

Article

Religion-Related Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding Practices and Initiatives of the Contemporary Chinese State

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Abstract: This paper reveals the contemporary Chinese state's active role in shaping the country's religion-related intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding, through a systematic review of China's official inventories of national representative ICH projects and extensive investigations of relevant local practices and initiatives. Although China is ruled by a political party officially embracing an atheist ideology, various elements of the contemporary Chinese state have been proactively involved in safeguarding religion-related ICH. The Chinese state's involvement in *de facto* religion-related ICH safeguarding predates its adoption of explicit ICH safeguarding narratives. Still, the Chinese state's practices and initiatives in safeguarding religion-related ICH flourished after ratifying the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2004. Since then, China's central government has established a nationwide framework to recognise representative ICH items, including religion-related ones. Beyond Beijing, various local state agencies have also developed noticeable enthusiasm for supporting the safeguarding of religion-related ICH. In addition to engaging directly with ICH safeguarding, the contemporary Chinese state has also shaped China's religion-related ICH by working closely with some academics and religious groups.

Keywords: China; heritage policy; ICH safeguarding; intangible cultural heritage; religion-related heritage; state–religion relations; state-centric approach



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1. Introduction

Religion and heritage safeguarding are closely interrelated. As the first international convention regarding heritage safeguarding, the UNESCO's 1972 *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* signified the globalisation of heritage safeguarding (UNESCO 1972). The 1972 *Convention* did not explicitly highlight religion. However, its definition of “cultural heritage” includes monuments, groups of buildings, and sites, all of which can be closely related to religions. Furthermore, the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* highlight the link between heritage conservation and various economic activities (UNESCO 1977). These guidelines triggered a shift in paradigms of managing cultural heritage, including religious sites. As a result, today, many religious sites are not merely spaces for worshipping but also destinations for heritage tourism and venues for safeguarding living heritage (Mathisen 2020; Simone-Charteris and Boyd 2010; Timothy and Olsen 2006; Urien-Lefranc 2020).

From the beginning of the 21st century, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has become a global initiative. The UNESCO's 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* establishes principles to address the political, social, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and gender discriminations in ICH safeguarding (UNESCO 2018, p. 49). Since then, the link between religion and ICH has become increasingly explicit (Guo et al. 2021; Hetmanczyk 2015). Elements related to religious traditions are presented in several varieties of ICH, including but not limited to performing arts, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, social practices, rituals and festive events, and traditional craftsmanship (Liu 2016; van der Zeijden 2014).

In addition to the community-based safeguarding practices, some government agencies and political parties also promote safeguarding religion-related ICH as a part of their strategies to manage religions or resist the challenges associated with secularisation (Timothy and Olsen 2006; van der Zeijden 2014). Moreover, the increasingly close associations between religion-related ICH and cultural resources for tourism have triggered considerable negotiations and contentions, often complicating the relations between religious communities, local states, and many other stakeholders, such as residents (Guo et al. 2021; Liu 2016; Roszak 2020; Urien-Lefranc 2020).

Given the significant roles that religious ideas and institutions have played in the shaping of the civilisation and politics in Europe and the Middle East, it is perhaps unsurprising that much existing research has focused on the increasingly close link between religion and ICH safeguarding in these places (Shefferman 2014; Timothy and Olsen 2006; Tsivolas 2014). However, this paper intends to shift the geographical focus to contemporary China, which, we argue, presents an interesting case to demonstrate how a country ruled by a political party with an atheist ideology proactively participates in the emerging global agenda of safeguarding religion-related ICH.

Unlike many European or Middle Eastern countries, China's history was heavily influenced by polytheistic, pantheistic, and non-theistic religions. Hence, the country provides a unique setting to discuss the link between religion and ICH safeguarding beyond the traditional framework of church–state relations (Tao 2018). Moreover, religion has been heavily restricted and regulated in China since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949 (Tao 2017). Even though the Chinese state has significantly loosened its control over religious affairs since the late 1970s (Yang 2011), the CCP still holds an atheist guiding ideology today. Meanwhile, substantive local variations exist in contemporary China's state–society and state–religious relations (Tao 2015; Tao and Liu 2013). However, despite all the challenges and variations in the state–religion relations in China, as this paper demonstrates, the Chinese state has remained active in safeguarding religion-related ICH in recent decades. Therefore, China provides an ideal case to observe and analyse how religion-related ICH are managed, safeguarded, and regulated in socio-political settings where institutional religions do not necessarily play a predominant role in shaping the cultural landscape. Finally, investigating how religion-related ICH safeguarding is formed and shaped in contemporary China provides us with a unique lens to examine the evolution and innovations in the country's many policy fields. Heritage conservation and safeguarding is a form of cultural politics (Smith and Akagawa 2008). Religion-related ICH safeguarding practices, therefore, embody contemporary China's dynamics of cultural politics. Meanwhile, the dynamics of religion-related ICH safeguarding in China also reflect the shifting attitude that the CCP and the Chinese government hold on religious affairs. For example, it has been argued that ICH has replaced the United Front 统一战线 to become the primary perceived function of religions in the eyes of the Chinese state (Hetmanczyk 2015).

In recent years, religion-related ICH has become an increasingly discussed research topic in China. Chinese scholars, noticeably Tian Qing and Zhai Fengjian, have recently published inspiring works in the area. They categorised contemporary China's religion-related ICH into four types, providing a much-needed scoping chart of the field. According to Tian (2019) and Zhai (2020), the concept of religion-related ICH reaches far beyond ICH preserved by religious groups for religious purposes. It also covers the other three types of ICH, namely (a) ICH that serves explicit religious purposes but is commonly preserved or practised by non-religious individuals or institutions, (b) ICH that carries on some religious meanings but no longer embodies explicit religious beliefs, and (c) ICH that has roots in religious traditions but has become a part of people's secular life.

Notwithstanding these insightful exploratory works, there has not been a systematic introduction to the contemporary Chinese state's religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives despite rapid developments in the field. Therefore, this paper will not merely look into the religion-related ICH in China *per se*. Instead, it intends to bridge the gap by recording, reviewing, and reflecting on how different elements of the contempo-

rary Chinese state interact with various players in its religion-related ICH safeguarding practices.

China officially adopted the concept and discourse of ICH safeguarding in 2004, when its central government ratified the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. However, the Chinese state's *de facto* ICH safeguarding practice significantly predates the explicit ICH safeguarding discourse (Xu et al. 2021). Therefore, this article first introduces the dynamics of the Chinese state's management of religion-related cultural heritage before 2004. It then explains how China's central government, local authorities, academic institutions, and religious groups act and interact in different areas of religion-related ICH safeguarding.

2. Religion-Related Cultural Heritage Management before 2004

The Chinese state's management of religion-related ICH significantly predates its adaption of the explicit concept of ICH in the early 21st century. *De facto* ICH management and safeguarding practices could be observed in China since 1949 (Xu et al. 2021). Generally speaking, two patterns can be identified in the dynamic of the Chinese state's policy stance towards religion-related ICH before 2004. First, such a dynamic is consistent with the Chinese state's general religious policy shifts. Second, like in many other areas of cultural heritage safeguarding, efforts in safeguarding the religion-related cultural heritage first started in material cultural heritage before getting extended into ICH.

