

Cheers and Criticisms: A Thematic Analysis of Chinese Netizens' Responses to the Spring Festival's UNESCO Inscription

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ABSTRACT

China has been very active in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) since its ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Currently, China tops UNESCO's Representative List of ICH of Humanity with 44 ICH elements inscribed. However, to our knowledge, few studies have focused on how Chinese public perceive China's efforts related to UNESCO's ICH lists. On December 4, 2024, China's Spring Festival was inscribed by UNESCO. The inscription of the Spring Festival, which is the most important festival in China, presents an ideal case for exploring how state-led ICH initiatives via UNESCO are interpreted within Chinese public sphere. By conducting a thematic analysis of the comments on Chinese social media, this study investigates and discusses Chinese netizens' responses to the inscription of the Spring Festival on UNESCO's ICH list. Data were collected by Octopus Collector software from four Chinese social media platforms. The findings demonstrated that Chinese netizens exhibited a wide range of attitudes towards the inscription including pride and jubilation as well as criticism and indifference, which can be further nuanced into more specific subcategories, each with distinct underlying reasons. Besides, an additional observation emerged from the study: The Spring Festival's UNESCO inscription elicited evident nationalist sentiments from Chinese netizens, possibly due to the festival's role as a cultural symbol of national unity and China's localized reinterpretations of UNESCO ICH framework. The study sheds some light on the diversity and coherence in ordinary Chinese individual's perspectives and interpretations of UNESCO ICH inscription.

Keywords: China; Chinese netizens; intangible cultural heritage; Spring Festival; UNESCO

INTRODUCTION

As emphasized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), cultural heritage does not end at physical monuments and artifacts; it also includes traditions and living practices we inherit from our ancestors and pass on to future generations. The latter is known as intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which encompasses oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. ICH is an important factor in preserving cultural diversity amid globalization. The value lies not in the cultural manifestation itself, but in the knowledge and skills transmitted through generations (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>).

To highlight the significance of ICH and encourage cultural preservation worldwide, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter “the Convention”) in 2003, which is now widely regarded as the central framework in the field (Gkana, 2020). The Convention serves to guide its Member States in understanding and institutionalizing ICH safeguarding, aligning domestic laws, and promoting respect for ICH and support for ICH bearers, communities, groups, and individuals involved (Tomczak, 2017). Moreover, three lists of ICH were established under the Convention, namely, the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” (hereinafter “the Representative List”), the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices. Member States of the Convention may submit nomination for specific ICH element they seek to have inscribed on the lists, and the relevant expert committees will decide on its inclusion after evaluation (Gkana, 2020).

As one of the first countries to ratify the Convention, China has played an active role in the field of ICH since its ratification (Tomczak, 2017; Su, 2021). So far, the Convention has been operational in China for over 20 years, during which time ICH, commonly referred to as 非遗 in Chinese, has become a widely recognized and well-established concept as well as an important paradigm in the cultural life (Bodolec, 2013). Domestically, China has engaged itself in developing an institutional infrastructure and implementing policies for the protection of traditional cultural practices (Maags, 2018). Internationally, China has made continuous bids for the inscription of its ICH elements on UNESCO’s lists; as a consequence, China currently leads the world with a total of 44 ICH elements inscribed by UNESCO. The Spring Festival, also known as Chinese New Year, is the most important traditional festival of the Chinese nation (Xiao & Zhang, 2025). The Chinese government initiated the nomination process for the Spring Festival’s UNESCO inscription in July, 2022. On December 4, 2024, UNESCO officially included the festival to the Representative List. Although the news came late at night in China, it was promptly reported by numerous domestic media outlets. The state media celebrated and hailed the inscription as a pivotal occasion; meanwhile, the hashtag #春节申遗成功 (Spring Festival inscribed on UNESCO’s ICH list) quickly became trending on domestic social media platforms with widespread and heated discussion.

The interactive and text-rich nature of social media data enables researchers to gain valuable insights into collective user responses to specific topics or events, and to systematically analyze the structure and patterns of activity among individuals or groups (Yang et al., 2021; Pu, Jiang & Fan, 2022). The analysis of comments on social media constitutes a potentially interesting data source to uncover implicit knowledge about users, post, categories and community interests (Siersdorfer et al., 2010; Alafwan, Siallagan & Putro, 2023). While some existing literature has explored China’s efforts to engage with UNESCO’s ICH framework (Bodolec, 2013; Tomczak, 2017; Maags, 2018; Lee, 2019; You & Hardwick, 2020; Su, 2021; Demgenski, 2023), less attention has been paid to how such efforts are perceived and interpreted by the Chinese public on social media. Thus, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing Chinese netizens’ reactions to the Spring Festival’s UNESCO inscription. As China’s most significant and cherished festival, the Spring Festival provides a culturally and emotionally resonant example through which to examine the domestic public discourse. In doing so, the study not only sheds some light on the sociocultural implications of ICH politics in the Chinese context, but also reveals how the Spring Festival evokes a complex range of sentiments in contemporary China.

