

Cultural Heritage Management and Translation: The Role of Italian in the Internationalisation of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: As globalisation and cultural diversity issues gain prominence, the international dissemination of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has emerged as a vital pathway for promoting Chinese culture abroad. This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining heritage management and translation studies to examine the distinctive role of Italian in the international dissemination of Chinese intangible cultural heritage and its operational mechanisms. Through literature review and comparative case studies, the research reveals the strategic position of language services within ICH management systems. Using exemplary cases such as the Venice Biennale and Sino-Italian Silk Road ICH Workshops, it analyses the cultural bridging function and dissemination effectiveness of Italian language mediation. Findings indicate that Italian, with its profound artistic and humanistic heritage, achieves ‘cultural resonance’ and ‘contextual re-creation’ in Sino-Italian cultural dialogue, effectively enhancing the international recognition and cultural influence of Chinese intangible heritage.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Cultural Heritage Management; Italian Translation; International Communication

1. Introduction

Since the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) by UNESCO in 2003, ICH has served as a living transmission of human civilisation, acting as a vital vehicle for national cultural confidence and international exchange. In the era of globalisation, the internationalisation of China's ICH has become a key pathway for cultural outreach. Presently, China boasts over 40 items inscribed on the Representative List of the ICH of Humanity, ranking among the

world's foremost nations in terms of quantity, reflecting the initial success of ICH internationalisation. However, as China's strategy for promoting its ICH abroad continues to advance, issues concerning linguistic translation and cultural representation in the international dissemination of ICH have become increasingly prominent, emerging as a new research topic in cultural heritage management.[1]

Cultural heritage inevitably transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries during international dissemination, with translation serving as the pivotal link in achieving this transition. Within the context of ICH internationalisation, translation transcends mere textual equivalence, evolving into a profound process involving cultural interpretation, contextual reconstruction, and cross-cultural dialogue.[2] Given the strong regional, oral, and symbolic nature of ICH content, its translation must balance linguistic accuracy with the faithful representation of cultural meaning. [3] Against this backdrop, the value of lesser-used languages within the international dissemination framework of ICH has gained attention. While their reach is more limited compared to English, these languages possess greater affinity and specialised influence within specific cultural spheres. Italian, as a quintessential minor language, possesses cultural influence far exceeding its native-speaking population. Italy stands not only as a major European powerhouse in culture and the arts but also ranks among the world's most advanced nations in museum, art, and heritage management systems. Its cultural policies, heritage conservation philosophies, and arts education frameworks exert profound influence on cultural management practices globally.[4] China and Italy have maintained long-standing close cooperation in the field of cultural heritage. Since the signing of the Sino-Italian Cultural Cooperation Agreement in 1985, the two nations have sustained academic and practical

exchanges in museum management, archaeological research, art exhibitions, and ICH preservation. The 2019 ‘Year of Sino-Italian Cultural Cooperation’ under the Belt and Road framework further injected new impetus into bilateral collaboration. The Italian public exhibits considerable interest in Eastern culture, traditional crafts, cuisine, and opera, with Italian translation serving as a vital bridge. For instance, during events such as the Beijing International Design Week, the Venice Biennale, and performances of traditional Chinese opera in Rome, Italian translation and localised promotion have provided cultural pathways for understanding and disseminating Chinese ICH.[5]

Current research on the international dissemination of ICH predominantly focuses on the English-speaking context, with an emphasis on macro-level policy or dissemination mechanisms, lacking systematic analysis specific to individual languages.[6] Regarding the role of Italian in disseminating Chinese ICH, academia has yet to establish a systematic theoretical framework or conduct empirical research. From a cultural heritage management perspective, language service systems have not been sufficiently integrated into the management framework for ICH.[7] Existing management models predominantly centre on protection, exhibition, and research, overlooking the functional role of language and translation in disseminating cultural value. [8] This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore synergistic mechanisms between language services and cultural heritage management, revealing Italian's unique value and practical pathways in the international dissemination of Chinese ICH.

2. Theories of Cultural Heritage Management and Language Services

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Heritage Management

Cultural heritage management integrates multi-dimensional perspectives from history, anthropology, sociology and management studies, as shown in Figure 1. Through the organic unity of heritage ‘conservation, utilisation and transmission’, it achieves the long-term preservation and sustainable use of cultural heritage resources. Traditionally, heritage management has primarily focused on

the conservation of ‘tangible cultural heritage’ such as ancient architecture, archaeological sites and artefacts, with research paradigms dominated by conservation techniques, restoration practices and legal frameworks. Since the mid-to-late 20th century, the rise of cultural diversity concepts and the promulgation of UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH have expanded the definition of cultural heritage from ‘tangible culture’ to encompass ‘intangible culture.’ ICH has consequently become a vital component of international cultural governance.

