Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

- Practice and Experience of China -

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The Project of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection has currently been developed into a famous and popular movement in China. It is such a widely influential movement that it involves different figures and institutions from different levels and region. If you google the “Intangible Cultural Heritage,” more than one million items you will get. Moreover, the first several pages are mostly the content about China. From this, we can see how flourishing it is.

The reason for the quick prevalence of this movement in China is deeply rooted in the strong consciousness of nationalism and the influence from international society, especially that from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In recent more than twenty years, China experienced dramatic changes in economy, culture, politics, and many other aspects in social life. Moreover, one of

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the problematic side results together with the great development is the fading of traditional culture. Facing the strong challenges of industrialization and globalization, how to preserve and maintain the identity of Chinese traditional unique culture and value, became a common concern of Chinese people, especially the intellectuals.

In fact, in China, intellectuals are always the first group of people who perceived sensitively and worried about the crisis of traditional culture, and it was because of their promotion and endeavor, that their anxiety towards the status of tradition became a nationwide care. One earlier example related to this is the rising of the nationwide Movement of Folksong and other Folklore Genres Collecting started by scholars from Peking University between late 1910s and early 1920s, which has been generally recognized as the origin of Chinese Folklore Study as a discipline (Zhang Zichen 1985: 306–347).

Since early 1980s, the voice of protecting Chinese traditional culture against the impact of western cultures as well as arbitrary misuse or excessive exploitation, has been raised continuously. This request was often consistent to a large extent because it was deeply related to and met people’s consciousness of tradition and nation. As early as in late 1970s and early 1980s, Chinese Ministry of Culture, State Ethnic Affairs Commission and China Federation of Literary and Art Circles jointly proposed the compilation of Ten Collections on China’s Folk and Ethnic Culture and Arts. The collections, including that of folktales, folk songs and rhymes, proverbs, opera music, ethnic and folk instrument music, opera and dance forms, song styles, arias, and so on, each was carried out by related specific governmental bureaus or government-based societies that all have agencies in different administrative levels. In the time shortly after the Cultural Revolution(1966–1976) that had brought fatal
destruction to Chinese culture, the purpose of reconstructing the culture with the resource of folk tradition was obvious in this project. The participants for different collections first collected their own genre in villages, then chose parts of the material and compiled them into a county collection. These county collections were then selected and compiled into volumes for each province.

In this process, many folklore genres that declined for a period got revival, various local artistic organizations were created or enhanced, and many local art talents were brought up. After twenty-five years, with more than 10 million participants’ co-working, by the end of 2004, 298 provincial volumes had been completed. Moreover, by the end of 2009, all those volumes totaling about 450 million Chinese words were published. This huge project being universally praised as a modern “Great Wall” of cultural undertakings, established a strong practical and theoretical foundation for the new movement of ICH protection. It is therefore easy to evoke the resonance and active response from different levels in the society, especially when it met particular stimulation.

The particular stimulation this time was the UNESCO’s series acts. Aiming at the protection of intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO ratified several conventions or declarations in recent years, such as UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore of 1989, UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of 2001, Istanbul Declaration of 2002, Convention for the Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003, and so on. All of them stress the importance and urgency of protecting the ICH in the whole world(An Deming 2008).

And in fact, to many countries, the most stimulating act of UNESCO was the program of “Proclamation of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” launched in 2000. In May 2001, Chinese
traditional opera Kunqu was listed as one of the first group of 19 masterpieces. In November 2003, Guqin, the seven-string zither, was listed as one of the second group of 28 masterpieces. These two events greatly encouraged Chinese people who are eager to distinguish the unique traditional culture in the world. Related state and local governments, official or academic institutions and organizations, different individuals with different background, were all hence engaged in this movement (Xiang Yunju 2004: 35–37).