BACKGROUND

Intangible Cultural Heritage Initially, UNESCO focused on heritage through a Western lens, highlighting the authenticity of paintings, sculptures, and architecture (Bortolotto, 2007). Following this approach, UNESCO adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (generally known as the World Heritage Convention) in 1972, and five years later, the World Heritage Committee of

UNESCO set criteria for inscription of properties on the World Heritage List (Jerome, 2009). It was not until the 1980s that the focus of heritage preservation changed to encompass cultural values that differed from Western cultural ideals, and began to recognize issues of time and scale (Ruggles, 2009). In 1982, UNESCO created a “non-physical heritage” section. Since then, experts made efforts to define the authenticity or integrity of invisible or non-material cultural heritage, as reflected in reports like the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994, Our Creative Diversity in 1996, and Authenticity and Integrity in an African Context in 2000 (Blake, 2006; Lee, 2020). Accordingly, new programs such as Living Human Treasures in 1993 and the Proclamation of the Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage from 2001 to 2005 were established. Eventually, these initiatives culminated in the adoption of the Convention in 2003, which provided legal frameworks for identifying and safeguarding ICH (Lee, 2020). The Convention functions at two parallel levels: At a national level, Member States are responsible for safeguarding ICH through policies, inventories, and legal measures; at an international level, UNESCO manages the three ICH lists and evaluates safeguarding efforts, with periodic state reports submitted to it (Gkana, 2020).

China has faced criticism for inadequate protection and over-exploitation of its heritage sites. In a comprehensive publication edited by Kuah and Liu (2017), issues including mismanagement, economic exploitation, and conflicts between modernization and tradition were highlighted. Alongside economic growth, the state’s recognition of ICH has increased. This shift began with China’s active participation in the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, a predecessor to the Convention (Tomczak, 2017). On December 2, 2004, China became the sixth country to ratify the Convention. Just four months later, on March 26, 2005, the Chinese State Council decreed a Recommendation to Intensify the Protection of National ICH (Bodolec, 2013). The document led to the creation of two domestic ICH lists: the Representative List of ICH and the ICH Transmitters List. The Representative List of ICH mirrors UNESCO’s Representative List and constitutes a selection of Chinese traditional cultural practices, whereas the ICH Transmitters List inscribes the cultural bearers or communities who perform and safeguard these traditional practices. These two lists largely form the foundation of Chinese ICH regime (Maags, 2018). In 2011, the Law of the People’s Republic of China on ICH was adopted, ensuring the legal basis necessary to define and regulate efforts for safeguarding China’s ICH (Tomczak, 2017). Soon, as a government-led ICH system took shape at four administrative levels—national, provincial, prefecture, and county—ICH discourses spread across China as part of a political campaign (You & Hardwick, 2020). In this system, ICH elements as well as ICH transmitters are identified through a “climbing-up-the-ladder” process. Throughout the process, ICH practices and cultural practitioners are nominated and approved selectively, first at the county and prefecture levels, then at the provincial level, before ultimately being recognized on the state-level Representative List of ICH and ICH Transmitters List (Zhang 2015). By the end of March, 2025, China had designated 1,557 elements as national ICH and acknowledged 3,998 individuals as national ICH transmitters (<https://www.ihchina.cn/>). However, this hierarchical structure extends beyond the national dimension, with UNESCO’s recognition at the top (You & Hardwick, 2020). With 44 inscribed elements, China holds the highest number of UNESCO ICH inscriptions among the 183 countries that have ratified the Convention. Such a number of elements certainly indicate the state’s strong engagement in implementing the Convention and its high-level expertise in navigating UNESCO’s bureaucratic processes, since every inscription requires sizable documentation and collaboration of numerous parties, including local community members, officials, experts, and technical staff (Tomczak, 2017).

The Spring Festival

The Spring Festival marks the beginning of a new year on the traditional lunisolar Chinese calendar. It is Chinese people’s most important festival and holiday time. Usually, celebrations start on Chinese New Year’s Eve, the night before the first day of the year, and last until the Lantern Festival, which is observed on the fifteenth day of the year, to herald the end of winter and the start of spring. The festivities include family

reunions, feasting on special foods, setting off fireworks, giving red envelopes with money, watching dragon and lion dances and so on. It is no exaggeration to say that the Spring Festival is one of the most concentrated demonstrations of the Chinese nation's folk customs and traditions. Though some customs and traditions have vanished or have developed new characteristics in the festival's long historical evolution (Shi, 2015), the functional value of the Spring Festival has remained unchanged since the ancient times, namely reinforcing consanguineous identity and strengthen family and social relations (Gao, 2012).

Moreover, as Zhang (2010) stated, festivals are not just events, but culturally created "time frameworks" that structure how societies operate and renew themselves. In this sense, Wu and Liang (2025) acknowledged the Spring Festival as "a reference point in time embraced by the whole Chinese nation, which signifies the cycle of life and living". Specifically, the Spring Festival has become a once-in-a-year occasion where not only long-established customs of celebration but also unique activities and dynamics related to the festival in contemporary China can be witnessed. For instance, every year, the arrival of the festival triggers the so-called Spring Festival travel rush, or *Chunyun* as known in Chinese. Hundreds of millions of Chinese people, who work, study or live away from hometown, embark on journeys to reunite with their families, and as the holiday comes to an end, depart to go back. The Spring Festival travel rush has been recognized as the world's largest annual human migration (Gao, Xu & Wei, 2021), which serves as both a result of economic and social transformations accompanying China's urbanization and a testament to the enduring significance placed on familial bonds by Chinese people (Yang, 2019). Another example is the Spring Festival Gala. This four-hour variety show is produced by China Central Television and has been annually aired on Chinese New Year's Eve since 1983 (Gao, 2012). Recognized by Guinness World Records as the most-watched television program globally, the gala acts as a cornerstone of Chinese culture, a medium of entertainment on the holiday and a propaganda and educational tool to convey information from the central government to engaged audience (Townsend, 1988; Zhao, 2004; Shambaugh, 2007).

