



FROM CULTURAL MEMORY TO SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS: THE GLOBAL EVOLUTION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE SAFEGUARDING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CHINESE KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

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Abstract

The global conceptualization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has undergone a profound paradigm shift, evolving from a focus on "cultural memory" and representational preservation to an emphasis on "sustainable development" and community livelihoods. Grounded in the UNESCO 2003 Convention and statistical data up to December 2025, this study conducts a comprehensive analysis of 849 ICH elements inscribed on the UNESCO Lists. It validates these trends through spatial analysis of the Silk Road corridor (Chang'an–Istanbul) and a deep dive into China's safeguarding model. The research identifies a distinct "livelihood turn" in global governance, characterized by the dominance of traditional craftsmanship (30.98% of all elements) and a post-pandemic quality-oriented recovery. Furthermore, the study proposes a "Law of Functional Sacralization" observed in the transmission of the Muqam/Makam musical family along the Silk Road. China, ranking first globally with 45 inscribed elements, exemplifies a state-led, community-centered model integrating digital empowerment, rural revitalization (via 12,900+ ICH workshops benefiting 1.2 million+ people), and systemic safeguarding (276 Cultural Ecological Protection Zones). These findings provide a theoretical baseline for the future trajectory of ICH safeguarding, bridging global trends with localized Chinese wisdom.

Keywords

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH); Sustainable Development; Cultural Memory; Silk Road; Muqam; China's Safeguarding Model; UNESCO 2003 Convention; Livelihood Turn; Functional Sacralization

I. Introduction

For centuries, cultural heritage was predominantly associated with monumental "tangible" structures—the Pyramids, the Great Wall, or the Parthenon. However, the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage marked a revolutionary cognitive shift, recognizing that the "living culture" of communities—transmitted through oral traditions, rituals, and craftsmanship—is equally vital to human civilization (UNESCO, 2003). This paradigm shift was not merely administrative but epistemological: it redefined heritage from static objects of preservation to dynamic processes of living transmission.

This paper argues that the global value cognition of ICH has evolved through three distinct phases, moving from an initial phase of inventorying "cultural memory" (1950s–1980s) to a current phase where ICH is increasingly viewed as a driver for "sustainable livelihoods" (2010s–present). This evolution is evidenced by three concurrent phenomena: (1) the quantitative and structural changes in the UNESCO Lists (2008–2025); (2) the spatial dynamics of heritage transmission along transnational corridors like the Silk Road; and (3) the emergence of distinct national safeguarding models, particularly China's systematic approach.

By synthesizing data from three recent studies (Sun & Sun, 2026a, 2026b; Sun et al., 2026) and integrating theoretical frameworks from cultural memory studies (Assmann, 1992; Connerton, 1989) and critical heritage theory (Smith, 2006), this paper constructs a comprehensive narrative of this global evolution and its theoretical implications.

II. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 From Cultural Memory to Living Heritage: Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical underpinning of ICH safeguarding has shifted significantly since the Convention's inception. Early scholarship, such as Kurin (2004), critically appraised the Convention's mechanisms, focusing on the institutional logic of safeguarding and the tension between international recognition and local ownership. Kurin noted the challenge of transforming "folklore" into "heritage" under a global framework.

However, a more profound theoretical lens is provided by cultural memory studies. Jan Assmann's (1992) distinction between communicative memory (informal, biographical, spanning approximately three generations) and cultural memory (formalized, institutionalized, transcending generational limits) offers a critical framework for understanding ICH. ICH occupies a unique liminal position: it functions simultaneously as communicative memory (through embodied, everyday practice) and as cultural memory (through ritualized, transgenerational transmission) (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). Paul Connerton's (1989) concept of "incorporating practices"—memory inscribed in bodily gestures and habitual performances—further illuminates how ICH transmits cultural knowledge through non-verbal, embodied channels that resist purely documentary preservation.

Subsequent research has bifurcated into critical heritage studies, which questions the "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (Smith, 2006), and practical governance studies, which focus on implementation (Blake, 2009). The current study bridges this gap by analyzing the outcomes of governance (the 2008–2025 listings) while incorporating critical spatial and memory perspectives.

