

# THE DISSEMINATION OF ICH IN INTERNATIONAL CHINESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** In recent years, innovative explorations have been made in integrating Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) into International Chinese Language Education (ICLE), yet their implementation remains insufficient in scope and depth. Grounded in the philosophical tenets of Chinese ICH and contextualized within China's cultural diplomacy frameworks, it is imperative to systematically incorporate ICH elements into international student curricula at tertiary institutions. This study advocates for the infusion of ICH into ICLE program design, pedagogical content, and instructional material development. By investigating effective pathways for ICH preservation and intercultural dissemination, this approach enhances disciplinary substance in ICLE while simultaneously advancing the global transmission of traditional Chinese cultural paradigms. Strategic curricular innovations in these domains are posited to catalyze dual outcomes: safeguarding living heritage traditions and optimizing the cross-cultural efficacy of Chinese language pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH); Chinese culture; International Chinese Language Education (ICLE); Cultural dissemination

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The understanding and recognition of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has evolved globally over time. Prior to the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, UNESCO employed varying terminologies such as "folklore creations," "oral and intangible heritage," and "intangible cultural heritage" across different periods. The 2003 Convention formally standardized its definition, articulating ICH 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." [1]

This cultural heritage plays an irreplaceable role in sustaining community traditions, consolidating national identity, and fostering cultural exchange. [2] It constitutes an invaluable spiritual asset for the Chinese nation and embodies global cultural diversity and human creativity. While Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is transmitted through human agency, it is inherently manifested through material forms. It is imperative to explore the spiritual dimensions and historical traditions embedded within these material forms—encompassing knowledge, craftsmanship, beliefs, and beyond. Though ICH has traditionally been associated with folklore studies, an emerging discipline of Intangible Cultural Heritage Studies is currently taking shape. However, much like the marginalization and misinterpretation encountered by folklore studies in modern academic discourse, ICH Studies faces parallel skepticism and challenges to its legitimacy. Fundamental debates persist regarding its conceptual boundaries, operational definitions, and sociocultural significance, such as: What constitutes the essence and scope of ICH? What justifies its preservation? [3] To address these challenges, it is crucial to articulate the intrinsic value of ICH as representing collective lifestyles, indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and aesthetic expressions that embody national memory. Such efforts will foster authentic societal comprehension and appreciation across all sectors.

Current humanities curricula in higher education institutions predominantly perpetuate an entrenched focus on scientific rationality, while demonstrating insufficient attention to traditional cultural heritage. Courses related to Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) preservation and folk cultural transmission remain systematically excluded from university curricula. Disciplines illuminating indigenous lifestyles, wisdom, and artistic practices—such as folk literature, folk arts, and traditional crafts—are persistently relegated to the periphery of academic programming. This curricular marginalization results in students' deficient understanding of their ethnic cultural traditions, consequently undermining the cultivation of cultural roots and the intergenerational transmission of national cultural consciousness. The absence of such knowledge systems in formal education jeopardizes the preservation of cultural DNA essential for maintaining civilizational continuity.

## 2 REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

International Chinese Language Education (ICLE) constitutes an academic discipline focused on the global dissemination of Chinese language pedagogy and cultural diplomacy. Emerging from the foundational practice of teaching Chinese to non-native speakers, this field has evolved into a distinct domain of study. In recent years, the establishment of Confucius Institutes has prompted terminological distinctions: "Teaching Chinese as a Foreign

Language" (TCFL) typically refers to domestic instruction for international students, while "International Chinese Language Education" denotes overseas Chinese language and cultural programs. However, such nomenclature has become increasingly fluid due to the field's rapid expansion. Since the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council inaugurated the Master's program in ICLE in 2007, the discipline has produced 20,793 postgraduate graduates, comprising 15,741 Chinese nationals and 5,052 international students. [4] Concurrently, undergraduate programs previously titled "Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language" have been systematically rebranded as ICLE. Thus, the scope of ICLE in this study encompasses both language training for international students (including Chinese language undergraduate programs) and degree-granting programs for domestic students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Confucius Institutes, established globally by China, serve as primary implementation channels for International Chinese Language Education (ICLE). Their nomenclature inherently reflects their strategic mission to disseminate Chinese cultural knowledge and value systems. As scholars have asserted, "The macro objective of teaching Chinese as a foreign language lies in promoting Chinese civilization, fundamentally positioning it as a vehicle for Chinese cultural propagation." This pedagogical framework necessitates differentiated approaches: for international students, Chinese language and culture instruction should emphasize experiential engagement with Chinese cultural paradigms, while for domestic undergraduates and postgraduates, the focus shifts to cultivating competencies in cultural interpretation, transmission, and intercultural mediation. The imperative of ICLE resides in perpetuating and globalizing China's diverse cultural legacy—including its Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)—thereby safeguarding the developmental trajectory of Chinese linguistic-cultural ecosystems at the national strategic level. This dual focus ensures the preservation of cultural security while enhancing China's soft power and amplifying its cultural influence within global governance frameworks.

