

## ***Transcending Boundaries: The Identity Transformation From Practitioners of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to School Educators***

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### **Abstract**

Frameworks of Postmodernism have challenged the dominancy of Western-centric perspectives on music, allowing Indigenous art production from the Third World to begin receiving closer attention. Postmodernism interrogates the notion of art as a separate and independent object, prompting art scholars and anthropologists to understand and analyze art within real-life contexts. In this fluid space, it is the Indigenous art world that transcends boundaries. This includes the integration of folk artists into school classrooms, the innovative exhibition of Indigenous artworks in museums, and the incorporation and adaptation of Indigenous music, dance, and rituals into contemporary stage performances. The crossing of contexts injects new meanings into Indigenous art itself while presenting new challenges to its contemporary transmission and development. This study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, combining anthropology, ethnomusicology, and education to analyze the multiple contextual crossovers of Indigenous art and provide suggestions and reflections for its transmission. The research will involve ten participants from China who have transformed from artists to educators. The study will consist of two phases: life-story-centric individual interviews, to explore the participants' experiences and challenges, and a documentary analysis to examine obstacles and memorable experiences encountered during their careers. The narratives collected from the interviews will be interpreted and analyzed using narrative and critical discourse analysis. The main object of this research is addressing the teaching challenges faced by Indigenous artists turned school educators.

**Keywords:** Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Identity Transformation, School Educators, Folk Artists

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## Introduction

In the early stages of art history, artists primarily focused on the artwork itself. However, within the context of postmodernism, artists increasingly view art as an event—a complex interplay between the artist, the viewer, and the social environment. This perspective has created a complex context that exists neither within traditional society nor within contemporary society, but rather encompasses multiple intersecting points. Postmodernism challenges the notion of art as a standalone object and instead emphasizes the interactive and relational aspects of artistic creation (Butler, C.2002). Artists now consider the context in which their work exists, how it is experienced by viewers, and how it engages with the larger social and cultural fabric (Smith T. 2019). The art event becomes a dynamic space where meanings are negotiated, interpretations vary, and the boundaries between artist, viewer, and society blur.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), mentioned on the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) by UNESCO, deserved more and more attention on recent years, as “considering the importance of the intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development”. From this perspective, indigenous art has the power to transcend boundaries, reaching beyond its traditional contexts and generate new meaning and value in various contexts. But what does it mean when the ICH and the practitioners depart from its original context and play a different role in this world? What obstacles and opportunities they encountered during crossing the boundaries? These questions are what instructed this study.

Based on the disciplinary perspectives of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and education, this paper mainly discussed the identity transformation towards some folk artists from the practitioner of ICH to school educators, explored the potential challenges and opportunities toward the ICH, the people and the school education.

## Literature Review

### *1. Peripheral and Aboriginal Arts*

Many research verified that the arising of decentering modernism makes peripheral arts more and more important, while some on this issue presents conflicting findings. Some scholar believed that all kinds of indigenous art and non-Western art such as developing countries are often come off as bit players in the master narrative (Mitter P. 2008). Kazushige K. (1994), for example, pointed that the striking economic development under way in Asia has taken a heavy toll on Asian ethno-cultures, reducing them largely to the modern mono-culture typical of Western countries and Japan. In the post-1949 era, Chinese scholars and musicians often view regional music, “difang yinyue” disparagingly as they attempt to establish a pan-Chinese musical style known as minzu yinyue or minyue (Lau, F. 2015). But another group of scholars aware of the importance of Aboriginal art (e.g., Fred R. Myers, 2002; George, J., & Dei, S. 1994). For instance, Fred R. Myers examines a series of complete events and transactions involving Bintubi art in central Australia from production to exhibition in the highest temple of urban art and points out that Aboriginal artists create "art with a clear purpose" for the urban world; Arnd Scheneider (2006) focuses on artistic practices in the appropriation of indigenous cultures, and the construction of new Latin American identities. Moreover, with the development, indigenous artists were involved in the expanding international art market, and their “group identity”, which had been hidden by

'tribal or primitive art', was reconstructed". Thus, dualistic distinctions such as national/local, us/them, center/periphery are no longer viable and sufficient categories, but rather manifestations of the dynamic processes of "defining" and being "defined" (Bourdieu 1977).

