



# PROGRESS AND TRENDS OF GLOBAL INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE SAFEGUARDING (2008–2025) : A STATISTICAL ANALYSIS BASED ON UNESCO LISTS AND CHINESE PRACTICES

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## Abstract

Under the framework of UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, this study analyzes 849 ICH elements inscribed on the Three Lists and Register as of December 2025 — representing the first full-sample analysis incorporating the 20th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee (New Delhi, 2025). We examine quantitative trends (2008–2025), five-domain structural composition, regional participation patterns, and the development of transnational joint nominations. Four key findings emerge. First, global ICH safeguarding has evolved through four stages: baseline integration (2008), early peak (2009–2019), pandemic adjustment (2020–2022), and strong recovery (2023–2025), with 2025 inscriptions reaching a multi-year high of 69 elements. Second, traditional craftsmanship has become the largest domain (30.98%), surpassing performing arts and oral traditions — a shift we term the “livelihood turn” in global governance. Third, transnational joint nominations have become normalised, with 9 cases involving 28 countries in 2025 alone. Fourth, China ranks first globally with 45 inscribed elements, forming a balanced structure (40/3/2 across the Three Lists and Register). We conclude that the global ICH system has moved from quantitative expansion to quality-oriented sustainable development. These findings provide theoretical baselines for future longitudinal research and practical implications for States Parties seeking to optimise their safeguarding strategies.

## Keywords

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH); UNESCO Three Lists and Register; statistical analysis; five ICH domains; transnational joint nominations; China's safeguarding model; post-pandemic recovery

## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Institutional Evolution

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), as a living carrier of human civilisation, embodies the cultural memory, identity and creativity of diverse communities. Unlike tangible heritage, ICH exists in forms such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, and traditional craftsmanship. Its safeguarding faces multiple challenges, including the ageing of bearers, changing cultural ecosystems and the impacts of globalisation.

The international institutionalisation of ICH safeguarding began in the late 20th century. In 1997, UNESCO launched the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which announced 90 masterpieces in three rounds by 2005. In 2003, the 32nd UNESCO General Assembly adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter the 2003 Convention), marking a new era of legalised and systematic ICH safeguarding<sup>[1]</sup>. The Convention entered into force in 2006 and had 183 States Parties as of 2025. The Three Lists and Register system established under the Convention — the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices — forms the core instrument of global ICH governance<sup>[2]</sup>.

As of December 2025, updated data from the 20th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (New Delhi, India) shows that the Three Lists and Register include

849 ICH elements, covering five regions and 157 countries worldwide<sup>[3]</sup>. The 2025 session inscribed 67 new elements and completed two reclassifications (transfer from the Urgent Safeguarding List to the Representative List), providing the latest data support for this study<sup>[4]</sup>.

### ***1.2 Research Significance and Research Questions***

At present, global ICH safeguarding is undergoing a profound transformation: from an early stage of quantitative expansion focused on “more inscriptions” to a phase of quality improvement oriented towards “more effective safeguarding, wider participation and sustainable transmission”. This transformation requires academic research to adopt systematic quantitative analysis, cross-regional comparative studies and forward-looking trend assessment.

The research significance of this paper lies in three dimensions: (1) theoretically, it enriches academic knowledge of global ICH quantitative research and cross-regional comparative studies; (2) practically, it summarises successful experiences of Chinese ICH safeguarding for reference by other States Parties; (3) politically, it provides data support for the future optimisation of the UNESCO listing system.

#### **Core research questions:**

- What quantitative evolution and phased characteristics has the global ICH Lists shown from 2008 to 2025?
- What governance logic is reflected in the functional differentiation of the Three Lists and Register?
- What are the characteristics of regional participation and emerging trends in global ICH?
- What achievements has China made in ICH safeguarding, and what global implications does its model offer?