### 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

#### 3.1 The Imperative of Integrating ICH Cultural Philosophy into International Chinese Language Education

The integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) as a core component of International Chinese Language Education (ICLE) holds profound cultural significance, reflecting China's cultural confidence and self-awareness. As scholar He Xuejun asserted, "From an ethnic perspective, ICH serves to awaken and reinforce a nation's cultural consciousness, representing the deep-rooted cultural accumulation of a nation-state and affirming its distinct cultural identity and uniqueness." [5] ICH, dynamically transmitted through grassroots communities, symbolizes the vitality of ethnic culture. Educating about ICH constitutes a promotion of national cultural ethos and core values, showcasing China's rich, diverse, ancient, and inclusive cultural character—rooted in the collective knowledge, craftsmanship, emotions, and beliefs of the Chinese nation. Within ICLE frameworks, it is imperative to systematically incorporate such culturally distinctive content, which embodies the uniqueness of human wisdom, into curricular designs. This integration enables both domestic and international learners to master and disseminate these cultural essences, thereby advancing intercultural understanding and global appreciation of China's living heritage.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) serves as a culturally approachable and inspirational medium that significantly enhances International Chinese Language Education (ICLE). A primary objective of global Chinese language dissemination lies in amplifying the appeal and influence of Chinese linguistic culture to strengthen the nation's soft power. However, the perceived difficulty of mastering Mandarin phonology and Chinese character orthography remains a substantial barrier. ICH, with its inherent emotive power and cultural accessibility, provides vital motivational impetus for language acquisition. By integrating ICH elements—embodying tangible cultural narratives and interactive practices—into pedagogical frameworks, learners gain contextualized engagement with linguistic systems through cultural embodiment. This symbiotic approach not only mitigates perceived learning obstacles but also cultivates deeper intercultural resonance, ultimately advancing the strategic goals of cultural diplomacy through linguistically anchored heritage transmission.

Scholar He Xuejun identifies four defining attributes of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH): living dynamism, folkloric essence, lived experience, and ecological embeddedness. She contends that "the vehicle of ICH resides in concrete processes of enactment, manifesting as dynamic, living phenomena in constant evolution, deeply interwoven with people's quotidian realities as an integral part of their experiential world." [6] Transmitted through oral traditions and embodied practices, ICH exhibits profound cultural vitality across historical continuity and contemporary life, reflecting the Chinese nation's emotional richness and artistic pluralism. Seasonal rituals, life-cycle ceremonies, dietary customs, recreational practices, and oral narratives—all imbued with culturally resonant symbols—constitute organic manifestations of this heritage. These practices not only encode collective memory but also sustain vernacular knowledge systems that animate the texture of everyday existence, thereby perpetuating China's living cultural epistemology.

Transmitted through oral traditions and kinesthetic practices, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) exhibits enduring vitality and engaging qualities across historical continuity and contemporary realities, epitomizing the Chinese nation's profound emotional depth and diverse artistic expressions. Seasonal rituals, life-cycle ceremonies, dietary customs, recreational traditions, and oral literatures—imbued with culturally resonant symbols and vernacular belief systems distinct from Western Christian traditions—demonstrate captivating narratives and multifaceted forms of expression. These practices, rooted in localized cosmologies and collective memory, function as potent accelerators for disseminating Chinese language and culture. By integrating such culturally immersive elements into pedagogical

frameworks, learners gain access to living embodiments of linguistic and symbolic systems, fostering not only linguistic proficiency but also cross-cultural empathy. This symbiotic interplay between heritage transmission and language pedagogy amplifies China's cultural diplomacy objectives, positioning ICH as a dynamic conduit for global engagement with Chinese civilizational paradigms.

Integrating the safeguarding principles of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) into the global dissemination of the Chinese language establishes a platform for equitable intercultural exchange, showcasing the distinct allure of Chinese culture through the lens of diversity. ICH preservation inherently constitutes the protection of humanity's cultural ecology. Under the homogenizing pressures of globalization, dominant cultural paradigms increasingly marginalize vulnerable traditions, destabilizing the equilibrium of pluralistic cultural ecosystems and stifling the creative potential of human civilizations. By foregrounding ICH preservation in Chinese language pedagogy, this approach advances a cultural ethos of coexistence and mutual respect, advocating for cross-cultural dialogues grounded in parity. Transforming China's ethnically distinctive heritage into globally shared civilizational assets not only revitalizes domestic cultural innovation but also contributes substantively to sustaining humanity's cultural pluralism. Through such initiatives, Chinese linguistic and cultural education transcends mere communication tools, evolving into conduits for fostering transnational empathy and safeguarding biocultural diversity—a critical counterbalance to hegemonic cultural narratives in the Anthropocene era.