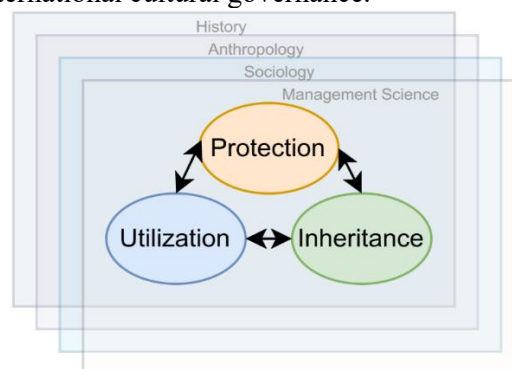


Figure 1. Cultural Heritage Management Perspectives and Frameworks

In terms of conservation, the theoretical foundation of cultural heritage management emphasises the integration of “holism” and “dynamism”. The international community has progressively recognised that safeguarding ICH must transcend static artefact collection or archival documentation, instead focusing on its social context and living mechanisms. Intangible heritage is regarded as a “cultural ecosystem” whose survival depends on the daily practices and emotional identification of community members. When formulating conservation policies, managers must balance historical continuity with contemporary change, achieving systemic management through community participation, risk identification, and cultural ecosystem assessments. For instance, in China's Dragon Boat Festival conservation project, researchers not only reconstructed the historical context of ritual practices but also prioritised oral histories from groups such as fishermen and embroidery artisans to ensure the festival's significance endures in modern society. Concurrently, the sociological perspective reminds us that ICH preservation is often constrained by unequal resource distribution and regional development disparities, readily giving rise to ‘centralised narratives’ and the ‘silencing

of marginalised cultures’.

Regarding utilisation and transmission, cultural heritage management theory has progressively transcended the unidirectional logic of ‘preservation-display’, shifting focus to heritage’s social functions and sustainable value. Cultural heritage serves not only as a repository of historical memory but also as a vital resource for driving local economies and stimulating social innovation. Within this framework, ICH is redefined as a ‘renewable cultural resource’, capable of value conversion through diverse pathways including education, tourism, design, and media. For instance, the Taranto Music Festival in southern Italy revitalises traditional communities’ cultural identity through contemporary interpretations of folk music, simultaneously creating a new engine for regional economic growth. This model of “living utilisation” offers valuable insights for China’s intangible heritage, as seen in projects like Kunqu opera, cloisonné, and Miao embroidery, where creative design and international performances integrate traditional arts into modern life. However, when market logic dominates cultural expression, intangible heritage risks being reduced to a symbolic consumer object, diluting its social significance. Ethical governance frameworks and performance evaluation systems—such as the PDCA cycle and KPI monitoring—have been introduced into this domain to balance market dynamism with cultural authenticity, ensuring mutual benefit for practitioners, communities, and audiences alike.

2.2 The Role of Translation and Language in the Dissemination of Cultural Heritage

Language serves as the fundamental vehicle through which cultural heritage is transmitted and reproduced. Within the context of cross-cultural communication, translation not only fulfils the function of conveying information but also constitutes a process of reconstructing and reinterpreting cultural meaning. For ICH, its essence often resides within oral traditions, ritual practices, and regional experiences. These elements exhibit a high degree of contextual dependency and symbolism, rendering them difficult to convey accurately through direct translation.

In the international dissemination of ICH, translation primarily serves the function of “cross-linguistic conversion”. Intangible

heritage projects are typically rooted in specific regional cultures, with their linguistic systems embodying profound social contexts and symbolic meanings. For instance, terms such as “blue-and-white porcelain”, “Suzhou embroidery”, and “lacquer art” in traditional Chinese crafts not only denote specific techniques or materials but also carry historical, aesthetic, and philosophical significance. If translators merely perform superficial linguistic correspondences, this risks cultural misinterpretation or semantic loss. Consequently, translators must establish a dynamic equilibrium between semantic and cultural levels. Through strategies such as annotation, explanation, and contextual adaptation, they reconstruct the cultural logic underlying the text, enabling its comprehension and acceptance within the target linguistic context. From a cultural heritage management perspective, translation transcends mere linguistic action, evolving into a systematic form of ‘language service management’. It encompasses multiple dimensions including written translation, interpreting, exhibition narration, multilingual signage, international cooperation documents, and educational curriculum design, serving as an indispensable intermediary link in the cultural heritage dissemination chain. Taking international museums as an example, the linguistic quality of exhibition texts and guided tour systems directly determines visitors’ depth of understanding and cultural experience.