According to Xiao and Zhang (2025), research on Spring Festival have gone through different phases. The appearance of the Spring Festival in Chinese academic literature dates back to at least 1923. In the half century that followed, scholars mainly engaged in identifying and documenting distinct customs and traditions in various Chinese regions as well as sorting through ancient records about the festival. After 1978, more in-depth studies on Spring Festival customs and traditions were conducted, with related theoretical studies, comparative studies and globalization studies emerging. At the dawn of the 21st century came a turning point when the Convention was adopted by UNESCO in 2003, which has effectively raised awareness about the importance of safeguarding "living heritage" on a global scale (Duvelle, 2016). Subsequently, in 2006, the Spring Festival was included in China's first representative list of state-level ICH. Following this, the focus of studies on the festival has shifted toward the ICH paradigm. Besides, interdisciplinary perspectives have been introduced and have enriched the current scholarly discourse regarding the Spring Festival, representing fields such as history, sociology, folklore, anthropology, cultural studies, literature, economics and psychology (Xiao & Zhang, 2025).

China's Social Media

China's Internet Era started in 1994 (Tan & Li, 2022). After 30 years of vigorous development, China has become the world's largest internet market. By the end of 2024, China boasts 1,108 million internet users, with 1,101 million social media users, making up 99.3% of the total (China Internet Network Information Center, 2025). Compared to traditional media, the interactive features of social media enable discussions about news content without time or space constraints. Moreover, social media allows internet users to present a more diverse array of views and attitudes on news events and hot topics, structuring public discourse (Stockmann & Luo, 2017; Ho & Chuah, 2022). Nowadays, Chinese citizens rely heavily on social media to express themselves through highly active posting and commenting. And the Chinese Government, despite utilizing a

ensorship system to track down “problematic” content on the internet, to some extent, acknowledges the legitimacy of online public opinion (as long as the posting does not “call for collective action”) , for the reason that they are keen on finding out public responses to certain topics or issues (Yang, 2011; King, Pan & Roberts, 2017). Consequently, attracting a large number of participants and audience, social media discussions have become a cheap and effective source for understanding the dynamics of public opinion on particular issues and policies in China (Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Wang & Song, 2019).

Over the years, China has created many of its own social media platforms. These platforms have transformed not only how Chinese citizens interact, but also serve as an expansive space where cultures intersect, identities are negotiated, and scholars from different disciplines try to unravel the enigma of digital discourse (Zhao & Wang, 2025; Sophie, 2025). The data of this study are from four of these platforms, specifically as follows: Weibo is a popular platform for civic engagement and citizen journalism, and generally the go-to place for the discussion of social issues (Yang, 2014; Lan & Navera, 2022). Meanwhile, Douyin and Bilibili, two video sharing sites, are especially favored among younger Chinese generations. The comments of Douyin users tend to be more direct, casual and superficial, whereas comments on Bilibili include more emotional complexities and thoughtful reflections (Huang, 2024). Lastly, Xiaohongshu, which features lifestyle content and experience sharing, can offer a more personalized and community-focused perspective. Together, these platforms encompass a variety of specific demographics and communication styles and thus provide a comprehensive data set.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data Collection

Comments on Chinese social media were collected from Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili and Xiaohongshu as just introduced, on February 15th, 2025. The dataset was collected with the help of Octopus Collector, which is an easily operated professional software for online data collection. We first searched for the hashtag #春节申遗成功 (Spring Festival inscribed on UNESCO’s ICH list) and sorted the search results by popularity from high to low, after which the top two posts were identified. The posts were mostly published by official accounts (in China) such as 联合国教科文组织 (UNESCO), 新华社 (Xinhua News Agency) and 人民日报 (People’s Daily), which have large follower bases and strong influence, and thus have generated a great number of views, likes and comments. Then, in Octopus Collector, we searched for the target platform and selected the “Post-Comments” built-in template tailored to that platform. The template is pre-configured with the necessary rules, so no manual setup is required. All the user needs to do is enter the URL of the target post, and follow the guided steps to automatically extract the associated comments. After performing the procedures for each of the four platforms separately, a total of 2275 comments were extracted. All data were saved in Microsoft Excel format.

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis (TA) to unpack perspectives and perceptions of Chinese netizens regarding Spring Festival’s UNESCO inscription. TA functions as a research method to identify and interpret patterns of shared meaning (themes) within a data set; it often brings fresh insights and understandings. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), TA is an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular approach to making sense of qualitative data. The steps of our analysis followed the six-phase guide proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): getting familiarized with the collected data, constructing initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining the themes and naming them, and finally, producing the report of findings.