### **3.2 Applied Practices of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Philosophical Tenets in International Chinese Language Education (ICLE)**

The discipline of International Chinese Language Education (ICLE) has established a pedagogical ecosystem encompassing the cultivation of Chinese language instructors, undergraduate programs for international students, language training initiatives, and particularly through the global proliferation of Confucius Institutes—collectively constructing multidimensional pathways for global Chinese linguistic and cultural dissemination. Implementing the safeguarding principles of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) throughout ICLE's operational frameworks offers expansive implementation potential across curricular, pedagogical, and material development domains. Strategic integration of ICH tenets into curricular frameworks, instructional content design, didactic material compilation, and classroom praxis will systematically transform heritage preservation into an organic component of cross-cultural education.[7] This paradigm shift positions ICH not merely as teaching subject matter but as a dynamic methodology for cultural cognition, enabling learners to experience China's living traditions as embodied knowledge systems rather than static historical artifacts.

The Chinese Language undergraduate programs for international students target non-native speakers and overseas Chinese, aiming to cultivate versatile professionals proficient in Mandarin application, knowledgeable about China's national conditions and historical-cultural contexts, and equipped with international perspectives and cross-cultural communication competencies—ultimately serving as cultural ambassadors facilitating Sino-global exchanges. Guided by these educational objectives, a critical evaluation of current curricular frameworks within the discipline reveals multiple pedagogical gaps requiring strategic enhancement. While foundational language training remains robust, systemic deficiencies persist in contextualizing linguistic instruction within living cultural ecosystems, particularly regarding the integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) as both pedagogical content and intercultural engagement methodology. Curricular modernization must prioritize the development of transdisciplinary modules that bridge linguistic proficiency with heritage literacy, thereby aligning program outcomes with the evolving demands of global cultural diplomacy and biocultural sustainability imperatives.

The curricular framework for international students in Chinese Language programs typically comprises four core modules: linguistic competencies, linguistic knowledge, China's socio-cultural landscape, and Chinese cultural studies. Within the "China's socio-cultural landscape" module, [8] the foundational course Introduction to China is supplemented by extensions such as Brief History of China, Chinese Folklore, Contemporary Chinese Society, and Human Geography of China. Current pedagogical approaches in these courses predominantly employ didactic overviews characterized by superficial content delivery, particularly evident in the inadequate contextualization of folklore and human geography within China's living cultural ethos.

Integrating Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) preservation principles into courses like Chinese Folklore and Human Geography of China presents transformative potential. For instance, when examining provincial socio-cultural profiles, curricula could foreground emblematic ICH elements—such as region-specific mythological narratives, musical/theatrical traditions, and artisanal craftsmanship—thereby synergizing static geographical features with dynamic cultural embodiments. This pedagogical innovation would achieve dual outcomes: 1) Enhanced cultural memory retention through immersive engagement with tangible-intangible heritage interfaces; 2) Optimized instructional efficacy by transforming abstract cultural concepts into experiential learning opportunities. Such an approach not only deepens learners' comprehension of China's regional diversity but also cultivates transdisciplinary literacy—bridging spatial geography with performative heritage, linguistic structures with vernacular knowledge systems. Strategic implementation necessitates reconfiguring curricular architecture to position ICH as both content and methodology. Provincial case studies could adopt heritage-centered frameworks where geographical landscapes are analyzed as cultural palimpsests inscribed with ancestral wisdom, ecological adaptations, and community identity markers. This paradigm shift from fact-based instruction to cultural hermeneutics aligns with global education trends

emphasizing critical heritage literacy, ultimately equipping students to function as cultural interpreters in an increasingly pluriversal world order.

The integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) safeguarding principles into practical curricula offers international students immersive opportunities to engage with Chinese cultural praxis and gain firsthand exposure to the nation's multifaceted folk traditions. Implementing ICH-themed cultural immersion programs—such as organizing field visits to local ICH performances, hosting masterclasses led by ICH inheritors, and facilitating workshops on culinary arts, calligraphy, Tai Chi, diablo spinning, paper-cutting, and Chinese knotting—enables learners to acquire vernacular cultural literacies. These experiential pedagogies transcend theoretical instruction, fostering embodied knowledge transmission that bridges historical continuity with contemporary application. By transforming learners into active participants rather than passive observers, such initiatives operationalize ICH as living epistemologies, thereby cultivating intercultural ambassadors capable of sustaining China's cultural legacy abroad. This pedagogical model not only amplifies the global resonance of Chinese traditions but also establishes a sustainable mechanism for cross-generational and cross-border heritage transmission, positioning ICH as a dynamic interface for soft power diplomacy in the 21st century.