Specifically, this paper draws on:

- Global Statistical Trends: Analyzing the shift from "quantity" to "quality" in nominations (Sun & Sun, 2026a).
- Spatial Corridor Effects: Investigating how geography shapes heritage transmission (Sun et al., 2026).
- National Model Construction: Examining China's transition from a "nomination power" to an "experience power" (Sun & Sun, 2026b).
- Sacralization Theory: Exploring how functional transformations of heritage along spatial corridors involve processes of sacralization (similar to the value transmission mechanisms identified in organizational studies; see Chatterjee et al., 2024).

2.2 The "Livelihood Turn": A New Theoretical Synthesis

Recent UNESCO thematic initiatives have explicitly foregrounded the economic dimensions of ICH safeguarding, recognizing that "for some communities, [ICH elements] represent a source of sustainable livelihoods" and "demonstrate that intangible cultural heritage is not only transmitted symbolically, but represents a source of income for the bearers" (UNESCO, 2025). This represents a significant theoretical evolution from the 2003 Convention's initial emphasis on pure preservation toward an integrated sustainable development paradigm.

III. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach:

- Quantitative Analysis: Utilizing the complete dataset of 849 ICH elements inscribed by UNESCO as of December 2025. This includes analysis of temporal phases, regional distribution, and domain composition.
- Spatial Analysis: Mapping the distribution of 148 ICH elements along the Asian Silk Road (Chang'an to Istanbul) to identify agglomeration effects and transmission gradients.
- Case Study/Comparative Analysis: A deep comparative study of the Muqam/Makam musical family and an analysis of China's national safeguarding policies.
- Theoretical Synthesis: Integrating cultural memory theory with spatial analysis to propose the "Law of Functional Sacralization."

IV. Global Evolution: From Quantity to Quality (2008–2025)

4.1 Four-Stage Evolutionary Model

The global ICH landscape has transitioned from rapid expansion to strategic consolidation. Data analyzed by Sun & Sun (2026a) reveals a four-stage evolutionary model of the UNESCO Lists:

- **Baseline Integration (2008):** The inclusion of 90 "Masterpieces" into the Representative List.
- **Early Peak (2009–2019):** A period of enthusiastic nominations, averaging 30–50 new elements per year.
- **Pandemic Adjustment (2020–2022):** A slowdown in inscription rates due to logistical challenges.
- **Strong Recovery (2023–2025):** A post-pandemic rebound, with 2025 seeing a multi-year high of 67 new inscriptions (including 11 on the Urgent Safeguarding List, 53 on the Representative List, and 1 on the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices) (UNESCO, 2025).

Notably, the 2025 session in New Delhi marked several milestones: it was the largest session to date with over 1,400 participants; 9 multinational inscriptions were submitted by 28 countries; and 7 countries received their first-ever inscriptions (Barbados, Chad, Comoros, El Salvador, Gabon, Libya, and Sao Tome and Principe), reflecting the Convention's expanding global reach (UNESCO, 2025).

4.2 The "Livelihood Turn": Structural Evidence

A pivotal finding is the structural shift within the five UNESCO domains. Traditional craftsmanship has emerged as the dominant domain, accounting for 30.98% of all listed elements (263 out of 849). This surpasses performing arts and oral traditions, indicating a global governance preference for heritage that directly links to community livelihoods, poverty alleviation, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Table 1. Structural Analysis of UNESCO's Five ICH Domains (Total N = 849, as of December 2025)

UNESCO ICH Domain	Number of Elements	Percentage (%)	Trend Analysis
1. Traditional Craftsmanship	263	30.98%	Dominant; directly linked to SDGs & sustainable livelihoods
2. Performing Arts	211	24.85%	Steady; focus on music, dance, theatre
3. Social Practices, Rituals & Festive Events	207	24.38%	Resilient; community cohesion and identity
4. Oral Traditions & Expressions	168	19.79%	Underrepresented; documentation vulnerability
Total	849	100%	Post-pandemic quality-oriented recovery phase

Source: Compiled from UNESCO ICH Lists data (Sun & Sun, 2026a) and UNESCO (2025).

This table illustrates the "livelihood turn," where craftsmanship's centrality reflects a pragmatic shift in global heritage governance toward sustainable development. The 2025 session explicitly highlighted the "practice by hand' highlighting traditional craftsmanship," noting that elements such as "musical instruments, crafts, foodways and performing arts rooted in precise gestures, technical knowledge passed down through generations... are far more than artisanal techniques"—they represent "a source of sustainable livelihoods" (UNESCO, 2025).