We began with familiarizing ourselves with the data by reading the 2275 comments carefully. During this

phase, we also eliminated comments which were meaningless or irrelevant to the research topic. We noticed that though these comments vary considerably in perspective, tone and depth, yet the attitudes they convey generally fall into the following three categories: supportive, critical and indifferent, which we used to guide the coding process. Actually, this is what should be done in Phase 3 of “searching for themes”. However, Terry (2017) pointed out that the six-phase is not a completely linear procedure, but iterative and recursive, so we entered Phase 3 at the same time. Then, we employed sentence-by-sentence coding, labeling meaningful original statements within the comment texts. Next, we refined the created codes, analyzed and allocated them to the preliminary set of three categories. In the last phase, we produced the report by selecting illustrative quotes to represent each theme.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings that emerged from the data are presented as below. Applause, criticism and indifference are used as overarching themes to describe the general attitudes towards Spring Festival’s UNESCO inscription. Related sub-themes and representative quotes are discussed to further illustrate the identified patterns within each theme.

Theme 1 Applause

Many comments show strong favor for the successful inscription, in which commenters share a feeling of elation and pride. For these commenters, Spring Festival’s UNESCO inscription signifies the festival’s bright prospect of internationalization and therefore a more appealing image of China on the global stage, which boosts their national pride.

Subtheme 1 Proud that the Spring Festival has received international recognition

Comment 1:

“This is not only a tremendous affirmation of our traditional culture but also an excellent opportunity to help the world better understand China! It will also make overseas Chinese worldwide take pride in their heritage while allowing foreign friends to share in this rich festive atmosphere.”

Comment 2:

“I’m delighted about the successful inscription. This enables our festival to step onto the global stage!”

Heritage is used by the present generation as a tool in constructing a country’s positive image that resonates with both national pride and global appeal. On that account, heritage fits into the category of “soft power”, a concept created by Joseph S. Nye (1990) to describe how states use influence and attraction rather than coercion to pursue their goals and enhance their international image. Nevertheless, if a state wants to make heritage its soft power resource, it must invest in diplomatic and political efforts (Nakano, 2018) for the reason that soft power can only be activated when it is spread out as a message and articulated attractively (Chitty, 2016). UNESCO, as a specialized agency of the United Nations, derives the power to diffuse information and practices on a worldwide scale. Therefore, the most effective route to disseminate the notion of a heritage element globally is through the UNESCO heritage listing and its impact (Nakano, 2018), which affirms the significance of heritage and legitimizes the historical narrative attached to it. This explains why the Chinese government has been enthusiastically using heritage lists of UNESCO as a crucial aspect of national policy to promote its soft power, featured by an avalanche of initiatives on heritage site/item nomination (Tomczak, 2017). Likewise, for domestic audience, the legitimizing effects of UNESCO give them a sense of confidence

in the value of inscribed heritage, as indicated by expressions like “tremendous affirmation”, “excellent opportunity” and “onto the global stage” in the comments above.

Subtheme 2 Triumphant that culture ownership of the Spring Festival is secured

Meanwhile, among all the celebratory remarks, some are hard to ignore, since they “coincidentally” mention another country, explicitly or implicitly.

Comment 3:

“Yay! No need to worry about theft anymore!”

Comment 4:

“South Korea can’t steal it now!”

Comment 5:

“Great! Let’s get more heritage elements inscribed! After all, cultural thieves live next door, and it’s hard to guard against them.”

These comments epitomize the age-long debates over “culture ownership” between Chinese and South Korean netizens. In recent years, Chinese social media platforms have been teeming with discourse calling for greater safeguarding of China’s ICH. In these discussions, South Korea is frequently mentioned and labeled as “thief”. The origin of this claim can be traced back to 2004 when South Korea initiated the process of inscribing its Gangneung Danoje Festival on the Representative List, which ended up with a success in 2005. Seoul’s move was confronted with widespread outrage in Chinese cyberspace. Given the similarities in name and timing between Gangneung Danoje Festival and China’s Duan Wu Festival, Chinese netizens accused South Koreans of claiming the festival as their own and appropriating Chinese culture as it originated in China (Yang, 2023). On the other side, South Koreans retorted that the festival had been part of their culture for over 1,000 years and developed distinct Korean style (Xie, 2023). Although the Duanwu Festival also managed to be inscribed on the Representative List (under the name “Dragon Boat Festival”) in 2009, the debates did not come to a close. Instead, the culture ownership conflicts have expanded to encompass new topics such as paocai and kimchi (fermented food), Hanfu and Hanbok (traditional costume). Meanwhile, both states had realized that either party could nominate any cross-border cultural element on the Representative List in the future, hence the concerns and need to track the other state’s endeavors in heritage nomination (Lee, 2020). In the past few years, another heated contention between the two countries has arose over their traditional new year festivities, which closely resembles the previous Dano/Duanwu controversy, as Korean New Year, or “Seollal” is celebrated on the first day of the lunar calendar and generally coincides with China’s Spring Festival. In China, whispers have been circulating online that South Korea is applying for the inscription of Seollal on the Representative List. Thus, for many Chinese netizens, the early inscription of Spring Festival in 2024 means that China has defeated South Korea in this leg of inscription-nomination race, especially as payback for the Dano/Duanwu fight. Therefore, by sarcastically referring to their neighbouring country with the contemptuous term of “thief”, they express and share the feelings of triumph and relief (Comment 3, 4, 5).