Since the 1990s, art appropriation has become more prominent, especially in contemporary artists' appropriation of indigenous art and art from non-Western countries such as developing countries. China's non-inheritors, as inheritors and performers of indigenous art, have also redefined their identities in collaboration with contemporary artists (Qiu Zhijie, Tan Dun, Tan Weiwei and other artists have included non-inheritors in their works). From the breaking of the centralism of western music to the rise of all kinds of indigenous art in non-western countries, this is also the embodiment of postmodern philosophy and Decentering Modernism (Morphy, H. 2003; Mitter, P. 2008).

We can see that the research on indigenous art has gradually become unified from the initial debate, and more and more researchers have noticed the prosperity of indigenous art and done related research. However, limitations of their research do exist which mainly lie in the fact that they only debate the importance of non-Western art or realize that non-Western art is gradually crossing different contexts, but rarely mention the problems and challenges encountered by art in crossing boundaries.

## ***2. Intangible Cultural Heritage***

The emphasis on the aboriginal arts, the profound influence of Postmodernist philosophy and the booming of economy and society making efforts together, leading to the ICH crossing its' original context and bringing new meanings and values to the world. Arizpe, L. (2004) pointed that One of the most valuable contributions of the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the oral and intangible cultural heritage of humanity is that it preserves the integrity of meaning of each activity selected. At the same time, many researchers focus on the study of intangible cultural heritage across the context, which mainly includes intangible cultural heritage into tourism and intangible cultural heritage into schools.

On the one hand, some researchers discovered that Intangible cultural heritage gradually served as tourism product and bring economic benefits. Kim, S., Whitford, M., & Arcodia, C. (2021) explores the priorities of ICH practitioners in relation to the development of ICH as a sustainable tourism resource, by utilizing South Korea as a case study, and discuss the possibility of coexistence between ICH and tourism. Besides, Rodzi. et al (2013) give us a more comprehensive perspective between tourism and intangible cultural heritage.

On the other hand, more and more research focused on the integration between ICH and formal/ informal education. For instance, Barghi, R., et al. (2017) pointed that due to the importance of education for sustainable heritage preservation, it is imperative to pay attention to how heritage is taught in the education system. Besides, Many researches verified the positive effect for the introduction of ICH to school education, including "Attentiveness to conscious cultural heritage contributes to the promotion of education"(Wang, C. Y. 2019); "the protection of cultural heritage is necessary for the protection of the national identity" (Gurel, D., & Çetin, T. 2017); fulfilling the educational goals of both intercultural education and teaching cultural heritage(Berti, F., & Zingari, V. L. 2019); although objectives also exist, for instance, Yalçinkaya, E. (2015) pointed that preservice teachers' interest levels on intangible cultural heritage are not sufficient. Their views on culture are generally favorable.

At the same time, the contemporary inheriting problem encountered by the ICH also be noticed and mentioned in recent research. Dimitropoulos, K. et al. (2018) believed that as the world becomes more interconnected and many different cultures come into contact, local communities run the risk of losing important elements of their ICH, while young people find it difficult to maintain the connection with the cultural heritage treasured by their elders. Simultaneously, Gürel, D. et al. (2019) also believed that technological developments cause young individuals to be alienated from national cultural values, that the conservation of such values is highly important for the existence of nations. Based on the phenomenon of intangible cultural heritage entering formal education in schools, some scholars have speculated that school education is a double-edged sword for ICH itself, for example, Aral, A. E. (2022) pointed that ineffective formal education can create ICH marginalization and render it institutionally non-functional.