Table 2. Global Evolution of ICH Value Cognition: From "Cultural Memory" to "Sustainable Development"

Phase	Period	Core Cognition	Safeguarding Philosophy	Theoretical Foundation	Key Characteristics
Salvage Memory	1950s–1980s	ICH as "historical cultural memory" requiring urgent rescue	Documentation, archiving, preservation	Assmann's Cultural Memory (institutionalized preservation); Connerton's "inscribing practices"	Static, object-oriented, state-led; focus on recording endangered practices
Living Transmission	1990s–early 2000s	ICH as community-based living practice; safeguarding as protecting transmission capacity	People-centered, community participation	Communicative memory (Assmann); "Incorporating practices" (Connerton); 2003 UNESCO Convention	Dynamic, process-oriented, community-based; recognition of bearer agency

Sustainable Development	2010s–present	ICH as core cultural resource driving sustainable development	Creative transformation, innovative development	Sustainable Livelihoods Framework; SDGs integration; "Functional Sacralization" (this study)	Strategic, integrated, development-oriented; linkage to poverty alleviation, digital empowerment, and climate resilience
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Current International Consensus: Intangible cultural heritage not only carries humanity's historical memory but also provides crucial support for addressing global climate change, eliminating poverty, and promoting mutual learning among civilizations. It is a vital force in implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This cognitive shift has opened broader development space for ICH safeguarding—from "heritage in museums" to "heritage in life," from "burden of protection" to "resource for development."

V. Spatial Validation: The Silk Road Corridor Effect

5.1 The Three-Gradient Structure

To validate the spatial dynamics of ICH transmission, a study of the Asian Silk Road (Chang'an–Istanbul) was conducted (Sun et al., 2026). The analysis of 148 elements across 7 countries reveals a "Three-Gradient Structure" and a "Corridor Effect."

The Gradient: China (45 items) and Türkiye (32 items) form the "First Gradient" (the two peaks). Central Asian nations (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan) form the "Second" and "Third" gradients, acting as cultural pivots and transmission nodes.

5.2 Functional Transformation: The Law of Functional Sacralization

A comparative analysis of the Muqam/Makam musical family demonstrates a clear law of transmission:

- China (Xinjiang): Secular Festive Music. The Uyghur Muqam is primarily performed at weddings and festivals (oral-dominant transmission, community-based).
- Central Asia: Courtly Elite Art. The Shashmaqom (Uzbekistan/Tajikistan) evolved into a refined art form for royal courts (institutionalized transmission, patronage-based).
- Türkiye: Sacred Ritual Music. The Makam system is integrated into the Mevlevi Sema (Whirling Dervishes) as a tool for spiritual meditation (sacralized transmission, mysticism-based).

This trajectory—from secular to sacred as distance from the origin increases—validates the deep connection between cultural transmission and its spatial-temporal context. It shows that ICH is not static but transforms functionally as it moves through different cultural ecosystems.

We term this phenomenon the "Law of Functional Sacralization": as cultural elements migrate along spatial corridors, they tend to undergo functional elevation from everyday practice to ritualized or sacred performance, driven by the need for cultural distinction and identity consolidation in new environments. This law draws on the concept of "sacralization" in value transmission theory (Chatterjee et al., 2024), where values endure across organizational and generational boundaries through processes of moralization, communion, and syncretism. In the context of ICH, sacralization serves as a mechanism for cultural memory preservation: by elevating a practice to sacred status, communities ensure its transmission across the "generational gap" that Assmann (1992) identifies as the limit of communicative memory.

VI. The Chinese Model: From "Living Inheritance" to an Independent Knowledge System

China, possessing the world's largest number of UNESCO-listed ICH elements (45), serves as a critical case study for the "sustainable development" paradigm (Sun & Sun, 2026b). As of 2025, China has 3 elements on the Urgent Safeguarding List, 40 on the Representative List, and 2 programmes on the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (UNESCO, 2026). Notably, four elements have been transferred from the Urgent Safeguarding List to the Representative List in 2024–2025, including the Hezhen Yimakan storytelling, whose safeguarding programme was also added to the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices—demonstrating measurable safeguarding effectiveness (UNESCO, 2026).

