermaker in her 30s, has earned her one million through Douyin (11).

In addition to the economic benefits, many ICH practitioners also attract huge young fans, such as the internationally famous internet celebrity Li Ziqi, who practices traditional Chinese way of living in the countryside.

Digital innovation is highly encouraged by the Chinese government and is considered by the government and entrepreneurs as a promising opportunity. In addition to Douyin, digital software's and APPs, including those for ICH displaying, shopping, entertainment and sharing, are popular among young people.

So that commodification of ICH through digital techniques yields not just economic benefits but also wider social effects. Governments, business, listed ICH inheritors, non-listed ICH practitioners, along with audiences, all contribute to the inheriting, creating, and disseminating of ICH values through digital techniques.

In recent literatures of the understanding and meanings of cultural heritage, international scholars argued that there exists an Authorized Heritage Discourse which defines, regulates and creates what heritage is and who owns it (Smith 2006).

In particular, the discourse of authenticity is a key of the Authorized Heritage Discourse. In the case of wide public engagement of general public with the making, creating and promoting of ICH online, in particular those non-listed ICH practitioners in China, the hegemony of Authorized Heritage Discourse is de-constructed through the democratic ICH making in digital space. Compared with traditional face-to-face learning and inheritance of ICH in the past, emergent learning and inheritance ways through digital technologies becomes easy and popular for young people.

Consequently, young people's value, taste, expectation and identities will influence the making of ICH in cyberspace, which, will challenge the definition and inheritance of ICH in conventional forms regulated by the Authorized Heritage Discourse.

11) See <https://www.chainnews.com/articles/592311580372.htm>

Conclusion

From the 1980s when traditional and ethnic cultures were documented and protected by academia, to the 2000s when the term ICH was privileged by the government for a national ICH campaign, to the 2010s when ICH was safeguarded and created for comprehensive political, cultural, economic and social development, it becomes clear that ICH has been not only inherited as “heritage” per se, but also created and re-created as cultural capital (following Bourdieu) by various social actors, including non-official ICH practitioners for various purposes.

While commodification of ICH is not considered for ICH safeguarding in UNESCO’s ICH Convention and even commodification of ICH is seen as a “taboo” (Bortolotto 2019), China has been gradually welcomed commodification of ICH since the 2010s, after the national policies on the revitalization of cultural heritage.

This paper, with illustration of three kinds of commodification of ICH, has shown that commodification of ICH through visiting, shopping, digital promotion and so on can sustain ICH in current Chinese society.

Commodifying ICH has multiple implications which can be seen from political and economic aspects. Politically, when the Chinese government revitalizes ICH in everyday life of Chinese people, commodification, among other possible ways, is to disseminate the ICH values that serve the current ideological purposes of national identity building and national unity (Ai 2012).

The production and re-production of ICH values through commodification at present not only suffices Chinese people’s burgeoning demand for cultural and spiritual needs but also maintain the ideological security of Chinese culture (Edney 2015). As shown in the three cases, new emerging young Chinese have strong and diverse cultural needs. Consuming ICH related products and services, then, they are also building their cultural identities, which in turn encourages the production (usually through commodification) of ICH.

Economic benefits drive commodification, which can be seen in various business programs such as tourism, E-commerce and ICH products. Commodification enables ICH practitioners, regardless of listed or non-listed, to make a living from their cultural heritage.

As the majority of ICH in China suffer from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, commodification is significant to sustain both the national economy as well as the livelihood of ICH practitioners and enterprises. When people have restricted access to travel overseas and foreign cultural products during the pandemic, it is meaningful for the government to stimulate and support domestic cultural products and services based on cultural heritage resources.

While the commodification of ICH generates significant economic revenue, the implications beyond economy become important. Commodification of ICH could be a meaningful way of sustaining and making ICH when the practitioners are able to engage with commodification with their free wills and expectations (Su 2019). When the government, like that in China, promotes commodification of ICH for comprehensive political, economic and social considerations, ICH practitioners, many non-listed practitioners, can gain power and capital from their commodification of ICH, in such a way to realize their cultural, personal and interpersonal needs.

In these ways, the definition and authentication of ICH, conventionally regulated by the Authorized Heritage Discourse, such as the objective notion of authenticity, are challenged by the cultural practice of those ICH practitioners. Commodification, therefore, could be an alternative way for non-listed ICH practitioners and non-official social actors to engage with ICH inheritance and production.

Consequently, the commodification will lead to issues of authority and cultural rights of heritage, rather than the seemingly tension between commodification and authenticity. Studies in other heritage regimes and cultural contexts in the world are needed to explore more manifestations and implications of commodifying ICH on individual practitioners, as well as their communities and the regions.



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