Overall, although existing studies have conducted some research on non-material cultural heritage in the context of school education and analyzed its role and influence in school education, few studies have analyzed the opportunities and challenges faced by non-genetic inheritors after they entering the field of school from the perspective of non-genetic inheritors, that is the point this paper will explore and discuss.

## **Methodology**

This paper primarily employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on 10 non-material cultural heritage inheritors from China as research subjects. Through interviews, field surveys, and classroom observation, it aims to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by ICH practitioners after their entry into schools. Subsequently, the study analyzes the implications of the incorporation of ICH into educational institutions for both itself, the practitioners, and the school education system.

### ***1. Methods and Procedures***

This paper employs three primary research methods: field surveys, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. These methodological approaches are rooted in Zelditch Jr.'s (1962) framework of three field study methods, which include participant observation, informant interviewing, and enumeration (or sampling).

Throughout the research process, we assume the role of a participant observer. The study revolves around 10 practitioners of ICH, spanning from the native context where ICH originates to the school environment. The field survey method is primarily applied in the native context of ICH, aiming to investigate how ICH is produced and inherited within its original context, the roles it plays in everyday life, and its methods of transmission.

The classroom observation method is primarily used after the transfer of ICH to the school environment, to examine how ICH integrates with the educational curriculum after its introduction into the school context and to observe the reactions of students.

Semi-structured interviews are conducted consistently throughout the study. We engage in two rounds of interviews with the 10 ICH practitioners, both formally and informally, with a one-year interval. The interviews aim to investigate the challenges and opportunities encountered by these practitioners as they transition from being folk artists to educators, how they adapt to the school education system, and their evolving roles.

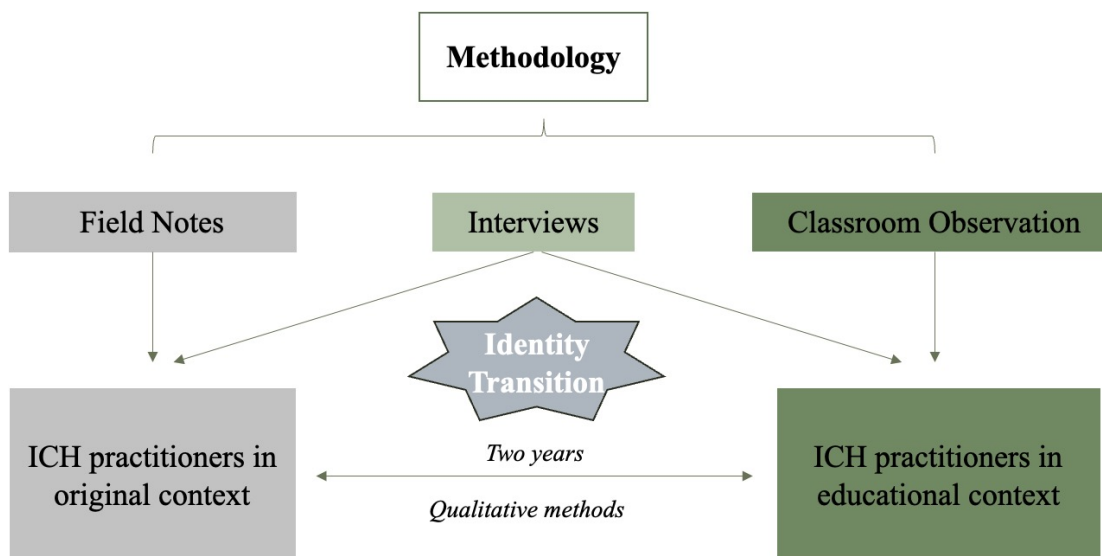


Fig.1: Research Methods and process

**2. Participants**

This research recruited 10 ICH inheritors from various regions of China. They had all transitioned from their original contexts and were invited to middle and primary schools to teach ICH as an educator.



