

## Original Paper

# Shenzhen's Policies on Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance and Practices of Digital Dissemination

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage in sports dance within Shenzhen, focusing on specific practices such as the Longgang Dragon Dance, Bao'an Qilin Dance, Longgang Qilin Dance, and Nanshan Yi Dance. Through comprehensive field investigations and direct interviews, it explores the current state of intangible cultural heritage preservation and transmission in Shenzhen. The analysis details the implementation of relevant policies and identifies that the potential contributions of online communities and grassroots organizations in promoting the conservation and inheritance of these cultural forms remain underexploited. The study proposes that heritage custodians more systematically leverage digital technologies to enhance the propagation of intangible cultural heritage. This, in turn, will foster the high-quality development of Shenzhen's cultural heritage.*

### **Keywords**

*Cultural Heritage Protection, Sports Dance, Digitalization, High-Quality Development, Shenzhen's cultural policies*

## **1. Research Background**

In 2023, General Secretary Xi explicitly emphasized that at this new historical juncture, it is crucial to "continue the Chinese cultural lineage, promote the flourishing of cultural enterprises and industries, and advance the protection and inheritance of excellent traditional Chinese culture." Cao et al. (2021) suggest that "the city serves as the geographical home of cultural heritage, a practical platform, and a system of discourse markers, acting as a fundamental space for its growth, protection, and development, and an essential spiritual space for its humanistic values" (p. 133). The protection and inheritance of

cultural heritage, structured at the city level, can be variably influenced by different urban governance styles.

After more than four decades of rapid development, Shenzhen has led with bold innovations in high-tech and cutting-edge technologies, serving as a pioneering example. In the realm of cultural heritage, unlike tangible heritage that includes physical artifacts, intangible cultural heritage more centrally involves its inheritors, presenting greater challenges in its protection and transmission. As of December 2021, Shenzhen had documented 214 intangible cultural heritage items and identified 176 inheritors (Fu & Qin, 2023). The city had previously established and has been progressively refining a foundational system for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the management of protection funds. A comprehensive catalog system has largely been developed, with several districts establishing district-level intangible cultural heritage exhibition halls. Since 2009, in response to the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage" and the "Opinions on Advancing the Implementation of the National Strategy for Cultural Digitalization," Shenzhen has introduced seven policy documents, including the "Interim Measures for the Management of Declaration and Review of Shenzhen's Intangible Cultural Heritage List Projects." These documents regulate and guide various aspects, including the protection catalog for intangible cultural heritage, the identification and protection of inheritors, protection subsidy funds, and related management measures.

Policy not only exists in text but is also reflected in the effectiveness of its implementation, as Schuster (2002) elucidated, "Most cultural policies concern practices and actions that embody policy intentions, which are not explicitly stated" (p. 9). This paper aims, on one hand, to explore the inheritance of cultural intangible heritage from the perspective of policy implementation, examining if the government's specific execution and support policies encounter challenges, and proposes recommendations for better transmission of intangible heritage. On the other hand, this paper seeks to understand, through research, how Shenzhen's policies engage various community groups in the protection and inheritance of intangible heritage.

## 2. Literature Review

The existing literature on the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage lacks specific studies on Shenzhen's policies, digital dissemination practices, and the involvement of various stakeholders. Prior research has mainly focused on the following areas:

Significant discussions in the literature regarding cultural heritage protection and inheritance in Shenzhen, like those by Cui Chong, Song Jusheng, and Gao Yuan (2020), point out that there is still room for improvement in terms of the integrity of the objects protected, the implementation of protection measures, and their effectiveness. Moreover, the protection of cultural heritage not listed in official registers remains significantly behind, with overlapping management jurisdictions leading to differential treatment of certain heritages (Cui et al., 2020). Leng Juan (2019) took a granular approach to individual urban districts and found through observations and empirical studies that although

Shenzhen's policies focus on the development of the digital cultural industry, the support for intangible cultural heritage protection—including financial aid, talent support, promotional efforts, and technical assistance—is insufficient. For example, in Bao'an District, only 30% of surveyed individuals could name local cultural heritages, and there is a notable lack of dedicated personnel for their protection and inheritance (Leng, 2019).

The protection and inheritance of cultural heritage are not solely reliant on government-led, top-down governance but depend on the involvement of inheritors of intangible heritage, various conservation organizations, communities, media, and the public. According to the renowned Ladder of Citizen Participation theory proposed by American scholar Sherry Arnstein, public engagement (including inheritors and other stakeholders) can be categorized into four levels: manipulation, tokenism, informed participation, and citizen power (as illustrated in Table 1). If public engagement is limited to being manipulated, guided, informed, or consulted, it is merely a passive "response" and does not constitute substantial involvement, thus failing to effectively mobilize various forces in cultural heritage protection (Arnstein, 1969).

While these studies raise concerns about potential areas for optimization in Shenzhen's approach to protecting intangible cultural heritage, they lack specifics on the stakeholders involved in the protection and inheritance processes, as well as clarity on the responsibilities each party should undertake.