Oriented by Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) safeguarding principles, advancing experiential pedagogy through the establishment of dedicated ICH internship bases represents a critical pathway for cultivating globally competent professionals in International Chinese Language Education (ICLE). Institutionalizing off-campus cultural engagement initiatives—such as forging cross-sector partnerships with local governments, enterprises, and communities to organize ICH-themed fieldwork, collaborative exhibitions, and community-based heritage revitalization projects—will amplify the cultural resonance of ICH practices. This pedagogical paradigm shift transforms learners into active co-creators of heritage transmission, equipping them with applied competencies in cultural interpretation, intercultural mediation, and sustainable heritage management. By embedding such transdisciplinary praxis into ICLE talent development frameworks, educational institutions can nurture a new generation of cultural custodians capable of bridging academic knowledge with grassroots cultural ecosystems, thereby ensuring the dynamic continuity of China's living heritage within globalized contexts.

The safeguarding principles of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) must be systematically integrated into the development of instructional materials for International Chinese Language Education (ICLE). Courses such as Chinese Culture and Communication and Chinese Cultural Arts and Performance should expand their content to include comprehensive introductions to ICH practices, harmonizing classical Chinese cultural canons with vernacular living traditions grounded in grassroots authenticity. By embedding these tangible manifestations of daily cultural practices into curricula, international students gain immersive access to China's lived cultural realities, fostering deeper emotional resonance and spatial familiarity with the nation. This pedagogical strategy enhances the penetrative capacity and global influence of Chinese culture, transforming educational materials into dynamic interfaces for cross-cultural engagement that transcend theoretical abstraction.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

In pedagogical methodologies, the transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) content necessitates the adoption of Claire Kramsch "multicultural interaction and synthesis"[9] framework. This approach, proposed by the University of California, Berkeley scholar, advocates a holistic perspective that integrates language and cultural instruction as an indivisible whole. Kramsch champions the establishment of a third culture—a conceptual space transcending both native and target language paradigms. Rather than narrowly focusing on target-language societal norms, this third-space pedagogy encourages learners to critically juxtapose and interrogate the target culture (e.g., Chinese ICH) alongside their native cultural frameworks. Through dialogic engagement and bidirectional cultural negotiation, students construct personalized interpretations of meaning while cultivating metacognitive awareness of cultural relativity. Applied to ICH instruction, this model transforms heritage transmission into a co-creative process: learners become active agents in deciphering ICH's symbolic systems, contextualizing practices within comparative civilizational frameworks, and renegotiating heritage values in globalized contexts. Such pedagogy aligns with the living nature of ICH by fostering adaptive reinterpretation rather than static cultural replication.

Cultivating intercultural communication awareness among international students from diverse cultural backgrounds requires implementing multicultural interaction frameworks that prioritize equitable exchange and dialogic engagement to resolve conflicts and achieve mutual understanding. A pedagogical approach fixated on unidirectional glorification of Chinese culture—particularly when coupled with implicit denigration of other cultural traditions—invariably undermines the objectives of cultural dissemination. Advocating Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) safeguarding principles necessitates adopting inclusive pedagogical paradigms that empower international students to present their own nations' ICH practices. Such classrooms stimulate comparative analysis frameworks, enabling learners to critically explore ICH's universal significance while deepening their comprehension of China's heritage through cross-cultural hermeneutic processes. The "multicultural interaction and synthesis" instructional model positions ICH as a transnational epistemic commons, fostering co-learning within pluralistic civilizational exchanges. [10] This pedagogical reorientation elevates the quality of International Chinese Language Education (ICLE) by embedding cultural humility into curricular architectures, thereby amplifying Chinese cultural influence through synergistic multicultural pedagogy rather than hierarchical cultural monologues.

The application of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) principles in International Chinese Language Education (ICLE) operates as a dual-axis mechanism: domestically, it fosters methodological rigor in cultural transmission pathways, advancing national cultural prosperity, while internationally, it contributes to crafting a proactive national identity aligned with China's cultural strategic objectives. [11]To revitalize ICH within contemporary society—positioning it as an influential cultural force that showcases Chinese societal values, aesthetic paradigms, and living artistry, while demonstrating the nation's cultural diversity and richness—substantial avenues for scholarly inquiry remain underexplored within ICLE. Future research must interrogate innovative frameworks for heritage revitalization that balance authenticity with adaptive reinterpretation, ensuring ICH practices resonate across generational and geopolitical boundaries. Such endeavors will not only enrich pedagogical praxis but also redefine ICH as a dynamic mediator between civilizational heritage and global modernity, ultimately operationalizing cultural education as a cornerstone of transnational dialogue and biocultural sustainability.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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