

The Changing Identity of ICH Inheritors: Implementing China's ICH to the Schools as a Nation-Building Policy

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ABSTRACT

The twenty-first century has seen a growing awareness of the social and cultural value of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and the Chinese state increasingly recognises the soft power of ICH in promoting social cohesion and nationalism. Paper-cutting, a once domestic-based form of folk art, has been coopted by the state as an effective propaganda tool, with cultural and political attributes that can be harnessed at this crucial time of nation-building. We draw on heritage identity theory and in-depth interviews to explore the private to public transformation of three official provincial paper-cutting ICH inheritors in Shaanxi Province who are now educators in the state's ICH to the Schools initiative. The paper examines how heritage identities have been transformed from rural paper-cutting practitioners to ICH inheritors. We argue that the ICH to the Schools policy, which seeks to revive certain state-mandated forms of Chinese traditional folk culture, has also redefined the identity of paper-cutting practitioners as ICH inheritors working within the framework of moral education and nation-building. The findings of semi-formal interviews with the three practitioners reveal their changing self-perception of their roles, their relationships with paper-cutting and their responsibilities to the state, and the material and financial impacts on their lives of these changing identities. The findings suggest that the state's recognition, while of benefit to some ICH inheritors, may exclude others, and that the state continues to have strong soft power motives for promoting and supporting ICH in formal education and elsewhere.

Contribution/Originality: This study offers original insights into how China's soft power strategy transforms rural folk artists into ICH inheritors. It highlights the political dimensions of heritage recognition and education, revealing the evolving self-identities, roles, and socio-economic realities of practitioners within a state-driven nationalism and cultural preservation framework.

1. Introduction

A global revival in the practice of traditional art forms over the past forty years reflects a growing awareness and renewed interest in cultural heritage (Michael Cole & Yang, 2016; Bell, 2010). In 1989, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1989) published “Recommendations on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore”, its first official instrument dedicated to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Building on this global discourse, China began a new phase of integrating traditional culture into many aspects of public life, elevating folk heritage to legitimately recognized art forms, as a means to both preserve heritage and harness its soft power to reinforce national identity (Xu, 2018).

In the 1990s, the Chinese government began to integrate traditional culture into educational programmes as part of a broader moral education policy. In 1994, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) released *Some Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving Moral Education Work in Schools*, Article 8 of which advocated that moral education in schools should be responsible for transmitting time-honored moral ideals and behavioral norms while integrating new content relevant to the contemporary era. More recently, President Xi Jinping has further raised the status of traditional Chinese culture. In 2014, during the *18th Collective Study Session of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China* (中共中央政治局第八次集体学习), President Xi stated, “China’s excellent traditional culture is our most profound source of cultural soft power, as well as the cultural soil in which socialism with Chinese characteristics is rooted” (Song, Y., 2020).

Since the academic revival of Chinese traditional culture in the late twentieth century, scholars have made numerous contributions to our understanding of its teaching and transmission (Wang & Wang, 2018; Yu, 2008; Billioud & Thoraval, 2007). However, there has been limited research into the relationship between the practice and philosophy of teaching traditional culture and the construction and transformation of ICH inheritor identity.

This paper focuses on paper-cutting, a traditional handicraft once practiced in rural homes across China and now widely taught in the country’s primary and secondary schools, and particularly in extracurricular clubs. We interviewed three paper-cutting experts in Shaanxi Province, whose identities have been transformed from rural craftswomen into ICH inheritors who share their skills and expertise in primary and secondary schools and in other public spaces. As an example of the broader coopting of traditional culture in the state’s use of soft power, we investigate how and why paper-cutting, once a domestic handicraft practiced by rural women, has been appropriated and transformed into a cultural tool to revitalize traditional art forms, and how official policies have reshaped the identities of paper-cutting practitioners into ICH inheritors in spaces of formal education. It seeks to explore the challenges of Chinese paper-cutting practitioners, who are regarded as ICH inheritors, in reflecting their identities within the larger context of Chinese heritage and nationality, especially due to actions of the state and the “ICH to the Schools” policy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. ICH and moral education in China

Folk art forms were once widely practiced across China, rooted in folklore and local customs and beliefs (Xu, 2000). Among these artforms were practices such as embroidery, puppetry, pottery, music, calligraphy, and martial arts. However, folk culture was generally overshadowed by more elite and cosmopolitan art forms. Throughout the twentieth century, the perception of folk art underwent a number of transformations, each of which impacted its practice.