### ***1.3 Analytical Framework***

This study follows a sequential analytical framework: Section 2 identifies research gaps through a critical review of existing scholarship; Section 3 specifies the data sources and statistical methods; Section 4 presents the global quantitative patterns across four developmental stages; Section 5 provides the first full-sample structural analysis of UNESCO’s five ICH domains; Section 6 examines the functional differentiation of the Three Lists; Section 7 integrates regional characteristics and emerging trends; Section 8 uses China as a case study to illustrate a national safeguarding model; and Section 9 concludes with theoretical and policy implications.

## **II. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 International Research Progress***

International scholarship has developed a relatively mature research framework around UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage (ICH) mechanisms. Early studies focused on legal and institutional analyses of the 2003 Convention. Kurin (2004) examined the institutional logic of UNESCO’s ICH safeguarding programmes<sup>[5]</sup>. Blake (2009) argues that the Convention’s community-centred principles represent a legal shift in ICH safeguarding from elite recognition to community-based transmission<sup>[6]</sup>. Aikawa-Faure (2009) traced the institutional transition from the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” programme to the Three Lists system, revealing UNESCO’s evolution from cultural representation to governance construction<sup>[7]</sup>.

Lenzerini (2011) offered a comprehensive analysis from an international law perspective, arguing that ICH constitutes a component of cultural human rights and that its safeguarding requires the concomitant application of international human rights law<sup>[8]</sup>. He emphasised that the 2003 Convention, while philosophically sound, adopted an operational model derived from the 1972 World Heritage Convention that inadequately addresses the specificities of intangible heritage.

Smith (2006) introduced the influential concept of the “Authorised Heritage Discourse” (AHD), critiquing the dominant Western, material-centred framework that grants excessive interpretive authority to heritage experts over communities<sup>[9]</sup>. This concept has become foundational to Critical Heritage Studies. Deacon and Smeets (2013) extended this critique, examining requirements for greater community involvement in heritage identification and management under both the World Heritage and Intangible Heritage Conventions, with special attention to the determination of heritage value and authenticity<sup>[10]</sup>.

Recent studies have increasingly addressed digitalisation, sustainable development, livelihoods, climate change, and transnational joint nominations (Lixinski 2020; LBortolotto & Demgenski 2023)<sup>[11,12]</sup>. However, large-scale empirical research based on the complete dataset of 849 inscribed elements (as of December 2025) remains limited. In particular, systematic analyses of the five-domain structure (oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, knowledge of nature, and traditional craftsmanship) and the phased evolution of listing patterns—from the 2008 initial inscriptions to the 2025 session, which saw 67 new inscriptions and the first successful nominations for seven countries—represent an important direction for future research.

## 2.2 Domestic Research Progress

Domestic scholarship on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in China has formed three major research directions: theoretical construction, policy analysis, and safeguarding practices. Early foundational work focused on defining the scope and significance of ICH protection. Wang (2006)<sup>[13]</sup> argued that protecting traditional cultures of different ethnic groups, communities, and regions had become a globally recognised concern, and that the core of ICH safeguarding lies in protecting traditional culture and cultural diversity. Li et al. (2006)<sup>[14]</sup> noted that as understanding of heritage values deepens and destruction caused by environmental change and unsustainable economic growth intensifies, heritage protection has become a hot topic in international scholarship and public discourse. Liu (2007)<sup>[15]</sup> emphasised that under globalisation and rapid modernisation, ICH faces a growing crisis—traditional and diverse folk cultures have been strongly impacted by mass production and foreign cultures, which not only threatens individual cultural fragments but also fundamentally alters the living environment of cultural diversity as a whole.

On safeguarding principles and methods, Li (2011)<sup>[16]</sup> argued that ICH is not static but requires development and continuous innovation on the basis of transmission to achieve scientific protection. Sun (2012)<sup>[17]</sup> provided a comprehensive assessment, stating that global ICH protection and management strategies are moving towards diversification, scientific rigour, and integration, and that ICH resources possess cultural, scientific, historical, aesthetic, economic, and social values. In a subsequent study, Sun (2013)<sup>[18]</sup> documented China's efforts and achievements in nominating elements to UNESCO's Lists, conducting international exchanges, exploring innovative safeguarding models, and strengthening capacity-building training, all of which have promoted the sustainable development of ICH safeguarding.