**Table 1. Ladder of Public Participation Diagram**

citizen control	degrees of citizen power
delegated power	
partnership	
placation	degrees of tokenism
consultation	
informing	
therapy	nonparticipation
manipulation	

Source: Arnstein, S. R., 1969

From the angle of digital dissemination practices, Lei and Xie (2023) suggest that the protection of cultural heritage must fully leverage digital technologies to foster living inheritance and narrative innovation, enhancing external communications. Zhou (2023), Wen and Zhao (2023) observe that with the progression of digitalization, traditional cultures and cultural heritages can utilize digital resources for preservation, while conversely, the abundance of traditional cultures provides a rich content source for digitalization, further propelling the evolution of big data technologies. Digitalization can enable cultural inheritance through multidimensional immersive experiences (Zhou, 2022; Wen, 2022). These

studies concentrate on the methods of digital dissemination of intangible cultural heritage but highlight a lack of specific practices in the dissemination of Shenzhen's cultural heritage.

The literature thoroughly analyzes the challenges faced in the protection and inheritance of intangible heritage, but it falls short in providing detailed management solutions and strategic recommendations for the protection of urban cultural heritage specifically. This study aims to build on previous research, incorporating Shenzhen's urban cultural heritage resources and protection status to deeply analyze how policies can better mobilize the enthusiasm of various stakeholders, thereby revitalizing cultural heritage and advancing its protection and inheritance.

### 3. Research Methods

To thoroughly understand the current state of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) inheritance in Shenzhen, this study focuses on the city's prevalent sports dance categories as research cases. Through field research and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with ICH inheritors, the study analyzes the roles played by various stakeholders, including ICH inheritors, conservation organizations, communities, media, and the public, in the protection process of sports dance-related ICH in Shenzhen. It aims to identify any gaps in participation and explore possible optimizations.

Sports dance-related cultural intangible heritage is distributed across different districts of Shenzhen. Based on the heritage level and the geographical factors of sports dances, For this study, the following intangible heritages were selected:

**Table 2. Representative Intangible Sports Dance Heritage Projects and Levels of Inheritors in Shenzhen**

No.	Category	Project Level	Inheritor Level
1	Yi Dance	Nanshan District	Nanshan District
2	Longgang Dragon Dance	Guangdong Province	Shenzhen City
3	Longgang Qilin Dance	Shenzhen City	Shenzhen City
4	Bao'an Qilin Dance	National Level	National Level

The study will conduct content analysis on data collected through field surveys and interviews to assess the involvement of various stakeholders in Shenzhen's ICH protection process and the progress of digital initiatives, and will propose recommendations for future ICH protection.

### 4. Research Analysis

Through field research, this paper analyzes the inheritance of sports dances in Shenzhen from several perspectives, including government support implementation, community and conservation organization support, media support, and digital aids for ICH.

#### 4.1 Government Support Implementation

The government's support for the inheritance of sports dance types focuses on several areas:

**Financial Support:** Compared to other cities, Shenzhen provides more substantial support for ICH inheritors and projects. The "Shenzhen Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Subsidy Fund Management Measures" specify: "National representative projects receive a subsidy of 60,000 RMB per project per year, provincial representative projects 40,000 RMB, and city-level projects 30,000 RMB; representative inheritors receive a subsidy of 10,000 RMB per person per year." All surveyed sports dance-related ICH projects and inheritors have timely received these subsidies. Currently, these funds are mainly allocated to activities such as publicity, venue rental, and training materials procurement (e.g., purchasing props for Qilin and lion dances, such as heads crafted in Dongguan, as depicted below). However, if ICH inheritors depend solely on government subsidies for full-time engagement, the funds are insufficient to cover all expenses associated with ICH protection and transmission. Consequently, most inheritors work part-time, dedicating their spare time to skill transmission and promotional activities.



Image: Purchased props for lion and Qilin dances. Source: Photographed by the author

**Other Support:** Different districts in Shenzhen prioritize various aspects of ICH promotion. For example, the Nanshan District Cultural Center provides books and other cultural materials to assist Yi dance inheritors in developing teaching materials; the Longgang District government organizes regular ICH events in schools, encouraging diverse ICH performances for primary and secondary students on Cultural Heritage Day to increase students' interest in ICH protection; Bao'an District actively provides competition information to help Bao'an Qilin dance inheritors win international awards.

Government support mainly offers directional guidance and encouragement but does not involve specific operational details. For instance, Nanshan Yi dance was initially invited to a vocational college to establish an ICH transmission program, but the collaboration faltered due to disagreements over the content of the transmission, and the program was not implemented.



Image: Longgang dragon dance team performing for students and ICH exhibition program list. Source: Photographed by the author

Research also reveals that ICH projects and inheritors may not always align in terms of levels; a project might be at the provincial level while its inheritor is at the city level. The inheritors' understanding of how to upgrade their projects based on existing standards is not well-defined, suggesting that this aspect requires further clarification in future studies.