After it took over China in 1949, the CCP entered a brief period of collaborating with influential religious figures to institutionalise mainstream religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. However, by the mid-1950s, as the CCP consolidated its rule, it tightened regulations on religious institutions and activities, reshaping China's religious landscape following its political vision (Tao 2017). Despite the increasing tightened regulations on religious practices, certain religious elements that were perceived as associated with economic utilities were tolerated, adapted, and reformed. For example, when China's national economy was weak in the 1950s, traditional craftsmanship was much valued to complement the insufficient industry productivity. Moreover, traditional handicraft products manufactured by skilful craftspeople were highly valued by consumers in Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. As a result, religious scenes and characters remained popular decorations on export-oriented porcelain products despite the Chinese state's increasing hostility towards religion in this period (Wang and Yin 1994).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), religion was banned in most places in China. The Red Guards denounced tangible and intangible religious heritage as residual of feudalism. Consequently, many religious sites were destroyed or converted into secular venues. In addition, religious rituals and training were prohibited, and many ritual materials and instruments were burned (Chau 2010, p. 17). Consequently, the practice of religion-related ICH was radically interrupted.

The loosening of China's religious policy in the late 1970s provided state-sanctioned religious institutions with opportunities to reconstruct their buildings and reinvigorate their rituals (Zhu 2020a, p. 97). Meanwhile, as the Chinese state mandates religious institutions to be self-sustained fiscally, many religious organisations experienced the motivation and pressure of developing profit-making activities. Consequently, heritage tourism attracted much attention. As a result, since the 1980s, many religious sites have been made into destinations for heritage tourism. For example, Mount Wudang 武当山, one of the most famous Taoist sacred places, was inscribed as a UNESCO world cultural heritage site in 1994. The considerable revenue generated through entrance fees and tourist services (such as food, souvenirs, and accommodation) incentivised many local governments in China to support the restoration and reconstruction of local religious sites with good potential to draw tourism attractions. The tourism bureau or cultural office in many local governments also associated religious sites with local customs and traditions, promoting the tourism industry (Feng 2014, pp. 171–72).

In the 1990s, conservating the intangible components of cultural heritage became an international concern (UNESCO 1993a, 1993b). In response to this trend, the Chinese state made reviving traditional culture integral to constructing the Chinese socialist society (State Council of the People's Republic of China 1997). Meanwhile, because religion remains politically sensitive and under heavy regulations in China (Tao 2012), the Chinese government labelled many religious practices as forms of traditional culture. Consequently, it supported the revival of these practices as a part of its efforts to revive China's traditional culture. The Chinese state also proactively shaped the scope of many folk religions through this process.¹ It suppressed or sidelined the elements perceived as superstitious and maverick but promoted practices closely associated with local cultural traditions (Feng 2014, pp. 171–72). However, certain elements and aspects of ICH embedded in religious practices were encouraged because the Chinese state perceives that these practices have positive social functions such as maintaining social stability, improving interethnic relations, and enriching local tourist resources.

Tao and Griffith (2018, 2019) revealed that the religious diversity narrative in contemporary China is closely associated with ethnic diversity. Similarly, the Chinese state's early *de facto* safeguarding efforts concerning religion-related ICH were heavily featured in the geocultural setting of the country's ethnic minorities. The traditional culture of many ethnic minorities in China has close links with religions or popular beliefs. Therefore, in areas traditionally inhabited by ethnic minorities, local religious elements are often extensively incorporated into the development of local tourism industries. Many religious practices and activities are packed as traditional cultural customs to attract tourists seeking exotic experiences (He 1995).

3. Nationwide Recognition of Religion-Related ICH since 2004

In 2004, China ratified the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Since then, ICH safeguarding has gradually become an explicit policy area for China's central and local governments (Xu et al. 2021). Against this background, many government agencies have implemented religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and innovations. However, it should be noted that the explicit term “religions (*zongjiao* 宗教)” rarely appears in contemporary Chinese state's ICH-related official documents, laws, and regulations. This pattern results from and reflects that religion remains a politically sensitive issue in the country (Tao 2019). Nevertheless, despite the lack of explicit labelling, China's ICH policies are widely applied to safeguard and manage religion-related ICH.

Since 2004, as ICH safeguarding emerged as a policy area of the Chinese government (Xu et al. 2021), increasing attention and efforts have been paid to recognising and recording religion-related ICH. On the national level, 732 out of the 3610 items in the five *Inventories of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects* approved and promulgated by the State Council of the People's Republic of China are religion-related (Digital Archive of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage 2021). These items spread across a wide range of ICH types, including folk customs, traditional dance, traditional drama, folk literature, traditional music, traditional fine arts, traditional craftsmanship, traditional sports, entertainment and acrobatics, *quyi*, and traditional medicine.² As demonstrated in Figure 1, more than half of the religion-related ICH items in the *National Inventories* exist in the forms of folk customs and traditional dance. In contrast, only a handful of the listed items are *quyi* and traditional medicine.

