The Safeguarding of the Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage

BAI Gengsheng
China Association of Folk Writers and Artists

In 2003, the Chinese government officially signed the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which was adopted by the United Nations, and became a part of the extended international family for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

Since then, the Chinese government has adopted various measures, conducted a series of safeguarding activities throughout China, excluding Taiwan, and has won wide acclaim for its impressive achievements. These activities consist of the following:

- “Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project” sponsored by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the China Association of Folk Writers and Artists, which is to last for ten years
- “China Ethnic and Folk Culture Preservation Project” (also known as the “State Project for the Preparation of the List of Oral Traditions and Intangible Cultural Heritages”) sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, State Ethnic Affairs Commission, Ministry of Finance, and the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, which is to last for 17 years
- Establishment of the State Center of China Ethnic and Folk Culture Preservation Project in the Chinese Academy of Arts, Ministry of Culture
- Establishment of the State Cultural Heritage Protection Leader Group, led by State Councilor, Chen Zhili
- Naming of the second Saturday of every June “National Cultural Heritage Day,” the first of which was celebrated on June 10, 2006
- Naming of 161 “masters of folk arts and crafts” by the National Development and
Reform Commission

- Designation of the first 165 “outstanding holders of folk cultural heritage” by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the China Association of Folk Writers and Artists
- Enactment of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
- Incorporation of the protection of intangible cultural heritage into the “Cultural Development Plan of the 11th Five-year Guidelines,” which was drafted by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China’s Central Committee and the Ministry of Culture, and the inclusion of provisions in a separate independent chapter
- Implementation of 17 points of the “Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project” on a full-scale across the nation, results of which are being achieved in stages
- Continuous applications for registration as World Cultural Heritage and the proclamation of China's art of Akyns, Mongolian ethnic Long Song, Uygur Muqam art of Xinjiang Autonomous Region and others as Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO
- Establishment of guidance organizations for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and working teams on all levels of government from Beijing to each province (municipality, autonomous region), city (autonomous district, ward) and county (autonomous county, zone)
- Investment of an enormous amount of funds into these initiatives by the central government under special budget for intangible cultural heritage
- And others

The following characteristics may be noted in China’s safeguarding of its intangible cultural heritage.

(1) Lofty origins

The history of China’s initiatives for safeguarding its intangible cultural heritage goes back to the time of founding of the Republic of China and even back to the New Culture Movement at the beginning of the 20th century. As China has already accumulated a wealth of practice and experience as well as tradition and theoretical knowledge, its safeguarding efforts need not start from scratch. The current boom for protecting intangible cultures, which began in the previous century, has also advanced within such a framework, against a background of reform and liberation, and is thus not totally detached from the movements of the rest of the international community. The
current cultural protection boom in China is a product of the pluralistic cultural boom occurring on a global scale and has proved to be a huge success as it linked the principles and practices experienced by industrialized nations for the past 200 years for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage with the specific conditions of China. The international principles, standards, technology and norms that reflect the spirit of the times are results that have been achieved through the application of the above successes.

(2) New principles

China’s recent movement for safeguarding its intangible cultural heritage is a conscious movement by the Chinese people to protect its outstanding culture and tradition. The movement has been driven by universal principles, while at the same time it has created many new and unique principles. The protection of the intangible cultural heritage in China in the past leaned toward cultural objects and as a general rule had been somewhat negligent of the creation and transmission processes or of the people who actually enjoyed the benefits of these products and those who transmitted them. Currently China has adopted the method of valuing both the cultural objects and the people who hand them down, and the concept of being people-oriented is now fully reflected in the field of protection of intangible cultural heritage. One example is the project to designate outstanding holders of folk cultural heritage. Moreover, since safeguarding activities to date emphasized static protection while leaving dynamic protection more or less to chance, the outcome of these activities tended to be non-comprehensive, and the survival and sustainable development of intangible culture were consistently disregarded. Today, however, both dynamic protection and static protection are being undertaken concurrently. In terms of the methods of protection, also, protection in the past had consisted mainly of academic protection led by groups of scholars and specialists, but today’s protection, while still being based on its former foundations, encompasses a multitude of diverse protection methods including international protection, national protection, productive protection, livelihood protection, life protection, educational protection, legal protection and industrial protection. Furthermore, the scope of protection has been expanded and the caliber of protection has also been improved. There have also been changes in the recognition of value with respect to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. The mistaken notion in the past of intangible cultural heritage as feudalistic superstitions and the set of values that considered the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage as mere accumulation of culture have been revised. Now the safeguarding of our intangible cultural heritage is
considered to be equivalent to the protection of our nation’s cultural gene or ethnic spirit and the source for our nation’s politics, economy, society and education. Furthermore, protection has been linked organically to transmission, conversion, renovation and development.