● Jiangsu Province	
Arts	Areas
Yangju opera	Yangzhou City
Taohuayu Woodblock Prints	Suzhou City

● Fujian Province	
Arts	Areas
Shifan Music	Fuzhou City
Liyuan Opera	Quanzhou City

● Hunan Province	
Arts	Areas
Sangzhi Folk Songs	Sangzhi City
Jingzhou Miao Songs	Jingzhou Miao City
Tantou Woodblock Prints	Longhui County

● Guizhou Province	
Arts	Areas
Dong Da Songs	Liping County
Flower Lantern Opera	Sinan City
Miao Embroidery	Leishan County

Fig. 2: Participants relative information

Figure 2 provides an overview of the participants in this study. The ten ICH inheritors originate from various regions in China, including the eastern, central, and western parts of the country. Their expertise in ICH spans three major categories: Folk Art, Traditional Drama, and Folk Music.

In terms of their original living contexts, one participant hails from a provincial capital city, six from prefecture-level cities, and three from counties. All of them are currently teaching in

schools within their respective provinces. The schools where they teach are generally of high educational quality and have favorable economic conditions. 70% of the participants are teaching in schools located in provincial capital cities within their provinces, while the rest are teaching in prominent schools in prefecture-level cities. None of the ICH practitioners in the study are teaching in schools located in counties or rural areas.

## Discussion

Through data collection and research, we have identified that while the phenomenon of ICH entering schools is an undeniable fact, it is accompanied by several inherent contradictions, which we refer to as paradoxes. A paradox is an idea involving two opposing thoughts or propositions that, no matter how contradictory they may seem, are equally necessary to provide more enlightening or thought-provoking insights into the truth that neither factor could adequately convey on its own (Harold A. Slaatte, 1968). In the context of ICH entering schools, the primary paradoxes revolve around practitioners' identity and educational purpose.

### 1. ICH Practitioners' Identity: Artists vs. Educators?

Identity is not something one possesses but rather something that develops throughout one's life (Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. 2004). In some degree, the concept of identity explains how the self is constructed through interactions with the environment. For ICH practitioners, when they move from their original contexts to the educational environment, the shift in surroundings can bring about confusion regarding their identity. They may continually question themselves: Are they educators or artists? Even though they have left their previous contexts and are now part of the educational discourse, they still grapple with defining their roles.

*I've spent over a decade teaching as a master, and my disciples and I had a relationship that extended beyond just teaching and learning. We had many interactions in daily life, and often, I had only one disciple. Now, everyone calls me a teacher, but I no longer have disciples; instead, I have many students. However, I still don't know whether I should consider myself a teacher or an artist. If I see myself as a teacher, I lack any educational theory or practical experience. If I see myself as an artist, what I'm doing now isn't what an artist should be doing.* --Interview notes of the practitioner from Yangzhou city.

*I don't fit the role of a typical teacher in school. They need to create lesson plans, prepare materials, make presentations, and participate in teaching workshops, but I don't have to do these things. I have a lot of autonomy. Consequently, I'm not sure about my identity. In the past, I thought of myself as an artist, but now I find it challenging to simultaneously be an artist and an educator. It seems like I haven't played either role effectively.*

--Interview notes of the practitioner from Suzhou city.

Through interviews, it becomes apparent that ICH practitioners currently harbor doubts and confusion regarding their self-identity. They express the belief that it is challenging to be both an artist and an educator. On one hand, they have departed from traditional methods of education they used as heritage bearers (typically one-on-one, master-apprentice relationships), and they no longer need to rely on instrumental, utilitarian means like performances and rituals to make a living. This divergence distances them from the role of an artist. On the other hand, being within the school system, they lack formal teaching

qualifications and educational theory knowledge, preventing them from defining themselves as educators. This ambiguity in self-identity can lead to professional burnout.