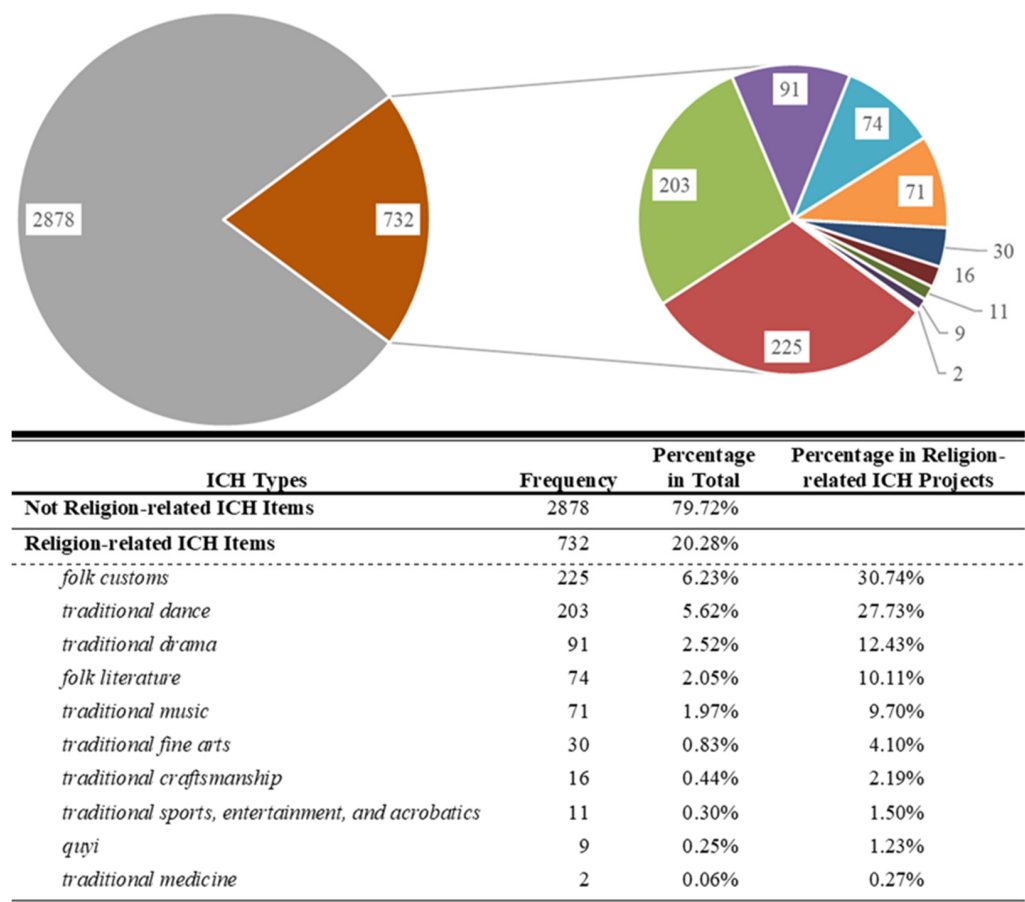


Figure 1. The Distribution of Different Types of Religion-related ICH Items in the *National Inventories*.

Among the 732 national-level religion-related ICH items, 474 (or 64.8%) are primarily associated with the Han 汉 people. However, given that the Han people constitute over 90% of China's population, religion-related ICH items associated with ethnic minorities are more likely to get featured in the *National Inventories*. This pattern is consistent with the findings reported by Tao and Griffith (2018, 2019), who argue that the narrative of religious diversity in contemporary Chinese scholarship is closely associated with ethnic diversity. Among the national-level religion-related ICH items associated with ethnic minorities, those associated with the Tibetan 藏, Miao 苗, Yao 瑶, and Mongolian 蒙古 peoples have the highest proportions (12.4%, 3.8%, 2.3%, and 1.5%, respectively).

Table 1 summarises the listed religion-related ICH items associated with the Han, Tibetan, Miao, Yao, and Mongolian peoples in the *National Inventories*. As demonstrated in Table 1, among the 474 listed items primarily associated with the Han people, the vast majority (340) are linked with folk religions. The remaining items are distributed almost equally between Buddhism and Taoism, with the former linked to 100 items and the latter to 97 items. Traditional dance and folk customs account for more than half of the listed religion-related ICH items primarily associated with the Han people. This pattern is consistent with the national trend. Approximately two-thirds of the 91 listed religion-related ICH items associated with the Tibetan people are linked to Buddhism, including traditional fine arts, dance, drama, and craftsmanship. By contrast, the 28 listed religion-related ICH items associated with the Miao are exclusively linked to folk religions. So are the 17 listed religion-related ICH items associated with the Yao people. Finally, among the 11 listed religion-related ICH items associated with the Mongolian people, 7 are linked with folk religions, and 4 are linked with Buddhism.

Table 1. Statistics of religion type and ICH categories in the top five nationalities in the proportion of religion-related ICH items.

Ethnicity	ICH Types		Folk Customs	Traditional Dance	Traditional Drama	Folk Literature	Traditional Music	Traditional Fine Arts	Traditional Craftsmanship	Traditional Sports, Entertainment, and Acrobatics	Quyi	Traditional Medicine	Total
	Religion												
Han	Folk religions	121	123	57 ^(a)	23	5	9	0	0	2	0	340	
	Buddhism	4	0	38 ^(b)	11	33 ^(d)	0	4	6 ^(f)	0	1	97	
	Taoism	19	0	42 ^(c)	2	26 ^(e)	0	0	6 ^(g)	5	0	100	
	Islam	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Christianity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Total	144	123	74	36	62	9	4	11	7	1	471	
Tibetan	Folk religions	6	13 ^(h)	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	30	
	Buddhism	4	16 ⁽ⁱ⁾	13	0	0	19	11	0	1	0	64	
	Taoism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Islam	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Christianity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Total	10	26	13	11	0	19	11	0	1	0	91	
Miao	Folk religions	10	8	1	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	28	
	Buddhism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Taoism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Islam	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Christianity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Total	10	8	1	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	28	

Table 1. Cont.

Ethnicity	ICH Types		Folk Customs	Traditional Dance	Traditional Drama	Folk Literature	Traditional Music	Traditional Fine Arts	Traditional Craftsmanship	Traditional Sports, Entertainment, and Acrobatics	Quyi	Traditional Medicine	Total
	Religion												
Yao	Folk religions	5	10	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17
	Buddhism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Taoism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Islam	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Christianity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	5	10	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17
Mongolian	Folk religions	5	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
	Buddhism	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	4
	Taoism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Islam	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Christianity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	6	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	11

Notes: (a) Among these items, 31 are simultaneously linked with folk religions, Taoism, and Buddhism. (b) and (c) Among these items, 31 are simultaneously linked with folk religions, Taoism, and Buddhism; one is simultaneously linked with Taoism and Buddhism. (d) and (e) Among these items, two are simultaneously linked with Taoism and Buddhism. (f) and (g) Among these items, one is simultaneously linked with Taoism and Buddhism. (h) and (i) Among these items, three are simultaneously linked with folk religions and Buddhism.

Three patterns can be identified from China's national-wide efforts and initiatives in safeguarding religion-related ICH.

First, Buddhism and Taoism are more deeply integrated with China's traditional culture among China's five officially recognised institutional religions. As a result, ICH related to Buddhism and Taoism is more likely to receive official recognition than ICH associated with Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. For example, whereas 172 listed religion-related ICH items are related to Buddhism and 103 to Taoism, none is explicitly related to Islam and only one to Christianity.³

China's central government has made noticeable efforts to push traditional craftsmanship closely associated with Buddhist activities for international recognition. For example, the Jinling Buddhist sutra engraving and printing technique 金陵刻经印刷技艺, a type of Buddhism-related traditional craftsmanship, was successfully inscribed in UNESCO's *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* as a part of China engraved block printing technique, thanks to the promoting efforts of China's central government. Furthermore, among the 172 Buddhism-related ICH items listed in the *National Inventories*, traditional drama, music, and fine arts are the top three types. As a result, many Buddhism-related ICH items have good potential to be developed into ICH-based commodities through the production-based safeguarding practice, which has become popular in China since the early 2010s (Xu et al. 2021).

Many Taoism-related ICH items listed in the *National Inventories* are protected as a part of the integral cultural treasures of a region. For example, in 2014, three listed Taoism-related ICH items—Laoshan Taoist music, Laoshan folk stories, and mantis boxing—were featured in the Qingdao Laoshan Taoist Cultural and Ecological Protection Experimental Zone at the Third China Intangible Cultural Heritage Expo (Wang 2014). Furthermore, among the 103 Taoism-related ICH items listed in the *National Inventories*, traditional drama, music, and folk customs are the top three types. As a result, many Taoism-related ICH items, particularly those closely associated with performing arts, can easily be transformed into cultural and tourism projects.