In these culture ownership debates, the main arguments made on the Chinese side are basically the same: That is, while cultural integration naturally occurs over time, South Korea takes advantage of this process by claiming Chinese-originated cultures as its own, which is a kind of cultural appropriation (Lee, 2020). This forms their grounds for calling South Korea “thief”. Yet, one point that remains unclear is why Chinese netizens perceive UNESCO’s inscription as embodiment of “theft” or “safeguarding against theft”. It seems

that they tend to equate inscription of a cultural element on UNESCO's list with a trademark or intellectual property right that prohibits other countries' claims, which is however not true. Though the Convention calls on Member States to identify and protect ICH within their borders, it does not certify the ownership of listed cultural elements. As illustrated by the Duan Wu Festival's inscription, even though a country has an ICH element inscribed by UNESCO, it does not prevent other countries from applying for similar items. In other words, despite Spring Festival's inscription, South Korea will continue to assert and promote the Korean identity of their new year practice freely, which might potentially be on the Representative List as well in the future. Among the comments collected, some responses posted with a purpose to clarify possible misinterpretation can also be seen.

Comment 6:

"First, congratulations on the inscription! However, I see many comments accusing South Korea of trying to steal the festival from us, but that isn't the case. UNESCO's inscription is more like an honorary title rather than a patented registration with exclusivity. If two countries share similar cultural elements, both can submit nomination separately...Let's avoid the misunderstanding that another country's successful inscription means our heritage becomes theirs. This whole thing is not about ownership."

Yet, this kind of comments are quite rare in contrast to the mass of remarks about "thief". The perception that South Korea "lacks its own culture and relies on stealing others' cultural elements for ICH inscription" has been shaped among Chinese netizens, partly as a result of misleading domestic media reports since the Dano/Duanwu controversy (Ke, 2022; Yang, 2023). Besides, due to the intermittent disputes between the two countries over political, territorial and cultural issues (Xie, 2023), the theft-related discussion has become a key part of how Chinese netizens simplify their understanding of Sino-Korean relations. Through the utterance of "theft", "thief" or "steal", their negative impression of South Korea are encapsulated in brief expressions. This expressive simplicity makes the racial labels more memorable, transmittable, and effective in gathering people around shared nationalist sentiments (Yang, 2023). In light of this, it might be easier to understand why some commenters take it for granted that the Spring Festival's UNESCO inscription represents "safeguarding against theft". They just see it as a chance to communicate nationalist feelings and dislike towards South Korea, by presuming the country as an enemy in terms of ICH safeguarding, while many of them neither are aware nor bother to care that UNESCO's inscription is not supposed to highlight culture ownership.

Nevertheless, there are voices that it is the UNESCO's ICH inscription mechanism that has inadvertently contributes to heritage tensions between countries (Aykan, 2016). According to the Convention, ICH is defined as a dynamic living culture which is "transmitted from generation to generation and constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history"(UNESCO, 2003). This has endowed ICH elements with two features to differentiate themselves from tangible heritage. First, the concept of authenticity, which is conventionally used as a criterion to register cultural elements in UNESCO's heritage lists, does not apply to the ever-evolving nature of ICH. Second, by emphasizing its fluid and hybrid character, the Convention acknowledges that ICH are not fixed within a particular geographical area since national borders might divide groups with similar ICH into different nation-states, or else ICH might spread over noncontiguous territories as a result of migrations, historical divisions and cultural exchanges (Labadi, 2013). In agreement with this transnational character of ICH, the Convention's Operational Directives introduce a multinational filing system that allows for joint nomination of shared cultural elements by multiple Member States. However, as the multinational nomination is just optional rather than necessary, one Member State can also nominate a transnational cultural element independently, which could be listed by UNESCO exclusively in the name of this Member State as long as the nomination fulfills the inscription criteria. Thus, it is possible for Member States to leverage UNESCO's ICH lists to assert national ownership over transnational cultural elements (Aykan, 2015)—once a shared ICH element is

inscribed on behalf of a Member State, it is often presented as national heritage by global media (Park, 2010), which is likely to create a narrative among the general public that the heritage belongs to the nominating country (Aykan, 2016). As a consequence, the UNESCO's ICH lists have led to a new arena for nationalist contests to obtain international recognition of national cultures (Lee, 2020). As Danforth argued, for nationalists, gaining international recognition is a competition where no international organization is considered too small or insignificant to win. This provides another perspective to understand Chinese netizens' sense of ICH insecurity caused by South Korea. In view of their sensitivity about China's current cultural status in East Asia (Ke, 2022), they feel stressed that South Korea may outperform China in utilizing ICH as a symbolic tool to achieve enhanced visibility on the global stage.

Theme 2 Criticism

Conversely, there are also criticisms against the Spring Festival's UNESCO inscription. For instance, some commenters argue that UNESCO inscription, as an external validation of heritage, is unnecessary for their country. Their comments reveal a tendency to promote the idea of "creating our own norms and rules".