In the early 1930s, intellectuals re-evaluated folk art as the potential basis for a new national culture that rejected the perceived decadence of elite art and culture (Huang, 2022). Following the Japanese invasion in 1937, elite artists incorporated folk art motifs into their work to evoke national unity and cultural pride (Lufkin, 2016). During the Cultural Revolution, folk art was stigmatized for representing feudal culture, which was scorned as superstitious and backward, and was seen to be representative of the “the four olds” – old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits – that the Cultural Revolution sought to overthrow (Lufkin, 2016). Following Mao’s death in 1976, a period of ‘folk art fever’ (*minjian meishu re*) ensued, during which folk art was recognized as a valuable component of artistic expression (Qiao, 2010) and became the subject of widespread academic and intellectual research (Qiao, 2010). In the twenty-first century, folk art has undergone another transformation, this time as ICH, which the Chinese state has coopted as a form of soft power to promote national unification and instill patriotism (Tan, 2024). This state-sponsored revival has fuelled a broader “heritage fever” (*yichan re*), leading to increased government recognition of national cultural heritage at all levels.

Despite the active protection of folk culture in the late 1970s, it was not until 2004, when China adopted UNESCO’s *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, that folk-art was officially recast as ICH (Unesco, 2003). In 2011, the Chinese government enacted its first ICH regulations and introduced a national *Law of the People’s Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Article 34 of that law specifies that ‘schools shall carry out education relating to intangible cultural heritage in accordance with the provisions of the department in charge of education under the State Council’ (Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2011, Art. 34). It is clear that China’s leadership views traditional culture as a strategic resource that serves as guardian and promoter, injecting legitimacy and authority into its modern power. Indeed, in 2022, President Xi noted the need,

...to promote the creative transformation and development of the best of traditional Chinese culture, enhance the cohesion of the Chinese nation and the appeal of Chinese culture, deepen exchanges and mutual learning with other civilizations, better tell the stories of China’s fine traditional culture and better present Chinese culture to the world (Xinhua News Agency, 2022).

As a vital element of the CPC’s national governance strategy, traditional art forms have become sources of soft power and social education, shaping the morals and thoughts of a new generation of Chinese citizens (Xu, 2018). The 2013 Report of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee states that cultural heritage be recognized as an integral part of the core socialist values incorporated into all levels of formal education. The Ministry of Education (2014) has issued several guidelines on teaching traditional Chinese culture, including the “Outline for Improving Education on Outstanding Chinese Traditional Culture” (完善中华优秀传统文化教育指导纲要), “Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools” (中小学德育工作指南) (MOE, 2017), and

“Notice on Conducting Intangible Cultural Heritage Transmission Education Activities in Extracurricular Venues for Minors” (关于在未成年人校外活动场所开展非物质文化遗产传承教育活动的通知) (MOE, 2018).

In 2017, three central government ministries jointly launched the “Plan on Revitalizing China’s Traditional Crafts” (中国传统工艺振兴计划) (Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, & Ministry of Finance, 2017) to develop and formalize a system for the transmission of traditional culture, strengthen the safeguarding of cultural heritage and revitalize traditional crafts. Article 9 of the plan encourages the integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) into primary and secondary schools and university humanities programmes to promote universal social education. The plan also encourages schools to organize craft events and competitions to showcase regional and ethnic traditions, the aim of which is to enhance students’ practical skills, creativity, and understanding of traditional culture.

In 2022, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, together with the Ministry of Education and eight other ministries, issued the “Notice on Promoting the High-Quality Inheritance and Development of Traditional Crafts” (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2022), which proposed the integration of outstanding traditional Chinese culture and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) into school curricula, supporting primary and secondary schools in incorporating regional and school-specific characteristics, fulfilling the learning requirements of national curricula, and conducting activities such as traditional craft exhibitions, performances and interactive experiences. The ambitious target of this proposal is to foster “cultural confidence” in students through their study of folk arts. As part of this movement, a range of folk arts have gained significant government support and been designated as ICH (Tan, 2024).