It should be noted that many Buddhism and Taoism-related ICH items are recognised not for their religious aspects but thanks to their close link with China's historical and cultural traditions. Take Buddhist music as an example. In the religious field, Buddhist music represents the sanctity of Buddhist doctrine. However, the more compelling reason for the several Buddhist music items in China's national ICH inventories is their significant and profound influence on the Chinese people's national characteristics, thought and behaviour patterns, aesthetic tastes, and customers (Tan and Wang 2009).

Second, besides supporting cultural elements of the officially recognised institutional religions, the Chinese government has also made considerable efforts to recognise ICH associated with folk religions and traditional popular beliefs. As a result, a significant proportion of religion-related ICH items listed in the *National Inventories* are linked to folk religions than institutional religions. More precisely, among the 732 listed religion-related ICH items, approximately 71.7% are linked to folk religions.

China's central government also plays an active role in extending the influence of the country's ICH associated with folk religions to an international level. For example, Mazu 妈祖 is China's most influential sea goddess. It is at the centre of many beliefs and customs in China's coastal areas, including oral traditions, religious ceremonies, and folk practices. In 2006 and 2008, worshipping rituals and customs related to Mazu were listed in the first and second *Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects*. Subsequently, with considerable backing from China's central government, the Mazu belief and customs were inscribed on UNESCO's *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* in 2009.

Moreover, the Chinese government has established and funded new institutions to oversee and manage ICH items and projects closely associated with folk religions and popular beliefs (Zhu 2020a, p. 102). For example, Miao's legendary epic of the King of Yalu 亚鲁王 was listed in *The Third Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage*

Projects in 2011. Traditionally, this epic serves as a sacred chant performed in funeral rites of the Miao communities around the Mashan 麻山 region of Guizhou Province. Furthermore, in 2012, the Research Institute of Yalu Culture was established in the Ziyun 紫云 Miao and Buyei Autonomous County, specialising in conducting surveys, excavations, research projects, and ICH safeguarding related to the Yalu culture.

It should be noted that many traditions and rituals associated with folk religions and traditional popular beliefs are often accredited and recognised as ICH for tourism development (Guo et al. 2021). Through this process, cultural and economic functions of religious activities tend to get highlighted, whereas those aspects perceived by the Chinese government as superstitious tend to be downplayed (Zhu 2020a, p. 103). For example, Taige 抬阁 (or Taigushi 抬故事) customs originally served as folk religious sacrifices in ancient China. In the 2010s, Lianyuan Municipal Government collaborated with researchers to systematically record Taige customs, abandoning the components deemed superstitious (Song et al. 2017, p. 126). In 2014, the revamped Taige customs were inscribed in *The Fourth Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects*.

Finally, religion-related ICH associated with minority ethnic groups attracts considerable attention from the Chinese government. Among the listed 262 religion-related ICH items associated with ethnic minorities in the *National Inventories*, 186 (or 72.1%) are linked with folk religions, many of which are integrated with the identity and traditions of minority ethnic groups. For example, the Torch Festival 火把节 is the most important cultural activity for the Yi 彝 people, who worship fire. The Torch Festival originates from folk religious rituals during which people use fire to expel insects and pests and protect the growth of crops. In 2006, the Chuxiong Yi Torch Festival 楚雄彝族火把节 was listed in *The First Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects*. Since then, the Torch Festival has been revamped to cover two activities: the performing arts of the Yi people on the one hand and social exchanges within the Yi community on the other. This festival has also become a well-known tourism project in the Chuxiong Ancient Town of Yi People (R. Liu 2019).

China's central government has also paid significant attention and provided considerable resources to safeguard other religion-related ICH items associated with the country's ethnic minorities. For example, many Tibetan communities in Western China are rich in Buddhist traditions and practices that embody different varieties of ICH, including traditional craftsmanship, music, rituals, and catering. Safeguarding religion-related ICH in Tibetan communities has become one of the noticeable areas where China's central government manages its ethnicity policies, intending to win over the support of the Tibetan people. To this end, China's central government has been heavily involved in safeguarding the Buddhism-related ICH in Tibetan communities, including conducting resource censuses, establishing heritage inheritance teams, allocating funds, rescuing endangered ICH, publishing materials, recording representative practice and practitioners, and curating national and international exhibitions (Anonymous 2012). One such example is safeguarding the making skills of ghee flowers.⁴ The Tar Temple Ghee Flower, a distinctive Tibetan art form, was included in *The First Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects* in 2006. Likewise, thangka making is a painting art with distinctive Tibetan characteristics, rich Buddhist links, and a unique artistic style. Tibetan thangka was also listed in *The First Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects* in 2006.

4. Local Authorities' Initiatives and Motivations

Since 2004, ICH safeguarding has become an essential cultural policy area for not only the central government but also many local authorities in China (Xu et al. 2021). Beyond Beijing, many local authorities have developed noticeable enthusiasm for promoting ICH related to local religious beliefs and practices. Most national-level religion-related ICH projects were directly administrated by the public institutions led by local governments (primarily at the municipal and county levels) or their departments. In addition, consistent

with the development on the national level, many religion-related items are included in various provincial, municipal and county-level lists of representative ICH projects. These items cover many aspects of ICH, such as ritual, music, stories, faith, customs, and traditional craftsmanship. One recent example is the Xiangcheng District 相城区 Government's effort to include Shengtang Miaohui 圣堂庙会, arguably the most influential Taoist festival in the Lower Yangtze region, in *The Fifth Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects* in 2021. Before that, the Xiangchen District Government had already pushed Shengtang Miaohui to be included in the *Inventory of Suzhou Municipal ICH Representative Items* in 2013 and *The Fourth Inventory of Provincial Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects* in Jiangsu in 2016. Moreover, to increase Shengtang Miaohui's influence and brand awareness, the Xiangcheng District Government coordinated the collective branding of several previously independent Taoist festivals in its jurisdiction (Meng 2021). Likewise, existing research results also reveal that local authorities play crucial roles in coordinating and supporting many other Taoist festivals in the Lower Yangtze region, supporting the local efforts in safeguarding relevant religion-related ICH (Yu 2018).

Many local authorities collaborate with non-governmental entities or citizens to safeguard religion-related ICH. For example, in 2013, the Zichuan District 淄川区 Government in the Shandong Province supported the establishment of a cultural research association to study and safeguard ICH related to Liguizu 李诡祖, a local Taoist saint often associated with wealth and fortune. Following this initiative, villagers in Dongwa established a committee to oversee the worship of Liguizu. Within a year, local government officials supported villagers in reviving rituals and reconstructing mausoleums and temples for Liguizu. Meanwhile, volunteers actively collected and compiled cultural materials associated with the popular belief of Liguizu. As a result of these jointed actions, the legendary story of the Liguizu was included in Zibo Municipal's list of ICH representative items (Ju 2013).

Three motivations drive local authorities' enthusiasm for safeguarding religion-related ICH in contemporary China.