In the process of the project on general investigation and preservation of Chinese traditional culture, there emerged a lot of new questions and problems encountered by the participants in their practice, which could not be solved through the project itself. One of the most critical issues worried scholars was the rapid vanishing of the folk tradition confronting the quick developing industrialization. In consideration of this situation, many scholars advocated to start a special program to salvage the vanishing national spiritual heritage. For example, Feng Jicai, a famous writer and the president of the Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Association since 2001, devoted himself together with the Association in the promotion of the urgency and significance of protecting the folk cultural heritage. The association is a national government–based organization of folklorists and has its agencies in every provincial, municipal and county level. In the late 2002, Feng and the association got a special grant from the National Fund for Philosophy and Social Sciences for the Project of Salvaging Folk Cultural Heritage, and hence started a new program throughout the whole country.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of 2003, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Finance, in collaboration with the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, launched the project of
protecting folk and ethnic culture. They set up a leadership panel, an expert committee and a national center for the project. Organizational institutions in local levels were also accordingly established in provinces, regions and municipalities. The National Center for Protecting Folk and Ethnic Culture, which was later changed as National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage Research and Protection, was founded in Chinese Academy of Arts. This center was authorized as the sole official agency that takes in charge of the whole affair of the project of Safeguarding ICH in China. Though there was competition between the CFLAA and the NCICHRP, finally the former one rendered that its project was in fact a part of the larger project of the Protecting ICH. Some Chinese scholars—most of them are folklorists—observe that comparing the domain of their listing contents, the concept of ICH is almost as same as that of folk culture, a term already familiar to Chinese people. The main reason for the prevalence of the former one is in order to keep the pace with international discourse. Nevertheless, the application of the new concept was actually also an indication and result of a new movement, though the concept folk culture is still used as replacement of the ICH in many occasion.

The comprehensive participation of the governmental departments is much helpful to promote further the project of ICH protection. Since mid 1990s, the State Council, Ministry of Culture and other Departments have issued a series of official documents, to emphasis the importance of protecting the Folk and Ethnic Cultural Heritage and call upon governments at various levels to enhance their leadership and incorporate the program into their major working agenda. Accordingly, The Ministry of Culture, as a focal point, collaborating with several other related departments, formulated an Inter-ministerial Joint Committee on the
project, to address major issues in a coordinated way; the Ministry of Finance set aside special fund, and many provinces, regions and cities put certain sum of money for the project. This greatly attracted wider attention of the whole society to the project of ICH protection. Institutions and people from all walks of life were getting involved into it, and thus shaped a new cultural movement throughout the country.

However, different participants acted very variously in this movement, based upon different purposes. What is ultimate goal of the project? There is no clear definition in official documents. This leads confusions and problems in the practice. Although many official documents stress the significance of ICH is “conducive to the affirmation of cultural identity of the Chinese people, instrumental to the enhancement of social cohesion, national solidarity and social stability,” although an official document issued by the State Council toward the project identified guiding principle of “protection as priority, rescue as primacy, rational utilization, and inheritance for development”(State Council 2005), it was still confusing to many officials in local or central governments who need a practical motivation to conduct this program. That’s why many local governments’ leaders or central department officials would rather to continue the idea that was popular after 1980s, “the culture builds stages and the economy perform plays.” For example, in 2004, the 28th Conference of World Heritage Committee was held in China. At the end of the conference, Zhang Xinsheng, the Deputy Minister of Education of China and the chair of the conference, had such a speech to reporters:

To many localities, to have a world heritage is helpful in attracting tourists and hence developing local economy. It has been a great promotion to the Northeast China as an old palace in this area was proclaimed as world heritage, and will thus benefit the economic
development of this area (Sun Yuting 2004).

This is very typical viewpoint of many officials toward the ultimate purpose of protecting cultural heritage. In addition, this constitutes one of the main motivations for many local governments to take vigorously part in the ICH protection affairs. However, this kind of understanding and purpose is off the original intention for UNESCO to launch the ICH protection project.

Now that the officials as the leadership of this project did not understand the actual significance of Protecting ICH, who really know that? If we skim the surface of the issue, the answer might be scholars! Indeed, scholars, most of them are folklorists, arts researchers or musicologists, met their more significant and powerful roles in the movement. Those being well known in their discipline were appointed as the members of Experts Advisory Committee of National Project of ICH Protection, or that of jury on Intangible Cultural Heritage. Besides giving advice to the project, their main function is to assess proposals from provinces and determine the inventory of national masterpieces of ICH. However, do scholars understand the meaning of ICH protection?