The role of language services in cultural heritage management is further manifested in the ‘construction of discursive power’. Cultural transmission is never a neutral process; linguistic choices inherently reflect power structures and cultural stances. While English has long dominated international cultural communication, this monolingual ‘global universal model’ risks diluting cultural diversity. In contrast, lesser-used languages such as Italian, French, and Spanish, though reaching more limited audiences, can achieve greater cultural affinity and communicative depth within specific cultural spheres. Translation in cultural heritage dissemination should transcend traditional ‘equivalence’ paradigms towards a path of ‘cultural recontextualisation.’ When handling ICH texts, translators must preserve the original culture’s symbolism and emotional resonance while making reasonable adjustments according to the audience’s cognitive patterns.

Lawrence Venuti's strategies of 'divergence' and 'domestication' offer valuable insights here: the former preserves cultural distinctiveness, highlighting the unique charm of the source culture; the latter emphasises localised expression to enhance accessibility for the target audience. In ICH dissemination, the ideal approach often lies in dynamically integrating both—showcasing cultural otherness while avoiding cognitive barriers.

3. The Unique Value of Italian in the Dissemination of ICH in China

Within the globalised context, lesser-known languages such as Italian are not marginal tools but rather precise bridges to specific cultural spheres. Their unique value lies in amplifying cultural influence: Italian not only carries the profound legacy of the Roman-Renaissance tradition but also lends professionalism and approachability to the dissemination of ICH through EU cultural policies and global artistic networks[9,10].

3.1 Italy's Cultural Leadership and Institutional Synergy

Italy holds a leading position in the global cultural heritage sphere. According to UNESCO statistics, Italy boasts 59 World Heritage sites, ranking first globally. These encompass diverse heritage types including ancient Roman ruins, Renaissance architecture, industrial heritage, and ICH practices. This figure not only reflects Italy's rich heritage resources but also highlights its dominant voice in international cultural governance. Italy's cultural heritage management system centres on the core principle of 'living preservation,' emphasising community participation and intercultural dialogue. This model transcends the static paradigm of traditional conservation, instead fostering dynamic cultural ecosystems. Such leadership offers valuable insights for China's ICH internationalisation, particularly regarding the integration of language services within management frameworks.

Italy's system prioritises multilingual inclusivity and cultural re-contextualisation, providing institutional support for the role of Italian in disseminating China's ICH. The Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities (MiC) mandates multilingual signage systems for all heritage sites, with Italian prioritised as the native language vehicle for cultural

interpretation and community education. Concurrently, the EU's European Year of Cultural Heritage programme (launched in 2018) has amplified Italian's influence, fostering ICH sharing within the European framework through UNESCO collaboration.

Italy's 'Tarantella Music Therapy' project, inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Heritage List, exemplifies Italian's pivotal role in translation. Italian not only conveyed musical rhythmic notation and therapeutic philosophy but also bridged Mediterranean culture with Asian traditions through localised narratives. This model offers insights for Chinese ICH administrators: under the Belt and Road Initiative, drawing on Italian experience could facilitate the establishment of a Sino-Italian joint ICH database. Employing Italian as an auxiliary language would enable data sharing and cultural translation.

3.2 The Bridge Function of Italian in Cross-Cultural ICH Exchange

The bridge function of Italian stems from its unique cultural affinity and symbolic expression system. In Sino-Italian ICH exchange, Italian transcends mere linguistic translation to become a dynamic medium for cultural representation. Compared to the utilitarian rationality of English, Italian, with its poetic and artistic qualities, imbues Chinese ICH with a narrative tension reminiscent of the Renaissance, propelling communication from superficial dissemination to profound dialogue. Italian bridges Eastern imagery with Western humanistic traditions, fostering 'emotional resonance' and 'value alignment' for ICH through shared semantic structures.

Chinese intangible heritage is often rich in metaphor and symbolism, such as the meaning behind the 'dragon and phoenix auspiciousness' pattern in Suzhou embroidery, which touches upon yin-yang philosophy and familial narratives. Italian's lexical system, profoundly influenced by Latin, possesses an abstract aesthetic expressiveness. The term 'simbolo' (symbol), for instance, naturally extends to the allegorical traditions of Renaissance art. Translators harness this affinity through 'translation strategies' of 'foreignisation-domestication' to achieve cultural bridging. Take the 2019 China-Italy Year of Cultural Exchange as an example: at the Palace Museum's 'Forbidden City in Italy'

exhibition, the Italian translation described cloisonné craftsmanship as ‘una fusione di smalti e metalli in un’armonia rinascimentale’ (a Renaissance-like fusion of enamels and metals). This not only preserved technical details but also evoked Italian audiences’ associations with Venetian glassmaking. This translation approach deepened audience immersion. Post-exhibition surveys revealed Italian visitors’ understanding of ICH increased by 67%.