First, safeguarding religion-related ICH often contributes to local governments' policy objectives. For example, the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission of the Wuhan Municipal Government actively promoted the Quanzhen Taoist Music 全真派宫观音乐 to be listed in the sixth batch of Wuhan municipal ICH representative items in 2018. Explaining their motivations, the Commission stated that "the successful inscription [of this religion-related ICH item] reflects the determination of local government in promoting the prosperity of socialist culture" (Wuhan Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission 2018). In regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, some local authorities also take events involving religion-related ICH as opportunities to highlight their achievements in dealing with ethnic affairs. For example, in Huanglong 黄龙, the local heritage management bureau leads the creation of temple festivals for international cultural tourism, showcasing the harmonious relations among all ethnic groups in Songpan (Kang 2009, p. 242).

Second, safeguarding religion-related ICH often contributes to local economic performance. Many local authorities perceive supporting religion-related ICH safeguarding as a convenient vehicle to enhance the local cultural image and promote local tourism. As a result, these authorities actively encourage the integration of religious traditions and local culture, creating opportunities for products that embody religion-related ICH to be consumed in museums, amusement parks, and street fairs (Zhu 2018). For example, the Jiuhua Mount scenic spot, which encompasses abundant Taoism-related tangible and intangible heritage, is a well-known Taoist sacred site in Anhui Province. In 2017, the annual tourist revenue of Jiuhua Mount reached over 12 billion yuan (approximately 1.89 billion U.S. dollars) (Zhang and Lu 2019, p. 17). Recognising the significant economic contribution of religion-related ICH, many local authorities in China are motivated to support safeguarding projects via tourism development, intending to enhance the brand awareness of the religion-related ICH in their jurisdictions.

Furthermore, in the name of production-based safeguarding, many local authorities actively encourage the integration of safeguarding and commercialising ICH (Xu et al. 2021). Against this background, many products that embody religion-related ICH are sold as commodities, generating income for practitioners and revenue for local authorities. Tibetan thangka is a typical example of how religion-related ICH revitalises the local economy. For example, in Tongren County 同仁县 in the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture alone, cultural industries generated an income of 750 million yuan (approximately 117.8 million U.S. dollars), much of which is linked to the making and selling of traditional Tibetan thangka (Zhao 2019).

Last but not least, safeguarding religion-related ICH often contributes to reducing poverty and increasing employment in the jurisdictions of local authorities. For example, *dongjing* 洞经 is traditional religious ritual music played by the literati at religious ceremonies to honour the deities in Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist religions. Nowadays, *dongjing* has been transformed into tourism entertainment in the Prefecture of Lijiang in Yunnan Province. Villagers are encouraged by local authorities to perform *dongjing* to tourists to generate family income (Su 2019). In other cases, safeguarding religion-related ICH may lead to developing cultural and creative industries that create considerable job opportunities for local people. For example, between 2006 and 2021, the government of the Tibetan Autonomous Region invested nearly 100 million yuan (approximately 15.7 million U.S. dollars) in safeguarding ICH related to thangka, leading to the growth of the thangka painting industry in Tibet. In 2021, the industry employed over 3000 thangka painters and 10,000 individuals in the surrounding sectors, with a *per capita* monthly income exceeding 3200 yuan (Anonymous 2021a).

It should be noted that local authorities do not merely adopt religious elements in their efforts to commercialise ICH. Instead, they actively shape religion-related ICH practices, either explicitly or unintentionally. For example, traditionally, the Tibetan metal forging craftsmanship in Zhaxijicai 扎西吉彩, a community in the Shigatse Prefecture, is primarily applied to make gold, silver, and bronze wares for Tibetan Buddhist rituals. However, thanks to production-based ICH safeguarding supported by the local authority, local practitioners have found many customers outside the religious communities. In response, they have increased the production of non-religious metal wares (Zhang 2014).

In some cases, local authorities also actively regulate the production-based safeguarding practices concerning religion-related ICH by setting up industry standards. For example, in Qinghai Province, local authorities have launched several certificated projects of thangka painting, including establishing “model bases” 示范基地.⁵ Furthermore, in 2014, the Tibet Autonomous Region Government enacted a milestone document titled *Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Thangka Industry* 关于推动唐卡产业加快发展的意见. It outlines the local authority’s plans for branding thangka products, training thangka painters, supporting thangka practitioners, and creating thangka industrial zones. In addition, the Quality and Technology Supervision Bureau of Tibet Autonomous Region and the Market Supervision and Administration Office of Qinghai Province have issued a series of industry standards for thangka painting since 2016, regulating the production and commercialisation of thangka paintings.

5. State-Sponsored Academic Efforts

Knowledge production and exchange are noticeably active areas in China’s religion-related ICH safeguarding. In this area, many members of academic institutions (such as universities, research institutes, and cultural and religious studies associations) often work closely with the Chinese state. Academics have a unique role in recognising religion-related ICH. They are equipped with scholarly knowledge and professional skills to discover, recognise, document, and theorise religion-related ICH. Because relatively few religion-related ICH items from China are inscribed in UNESCO ICH lists, the Chinese state actively supports academic activities in the area to enhance China’s state image and soft power (Nakano and Zhu 2020; Schreiber 2017).⁶ The Chinese state utilises the scholarly

knowledge and professional skills of academics to strategically highlight the cultural aspects of religion-related ICH while marginalising their religious or ideological implications. Chinese academics work for these objectives in different ways.

Firstly, some scholars undertake projects and studies to investigate the problems existing in safeguarding religion-related ICH, assisting China's application for including more religion-related ICH items in UNESCO ICH lists. Moreover, the Chinese National Social Science Foundation has made safeguarding religion-related ICH a priority research topic.

Secondly, religious researchers are increasingly focused on the cultural aesthetic aspects of religions, intending to theorise religion-related ICH studies. As a result, the ideological aspects of religion are marginalised. For example, Taoism significantly impacted arts and craftsmanship in traditional Chinese society. As a result, stories, figures, and patterns associated with Taoism are heavily featured in traditional pottery products from Jingdezhen 景德镇. In recent years, Jingdezhen Ceramic University expressed a strong desire to work with Taoist groups to promote the research and creation of high-quality porcelains (Zhou 2021). However, the proposed collaborations focus primarily on cultural aesthetics, with little academic attention paid to Taoist theology. Likewise, according to the chair of the Chinese Religious Studies Association's Committee of Contemporary Social and Religious Art, the Committee's objectives are to "promote the transmission of Chinese traditional culture" and to "strengthen contemporary Chinese people's aesthetic appreciation and creativities" (Wang and Liang 2019). In other words, religious meanings and theologies are not the Committee's primary concerns. Many local authorities in China also take the same approach to reconfigure folk religious traditions. They work closely with local intellectuals and practitioners to downplay what are considered superstitious attributes, highlighting religion-related ICH's aesthetic and historical value (Oakes and Sutton 2010, pp. 61–62).