In China, the most striking highlight among ICH movement, completely following what proposed by UNESCO, is the Proclamation of Masterpieces of ICH. According to the official document promulgated by national leadership of the project, it will adopt a graded protection mechanism in order to better protect the ICH, and thus establish an inventory system of intangible heritage masterpieces on national, provincial, municipal and county levels. In the procedure of application for the proclamation of masterpieces in each level, a determined stage is the assessment of the jury members in different levels, which consist of folklorists, musicologist, and arts researchers, and so on. In order to be
listed into national proclamation, the cultural event in application will have to make its proposal pass assessment of the jury from the basic level up to the national level. This, besides enabling invisible power of the jury members, actually formed a new hierarchy of knowledge. Unfortunately, few scholars pay academic attention to these issues.

Local governments tried their best in order to have the cultural items spreading in their region be listed in the national proclamation. According to official document, the ICH in China is cataloged into ten types: folk literature, traditional drama, folk arts, folklore (custom), folk music, folk performing arts, traditional handcraft, folk dance, acrobatics and sports, and traditional medicine. However, in whichever type, almost every folk cultural item or work is usually shared by people in a broad region. It is too difficult to distinguish a cultural event in one place from that in another, let alone to identify and justify its unique local quality or property. Therefore, there is often a competition among different regions that have same or similar cultural items. Therefore, scholars in related disciplines attracted people’s attention again. Many folklorists, especially those from academic institutions in Beijing, were invited to different areas by local governments or bureaus, to evaluate the local cultural spectacles. Some wealthy local government even would like to support and host academic conference cooperating with scholars or academic societies.

The mass media in China paid highly comprehensive and wide attention to the ICH project, too. The wide reports about the ICH protection program by TV, newspapers, and radio, greatly promoted this event and interrelated ideas among people throughout the whole country. Sometimes some media even use quite stimulating words to stir up people’s desire. For instance, at the end of last year, when the government of Henan Province promulgated an official document on provincial proclamation of
ICH, a local newspaper released a news on it with such a beginning: “Do you possess any inherited unique art or skill? Why don’t you apply for the ICH. Once you are listed, you will not only be recorded into history, but also get financial support from the government, to carry forward this unique skill” (Today Daily 2006).

Many entrepreneurs are also very active to label their specific products as an ICH-related item, for the sake of enhancing their social position, or especially, the economic benefits. One of the examples is from Wanglaoji, a famous brand of cold tea in China. Six years ago, the successfully-marketed Waolaoji got a critique from Ministry of Sanitation for a herb with uncertain effect included in its recipe, which of course brought negative impact upon its marketing. Wanglaoji made a series response towards it. One of its strategies was stressing that its product belongs to national ICH, and stated that those attacks towards it is the action of “not protecting ICH,” which is at a risk of legal trouble (Dong Wei 2009). People might be surprised that such an active commercial product as Wanglaoji could be listed in national ICH. This is in fact a result of the dilemmatic and controversial process of ICH project in practice, at least in China. As the ICH was becoming a famous and popular movement, many enterprises that would make any possible relationship between their products and kind of tradition, were extremely active in applying for ICH for the products, and this somehow coincides with the intention of the government based National Center for ICH Protection, the authority in charge of the related issues, which would also like to take the advantage to expand its power.

We must admit that the movement of ICH protection has already shown its significance to the survival of folk tradition and to the folklore studies. Many genres of folk tradition, such as temple festivals and other
folk belief activities, have long been functioning in people’s everyday life. However, they have been identified as feudal superstitious remains and been restrictedly prohibited for several decades. Although these kinds of tradition got revived after Cultural Revolution, they are still in the struggling effort to get the legitimacy from the governmental discourse. Yet after the confusing translated concept Intangible Cultural Heritage (“feiwuzhi wenhua yichan” in Chinese, literally “Non-material” cultural heritage) came to be more and more popular, it became a new fashion to cite this awkward-sounding word among officials and others having high positions in the society. Meanwhile, as a most remarkable achievement of the ICH protection movement, in the Guiding Manuals for General Investigation of ICH published by the National Center for ICH Research and Protection in 2005, folk belief has been listed as one genre to be investigated. This is actually an indication that the folk belief or religious practice got somewhat legitimacy in an official discourse. In this situation, officials or legislators will have to be cautious when they deal with the folk culture such as temple festivals and other traditional religious practice (Gao Bingzhong 2013).

