

# Lessons from China in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage



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CULTURE embodies the way of life of a society. From language, knowledge, customs and beliefs to ideas, skills, arts and crafts, culture is how a society organises itself. Heritage is an aspect of culture that is transmitted from generation to generation. According to the Unesco Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, “tangible cultural heritage” includes artistic creations, built heritage such as buildings and monuments and other physical or tangible products of human creativity that are invested with cultural significance in a society. Meanwhile, “intangible cultural heritage” indicates “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (Unesco, 2003).

Under the invitation of the consulate-general of China in Kuching, a group of ten participants from public and private sectors in Sarawak took part in the “Seminar on intangible cultural heritage conservation and development in Malaysia” from Oct 25 to Nov 5, 2021. The seminar was also attended by five participants from cultural industries in West Malaysia. The event was hosted and organized by the Central Academy of Culture and Tourism

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Administration, an educational and training institution directly affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China.

The academy provides training to government administrative staff of cultural and tourism departments in China and also management training to cultural and tourism enterprises and institutions. The academy also extends its exclusive training programs to overseas counterparts. To date, a total of 2,500 participants from 130 countries, with cultural and tourism backgrounds, have attended such pieces of training. The program up until the Covid-19 pandemic was on-site in China, and since 2021, the training program has adopted the online mode, where virtual tours are conducted to supplement actual site visits, with adequate guidance and explanations being provided to the participants.

Throughout the two-week seminar, various past and contemporary issues were shared by the Chinese experts. Measures and practices on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and the sustenance of the heritage by the Chinese government and local stakeholders were presented. The academy shared China’s concept of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and left a profound impression on the participants. China tops the ranking by being the country with the most inscribed intangible cultural heritage on Unesco’s list of intangible cultural heritage, where the country has 42 items of intangible cultural heritage inscribed on the list as of 2020. The country’s principles in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage play a tremendous role in ensuring its multi-ethnic nation’s rich cultural heritage receives deserving attention and protection.

China is a multi-ethnic nation with 56 ethnic groups. Although the Han ethnic makes up 90% of the country’s population, other ethnic groups’ intangible cultural heritages are also recognized, nominated and successfully inscribed to Unesco’s list. For example, the Tibetan Lum medicinal bathing traditional knowledge, the Mongolian Khoomei or “throat singing”, the Uyghur Meshrep traditional social gathering and the Tibetan, Mongolian and Tu Gesar epic traditions. China realized the importance of every ethnic’s cultural heritage and strived to protect and also promote it at

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creating awareness about the beauty and charm of its rich and diversified heritage. Rigorous efforts were expended to acknowledge and encourage cultural heritage inheritors to come forth to share, impart and pass on the knowledge. Communities or ethnic groups that own the heritage are also being recognized and training workshops are conducted to explore the potential in improving the protection of the heritage. Discussions on commercial activities and cultural products as well as cultural services are organized between government offices, community owners of the heritage and industrial players. Such moves raised awareness of the importance of heritage and how it is able to generate income and improve the living standards of the community.

Malaysia is also a country rich in cultural diversity. However, sadly only five of our cultural heritages are inscribed on Unesco's list of intangible cultural heritage. Every state in the country has its own unique cultural heritage belonging to people from diverse ethnicities. We do not lack songs, ritual songs, epics of legendary beings or traditional healing that have been practised for generations. Our country should emulate China's principle of "putting the people first" in safeguarding cultural heritage. Every ethnic group in the country should be given the opportunity to present and propose the heritage they want to protect and promote to the present and next generation. The efforts have to start from the people but with strong encouragement and support from the government. Heritage is the resource and wealth of our country and we should not let it disappear because of urban development, advancement of technology and most of all, the ignorance of its importance. As the Chinese saying goes, "A single flower does not make spring, while one hundred flowers in full blossom bring spring to the garden". "Spring" can come to Malaysia too if we acknowledge the importance of safeguarding the invaluable cultural heritage of our multi-ethnic populace.

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