The central government and various local authorities in China also sponsor workshops and conferences on safeguarding religion-related ICH organised by academic institutions. For example, in 2011, the Chinese National Academy of Arts, overseen by the then Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China, hosted a policy-oriented workshop on safeguarding religion-related ICH in contemporary China. The then director of the Ministry's ICH Department attended the workshop (Anonymous 2011). In 2016, a Buddhist ICH symposium held in Nanjing Great Bao'en Temple 南京大报恩寺 was co-sponsored by the Nanjing Municipal Government and the Chinese Buddhist Association and jointly hosted by the Institute of Chinese Buddhist Culture, the Chinese National Academy of Arts' Religious Art Center, and the Nanjing Cultural Investment Group (Han 2016). In addition, since the 21st century, China's central government and various local authorities have sponsored a series of national and international religious forums, creating platforms to showcase religion-related ICH. For example, the Second World Buddhist Forum, which took place in Wuxi and Taipei in 2009, highlighted several objectives related to Buddhist ICH, including (a) promoting the research of ICH related to the Buddhist culture, (b) enhancing the understanding of ICH related to the Buddhist culture, and (c) mobilising various players to join in the safeguarding of the Buddhist ICH.

6. State–Religion Interactions

The inherent ambiguity in contemporary China's religious regulations causes considerable risks and uncertainties to religious groups. Consequently, religious groups that intend to survive and thrive under these circumstances often need to develop innovative strategies to align their development with the state's agendas and initiatives (Stapleton and Tao 2022).

Religion-related ICH safeguarding is an area in which many religious groups actively engage with government initiatives, including but not limited to surveying, recording, and promoting religion-related ICH items. For example, a Qingcheng 青城 Taoist Kung Fu master led 15 disciples to showcase traditional Taoist martial arts at the Third International Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival in 2011 (He 2011). Some religious groups

also extend their influence by taking advantage of the government's official support for ICH safeguarding. For example, the Qixia Temple 栖霞寺 in Nanjing specialises in the Jinling Buddhist sutra engraving and printing technique, which, as previously mentioned in this paper, was inscribed in the UNESCO's *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* in 2009. Taking advantage of its UNESCO-listed ICH item, the Qixia Temple managed to receive sponsorship from the Nanjing Municipal Government to host the Jinling Buddha Worshipping Culture Month 金陵礼佛文化月 in 2011 to commemorate the Buddha's birthday (Sun 2011).

Some religious groups directly collaborate with government agencies in managing ICH because government departments, such as tourism and culture offices, have the power to decide whether certain religious activities are allowed to be carried out in the name of ICH-related cultural events. For example, in 2021, a Taoist music festival was held in the name of ICH safeguarding. The Grand Taoist Temple hosted the event in Moshan 磨山大道观 under the guidance of the Taoist Associations of Hubei Province and the City of Wuhan. However, the organisers also had to work closely with local government authorities, notably the Tourism Administration Bureau of the East Lake Eco-tourism Scenic Area and the Centre for Cultural Relics and Intangible Heritage of Wuchang District (Wang 2021).

Religious specialists and institutes collaborate with local authorities to implement various initiatives for safeguarding religion-related ICH. Between 1949 and 1978, the number of religious specialists with rich knowledge and skills to transmit cultural knowledge shrank significantly in China due to the state's hostility towards religion, especially during the Cultural Revolution between 1967 and 1976 (Chao 2012). In response to this problem, China's central government set up a series of education programs to train specialists in folklore and anthropology among the religious communities. Against this background, several religion-related research and training institutes were established. Financially supported by local governments, these institutes have trained new generations of religious specialists who actively document traditional and living religious practices. Once religious traditions are inscribed as ICH, these specialists are often in charge of recording and interpreting relevant practices, aligning them with official policies and institutionalised heritage knowledge (Zhu 2020a, p. 103).

Some religious groups perceive religion-related ICH as opportunities and platforms to demonstrate their values to the Chinese state, especially when religious practices per se are often suspicious in the eyes of government officials. To this end, many religious groups actively collaborate with academics to identify, safeguard, and promote their ICH. For instance, Chengdu Taoist Association invited researchers from the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Research Center to investigate how to efficiently safeguard and promote Chengdu Taoist music, which was listed in *The Second Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects* in 2008. The investigation team highlighted that Chengdu Taoist music effectively promotes traditional Chinese culture and builds the nation's cultural confidence (Anonymous 2021c). As this case demonstrates, collaborating with state-sponsored academic institutions to identify and record religion-related ICH is an efficient approach for religious groups to get their values recognised by the Chinese state. Moreover, some religious groups actively seek academic collaboration to enhance the professionalism of practising and safeguarding their religion-related ICH. For example, the Maoshan Taoist Monastery 茅山道院 sends young priests who are gifted in Taoist music to the Wuhan Conservatory of Music for professional training every year (Anonymous 2014).

With the hope of winning over the state's support, some religious groups also proactively incorporate secular objectives and elements in their practices of promoting and safeguarding religion-related ICH. For example, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Jiading Taoist Monastery donated 30,000 rolls of noodles to 17 communities in the Jiading District of Shanghai at the 2021 Jiading City God's Birthday Celebration 嘉定城隍华诞庆典. The Monastery also donated 50,000 yuan to the Jiading District Red Cross Society for COVID-19 prevention and control (Anonymous 2021b). In addition, other religious

groups integrate secular elements into their religion-related ICH practices. The Chengdu Taoist Music Troupe 成都道教音乐艺术团, for example, proactively integrates traditional Taoist songs and singing skills with modern orchestras to appeal to non-religious audiences (Anonymous 2021c).

7. Discussions

The data and analyses presented in this paper demonstrate that the religious field is no exception to what has been described as the state-centric approach in China's emerging legislative and policy framework for safeguarding ICH (Xu et al. 2021). As in many other areas of the ICH safeguarding practices in contemporary China, it is common for the state to coordinate various players to work together in religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives, but the state's direct involvements are also prominent. As a result, the religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives in contemporary China have several distinctive features due to the country's specific state-religion relations. They also provide an ideal analytical lens for observing and analysing many other aspects of state–society relations in contemporary China.

7.1. The Absence of Explicit Mention of Religion

Whilst abundant and diverse religion-related ICH safeguarding projects are functioning in contemporary China, many state-led practices and initiatives are carried out in the name of culture rather than religion. As argued in this paper, the proportional absence of the explicit mention of religions in the contemporary Chinese state's religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives reflects the political sensitivity of religion in China's political and policy spaces. It also highlights some inherent contradictions faced by contemporary China's policymakers and practitioners who design and implement religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives.

Religion-related ICH, as revealed by this paper, is a significant and indispensable component of contemporary China's ICH portfolio. Therefore, no sincere ICH policymaker and practitioner in contemporary China can ignore religion-related ICH despite the potential political sensitivity. Moreover, religious affiliations and activities are essential social aspects of overseas Chinese communities (Tao and Stapleton 2018). As a result, religion-related ICH provides platforms, channels, and vehicles for the contemporary Chinese state to engage with the overseas Chinese communities, which are often highly diverse in their identities and may not always naturally feel attached to the People's Republic of China (Tao and Loo 2022). However, the Chinese state only officially recognises five religions and the Chinese legislative framework only protects "normal" religious activities that occur within registered religious sites. As a result, frontline ICH policymakers and practitioners often find that they must be innovative in interpreting official lines and presenting their works regarding religion-related ICH safeguarding.