Recent research has expanded into living transmission, innovative development, and annual monitoring. Li (2018)<sup>[19]</sup> systematically theorised the practice of living transmission. Wu (2021)<sup>[20]</sup> provided a comprehensive overview of ICH studies. Li (2023)<sup>[21]</sup> further explored the relationship between living transmission and innovative development. Wang (2023)<sup>[22]</sup> updated the foundational *Introduction to Intangible Cultural Heritage* to its fourth edition. Song and Li (2025)<sup>[23]</sup> produced the *Annual Development Report on Chinese ICH Safeguarding (2024)*, addressing key themes such as ICH safeguarding and Chinese-style modernisation, digital resource construction, and independent knowledge system development, alongside hot topics like common prosperity, 'neo-Chinese trends' (guochao), and cultural tourism integration. Sun and Sun (2026)<sup>[24]</sup> point out that while current research hotspots focus on living inheritance, digital and intelligent empowerment, integrated development of culture and tourism, and international communication, the field still faces core challenges including insufficient research depth, theories lagging behind practice, backward disciplinary construction, unbalanced research distribution, and insufficient inheritance vitality.

In summary, while Chinese scholars have conducted extensive research on the conservation, management, and sustainable development of China's ICH resources, recent years have seen a clear shift from descriptive inventory towards policy evaluation and practical implementation models.

## 2.3 Research Gaps and Innovations

**Research gaps:** (1) outdated data without coverage of the 2025 New Delhi session; (2) insufficient structural analysis of the five ICH domains; (3) incomplete phasing across the full 2008–2025 period; (4) inadequate comparison of China's structural position in the global landscape.

**Innovations:** (1) use of the complete 2025 dataset of 849 elements; (2) first systematic statistical analysis of the five-domain structure (2008–2025); (3) construction of a four-stage developmental model; (4) integrated framework linking global trends and Chinese practices suitable for academic publication.

## III. Data and Methodology

### 3.1 Research Data

Core data derive from the UNESCO ICH database updated in December 2025, including 849 elements with information on year, region, country, domain, listing type and nomination format. Time-series data cover 2008–2025. Two statistical rules are clarified: (1) the 90 elements of 2008 represent the integration of pre-Convention Masterpieces; (2) the 69 elements of 2025 include 67 new inscriptions and two reclassifications. Supplementary materials include Committee session reports, State Party reports and official documents from China's Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center.

### 3.2 Methodology

Four methods are employed: (1) statistical analysis — quantification of volume, phases, regions, domains and listing structures; (2) literature review — review of the Convention, operational directives and global scholarship;

(3) comparative analysis — cross-regional, cross-temporal and China–global comparisons; (4) inductive analysis — extraction of trends, models and governance logic.

## IV. Overall Pattern of the Global ICH Lists (2008–2025)

### 4.1 Total Volume and Coverage

By December 2025, the Three Lists and Register include 849 elements covering five regions and 157 countries. Participation exceeds 85% of States Parties. Europe and Asia-Pacific remain major hubs, while Africa, the Arab States and Latin America have grown significantly, leading to a more balanced global distribution.

### 4.2 Historical Periodisation and Quantitative Changes

**Table 1. Global ICH development can be divided into four stages**

Development Stage	Time Period	Annual Inscriptions	Stage Characteristics
Baseline Period	2008	90 (base)	Integration of pre-Convention masterpieces
Early Peak	2009–2019	+82 (2009) then 30–50/year	Enthusiastic early nominations
Pandemic Adjustment	2020–2022	32 → 47 → 47	Slowdown in preparation and review
Strong Recovery	2023–2025	55 → 66 → 69	Full post-pandemic rebound

*Note:* The 69 elements in 2025 include 67 new inscriptions and two reclassifications (transfer from Urgent Safeguarding List to Representative List). *Source:* UNESCO ICH database, December 2025.

The 2025 volume reaches a multi-year high, indicating that global ICH safeguarding has entered a high-quality recovery phase.