The policy documents outlined above guide local governments and schools in the active implementation of a policy known as ICH to the Schools, providing traditional culture practitioners with clear and detailed guidelines for transmitting their knowledge and skills to younger generations. As the title of the 2017 “*Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools*” (MOE, 2017) suggests, there is an intrinsically moral aspect to the teaching of traditional Chinese culture in schools, with this education expected to be firmly and unswervingly nationalist, patriotic and collectivist. This moral education policy adopts a top-down approach, transmitting folk art knowledge and skill while emphasizing principles that socially guide children to meet the moral needs of the country (Jie & Desheng, 2004).

The *ICH to the Schools* policy, implemented in 2017, includes a variety of folk art forms which the government recognizes as ICH. It utilizes and instrumentalizes ICH practitioners by placing them at the centre of cultural transmission efforts. The initiative aims to promote a broad range of folk music, folk dance, shadow puppetry, embroidery, folk theatre and marital arts practices, including paper-cutting. These forms of ICH are integrated into school curricular and extracurricular activities.

As ICH practices have increasingly become part of school programmes, the role of ICH practitioners as transmitters of tradition has grown, leading to their evolving cultural identity as “ICH representative inheritors.” In the context of this policy, their identities are further instrumentalized to convey and instill nation-state morals to younger generations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework: Heritage identity

Heritage is a form of metacultural production that extends beyond the static preservation to the active reproduction of culture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2014). In other words, heritage is not a naturally existing entity but is actively shaped by state-sanctioned cultural institutions and elites (Smith, 2020). It is a dynamic, embodied process that actively constructs both individual and collective identity, rather than merely retaining past traditions (Smith, 2017). Crouch and Parker (2003) argue that heritage serves as a legitimizing discourse in the construction and maintenance of certain identities.

Within the framework of ICH and, particularly, *ICH to the Schools*, the term 'ICH representative inheritor' reflects a state-designated identity shaped by official policies and cultural governance strategies from local to international scales. The construction of ICH inheritor identity, therefore, is integral both to the protection and transmission of specific forms of traditional culture and to national cultural policy. In this context, the title of 'ICH representative inheritor' functions not only as an official designation, but as a powerful instrument for cultural governance, assigning specific responsibilities and obligations to specific inheritors who are tasked with maintaining and transmitting government mandated forms of traditional knowledge and practice, while excluding others who do not conform to that mandate (Beardslee, 2016). ICH inheritor identity is further reinforced through institutionalized heritage narratives, which not only sustain cultural traditions but contribute to broader nation-building efforts.

National heritage institutions play a key role in constructing and reinforcing identity narratives, ensuring that ICH inheritors both safeguard traditions and align with broader cultural policies (Hu, 2022). These narratives contribute to the formation of national identity by embedding heritage within symbols of collective memory and cultural continuity (Pendlebury, 2015). In this regard, the recognition of ICH representative inheritors fosters a sense of belonging, unity and national pride, while also serving as a mechanism of cultural governance. In China, state authorities actively designate ICH inheritors through policy initiatives, including a national ICH recognition system and integrative educational programmes such as *ICH to the Schools*.

3.2. Interview

We conducted in-depth, semi-structure interviews with the selected three ICH inheritors. All the interviews took place in their studios or homes and lasted for one to two hours, and were carried out based on the interview framework. The selection of these three ICH inheritors was based on several key criteria. First, they are regarded as provincial official ICH inheritors who have certain representativeness, authority and influence in their communities and actively involved in the "ICH to the Schools" policy. Second, due to their different career trajectories, they have different understandings of paper-cutting education and their own identities as ICH inheritors. These criteria could provide in-depth insights into the intersection of ICH transmission, policy implementation, and identity formation.