Subtheme 1 Critical of embracing international heritage framework

Comment 7:

"It's disappointing to see our country still being restricted and trapped by Western norms and systems. What we should do is to develop an evaluation framework led by ourselves."

Comment 8:

"Who exactly sets the criteria for ICH inscription? Why do we need external approval for our own cultural traditions, and even have to comply with their standards?"

Comment 9:

"China must break free from the humiliating situation of being led by the nose! We should have the final say over our own heritage! What do foreigners have to do with it? Does something stop being a heritage just because foreigners don't recognize it?"

During its modernization process, China has gradually integrated into the international community, yet it faces growing pressure from foreign (especially Western) powers. This has fueled nationalist sentiments among the Chinese, making them sensitive and reactive to foreign interference. Such sentiments often manifest as an emphasis on "Chineseness" and the distinctiveness between Chinese and Western civilizations (Xie, 2023). This emphasis can take different forms. The concerns about cultural heritage ownership, which have been discussed previously, is one example. The reluctance to accept some international norms, as suggested in the comments above (Comment 7, 8, 9), is another one.

It is worth mentioning that there is a degree of misunderstanding in Comment 7 and similar statements which describe UNESCO ICH framework as Western-centred. Instead, the Convention and the follow-up ICH lists, are largely a consequence of non-Western countries' criticisms and demands. Before the concept of ICH and its safeguarding convention emerged, the UNESCO heritage regime tends to privilege the mainly Western idea of heritage as material high culture, with criteria for inscription overwhelmingly based on European and Western values and principles of artistic, aesthetic and architectural significance (Harding, 2024). This imbalance and unfairness has been criticized by non-Western countries, as well as by postcolonial scholars. As a consequence, UNESCO adopted a more inclusive definition of heritage through the Convention in 2003. It is the new category of ICH that helps to counterbalance the hegemonic position held by Western countries such as France

and Italy in the original World Heritage List (Gerlini, 2022). However, it is not entirely unreasonable to perceive UNESCO's ICH listing as biased in favor of Western countries, as certain factors might contribute to this impression. For example, the nomination applications to the ICH lists are available for evaluation only in English or French, though linguistic barriers may lead to loss of non-Western cultural nuances during translation, thus affecting the authenticity and depth with which nominated ICH elements are understood and evaluated.

Subtheme 2 Critical of the translation of the festival's name

Besides, some commenters, while not opposed to the application for UNESCO inscription, criticize the adoption of the term "Spring Festival" instead of the festival's Chinese name "Chunjie".

Comment 10:

"Seriously, it should be called Chunjie to stay authentic. If foreigners keep using 'Chunjie', they'll get used to it gradually. Once we cave to internationalized labels, we might never reclaim the original name!"

Comment 11:

"Why not use the name 'Chunjie'? It is the obsession over making things easier for foreigners to pronounce that has led to a mess of ridiculous translations. To export Chinese culture successfully, we must stop catering to foreigners. Only by preserving strong national characteristics can we provoke genuine curiosity from them."

The difference between "Chunjie" and "Spring Festival" lies in the ideologies of translation involved. "Chunjie" is a transliteration of the Chinese word for the festival, which preserves the original phonetic and cultural identity. By contrast, "Spring Festival" is a descriptive translation that contextualizes the festival for English-speaking audiences. For the commenters, "Chunjie" is preferable as choosing the Chinese-oriented term is a reflection of cultural confidence. Though such a name runs the risk of being incomprehensible and confusing the non-Chinese audiences, this seems just the outcome desired by the commenters. Thus, a somehow paradoxical stance can be seen from their comments: On one hand, they want the Spring Festival to be renowned and recognized overseas; on the other hand, they appear to expect a Chinese-style name to act as a certain barrier against foreigners—as if the difficulty in pronouncing and understanding the name is a threshold that must be crossed before an outsider can access and appreciate the festival's cultural essence. This just serves as another example of the aforementioned emphasis on "Chineseness". It can be also regarded as a result of the intertwining of nationalism and globalism exhibited in the top-down cultural discourses and policies under the current administration, which highlight the importance of exerting China's cultural influence globally, and at the same time call for resisting Western-centred "universal" values and embracing "authentic Chinese cultural roots" (Yao, 2015).

Theme 3 Indifference

Noticeably, a number of commenters neither praise or criticize the Spring Festival's UNESCO inscription. That said, they are not being neutral or apathetic. In fact, they appear to be active in voicing their concerns, yet what they focus on is other matters concerning the festival rather than whatever list it gets on.

Subtheme 1 More concerned with the diluting of Spring Festival traditions

Comment 12:

"The top priority is to protect the true essence of the Spring Festival. I don't even feel like celebrating it anymore because the most festive moments are only on the news broadcast."

Comment 13:

“What’s left of the Spring Festival now? No fireworks allowed, what’s the damn use of getting it inscribed anyway?”

Comment 14:

“What’s the use of the inscription? The Spring Festival is no longer what it used to be.”

As can be seen, these commenters are questioning whether the Spring Festival nowadays still holds the charm and traditions they once valued. In addition to these seemingly pointed remarks, the comment below narrates nostalgic recollections of bygone Spring Festival celebrations with tender and vivid language.