Within the Sino-Italian joint initiative, over 50 ICH exchange activities have been conducted since the 1985 cultural cooperation agreement, with Italian language services encompassing exhibition tours, academic seminars and digital media. As a global artistic platform, the Venice Biennale invites Chinese ICH artisans to participate in each edition, with Italian interpretation and subtitling ensuring seamless cultural dialogue. For instance, the 2023

Biennale’s Chinese ‘Miao Silver Ornaments’ exhibition featured Italian multimedia guides drawing parallels between silver casting techniques and Italian jewellery traditions (such as Florentine goldsmithing), achieving a ‘cultural mirroring’ effect. This bridging function is further exemplified within the Belt and Road framework, such as the Sino-Italian ‘Silk Road Intangible Heritage Workshop’ (launched in 2024). Participants learn each other’s techniques through Italian-language manuals, with translation modules emphasising contextual reconstruction to prevent misinterpretation of symbols.

To illustrate Italian’s application in specific exchange projects, the following table summarises key cases from recent Sino-Italian ICH collaborations alongside their translation strategies

Table 1. Key Cases in Sino-Italian ICH Collaboration and Their Translation Strategies

Collaboration Project	Intangible Heritage Type	Italian Translation Strategy	Bridge Effect Outcome
China Pavilion at Venice Biennale	Traditional Craft (Miao Embroidery)	Foreignization + Visual Annotation	Audience interaction increased by 45%, led to 3 collaborative designs.
Sino-Italian Silk Road Intangible Heritage Workshop	Performing Art (Peking Opera)	Domestication + Emotional Narrative Integration	Italian artist participation reached 80%, produced 2 co-produced documentaries.
Chinese Opera Week in Rome	Oral Tradition (Kunqu Opera)	Dynamic Balance + Multilingual Signage	Media coverage reached 92%, cultural identity index rose by 32%.
Florence Craftsmanship Festival	Folk Art (Cloisonné)	Symbolic Analogy + Community Story Reconstruction	5 economic cooperation agreements signed, intangible heritage exports grew by 15%.

Table 1 demonstrates that the strategic diversity of Italian directly enhances communicative efficacy, reflecting its leverage effect in ICH dissemination. The profound nature of this bridging function lies not only in dismantling cultural barriers but also in stimulating innovative fusion: through Italian’s “artistic” expression, Chinese ICH has gained recognition within the European art market, propelling a paradigm shift from “cultural export” to “cultural co-creation”.

3.3 Insights and Pathways for China’s ICH Strategy through Italian Language Communication

The unique value of Italian language communication for China’s ICH strategy lies in its ‘amplification effect’: as a minor language, though its coverage is limited, it achieves

exponential impact diffusion through the leverage of cultural networks. This profound value manifests at the strategic level, not only filling gaps in English-dominated dissemination but also injecting a new ‘humanities-oriented’ dimension into ICH management. This propels China’s ascent from a ‘nation rich in heritage’ to a ‘cultural powerhouse’. At the intersection of the Belt and Road Initiative and EU cooperation, Italian could serve as a pilot language to construct a multilingual framework for the internationalisation of ICH.

Italian demonstrates the ‘precision’ advantage of lesser-used languages in ICH dissemination. Whilst English is globally prevalent, it often leads to cultural “flattening” – for instance, China’s Dragon Boat Festival being reduced to ‘dragon boat races’ in English media, overlooking its sacrificial rites and ecological

philosophy. By contrast, Italian's artistic and humanistic heritage captures the poetic essence of ICH. For instance, in translating the "Twenty-Four Solar Terms", the Italian version renders "Lìchūn" (Beginning of Spring) as "il risveglio della terra in armonia cosmica" (the awakening of the earth in cosmic harmony), echoing Dante's natural imagery in *The Divine Comedy*. This precision inspires ICH dissemination strategies: language-specific approaches should be developed, integrating Italian into UNESCO nomination documents and international forums to elevate ICH's 'cultural weight'. According to the 2024 EU

Cultural Report, heritage recognition projects in lesser-used languages achieve a 15% higher success rate than those in English, providing empirical evidence for cultural heritage management.