## ***2. Educational Purpose: Cultivate All-Rounded Students vs. Cultivate Professional Inheritors?***

School education, particularly in the realm of arts education, aims not only to develop students' skills and techniques but also to meet their needs and foster their holistic development. Art education, in all its diversity influences the moral, spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual development of an individual and is essential for every person for their successful and fulfilling life in modern society. While in ICH transmission, although teaching activities exist, their primary purpose is often to pass down techniques, train the next generation of ICH inheritors, and enable livelihoods. This differs significantly from the objectives of formal school education, which are non-utilitarian. For instance, in the context of arts education, the main goal is to cultivate students' attitudes, values, and tastes while fulfilling their interests and hobbies (Elfland, A. D. 1974). Under such educational objectives, the curriculum and teaching methods are diverse, all geared towards the growth and development of students.

In contrast, in the transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the sole aim of teaching is for disciples to master the craft, become outstanding artists, and make a living through their skills. When ICH practitioners entered the school context, they encountered difficulties in transitioning their teaching objectives, and these two sets of objectives are contradictory. The traditional, transmission-based ICH education involves each practitioner having only one or a few disciples, without a fixed timeframe for teaching. It primarily relies on imitation and guidance. To cultivate exceptional ICH practitioners, both the instructor and the disciple must invest significant time and effort because their livelihoods depend on it. However, when ICH education is transplanted into the school system, the educational goals begin to de-emphasize utilitarianism, as the ultimate purpose is not to train the next generation of ICH inheritors but to satisfy students' interests and cultivate their cultural confidence. The utilitarian and non-utilitarian goals are challenging to reconcile, leading to the paradox.

*When I teach in schools, it's entirely different from teaching my disciples. In school, I lower my expectations for students and constantly remind myself not to train them as artists. But this causes a lot of confusion for me. For instance, when I want to lower my expectations for them, I'm also unsure if they can truly benefit from my teaching.*

--Interview notes of the practitioner from Longhui county.

This reminds us that ICH teaching across contexts faces a paradox in educational objectives, which can be perplexing for ICH practitioners. While the school education system leans toward the former set of objectives, the latter is still an expectation for ICH practitioners because they hope to cultivate disciples.

## **Conclusion**

The tensions between these paradoxes have prompted profound philosophical reflections on transcending boundaries in the context of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). These unresolved questions warrant deeper insights. Nonetheless, through the research presented in this paper, we have arrived at some affirmative conclusions. These include the opportunities and challenges presented when ICH practitioners enter the school system, and the corresponding recommendations.

## ***1. Opportunities***

Change Signifies opportunity. When art transitions from the exclusive stage to becoming a part of people's everyday lives, it can truly convey its infinite charm, influence people's thoughts and behaviors, infuse life with vitality, and emit a vibrant brilliance. The change in the identity of the ICH practitioners also means that the ICH is detached from its original field and is closely related to society and education, which has far-reaching significance for art education in schools, for ICH practitioners and for the ICH itself.

**Enhanced Resources for Arts Education:** Currently, as art curriculum contents are simplified and organized for instruction, the complex richness of expert knowledge may be decontextualized, frozen in time, and treated as an end rather than a means to student understanding of art and of themselves in relation to the worlds of art (Stankiewicz, M. A. 2000). However, ICH coins to represent living cultural expressions and practices (Alivizatou-Barakou, M., et al. 2017), coming from real situations and closely related to our life can bring new possibilities for contextualized teaching and enriching the teaching content of art education. When we introduce local and exceptional traditional Chinese arts into the curriculum, it helps school educational system creating a platform to broaden students' horizons, cater to their interests, and cultivate their cultural consciousness. ICH encompasses a rich variety of arts, while often being an amalgam of multiple arts, which brings innovation to the form of arts education in schools.

**Career Enrichment for ICH Practitioners:** For ICH practitioners, crossing boundaries can help address their survival challenges and enrich their careers. The change of environment makes them rethink their career and life goals, which will add new colors to their unchanging career. With the disappearance of the utility of ICH, many ICH practitioners are facing an even more difficult survival situation than in the past, as the artistic skills they rely on are gradually losing their instrumental significance in reality, except for their performative and ornamental qualities. However, the entry of ICH practitioners into the school field will provide them with new options. In addition, while the original identity of ICH practitioners gives them a relatively stable career, becoming a teacher often brings them a higher level of fulfillment and happiness. This transition might offer solutions to their livelihood concerns by opening new career opportunities and enriching their professional journeys.