To optimize the interview process, we adopted the funnel technique proposed by Roller and Lavrakas (2015), which involves starting with broad, general questions before progressing to more specific and complex ones. Since they lack any formal education in

the Academy of Fine Arts, it is difficult for them to think logically and analytically. Therefore, we simplified and shortened most of the questions, making them more direct and easier to remember. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants were first asked about when they started teaching paper-cutting at schools, where they teach, how many classes they teach per week and the length of those classes. They were asked how much and by whom they are paid. Next, the participants were asked about course content and whether they create their own syllabus or follow a prescribed curriculum and prescribed themes. Finally, they were asked about their identity as ICH inheritors. These broad questions provided the interviewees with space for self-reflection and allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions as necessary. The semi-structured agenda led to extended discussions contributing to deeper reflections by the participants on their identity as ICH inheritors.

4. Findings

4.1. Paper-cutting: Heritage identity in practice

Paper-cutting was traditionally widespread across China, with each region having its own distinct style. Requiring merely scissors and paper, this art form was practiced by rural women who created paper-cuttings for decoration or related to local beliefs. Similar forms and designs were passed from one generation to the next with little change or innovation. Before the formalization of ICH, paper-cutting was both an informal family-based practice and a professional skill passed on through long-term master-apprentice relationships, with region-, festival-, and season-specific styles, techniques and motifs learned over many years of apprenticeship. Developing skills and expertise in paper-cutting was embedded in practice and through direct interaction and participation in local and culturally meaningful events.

[Ai and Jiang \(1946\)](#) compiled a book named *Collection of Northwest Paper-Cuttings* featured examples of paper-cutting from the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region. It explored the artistic features and social significance of these works, and emphasized the cultural value of paper-cutting during the revolutionary period. As with other forms of folk art, as mentioned above, paper-cutting was coopted for political purposes throughout the twentieth century.

Until the 1980s, paper-cutting was not recognized as an art form. However, in the past four decades, it has been transformed from a marginal, female, rural household craft into a legitimate public art form. In the process, it has been infused with both modern creativity and a reinforced sense of cultural “indigenouness” As UNESCO was beginning to recognize the importance of local and traditional art forms ([Aikawa, 2004](#)), in China, institutions such as county Halls of Culture, provincial Mass Art Museums and universities began to play a crucial role in transforming the perception of paper-cutting. Through training classes, seminars, exhibitions and performances, paper-cutting practitioners, ‘discovered’ by art intellectuals, gained social recognition and prestige. In 2002, Chinese authorities nominated paper-cutting as a *Representative Work of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* and it was officially inscribed onto *UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* in 2009 ([Unesco, 2003](#)).

4.2. ICH Inheritor as a Profession

Many paper-cutting practitioners who were incorporated into these transformational processes are now recognized for their distinct styles and their status has been elevated from “rural women” to “folk artists.” This newfound identity has given many the freedom and courage to develop their own creative styles, introduce innovations in form, technique, content and composition, and create artworks that reflect their personal narratives, all the while supported and encouraged by government-organized regional and national paper-cutting competitions. Many have been granted the title ‘folk artist’ and ‘ICH representative inheritor’, and their work is displayed in prominent public spaces. These women have also been recruited into national, regional and local education programs, including *ICH to the Schools*.

The professionalization of these folk artists began in 2008 when the Interim Measures for the *Identification and Management of Representative Transmitters of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects* defined the role of ‘representative inheritor’ as an individual who has been authenticated by relevant cultural administrative departments at several levels, who assumes the right and responsibility of inheriting and protecting ICH. Representative inheritors are further defined as being representatively, authoritatively, and influentially alike within each ICH community. The Ministry of Culture oversees a four-level ICH management system of national inheritors, provincial inheritors, city-level inheritors, and county-level inheritors (Song, J., 2020). This hierarchical structure reflects varying levels of recognition and support provided by cultural administrative departments. Individuals officially authenticated as representative inheritors receive economic and/or political support, including resources such as venues for cultural activities, platforms to showcase their skills, and assistance in collecting and publishing ICH materials.

In the context of paper-cutting, the ICH incentive mechanism plays a key role in selecting practitioners from local communities and granting them the title of ‘representative inheritor,’ bestowing social and personal honor as well as material benefits. Inheritors are chosen by the local cultural bureau based on their skills, experience, and family background, or through an open selection process.