(3) Powerful technology

Until recently the protection of the intangible cultural heritage in China had been limited to the recording in writing and the collection of documents. However today’s protection incorporates the latest in new technology, such as digital technology, multi-media, audio-recordings and video recordings. Specific activities include the following:

- Compilation of Ethnic Zhongyuan Folk Culture Materials Databank by Zhengzhou University in Henan
- Compilation of Chinese Oral Tradition and Intangible Cultural Heritage Databank by the Chinese Academy of Arts, Ministry of Culture
- Use of the medium of TV by the mass media of Beijing, Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, etc. and successive participation in activities to record intangible cultural heritage on an emergency basis
- Application of animation technology in Beijing and the provinces of Zhejiang, Hunan and others to turn orally transmitted literature into animations, achieving great successes
- Use of latest design technology in collection of books including, Collection of Chinese Wooden Print New Year Picture, Collection of Chinese Paper-cuttings, Encyclopedia of Chinese Folk Tales, Publication of Records of Chinese Folklore and others compiled by the China Association of Folk Writers and Artists
- Publication of Collection of Thangka Buddhist Paintings, Collection of Chinese Clothing, etc.; each volume containing a disk, which may be used to view dynamic displays of related artwork.

On the whole, the use of these new technologies and new methods has enabled a more three-dimensional, realistic and complete way of protecting China’s intangible cultural heritage and has substantially mitigated the risk of distortion or loss of information, thus elevating China’s attempts to safeguard its intangible cultural heritage to another level.

(4) Close-knit organization

At the present, China protection of its intangible cultural heritage is conducted
under the systematic guidance of the government using a close-knit organization. On the
government level the State Council has formed the State Cultural Heritage Protection
Leader Group, which oversees the safeguarding activities of all cultural heritage
including intangible cultural heritage on a nationwide level. In specific terms, activities
include the formulation of policies, adjustment of related parties, drafting of plans and
implementing of supervision. Under the municipalities and autonomous regions of each
province, the Cultural Heritage Protection Leader Group for each administrative region
has been organized and each Group, in turn, has set up offices in order to engage in
protection activities. Operationally, these Groups follow the guidance of the superior
organization, the government’s State Cultural Heritage Protection Leader Group but
administratively they follow the instructions of the regional governments.

In the private sector, China’s activities for the protection of its intangible cultural
heritage are led mainly by the China Association of Folk Writers and Artists. In 2003, the
China Association of Folk Writers and Artists commenced the formation of the
Leadership Group of the Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project and by forming
two sub-groups – Expert Committee of the Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project
and the Working Committee of the Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project - it
has allocated and adjusted the necessary system skills and conducted activities for the
protection of the intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, beneath these sub-groups,
local Leadership Groups of Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project and their
Expert Committees and Working Committees have been formed on each of the three
administrative levels of provinces (municipalities, autonomous regions), prefectures
(autonomous districts, wards) and a portion of the counties (autonomous counties, zones,
localities). The Leader Group for each level becomes the chief guidance group of the
Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project conducted by the China Association of
Folk Writers and Artists The Leader Groups mainly consist of responsible officials from
the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China, China Federation of Literary
and Art Circles and China Association of Folk Writers and Artists. Each Working
Committee formed under these groups consists of officials in government responsible for
areas related to the project, such as culture, finance, tourism, ethnic groups, and religion.
Additionally each Expert Committee consists of local specialists or related specialists.

In terms of the specific form of organization, in the case of the Chinese Folklore
Heritage Preservation Project sponsored by the Ministry of Culture the Expert
Committee Headquarters has been made responsible for the editing committee of each
specific project. Project applications are first submitted on a regional level. Then the
approved project applications become subject to protection under the direct guidance of the Leader Groups throughout the country and their Expert Committee with the cooperation of the cultural section of the local government.

The Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project sponsored by the China Association of Folk Writers and Artists conducts three types of specific emergency restoration work: i.e. national projects, regional projects and local projects. The first type, i.e. national projects, include publishing such works as the *Encyclopedia of Chinese Folk Tales* and the *Publication of Records of Chinese Folklore*, as well as conducting national surveys on folk cultural heritage. These projects are carried out under the guidance of the Leader Groups throughout the country and their Working and Expert Committees by forming editing committees on each level, with specific tasks being carried out on the county level (autonomous county, zone, locality). Thereafter reviews and revisions are made from bottom-up, which is ultimately followed by the review and revision of the project overview by the editing committee headquarter of the project. The second type, i.e. regional projects, consists of special projects that are set up mainly for folk literary phenomena that span a number of provinces. For example, Chinese New Year wood block prints are not found in all regions of China, but only in the regions of Henan, Hebei, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Tianjin and Shanxi. Therefore, in terms of emergency restoration work for the specific Chinese Wooden Print New Year Picture project, the editing committee headquarter formed in Beijing by the Working Committee and Expert Committee is responsible for guiding this project as well as for reviewing and revising the outcome and publishing the *Collection of Chinese Wooden Print New Year Picture* Under the editing committee headquarter, the Association of Folk Writers and Artists of each province forms local committees to do research and edit each volume. The third type, i.e. local projects, consists of the Association of Folk Writers and Artists of each province, municipality and autonomous region as well as its Leader Group and Expert and Working Committees planning and implementing specific projects according to the situation in each area; these projects are not included in national projects. For example, a comprehensive research into specific cultures is being conducted in Jiangsu province and another comprehensive research on shops of long-standing is being conducted in Henan province, but both are being planned independently by the Leader Groups of the Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project and their Expert and Working Committees of the respective provinces and carried out as local emergency restoration projects

(5) Substantial investments
During the past 30 years of reform and liberation, China has successfully constructed its economy and accumulated enough national strength to be conducted for cultural construction, including the safeguarding of its intangible cultural heritage, at the beginning of the 21st century. Therefore it has become possible to support the activities for the safeguarding of our intangible cultural heritage, which are currently being conducted from Beijing to the outskirts of China, with substantial funding. The China Ethnic and Folk Culture Preservation Project alone has received more than 40 million yuan in dedicated funds from the national budget since 2003. The Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project has also received more than 4 million yuan in dedicated subsidies from the upper-level departments, and similar support is continuing, while its magnitude continues to expand. Efforts are being made not only by the national budget but also by the governments of each province, municipality and autonomous region and their prefectures (autonomous districts, wards), and counties (autonomous counties, zones, localities), respectively, in order to construct a cultural province, cultural prefecture and cultural county, by setting aside special budgets for local activities to safeguard their intangible cultural heritage. The province of Jiangsu alone has invested nearly 50 million yuan per year into this undertaking. Another fortunate development is that as the economy of China moves from planned economy to market economy, the market-oriented diversification has generated a diversity of investments, thereby inviting participants beyond the governments of each administrative level to China’s cultural construction. Consequently, with the massive inflow of private capital into the safeguarding of our cultural heritage, activities to safeguard our intangible cultural heritage also have acquired the support of abundant funds. The linking of activities to safeguard our intangible cultural heritage with tourism and cultural industries has facilitated fund procurement for these projects as it has fueled the investment climate for local entrepreneurs, travel agencies, the media, and others. Currently the total amount of various funds procured for the Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project alone has surpassed 1 billion yuan and this amount far exceeds the amount granted by the government in subsidies.

(6) Broad participation

Until now, cultural activities have generally been thought to be the official responsibilities of cultural organizations, agencies of the Ministry of Culture and intellectuals. However, such ways of thinking are changing. Under the guiding principles of “government-led, social participation, long-term plans and gradual implementations,”
the nature of participants in the activities to safeguard our intangible cultural heritage is undergoing substantial change. Government organizations, members of the legal, educational, industrial fields and the media, in addition to scientific research centers, literary organizations and agencies of the Ministry of Culture, are now taking part in these activities. Despite the fact that cultural figures still hold central roles, civil servants, lawyers, businesspeople, teachers, students, newspaper reporters, editors, farmers and citizens are joining in safeguarding activities. It may even be said that the safeguarding of our intangible cultural heritage is certainly becoming a cultural activity that involves all citizens. The broad and popular appeal of these activities has made the sweeping safeguarding of our intangible cultural heritage possible across the nation.

The activities to safeguard intangible cultural heritage today differ from those of the past in that such activities in the 50’s and 60’s were almost exclusively limited to ethnic minorities and that the intangible cultural heritage of the Han people was not under comprehensive protection. What had until now been limited to certain specific cultural objects or specific literary forms has been expanded to include the intangible cultural heritage of each ethnic group throughout the country and is now undergoing massive reviews as well as being placed under protection.

In terms of the scope of protection, rather than being conducted independently and cut off from other activities, today’s activities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage are being promoted comprehensively and in concert with activities to protect tangible cultural heritage and oral cultural heritage. Distinct results are being achieved.