It should be noted, however, that engaging with religions without explicitly naming them does not merely occur in ICH safeguarding. Even China's central government can be flexible in this regard. For example, Confucianism is not regarded by the Chinese state as a religion and was heavily targeted during the Cultural Revolution for political and ideological reasons. However, despite being heavily criticised and persecuted before and during China's Cultural Revolution between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, Confucianism remains influential to many Chinese people today. As a result, the Chinese state proactively promotes a range of Confucius values that are deemed suitable for consolidating existing social and political orders, packing such values as traditional Chinese cultures rather than treating them as religious (Tao 2021).

7.2. Regulating Religious and Cultural Affairs through ICH Safeguarding

Religion-related ICH safeguarding serves as a focusing lens through which researchers can observe and analyse how the contemporary Chinese state effectively regulates its religious and cultural affairs.

This paper reveals that the contemporary Chinese state has shaped many aspects of China's religious landscapes, directly or indirectly, through its involvement in religion-related ICH safeguarding projects and actions. As evident in the distribution of ICH projects in Table 1, China's *National Inventories* include much more projects linked to folk religions than institutional religions. In contemporary China, many folk religions thus are not managed by the formal religious affairs regulatory and legislative frameworks because they are by nature diffused. However, ICH safeguarding provides various elements of the contemporary Chinese state to interact with the organisers and practitioners of these diffused religions, effectively establishing an active interface for state-religion interactions in the absence of formal institutional channels.

Furthermore, religion-related ICH is often intertwined with other forms of ICH, and the religious aspects are merely the primary consideration in recognising and safeguarding religion-related ICH. When state agencies include religion-related ICH items in various national and local inventories of representative ICH projects, the vast majority, if not all, of considerations are given to these items' "heritage" characteristics rather than their religious meanings. According to China's official documents and legislation on ICH safeguarding, whether a project can be listed in the *National Inventories* has much to do with whether it embodies and enhances some aspects of China's national identity and unity. For example, the religion-related projects included in the *National Inventories* must be "conducive to enhancing the cultural identity of the Chinese nation", reflect "the creativity of the Chinese nation", and strengthen "the unity of the Chinese nation" (GOSC 2005; MC 2007, 2009, 2013; MCT 2019). In addition, the selection criteria for ICH projects to be listed in the *National Inventories* also emphasise cultural significance. The selected projects are deemed as "rooted in local communities" and have been "practised and passed down through generations" (GOSC 2005; MC 2006, 2007, 2009, 2013). They are expected to reflect China's "cultural diversity" (MCT 2019), have "significant regional influence" (MC 2006, 2007, 2009; MCT 2019), and "possess exceptional historical, cultural, and scientific values" (MC 2006, 2007, 2009, 2013; MCT 2019).

7.3. ICH Safeguarding as a Vehicle to Advance Economic and Political Agendas

Various elements of the contemporary Chinese state have used safeguarding religion-related ICH as a policy and practice vehicle to enhance and advance their policy and political agendas. Through its religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives, the contemporary Chinese state works with various players in, among other areas, constructing cultural identities, managing state-society and interethnic relations, reducing poverty, and developing local economies.

In contemporary China, economic value is rarely written in the selection criteria for listing religion-related ICH in national and local inventories. However, various elements of the Chinese state have developed many schemes and policies to promote the commodification of suitable ICH items. Since 2005, one notable feature of China's legislative and policy efforts to safeguard ICH after 2004 is the explicit agenda of integrating ICH with commercial activities and economic developments. In particular, since China's ICH Law was enacted in 2011, it has become increasingly noticeable that China's national and local governments intend to integrate safeguarding ICH with economic development, mainly under the notion and discourse of "production-based safeguarding" 生产性保护 (Xu et al. 2021). In many regards, the commodification of religion-related ICH in contemporary China echoes similar practices that have emerged in many other countries. For example, in Mecca, pilgrims are increasingly treated as tourists and consumers; likewise, in Tokyo, the many ancient sites associated with the Seven Gods are rebranded and promoted in neoliberal tourism approaches (Yadav 2019). Accordingly, concerns have been raised over how tourism and commodification may negatively impact the sacred and authentic meanings associated with religion-related ICH (Ku 2018; Yadav 2019).

Safeguarding the religion-related ICH among ethnic minorities is also regularly presented by China's central and local governments as an effort to improve interethnic relations.

In this regard, linking ICH safeguarding with religious practices and knowledge creates a new cultural governance tool for the contemporary Chinese state to regulate ethnic relations and affairs. As revealed in [Zhu's \(2020b\)](#) research in some areas traditionally inhabited by ethnic minorities, the Chinese state actively transformed local religious practices into ICH tourism projects during post-disaster reconstruction. As a result of this process, religion-related ICH becomes a powerful tool for legitimising the state's control over minority ethnic groups and their knowledge and practices ([Zhu 2020b](#), p. 98). The state-designed heritage programs serve primarily as a platform for glorifying the state and showcasing the minority ethnic groups' gratitude to the state. They also legitimise the commercialisation of tourism in areas traditionally inherited by minority ethnic groups.

7.4. Limits and Uncertainties in the State-Centric Approach to Safeguarding Religion-Related ICH

China's state-centric approach has led to some significant achievements in ICH safeguarding. However, the country's legislative and policy endeavour for safeguarding ICH is also hampered by significant challenges inherent to its state-centric nature ([Xu et al. 2021](#)). State intervention may contribute to certain aspects of ICH safeguarding, but it may also negatively impact other aspects of ICH ([Xu and Tao 2022](#); [Xu 2022](#)).

For example, among China's five officially recognised institutional religions, Buddhism and Taoism are often considered more closely integrated with China's traditional culture than Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, Buddhism and Taoism-related ICH projects appear much more likely to receive official recognition and endorsement. Applying the same logic, one may infer that the following two patterns may exist in the contemporary Chinese state's ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives. First, those elements or aspects of religion-related ICH safeguarding deemed cooperative, uncontroversial, and harmonious are much more likely to receive support and encouragement. Second, in contrast, those deemed suspicious and superstitious by the state tend to get marginalised. Further empirical and critical research projects examining these propositions will likely return meaningful findings and insights.

In addition, under the notion of "production-based safeguarding", many elements of the contemporary Chinese state proactively promote various forms of commodification of religion-related ICH, including developing relevant tourism projects. Many local states regard these state-led efforts and initiatives as effective means for economic development and poverty reduction. However, as [Xu et al. \(2021\)](#) pointed out, some of these top-down policy initiatives may ignore local circumstances and hence not always be feasible or relevant on the local level. For example, directing rural communities to host traditional festivals may not be effective or efficient in villages where many young residents have migrated to the cities. Moreover, some state directives may not always follow market rules. For example, according to a leading practitioner in China, the commercial exploitation of ICH is often hindered by the lack of economies of scale—an inherent nature of many ICH projects ([Wu 2019](#)). Likewise, some scholars have questioned the efficiency of poverty alleviation projects that involve ICH ([J. Liu 2019](#)). Therefore, it is academically and practically important to empirically examine the effectiveness and efficiency of the contemporary Chinese state's "production-based safeguarding" paradigm in subsequent research projects.