Folklore studies are also facing its new opportunity. This does not mean the skin-deep prosperity such as the so-called folklore experts got highly respectable recognition from the governments, local communities and mass media. Instead, this movement enables the scholars to think thoroughly and deeply about the relationship between culture and people’s lives; to have chance to make deeper and more comprehensive investigations to Chinese folklore with the strong support from government; to search a way to solve the big dilemma embedded in the movement itself; and therefore, to contribute new perspectives and method to the discipline based upon Chinese experiences.
However, the project also had many negative impacts. The most prominent one is the competition or even conflict caused. Because of the system of proclamation of masterpieces or that of nominating masters for specific arts or skill from UNESCO, national to local levels, there appeared discordance among local people and competition on disputing the ownership of specific cultural item among communities or localities within same nation, or between different nations. This sometimes disturbed people’s regular relationship among locality or community. For some specific culture items or event, there used to be various claims of ownership from different areas in China. And the proclamation of masterpieces reinforced these kinds of tensions because it’s related to economic and other benefits. In China, the most remarkable event concerning this affair was the debate about the property of Duanwu Festival between Chinese and Korean internet users.

Folklore is highly featured with the transformation and transmission. From the time and space, it always changes and adjusts to adapt new context. In this process, many of customs absorb the influence from other culture and keep vitality. In the time when the world is closely tied together, to emphasize the distinctiveness of each culture, to some extent, might be a new source for the new conflict: and the legislative proclamation of the ownership of a traditional cultural item in fact restricts or even hurts the vitality of the culture itself.

The project of ICH protection was founded on the basis of equality and diversity of human culture, but unfortunately, it in fact shaped new hierarchy among cultures and within a unique culture. The experts or UNESCO have the privilege to determine which one is the valuable Cultural Heritage, and the actual owners of the culture cannot make voice on it. This is another big problem within it. Although the community
participation is always emphasized by UNESCO, community members actually are only objects in the schemed framework of ICH. To some extent, they might be dealt with according to the desire of the ones who are in the higher rank of hierarchy. This caused a ridiculous result that the government agency will decide which culture or who’s culture is culture (or cultural heritage), and folklorists who are supposed to be made by folklore will decide what is folklore. In this process, ordinary people are actually losing their last power of expressing themselves by their own tradition, while being divided into two separate groups by recognized with having culture or not having culture.

All these issues require closer and deeper investigations of the movement. Chinese scholars including folklorists, together with those from the UNESCO domain, still have a long road to go.
References


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무형문화유산의 보호

-중국에서의 실천과 경험이-

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무형문화유산 보호 캠페인은 중국에서 영향력 있는 사회문화적 움직임으로 발전해왔다. 이러한 급격한 확산은, 특히 산업화와 전자화의 강력한 영향에 직면한 상황에서 무려한 민족주의 의식 그리고 유네스코의 영향에 깊이 뿌리내리고 있다. 이 캠페인은 중국에 도입된 후 민간 전통과 민속학 연구에 많은 실질적 결과를 이끌었다. 무형문화유산 보호 프로그램과 관련된 다양한 사건들을 통해, 전통 민속문화, 특히 봉건 미신으로 낙인 찍혀 엄격히 금지되었던 종교적 실천과 민간 종교들은 전국적으로 지위가 크게 개선되고 생존 공간이 확대되었다. 한편 민속학 또한 이런 움직임을 통해 새로운 기회와 도전을 맞이하고 있다.

그러나 동시에 많은 문제들도 생겨났다. 가장 핵심적인 문제로는, 유네스코 시스템에 따른 새로운 문화 관료주의와 해체모니의 등장이 있다. 이는 하나의 전통적 사건에 대한 권리를 주장하는 다양한 국가 또는 한 국가 안의 여러 장소간의 경쟁과 갈등을 야기했을 뿐 아니라, 평범한 사람들이 자신의 문화를 통해 스스로를 표현하는 전통적 담지자로서 지니는 권위와 자신감을 약화시켰다. 이런 점에서 전세계적으로 민속학자를 포함한 학자들은 여전히 많은 모색을 해나가야 할 것이다.

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