Paper-cutting inheritors at these four levels are granted different heritage identities based on the honors and certifications they have achieved. Correspondingly, the subsidies they receive vary according to hierarchy, ranging from 20,000 RMB per year for a national-level inheritor down to 2,000 RMB per year for a county-level inheritor (Interview data, 2024). In addition, being recognized as a representative inheritor enhances an individual’s ability to participate in high-level cultural activities, symbolizing the alignment of their practices with the interests of specific social classes within China’s heritage hierarchy (Hu, 2022). The title also artificially determines an inheritor’s capacity to perform certain socio-cultural practices within particular cultural frames. This dynamic brings into relief the ideological and social relationship between policy, cultural authority and social stratification in the construction of heritage in China.

In return for these financial, social and artistic benefits, ICH representative inheritors are expected to adhere to specific rules, responsibilities and expectations laid down by the governing authorities. These include the transfer of traditional cultural skills to younger generations.

In 2016, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education jointly implemented the Training Programme for ICH inheritors (Xu et al., 2022). The programme provides three levels of training for ICH practitioners: general training for ordinary apprentices or practitioners, advanced workshops to enhance the cultural and artistic literacy and innovative capacity of highly skilled inheritors and senior practitioners, and study workshops to bring young and middle-aged inheritors into universities and design companies to facilitate cross-disciplinary exchanges to address bottlenecks in the safeguarding and transmission of ICH. This programme serves to further transform the heritage identities of participants.

In Shaanxi, substantial financial support from the regional government, official institutions and select universities has been directed towards ICH inheritor training programmes. In 2007, Shaanxi introduced regulations aimed at identifying provincial, municipal and county-level ICH inheritors. In 2016, the Shaanxi Provincial Department of Culture and Shaanxi Normal University, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, organized the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance Group Study and Training Programme, its first form of training for ICH inheritors. The primary focus of this initiative was to train inheritors to integrate new knowledge with their existing skills, thereby shouldering the responsibility for safeguarding ICH. Owing to this process, ICH practitioners are not entirely authentic traditional culture subjects; rather, they are selectively cultivated and trained by the state and its institutional frameworks to become ideal carriers of traditional culture in alignment with the state's cultural objectives. It was within this context that we interviewed three representative inheritors of paper-cutting ICH in Shaanxi province.

4.3. Shaanxi paper-cutting inheritors

Since 2017, paper-cutting appreciation and creation programmes have been introduced in the club class (*shetuan kecheng* 社团课) curriculum of primary and secondary schools as a way to promote patriotism. These programmes and the salaries of ICH inheritors who teach them are paid from government budgets. In this context, local rural women have assumed new roles as official inheritors of paper-cutting, garnering certain benefits from their elevated status.

In order to understand the impact of the ICH to the Schools programme on the identities of local folk artists, we interviewed three paper-cutting practitioners – Xu Yindi (61), Tian Yali (65) and Wang Xiaoxia (78), all of whom are employed as paper-cutting educators in primary and secondary schools.

In 2017, the Ministry of Education issued the *Management Measures for Part-Time Physical and Aesthetic Education Teachers in Schools*, supporting and encouraging schools to hire local ICH inheritors as part-time teachers to guide students in learning traditional Chinese culture (MOE, 2017). The three interviewees, named as paper-cutting representative inheritors, formally become part of this process. Once selected as official ICH inheritors, they were obligated to participate in folk art exhibitions and promotional activities organized by local heritage authorities. In other words, these authorities determine which cultural activities these women can or cannot attend. In effect, heritage practices have become a form of employment for these women and are integrated into the process of government-led identity formation (Interview data, 2024).

In addition, the three teach paper-cutting in the club classes of Shaanxi province primary and secondary schools. Their teaching content is divided into four parts. First, they introduce students to the basic and thematic features of Chinese paper-cutting. For example, students are shown certain common paper-cut symbols and are encouraged to guess the meaning. Second, they discuss the history of paper-cutting, including where it originated and how it has developed and been promoted over time. Third, they present samples of their own paper-cut artwork. Fourth, they teach the students how to fold, layer and cut paper, and guide them through making their own artworks. These expressive and interactive methods effectively stimulate the students' interest in paper-cutting while also playing a significant role in fostering patriotism and instilling national cultural identity.