Furthermore, as revealed in this paper, religion-related ICH projects are frequently used by the Chinese state to develop the local economy in areas traditionally inhabited by ethnic minorities. However, according to [Zhu \(2016\)](#), such projects also often strengthen the Chinese state's control over ethnic minorities. Moreover, they sometimes fail to effectively address the needs of ethnic communities in the long term ([Zhu 2020b](#)). Likewise, according to [Yadav \(2019\)](#), developing religion-related tourism and commodifying religion-related ICH may undermine the sacredness and authenticity of religious practices. Furthermore, many agencies of the Chinese state welcome the establishment of official professional standards for ICH-embedded products and services, considering these standards as a clear and convenient framework for regulating ICH-embedded commercial activities ([Wang 2015](#)). However, according to [Hu \(2018, p.11\)](#), these standards may obstruct the ICH's natural

evolution and dynamics. Likewise, according to Li (2015), they may also unintentionally reduce the local nuances and diversity of some ICH items. Therefore, more empirical research projects are needed to comprehensively and systematically assess the religious, cultural, political, and social impacts of the contemporary Chinese state's religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives, revealing the winners and losers.

Last but not the least, this paper reports the main selection criteria that China's central government claims to apply in its selection of representative ICH items. However, existing research has demonstrated that the policy implementation in contemporary China can vary significantly among different localities because local states often have considerable discretion in interpreting top-down instructions (Tao et al. 2016, 2020). Therefore, additional empirical research projects are needed to examine the drivers and mechanisms behind various local state agencies' involvement in religion-related ICH safeguarding. These research projects may also reveal which structures of local state–society relations are likely to foster effective religion-related ICH safeguarding practices.

8. Conclusions

Thanks to the close links between religion and heritage, safeguarding religion-related ICH has become a significant part of the global ICH safeguarding practices, which have emerged since the early 21st century. China is no exception, even though religion remains a politically sensitive affair despite the various reforms in the country. This paper reveals the contemporary Chinese state's active role in shaping the country's religion-related ICH safeguarding through a systematic review of China's official inventories of national representative ICH projects and extensive investigations of relevant local practices and initiatives.

Although China is ruled by a political party officially embracing an atheist ideology, various elements of the contemporary Chinese state have been proactively involved in safeguarding religion-related ICH. As introduced in this paper, the Chinese state's involvement in *de facto* religion-related ICH safeguarding predates its adoption of the explicit ICH safeguarding narratives. However, the Chinese state's practices and initiatives in safeguarding religion-related ICH did not flourish until the country's central government ratified the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2004. As this paper demonstrates, different elements of the Chinese state often collaborate in religion-related ICH safeguarding practices and initiatives. However, different government agencies and collaborators can take various approaches in the same area and often have different focuses, agendas, and priorities.

Since 2004, the central government of China has established a nationwide framework to recognise representative ICH items, including religion-related ones. The results of our empirical analysis demonstrate that China's central government is much more likely to officially recognise ICH related to religions that are more closely associated with China's traditional society, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and popular beliefs. In addition, religion-related ICH of ethnic minorities is proportionally better represented in the five *Inventories of National ICH Projects*.

Beyond Beijing, various local state agencies have also developed noticeable enthusiasm for supporting the safeguarding of religion-related ICH. As explained in this article, local authorities often perceive that safeguarding religion-related ICH can contribute to their policy objectives and the development of the local economy. They often also link safeguarding religion-related ICH with policy objectives such as enhancing employment and reducing property. Moreover, as pointed out in this article, some local authorities' practical and regulatory initiatives have also profoundly shaped religion-related ICH.

In addition to engaging directly with safeguarding religion-related ICH, the contemporary Chinese state has also shaped China's religion-related ICH by working closely with some academics and religious groups. In particular, the contemporary Chinese state has managed to manifest those aspects of religion-related ICH that it deems desirable through state-sponsored scholarship and religious practices. In addition, some religious groups

also proactively collaborate with the state in safeguarding religion-related ICH, for they perceive religion-related ICH as opportunities and platforms to demonstrate their values to the Chinese state.

To further improve the quality and effects of safeguarding religion-related ICH in China, the contemporary Chinese state should respect the autonomy and creativity of religious communities and ICH practitioners, avoiding unnecessary direct interventions in the daily operation of ICH safeguarding. Moreover, the state should create a decent social environment where ICH practitioners are valued for their knowledge, skills, and techniques. Finally, the state should also respect the essential roles that local communities play in ICH safeguarding, supporting the long-term resilience of the communities of ICH practitioners through a responsible social welfare system that balances the risks and challenges associated with the market economy.

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Notes

- ¹ In this article, we follow relevant academic and practical conventions to use the term “folk religion” to describe the many diffused religions prevalent in Chinese society but not officially recognised by the Chinese state. The Chinese word for this term is *minjian zongjiao* (民间宗教), in which *minjian* literally means “among the people” and *zongjiao* means “religion”. For more detailed discussions on the concept and some recent practices of *minjian zongjiao*, please see, for example, Guo et al. (2022).
- ² *Quyi* 曲艺 is a genre of traditional Chinese oral performing arts.
- ³ The *масхадо* 巴斯克节, also called Basque Festival, celebrated by China’s Russian ethnic minority located in the Erguna City of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, was listed in *The Third Inventory of National Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects* in 2011. It is a holiday established by Orthodox Christians to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus, which remains the only nation-level ICH item inscribed in five inventories so far.
- ⁴ Since the 15th century, Nyingma, the oldest of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, gradually adapted and developed a system of “five understandings” *wuming* 五明. The “five understandings” consists of *da-wuming* 大五明 (the five grand understandings) and *xiao-wuming* 小五明 (the five minor understandings). *Da-wuming* includes *neiming* 内明, *yanming* 因明, *shengming* 声明, *yifangming* 医方明, and *gongqiaoming* 工巧明, referring to the understanding of Buddhist doctrines, reasoning, music, medicines, and handicraft skills and techniques, respectively (Xie and He 1994). The ghee flowers handicraft knowledge and techniques come under *gongqiaoming*. Flowers are one of the seven offerings to the Buddha. However, the variety of flowers in Tibet is limited due to the cold local climate, and the flowering period is extremely short. Therefore, making ghee into flowers and offering them in Buddhist rituals is a method developed by Tibetans. The earliest form of ghee flowers was literally “flowers”, a kind of flower made of ghee. However, as Tibetan Buddhism evolves, ghee is increasingly used as a raw material to create artistic sculptures and landscapes. As a result, the skills of making ghee flowers evolved to make sculptures in various patterns, colours, designs, and techniques to satisfy the religious ritual’s requirements (Qingcuo and Lamu 2010).
- ⁵ Model bases are originally established to preserve and showcase specific ICH practices. However, many model bases are increasingly devoted to profit-making exercises such as producing and selling commodities to embody ICH and organising paid training sessions.
- ⁶ In this article, the term “UNESCO ICH lists” refers to the following three lists administrated by the UNESCO: (a) the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, (b) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and (c) Register of Good Safeguarding Practices. For more information, please refer to the relevant sections on UNESCO’s official website.

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