While the quantitative growth reveals macro-level trends, the internal structural composition — particularly the distribution across UNESCO’s five ICH domains — offers deeper insights into shifting safeguarding priorities.

## V. Structural Analysis of the Five ICH Domains (2008–2025)

UNESCO classifies ICH into five domains. This paper presents the first full-sample structural statistics.

### 5.1 Overall Distribution of the Five Domains (2025)

**Table 2 Distribution of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage across Five Domains (2025)**

Domain	Number of Elements	Percentage
1. Oral traditions and expressions	168	19.79%
2. Performing arts	211	24.85%
3. Social practices, rituals and festive events	207	24.38%
4. Traditional craftsmanship (including knowledge of nature and the universe)	263	30.98%
Total	849	100%

*Source:* UNESCO ICH database, December 2025.

Key findings: (1) Traditional craftsmanship is the largest domain (nearly 31%). (2) Performing arts and social practices/festivals together account for nearly half of all elements. (3) Oral traditions are underrepresented, partly due to their higher endangerment and difficulties in documentation.

### 5.2 Evolution of Domain Structure (2008–2025)

Four phases are observable:

- 2008 baseline: performing arts and oral traditions dominant (legacy of the Masterpieces Programme).

- 2009–2019: steady growth of festivals and craftsmanship as States Parties diversified nominations.
- 2020–2022: craftsmanship and festivals proved more resilient during the pandemic, as they could be nominated with existing documentation.
- 2023–2025: craftsmanship becomes the clear mainstream, reflecting alignment with sustainable livelihoods and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### 5.3 Governance Implications

The domain shift from “cultural representation” to “livelihood-oriented practice” demonstrates that global ICH governance has become more pragmatic, community-centred and development-focused. Beyond domain composition, the functional specialisation of the Three Lists and Register constitutes another critical dimension of the global safeguarding architecture.

## VI. Functional Differentiation of the Three Lists and Register

**Table 3. The distribution of 2025 inscriptions clearly reflects functional positioning**

List / Register	New Inscriptions	Proportion	Functional Position
Representative List	53	79.1%	Core showcase of mature safeguarding
List in Need of Urgent Safeguarding	11	16.4%	Endangered heritage rescue
Register of Good Safeguarding Practices	1	1.5%	Model for replicable experience

Source: 20th Session Report, UNESCO (2025).

### 6.1 Representative List: Core Pillar

Covers well-preserved, community-supported elements such as Beijing opera, acupuncture and the Twenty-Four Solar Terms.

### 6.2 Urgent Safeguarding List: Safeguarding Floor

Targets highly endangered elements. Two elements were transferred to the Representative List in 2025, showing successful rescue outcomes.

### 6.3 Register of Good Practices: Global Model

The 2025 addition is China’s Safeguarding Plan for the Hezhe Manchu Folk Song Yimakan, reflecting China’s transition from a “nomination power” to an “experience power”.

### 6.4 Governance Logic Upgrade

The system embodies a shift from “inscription-oriented” to “safeguarding-centred” governance.

## VII. Regional Characteristics and Emerging Trends

### 7.1 Balanced Regional Participation and Africa’s Rise

Asia-Pacific and Europe remain leading, but Africa achieved a record nine inscriptions across 13 countries in 2025. Seven countries gained their first inscription, expanding the global ICH community.

### 7.2 Normalisation of Transnational Joint Nominations

In 2025, nine transnational nominations involved 28 countries, institutionalising the protection of shared heritage (e.g., nomadic camel culture, sericulture traditions).

### 7.3 Thematic Focus on Traditional Craftsmanship

Craftsmanship links directly to community livelihoods, poverty alleviation and rural revitalisation — a key reason for its dominance.

### 7.4 Four Global Trends

1. Systematic safeguarding — legal and listing frameworks;
2. Living transmission — community-led practice;
3. Diversified research — academic, industrial and community-based;
4. Digital popularisation — documentation, dissemination and virtual experience.