4.4. Transformation into ICH inheritors

State recognition of ICH inheritors directly shapes the self-identification of these women and their willingness to engage in cultural inheritance practices (Su et al., 2020). Their early artistic achievements played a crucial role in shaping their career trajectories, enabling them to generate income and establish economic independence. With the introduction of the *ICH to the Schools* programme, their identities as official ICH inheritors fulfilled an objective need by the Chinese state while elevating and professionalizing their own paper-cutting skills.

The *ICH to the Schools* programme has redefined their economic and social status, providing them with access to new employment opportunities and financial support, and marking a shift from informal, unstable work to more structured and state-managed professional work. In addition to the ICH inheritor subsidies, mentioned above, the women are paid 150 RMB by the schools for each 45-minute session (Fieldnotes, March 2024). The schools also provide them with social security benefits. As inheritors from remote and impoverished villages that have historically been marginalized, the economic potential of *ICH to the Schools* may be more immediate and practical than the cultural value. In this context, inheritors, and rural women inheritors in particular, often perceive ICH not only as cultural transmission but also as a potential economic resource, especially in regions where ICH support manifests as government-led development.

Prior to the implementation of this policy, all three women sustained their livelihoods by leveraging their reputation in the folk-art community to create and sell paper-cuttings. The *ICH to the Schools* program provides novel financial support while fostering a sense of responsibility and obligation to inherit and transmit traditional culture. As Tian explained,

There's definitely a connection between being an inheritor and an educator. Inheritance means passing something down to the next generation, and education is about teaching the next generation.... The goal is the same—to pass on paper-cutting and promote traditional Chinese culture, transmitting it to the world (Tian Yali, personal communication, March 26, 2024).

Xu, Wang and Tian all emerged as prominent figures in paper-cutting during the transformative 1980s. All were successful in recognizing and adapting to evolving cultural trends, and in building strong social networks, ensuring that they were recognized and labelled as ICH inheritors. Although they maintain their identities as folk artists and continue to create paper art in their spare time, their identities are now integrated into education.

Before being officially recognized as an ICH inheritor and becoming a part-time paper-cutting teacher in local schools in 2017, Xu Yindi ran a smallholding with her husband. She now also offers free classes at the paper-cutting institute she established near her home in 2021, with support from the local government. To date, she has trained more than one hundred members, including local rural women, students and other social practitioners. Xu believes she has a responsibility to teach and propagate paper-cutting and hopes that more young people will learn the skill. However, she remains unsure of her identity as an ICH inheritor:

Now everyone calls me “teacher,” and I’ve actually taught quite a few students. But sometimes, I still wonder if I really qualify as a proper educator. After all, I’m just a farmer—I never attended any formal art university, and I don’t have much knowledge of educational theory or experience. But since I’ve been recognized as an ICH inheritor, I feel it’s my responsibility to live up to that title (Xu Yindi, personal communication, February 27, 2024).

Wang Xiaoxia is a retired rural non-state-employed teacher, who taught art education in primary schools for over 40 years, including teaching paper-cutting to decorate blackboard newspapers and to spread propaganda concerning public health education and the state’s family planning policy. In 2017, Wang proactively assumed responsibility for ICH transmission and actively responded to the *ICH to the Schools* policy. She began teaching paper-cutting at local schools, fostering students’ interest in traditional culture and their consciousness of the importance of transmitting such culture:

As an ICH inheritor, I can apply the teaching experience I’ve accumulated over the years to the education of ICH. I’ve found that I can effectively balance both identities – educator and ICH inheritor (Wang Xiaoxia, personal communication, March 15, 2024).

Tian Yali, who ran a restaurant in her early years, participated in over 20 practical and theoretical paper-cutting training classes between 1980 and 2020, and frequently participated in cultural exchange activities in various countries on behalf of official organizations. In 2015, she was hired by Nanjing University as a teacher for the Advanced Workshop on Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage (Folk Culture), and she has taught paper-cutting at ten universities and institutions in China and Taiwan. In 2016, she was appointed skills mentor at Xi’an University of Technology and was hired by Tongchuan Elderly University to teach paper-cutting.