Comment 15:

“Nowadays, the essence of the Spring Festival feels increasingly diluted. In my childhood, there were dragon dances, land boat performances, lantern exhibitions, and other diverse folk customs. Every village, town, and organization would put on elaborate shows, and people would visit relatives far and wide to exchange new year greetings. During the Lantern Festival, families busily made lanterns while competing to create the most beautiful ones, and the streets would glow with children parading through neighborhoods holding their handcrafted lanterns. Now, these scenes have faded into memory.”

Since the reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, China’s urbanization process has entered the stage of rapid development, which, however, brings about challenges faced by longstanding lifeways and cultures. In recent years, many in China have been worrying and complaining that the traditional spirit of Spring Festival is fading, as demonstrated by the dilution of customs such as fireworks displays, New Year’s greetings, and ancestor worship. This is exemplified by Comment 12, 13, 14 and 15. According to Xiao and Zhang (2025), there are three set of contradictions which lead to the waning of Spring Festival traditions. The first contradiction centers on the clash between cultural preservation and modern governance. For example, to protect air quality and public safety, local governments in many places have for years prohibited the use of fireworks and firecrackers to celebrate the Spring Festival. Despite the danger and harm these explosive devices involve as well as alternatives like drone displays, laser shows and eco-friendly decorations, they are still considered as an irreplaceable symbol of New Year festivities by numerous individuals, who frequently defy the restrictions.

The second contradiction arises when the rich and time-consuming Spring Festival traditions are disturbed by contemporary fast-paced lifestyles. While in the past, people delighted in participating in various Spring Festival customs within the 15-day duration, the busy life nowadays has left many getting increasingly reluctant to devote time and energy to this extended celebration. The third contradiction concerns the mismatch between folk customs originating from agrarian roots and modern industrial societies. Originally, the Spring Festival was created to provide leisure and entertainment opportunities during the agricultural off-season. However, modern society operates under the Gregorian calendar, and the Spring Festival often falls shortly after the start of the Gregorian New Year, which signals the launch of new projects, initiatives, or goals for almost people from all walks of life. To put it another way, as the Spring Festival approaches, workloads become heavier than usual. Consequently, to make preparations for the festival, to some extent, has transformed from an enjoyment into a burden in many Chinese people’s lives. Meanwhile, as economy develops, changes in people’s consumption habits, dietary preferences, and recreational choices have made it difficult for traditional festivities and products to maintain their appeal. Additionally, due to the significant improvement in life expectancy and education levels, people no longer revere traditional practices as they used to, which undermines the ritualistic atmosphere of the festival (Wang, 2022).

Subtheme 2 More concerned with festive stress during the Spring Festival

For another group of commenters, the Spring Festival represents a big source of stress and anxiety in their personal lives. According to their comments, during the Spring Festival, there exists a nuanced interplay between the celebrations and the mental well-being of individuals.

Comment 16:

“It doesn’t matter to me even if South Korea registers the Spring Festival as their own heritage. I don’t even want to celebrate it at all. I barely made any money this year, yet I still have to go home and fake a smile.”

Comment 17:

“When it comes to the Spring Festival, I dread the endless comparisons in my family. When I was a kid, it was all about comparing grades, new clothes, and whose family was making more money. Now it’s evolved into comparing who’s married.”

As a defining feature of the festival, family gatherings can trigger complicated emotions (Gram, Therkelsen & Larsen, 2018). In many Chinese families, the gatherings inevitably involve discussions and comparisons of children’s (and adults’) achievements, which might result in discomfort and embarrassment to family members. For younger members, having to address the onslaught of well-meaning yet intrusive questions from relatives about their grades, jobs, or finances can be exhausting. Especially for those who study or work away from hometown, to reunite with family is sometimes more like a stressful and obligatory task if they failed to yield impressive results in the past year, as a traditional view prevails that only by becoming successful in the outside world can one return home with dignity (Comment 16). Another unwelcome part of Spring Festival reunion is that the elder generation oftentimes take the opportunity to urge the adult-children to get married or have a baby (Yan, 2018). From their perspective, it is their responsibility to express concerns and give suggestions on the younger generation’s relationship, marriage and childbirth matters, while the latter often find that bothersome (Comment 17) as they tend to value privacy and independence (Choi & Luo, 2016).

Subtheme 3 More concerned with other aspects of the Spring Festival

Other commenters express their expectations and feelings about the Spring Festival from different perspectives.

Comment 18:

“We ordinary people only care about having more days off.”

Comment 19:

“Now that it’s successfully inscribed, how about having more days off?”

Comment 20:

“By the way, I hope the Spring Festival Gala brings real joy to the people, not just the endless value inculcation.”

Comment 21:

“Just one request: no preaching and no manipulative emotional appeals in the Spring Festival Gala.”