#### 4.2 Community and Conservation Organization Support

Cheng (2024) highlights that a "community-centered" approach has consistently been a core principle upheld by UNESCO in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes the vital role of communities in this process, marking China's shift from "ICH entering the community" to "ICH within the community" (p.58).

**Spatial Support:** In the case of sports dance-related ICH in Shenzhen, training spaces are essential as inheritors' homes are not viable venues. Shenzhen's prominent ICH sports dance communities provide geographical space for these activities. For example, the Nanshan Cultural Center has allocated the largest available space within the center to the Nanshan Yi Dance, in exchange for rental fees paid by the inheritors. Similarly, the Longgang and Bao'an communities provide facilities for practicing and teaching Qilin Dance, as illustrated below.



Image: Longgang community providing space for Qilin and Dragon Dance. Source: Photographed by the author

**Personnel Support:** Communities assist local ICH inheritors by promoting heritage within the community, recruiting local audiences, and encouraging participation. This facilitates the identification and training of potentially talented successors by the inheritors.

**Activity Support:** For example, the Longgang Dragon Dance team, where the inheritor works in the community fire department, experiences reduced workloads during their involvement in ICH competitions or school performances. This adjustment allows more time for training, with the fire department also providing space at the workplace for this purpose.

Currently, the preservation and inheritance activities are primarily advanced by the inheritors with support from the community and relevant governmental departments. Conservation organizations have not played a significant role. While there are occasional competitions among similar ICH types, such as Dragon and Qilin Dances across different communities, no federations or unified organizations exist to coordinate these activities.

#### *4.3 Media Promotion and Digital Support*

**Traditional Media Support:** Shenzhen places a high emphasis on ICH promotion, as evidenced by the weekly broadcast of the "Shenzhen ICH" television segment. This program focuses on both local and established cultural heritages in Shenzhen, utilizing on-site visits and panoramic documentation to showcase the spirit of craftsmanship and the expertise of the inheritors.





Illustration of Shenzhen ICH TV Segment. Source: Shenzhen TV's "Shenzhen ICH" program interviews Professor Du Keyi from the "Century-Old Du's Anorectal Family" - Tencent Video (qq.com)

**Digital Dissemination Support:** The current age of sports dance inheritors in Shenzhen varies, with Longgang Dragon Dance inheritors over 40, Nanshan Yi Dance inheritors over 50, and both Longgang and Bao'an Qilin Dance inheritors over 70. Due to their ages and backgrounds, these inheritors are not trained in social media usage. Those from Nanshan Yi Dance, Bao'an Qilin Dance, and Longgang Qilin Dance do not manage their own social media platforms; the Longgang Dragon Dance inheritor uses social media conventionally, primarily for personal remembrance or entertainment. The current dissemination faces several challenges:

Firstly, the presentation style on the inheritors' social media does not resonate with contemporary youth, who are the primary audience for training. While these young learners understand their peers' media habits better, their novice skill level in ICH means they cannot yet fully convey the heritage's depth and essence through social media.

Secondly, from a content creation perspective, the focus has been on showcasing performances rather than explaining specific techniques. While digital platforms are utilized, the content produced does not significantly contribute to skill transmission (as shown in the image below).





Image: Longgang Dragon Dance promotional Douyin account

Thirdly, from a content management viewpoint, there are no dedicated video accounts for specific sports dance ICH projects. Current promotional efforts are scattered across city or district-level video accounts, which only briefly introduce one or two heritage items per episode, lacking depth and systematic promotion.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) relies primarily on inheritors, yet it also requires multidimensional support from the government, communities, conservation organizations, and media. Our study on sports dance-related ICH in Shenzhen reveals that while the government facilitates financial backing and promotional platforms, its involvement is not sufficiently deep. Community support currently manifests mainly in providing physical spaces and personnel recruitment offline, with online support remaining inadequate. Conservation organizations have yet to show significant effectiveness in dissemination and practical impact. Although both traditional media and digital communication strategies are being utilized, support for digital dissemination remains superficial.

From the perspective of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, our findings indicate the roles of various stakeholders in promoting ICH inheritance as follows:

**Table 3. Roles of Different Stakeholders in Promoting Sports Dance-related ICH in Shenzhen**

Stakeholder	Level of Participation
ICH Inheritors	Guided, Informed
Community	Informed
Conservation Organizations	Guided, Informed
Traditional Media	Collaborative
Social Media	Guided

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are offered for enhancing ICH protection in Shenzhen:

1. Enhance the Role of Communities: The concept of community should extend beyond geographical boundaries to include online interactive groups (Yang, 2016). There is a pressing need for Shenzhen to improve its online community engagement, connecting more groups to actively participate in ICH protection and encouraging communities to evolve from being merely informed and guided to becoming active participants.
2. Empower Conservation Organizations to Foster Collaboration: As non-profit entities dedicated to the public interest and deeply rooted in the community, conservation organizations should play a more significant role in advancing the protection and inheritance of ICH.
3. Systematize Digital Dissemination for ICH: Communities should enhance training for ICH inheritors on managing social media, ensuring accurate recording and effective promotion of the specific techniques and steps involved in ICH crafts.

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