In addition to the financial security and status the three women have gained in their roles as ICH representative inheritors, they each acknowledge the role they play in promoting the values and morals of the state. Xu said,

I’ve been a member of the CCP for 34 years, and when I heard the report from the 20th National Congress, talking about promoting cultural confidence and strength, and creating new brilliance for socialist culture, it gave me a lot of confidence. Over the past ten years, there’s been strong support from the national to local levels for the safeguarding and development of ICH. Thanks to that, I’ve had more opportunities to show paper-cutting art I love and pass it down to the next generation (Xu Yindi, personal communication, February 27, 2024).

Wang's approach to teaching paper-cutting is even more overtly moral in tone:

I often tell my students that they are the strength and hope of the country, I hope they can use the opportunities they have, and cherish the peaceful and harmonious environment at school. Meanwhile, I encourage them to study hard for the development of the country, especially in transmitting Chinese traditional culture (Wang Xiaoxia, personal communication, March 15, 2024).

Wang and Tian both recognize a close relationship between their educator and inheritor identities. As participants in the *ICH to the Schools* policy and as inheritors in the wider community, their ultimate goal is to ensure the continuation and transmission of traditional culture, aligning with the state's intention. Skills such as paper-cutting require systematic and ongoing transmission to avoid being forgotten or lost. Therefore, their mission as inheritors is not only to safeguard traditions but, more importantly, to educate younger generations to master these skills and to understand their importance as national symbols. Their role as educators, therefore, has two outcomes: it enhances their self-identity and socially perceived identity as inheritors while also providing systematic support for the organized and effective transmission of traditional culture.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the evolution of folk art from traditional, rural, communal practice into art forms with social and political significance that are promoted and transmitted under the state's *ICH to the Schools* policy. The experiences of three representative ICH inheritors who specialize in and teach the traditional art of paper-cutting reveal that ICH education serves not only as a means of reviving Chinese traditional culture but also as a crucial strategy to address the social problem of employment among inheritors. This policy brings tangible benefits to inheritors, who are actively engaged in transmitting the reinvention of traditional culture. Their identities as ICH inheritors are utilized as state soft power to convey patriotism, nationalism and collectivism to the younger generation. Officially recognized ICH inheritors, however, lack autonomous cultural agency, operating within the bounds of government specified policies and institutional academic standards, which cast them as "idealized" carriers of tradition. The *ICH to the Schools* policy, as exemplified in paper-cutting in Shaanxi province, encourages China's younger generations to appreciate and learn traditional art forms as specified by the state. As key practitioners and implementers of the government's promotion of traditional Chinese folk culture, ICH inheritors bear the responsibility of transmitting government-approved traditional culture to these generations. The experiences of the three interviewees exemplify this transformation from private rural practitioners to recognized cultural figures, with accompanying unprecedented opportunities to teach and showcase their skills. Their contributions extend beyond artistic creation as they play an essential role in fostering patriotism, strengthening national identity and contributing to the broader project of nation-building.

The construction of ICH inheritor identity serves as a strategy for state-led revitalization of traditional culture and nation-building. China's approach not only preserves its intangible cultural heritage by integrating traditional practices into modern education, but reaffirms national identity domestically and internationally. This process highlights how ICH policies are shaped to meet a state's political goals and how those policies, in

turn, reshape the roles, lives and livelihoods of inheritors as they contribute to the transmission of national identity, social values and cultural continuity.

This research is not without limitations. With a specific focus on paper-cutting and on only three ICH inheritors, future research would benefit from a comparison with other forms of folk-art and with a broader range of ICH inheritors. In addition, this research focused only on those folk-artists who have been formally named and incorporated into the state-mandated role of ICH representative inheritor and only those folk-art practices that are recognized as ICH. In order to gain a better understanding of the state's use of soft power through ICH, future research should explore those artists and art forms that have been excluded from official recognition and support. Finally, while this research focused on ICH inheritors, future studies should examine the impact of the *ICH to the Schools* policy on the development of the moral and political identities of primary and secondary school children.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Malaya (RECUM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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