China's model is characterized by a "**State-led, Multi-stakeholder Participatory, Classified Protection, and Living Transmission**" framework (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025). Unlike the early "salvage recording" phase, current Chinese research and practice focus on:

Digital Empowerment: Utilizing AI, VR, and big data to create "digital gene maps" of heritage, ensuring preservation while innovating dissemination (Wang, 2023; Yan et al., 2025). The development of digital dissemination evaluation indicator systems for traditional techniques (Yan et al., 2025) exemplifies this approach.

- **Rural Revitalization:** Linking ICH workshops with poverty alleviation and rural income generation. As of 2025, over 12,900 ICH workshops have been established nationwide, distributed across 2,138 county-level administrative regions—including 693 former poverty-alleviation counties and 135 key counties under the national rural revitalization strategy—generating employment and income for over 1.2 million people (CNR, 2025; People's Daily, 2026). This directly connects ICH to Sustainable Livelihoods and aligns with China's national Rural Revitalization Strategy.
- **Systemic Safeguarding:** Moving beyond single-item protection to establish 276 national and provincial-level Cultural Ecological Protection Zones, with 14 national-level experimental zones having passed official evaluation and acceptance during the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021–2025) (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025). This holistic approach preserves the ecological environment in which ICH thrives.
- **Transnational Leadership:** China will host the 21st session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee in Xiamen from November 30 to December 5, 2026 (UNESCO, 2026), signifying its transition from "nomination power" to "governance power" in global ICH affairs.

China's experience demonstrates that ICH is not merely a memory of the past but a dynamic resource for modernization and community well-being.

VII. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Theoretical Synthesis: Three Paradigm Shifts

The journey from "Cultural Memory" to "Sustainable Development" is empirically evident in the UNESCO data and regional studies. The global ICH system has matured through three interconnected paradigm shifts:

- **Governance Maturity:** The system has moved from "inscription fever" to a focus on the quality of safeguarding, as seen in the functional differentiation of the Three Lists (Representative, Urgent Safeguarding, and Register of Good Practices). The 2025 transfers of elements from Urgent to Representative Lists demonstrate that safeguarding effectiveness can be measured and validated.
- **Spatial Awareness:** The Silk Road study confirms that ICH transmission is governed by spatial laws (e.g., the corridor effect and functional sacralization), necessitating transnational cooperation for shared heritage. The "Law of Functional Sacralization" provides a new theoretical tool for understanding how cultural memory transforms across geographies.
- **The Chinese Paradigm:** China's success lies in its ability to systematize protection while aligning it with national development strategies (Digital China, Rural Revitalization). The tangible outcomes—12,900+ workshops, 276 protection zones, and 1.2 million+ beneficiaries—demonstrate that ICH safeguarding can be operationalized as a measurable development intervention (CNR, 2025; Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025). The hosting of the 2026 Committee session in Xiamen further consolidates China's transition from "nomination power" to "governance power" in global ICH affairs (UNESCO, 2026).

7.2 Future Research Directions

While progress is evident, challenges remain. Future research should focus on:

Developing a standardized "Safeguarding Effectiveness Index" to measure the vitality of ICH beyond the nomination list, incorporating indicators of intergenerational transmission, economic sustainability, and community participation.

Exploring the ethical implications of digital technology (AI, Metaverse) in ICH transmission, particularly regarding the tension between "digital preservation" and "living practice" (Connerton's "inscribing" vs. "incorporating" practices).

Further testing the "Law of Functional Sacralization" on other transnational heritage routes (e.g., the Maritime Silk Road, the Trans-Saharan trade routes) to validate its generalizability.

Integrating climate change adaptation into ICH safeguarding frameworks, as traditional knowledge systems increasingly serve as resources for disaster risk reduction and environmental resilience (IRD, 2025).

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the global evolution of ICH safeguarding reflects a sophisticated understanding that preserving culture is inextricably linked to preserving the livelihoods and identities of the communities that create it. The shift from "cultural memory" to "sustainable livelihoods" is not a rejection of the past but its reactivation in the present—a process that Assmann (1992) would recognize as the transformation of communicative memory into

cultural memory through institutionalization. As the 2026 Xiamen session approaches, the international community stands at a critical juncture: will ICH safeguarding remain a mechanism of cultural documentation, or will it evolve into a dynamic engine for sustainable development? This paper argues for the latter, grounded in empirical evidence and theoretical innovation.

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