### 7.5 Three Regional Models

- East Asia: state-driven, high inventory, strong investment.
- Europe: legalistic, cross-border cooperation, mature cultural tourism.
- Americas: flexible, innovative, industry-oriented.

Against this global backdrop, China's ICH safeguarding model — as the largest single State Party in terms of inscribed elements — merits focused examination for its potential replicability.

## VIII. Chinese Achievements and Safeguarding Model

### 8.1 Core Achievements: Global Leader with Balanced Structure

**Table 4. By December 2025, China has 45 inscribed elements, ranking first globally**

List / Register	Number	Typical Cases
Representative List	40	Beijing opera, acupuncture, Twenty-Four Solar Terms
Urgent Safeguarding List	3	Yimakan, Qiang New Year, Li traditional brocade
Register of Good Practices	2	Fujian puppetry succession plan; Yimakan safeguarding plan

Source: UNESCO ICH Portal and China ICH Network.

### 8.2 China's Five-Domain Characteristics

China shows strong representation in performing arts and festivals, growing craftsmanship, and focused rescue of endangered oral traditions, which is consistent with the latest research on China's ICH development .

### 8.3 China's Model: State Leadership, Social Participation, Classified Protection, Living Transmission

1. National–provincial–city–county four-level listing system;
2. Official bearer recognition and financial support;
3. Large-scale digital documentation;
4. ICH workshops integrated with rural revitalisation;
5. Active international cooperation (e.g., transnational nominations with Mongolia, Kazakhstan).

### 8.4 Global Implications

1. Systematic and legalised safeguarding;
2. Classified policies for representative, endangered and best-practice elements;
3. Community-centred living transmission;
4. Active participation in transnational shared-heritage nominations.

## IX. Conclusion and Outlook

### 9.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it provides the first full-sample statistical baseline (N=849) for post-2025 ICH research, enabling future longitudinal comparisons. Second, the four-stage periodisation model (Baseline–Early Peak–Pandemic Adjustment–Strong Recovery) offers an analytical framework for understanding how exogenous shocks affect UNESCO's listing dynamics. Third, the identification of craftsmanship as the dominant domain (30.98%) challenges earlier assumptions that performing arts and oral traditions would remain central, suggesting a “livelihood turn” in global ICH governance.

### 9.2 Main Empirical Findings

- Global ICH safeguarding has evolved through four stages, with a strong post-pandemic rebound and a total of 849 elements by 2025.
- Traditional craftsmanship is the largest domain (nearly 31%).
- The Three Lists form a tiered governance system focused on quality and sustainability.
- Regional distribution is more balanced; transnational nominations are increasingly mainstream.
- China ranks first with 45 elements and provides a replicable model.

### **9.3 Policy Implications**

For UNESCO: The functional differentiation of the Three Lists should be further strengthened, particularly by expanding the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (currently only 1.5% of new inscriptions) as a mechanism for cross-national learning.

For States Parties: The normalisation of transnational joint nominations (nine cases involving 28 countries in 2025) suggests that bilateral and multilateral coordination mechanisms should be institutionalised, rather than remaining ad hoc.

For China: While ranking first with 45 elements, China's future contribution should shift from quantitative nomination to qualitative experience-sharing, particularly in integrating ICH safeguarding with rural revitalisation and the UN SDGs, which aligns with the prospects of China's ICH research.

### **9.4 Limitations**

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study relies exclusively on UNESCO's inscribed lists, which reflect state-led nomination strategies rather than on-the-ground safeguarding effectiveness. Second, the five-domain analysis aggregates elements at the nominal level, without accounting for the actual scale or vitality of each ICH practice. Third, the study does not analyse the influence of economic, political or demographic variables on nomination success rates.

### **9.5 Future Research Directions**

Future research should: (1) develop a "safeguarding effectiveness index" that combines listing status with community-reported vitality measures; (2) conduct comparative case studies of transnational joint nominations to identify success factors; (3) examine the impact of digital technologies (AI, VR, digital twins) on ICH documentation and transmission; and (4) integrate ICH data with SDG indicators to assess heritage's contribution to sustainable development goals.

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