**Contemporary Preservation and Promotion of ICH:** With the problem of preserving ICH of one country is becoming more and more urgent, using general education programs to transfer these arts and folk culture served as one of the solutions (Lovtsova, I. V., et al. 2021). The integration of ICH into school education not only promotes its contemporary inheritance and development, but also change its mode of transmission from elite to popular education. Teaching ICH in schools exposes more students to ICH, fostering their understanding, appreciation, and a love for intangible cultural heritage. It may even inspire active involvement in the preservation and development of ICH.

This blend of opportunities has the potential to positively contribute to the preservation and promotion of ICH, enhance the diversity of arts education in schools, and offer ICH practitioners a new path in their careers.

## **2. Challenges**

Opportunities and challenges inevitably coexist, and the integration of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) into schools brings both advantages and difficulties to school education, ICH practitioners, and ICH itself.

**Exacerbating inequities in education:** For school arts education, while it enriches educational resources to some extent, it may not fully meet the diverse interests of all students. Since ICH encompasses various forms, catering to every student's individual interest can be challenging and may affect educational equity to some extent.

**Bring burnout for ICH practitioners:** For ICH practitioners, the shift in their living context blurs their self-definition, potentially leading to professional burnout. Today, work is viewed as an imperative not only for socioeconomic well-being but also for physical and psychological well-being (Vondracek, F. W., Lerner, R. M., & Schulenberg, J. E. 2019). As we discovered in interviews, many ICH practitioners lack familiarity with educational theories, which can be overwhelming when they first enter school education. Furthermore, not all of the 10 ICH practitioners volunteered for schooling, and when it came to the reason of choosing to enter the school system, 60% said that the Ministry of Education and the local government imposed requirements that outweighed their own subjective wishes, which further side-steps the potential for burnout to exist when the identity of ICH practitioners shifts.

**Weakening of intergenerational transmission:** For ICH itself, the proliferation of school-based dissemination may weaken intergenerational transmission. In traditional ICH education, practitioners typically passed on their skills to their own children and chosen disciples through generations. However, the transformation into school-based education implies a reduction in intergenerational transmission.

## **3. Suggestions**

Considering these challenges, several suggestions are followed.

**Education for ICH Practitioners:** Although ICH practitioners possess deep expertise in artistic skills, it does not necessarily mean they have a high level of education or knowledge in educational theory. Currently, theory and practice are separate and a view of theory as largely irrelevant had been carried through from college into the school and classroom (Day, C. 2021), which means that even professionally trained teachers suffer from a lack of teaching experience, let alone ICH practitioners who lack professional training. Therefore, to ensure the deep integration of ICH into the school education system, there should be efforts to enhance the education of ICH practitioners in educational theory and practice.

**Selective Integration into Schools:** The introduction and selection of ICH into schools should be done carefully and not blindly. Specific circumstances of the schools and students need to be taken into consideration to ensure effective integration.

**Preservation of Traditional Transmission:** While school-based promotion of ICH is thriving, preserving traditional modes of intergenerational ICH transmission is as significant as promoting its transformation. Traditionally, ICH practitioners often passed their skills on to their own children, and this mode still holds advantages.

Critical reflection on transcending the boundaries of ICH is not only necessary but also meaningful. This topic combines elements of music education and ethnomusicology, holding profound significance for school education, ICH practitioners, and ICH itself. The existence of paradoxes underscores the critical philosophical nature of this phenomenon. However, the presence of paradoxes should not deter us from advancing the trend of ICH integration into schools. What we should do is to amplify opportunities, mitigate challenges, and achieve a harmonious coexistence of traditional ICH transmission and school-based transmission.

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