It should be of particular note that activities to safeguard China’s intangible cultural heritage are definitely not terminating as protection for protection’s sake. Transmission, conversion, renovation, development and protection are combined appropriately, followed by static protection with an academic basis and, at the same time, dynamic protection rooted in our everyday lives. By protecting our cultural heritage in the process of production and in our everyday lives, it is hoped that such heritage will pulsate with even greater life and lead to the formation of a practical mode for the protection of culture.

(7) Outstanding results

Ever since the signing of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted by the UN, and the implementation of the China Ethnic and Folk Culture Preservation Project and the Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project, the protection of intangible cultural heritage in China has generated impressive results to date, owing to the enthusiastic interest shown by the Chinese government and
wide-ranging participation by its citizens, in addition to such factors as the loftiness of its origins, the novelty of its concept, the aggressive introduction of high-tech skills, the integrity of its organizations and the massive amounts of investments.

In terms of social effects, China’s current activities to safeguard its intangible cultural heritage for all practical purposes has become a certain cultural movement that calls on the general public to cherish cultural traditions, respect the creation of culture by our ancestors, take another look at cultural values and emphasize the construction of a balanced culture. The movement has taken the cultural awareness of all the people of China to another level and has generated progress in the reforms of culture-related systems, in human resources development, in the construction of facilities and in the formulation of medium- to long-term plans. For example, Henan province has renewed the image of Henan province and, by materializing the revitalization of central China, has gained momentum for the Henan Province Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project.

As far as the fruits of protection itself are concerned, the project to tentatively identify the 40 items within the China Ethnic and Folk Culture Preservation Project is proceeding smoothly and initial results have already been achieved in certain quarters. From the first list, 158 items have already been announced and applications are currently being accepted for the second list. Under the Chinese Folklore Heritage Preservation Project, a total of 17 series 15,000 works are scheduled for publication, which eventually will become one of the greatest cultural collections in the history of China since the *Siku Quanshu* (Imperial Collection of Four). Currently the Project’s first series of products are being published and successively winning awards, thereby causing a sensation both domestically and abroad. The specific works and the awards they have won are as follows:

- The model-version of the *Collection of Chinese Wooden Print New Year Picture “Shantung Yang Ja Pu”* (Chung Hwa Books, 2005) won a publisher’s award in the United States.
- The model-version of the *Collection of Chinese Paper-cuttings “Hebei Yu Xian”* (Hebei Education Press, 2006) won three awards in Hong Kong, including the King of Kings Award.
- The model-version of the *Encyclopedia of Chinese Folk Tales “Yunnan Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture”* (China Sinda Intellectual Property Ltd., 2006) was nominated as a 2006 national outstanding book nominee by nine ministries and committees of the People’s Republic of China.
· The Library of Chinese Oral Tradition and Intangible Cultural Heritage (published successively by Heilongjiang People's Press from 2004) won the first China Outstanding Book Award.

· Chinese Knotting Library (Hebei Children and Juveniles Press, 2005) won the first China Outstanding Book Award.

In addition, high-level research and editing are being conducted currently for Collection of Thangka Buddhist Paintings, Collection of Chinese Villages, Collection of Chinese Clothing, Collection of Chinese Ceramics, and Collection of Chinese Clay Painted Dolls and impressive results are anticipated.

Based on policies of combining provenance protection and the management of division of specialist labor, increasing the number of participants and enhancing the caliber of protection, the China Association of Folk Writers and Artists has established 123 folk culture home towns, folk culture protection stations, folk culture transmission stations, folk culture research centers, folk culture expert committees and museums specializing in folk culture in various areas. National membership is increasing at a pace of approximately 100 persons a month. To keep up with this pace, the China Association of Folk Writers and Artists frequently holds art festivals, exhibits, symposiums and exchanges for the purpose of exhibiting or performing the results of intangible cultural heritage protection, actively promotes safeguarding activities of our intangible cultural heritage. Remarkable results have been produced.

Due to the keen interest shown by UNESCO and innovative concepts, theories, methods, techniques, and standards of countries such as England, United States, France, Russia, Germany, Japan and South Korea for its model, China has been practicing a realistic approach that is full of life and that also reflects its long traditions. In light of these circumstances, China’s attempts at safeguarding its intangible cultural heritage is certain to achieve substantial success worthy of all the attention it has been attracting and generate multiple findings and creations. I believe that it is our duty to make our unique contributions to the effective safeguarding and reasonable use not only of intangible cultural heritage but also of the entire cultural heritage of mankind.