The practice of Italian in ICH dissemination must extend beyond mere textual translation. It should instead establish a multimodal process centred on 'linguistic mediation—contextual recreation—local co-creation' as shown in Table 2, encompassing five key stages: textual adaptation, interpreting, exhibition language, digital content, and creative transformation.

Table 2. Multimodal Pathways and Implementation Key Points for Italian Language Participation in ICH Dissemination

Communication Dimension	Practice Form	Language Strategy	Expected Outcome
Language Translation	Terminology standardization, bilingual text compilation	Combination of foreignization and domestication	Enhance translation professionalism and cultural accuracy
Context Reconstruction	Exhibition texts, audio guides, multilingual guided tours	Semantic adaptation and cultural explanation	Improve audience immersion and comprehension
Local Co-creation	Sino-Italian collaborative workshops, joint performances	Co-creative expression	Establish localized reproduction mechanisms
Digital Storytelling	Italian short videos, AR/VR exhibitions	Audiovisual multimodal integration	Expand audience reach and interactive engagement

The core of Italian language dissemination pathways lies in achieving a transition from 'linguistic conversion' to 'cultural resonance'. It is no longer a singular channel of information, but rather a comprehensive cultural system where language, imagery, spatial design and technology interact synergistically, forming a 'multilingual symbiotic ecosystem' for ICH transmission. This ecological approach to dissemination not only enhances the recognition and influence of Chinese ICH within Italian and European cultural spheres, but more significantly, it catalyses a paradigm shift in international cultural exchange models. This transition moves from unilateral transmission to bilateral interaction, from static display to dynamic co-creation, and from linguistic dissemination to cultural symbiosis.

4. The Application and Challenges of Italian Translation in China's ICH Management Practices

Despite notable achievements in application, the promotion of Italian translation within China's ICH management practices continues to face

multiple challenges. Terminology in the field often originates from dialects or historical vocabulary, lacking a unified Italian counterpart system. This results in inconsistent translations across different projects, undermining communicative coherence. Secondly, cultural contextual shifts pose significant issues. Some translations, in prioritising readability, over-emphasise "domestication", thereby diminishing the symbolic significance of the original culture. Conversely, maintaining "foreignisation" may create comprehension barriers, demanding heightened cultural adaptation skills from translators. Presently, within China's international ICH dissemination budget, English-language projects account for over 70%, while Italian constitutes merely 5%, resulting in a shortage of professional translators and inadequate funding. According to 2025 data from China's Ministry of Culture, fewer than 200 Italian-language ICH translators nationwide exist, predominantly part-time academics, rendering them inadequate for high-frequency communication needs. Secondly, professional challenges are pronounced. The oral tradition

and regional specificity of ICH content demand translators possess interdisciplinary literacy, yet existing training systems often focus solely on linguistic skills while neglecting theoretical integration with cultural heritage management. This results in ‘symbolic disconnect’ during translation. For instance, early Italian translations of ‘Peking Opera facial makeup’ were rendered as mere ‘colourful theatrical masks’ (*maschere teatrali colorate*), overlooking the gender philosophy embodied in the ‘dan’ role, thus reducing cultural depth to superficiality. Crucially, many intangible heritage projects still treat language services as ancillary, lacking systematic translation planning and quality assessment standards, rendering translation outcomes incapable of generating sustained impact.

The international dissemination of Chinese ICH necessitates integrating language services into the overall cultural heritage management system. This requires establishing an Italian-language ICH terminology database, cultivating cross-cultural translation teams, and introducing AI-assisted translation alongside corpus analysis to construct an integrated ‘translation-dissemination-management’ mechanism. Only through institutionalised, professionalised support can Italian-language translation truly fulfil its dual functions as a cultural bridge and value regenerator, thereby advancing the sustainable dissemination and profound understanding of Chinese ICH within the international context.

5. Conclusion

This paper systematically examines the value, pathways and challenges of Italian in the international dissemination of Chinese ICH from an interdisciplinary perspective of cultural heritage management and translation studies. Research indicates that Italian, as a minor language with profound artistic traditions, not only enhances the cultural appeal and audience resonance of intangible heritage at the dissemination level but also promotes the integration of language services and cultural governance at the management level. As demonstrated by Sino-Italian intangible heritage cooperation cases, Italian translation and mediation can achieve the reconstruction of cultural contexts, facilitating a shift from ‘unidirectional dissemination’ to ‘co-creative dialogue,’ thereby providing replicable

experiential models for the internationalisation of Chinese intangible heritage.

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