The week of the Spring Festival is an important holiday time for billions of Chinese people, yet complaints about it being too short have persisted for years. Unlike modern holidays such as the National Day holiday, which lasts one week as well but allows people to have a thorough rest, the Spring Festival is a traditional one characterized by family reunions and socializing. During the holiday, especially for employees working in cities far from their families, they have to navigate such a busy schedule including returning to (and coming back from) their hometowns, visiting relatives, and attending social gatherings that there is little time left for rest. For many migrant workers who live apart from their children, the holiday is one of the few chances in a year they can reunite, but the week is too short and the parents are often too busy. Obviously, Comment 18 and 19 exemplify people's hope for longer holidays. Besides, the Spring Festival Gala, as one of the most influential cultural events in China and a ritual for many Chinese families during the holiday, too has aroused considerable complaints in recent years, as demonstrated by Comment 20 and 21. The gala's heavy ideological messaging and overt glorification of Chinese values have led to a noticeable decline in its appeal accompanied by suggestions for improvement among Chinese people.

Upon discussing each theme in detail, we conducted a broader review to draw an additional insight from the research findings, that a significant portion of comments are anchored in nationalist sentiments, which, however, manifest in various individual expressions. Some view the Spring Festival's UNESCO inscription as a symbol of China's cultural prominence and thus express pride in it (Comment 1 and 2). Others carry the geopolitical undertone of "defeating" South Korea in a perceived cultural competition (Comment 3 and 4). Still others adopt a more critical stance, suggesting that the act of inscription reflects an unnecessary dependency on international norms (Comment 7, 8 and 9). Though these views reveal different attitudes including national pride, cultural superiority and hostility towards other nations, a common thread across them is nationalist sentiments, which can be understood as the sense of belonging to a nation and aspirations for its well-being, strength and security (Ho, 2022). Then, a question that arises is why the Spring Festival's UNESCO inscription can stir such nationalist sentiments among the Chinese public. One key factor is the reality that the Spring Festival has been deeply associated with a sense of belonging to the nation by Chinese (Wu & Liang, 2025). During the Spring Festival, a vast number of Chinese undertake long journeys to return to their family homes and participate in rituals such as reunion dinner and ancestral worship, which emphasize togetherness, filial piety, and ancestral respect. As these practices are widely shared across the country, they create a synchronized emotional and cultural state (Li, 2008). Meanwhile, celebrations and festivities provide occasions for the visual and audible realization of national symbols, including red and yellow colors, Chinese characters "Fú" (fortune), lanterns, loong (Chinese dragon), Chinese zodiac and so on. Through the exhibition and performance of these symbols, participants experience an awareness of national cohesion. Though these experiences are infrequent and ephemeral, their annual recurrence allow them to leave an enduring impression on the national consciousness of ordinary people who engage in them (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). To sum up, the Spring Festival inspires not only personal nostalgia for homeplace but also a collective imagination of homeland among Chinese people. Accordingly, many of the comments on its UNESCO inscription reflect nationalist sentiments.

Another reason for the nationalist sentiments triggered by the Spring Festival's UNESCO inscription lies in how Chinese policymakers have selectively adopted and reinterpreted UNESCO ideas, norms and values to shape local understanding and approaches to heritage protection (Tomczak, 2017; Zhu & Maags, 2020). According to You and Hardwick (2020), ICH-related concepts have been constructed, interpreted and applied by different actors, in different contexts, for different purposes, hence the diversity of ICH discourses and practices worldwide. Though the Convention is administered by UNESCO, it relies on Member States to cooperate on their own accord in the ICH mission, during which countries often prioritize their own national interests. Michael Dylan Foster (2015) summarizes that the significance of UNESCO inscription can vary greatly—it might be regarded as an economic advantage, a symbol of pride and identity, a burden, a decorative label, or even something insignificant—depending on how it is situated and valued in different places. Under

the political slogan of “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”, the current Chinese leadership emphasize the importance of developing “excellent traditional culture” (You & Hardwick, 2020). The Convention offers an international framework that Chinese government can strategically adopt for the goals of promoting China as a culturally powerful country internationally and nourishing an united nationalism by assuring the citizens that China can revive its traditional cultures and historical glory, domestically (Tomczak, 2017). For this reason, ICH has become a discursive instrument to promote cultural revival, shape nationalist imagination and strengthen nation-state building in China (Bodolec, 2013). to foster cultural nationalism and economic development domestically, as well as soft power internationally. Maggs (2018) argued that the Chinese Government has adopted a UNESCO-inspired heritage regime to foster cultural nationalism and economic development domestically, as well as soft power internationally. As a result, the Chinese public may tend to associate the concept with national pride and respond to UNESCO inscription with nationalist sentiments. However, as argued by Ke (2022), the magic of Chinese official propaganda should not be exaggerated, and Chinese public’s ability to think autonomously should not be ignored. As evidenced by examples such as Comment 13 and 14, which question the practical usefulness of UNESCO inscription in preventing the dilution of Spring Festival traditions, the efforts of Chinese government in the ICH field have drawn skepticism about their actual effectiveness in safeguarding ICH. While Chinese official media often glorify UNESCO inscription as a significant act (Tomczak, 2017), some individuals may perceive it as symbolic or performative. Especially when the ICH element in question is one they are deeply familiar with and have personally experienced throughout their lives, they may be more inclined to doubt whether the inscription genuinely contributes to safeguarding.

CONCLUSION

Chinese social media has been important in giving more people a voice in heritage discussions and in shaping how ordinary people see and talk about their cultural traditions (Hu, 2023). This study employed thematic analysis to examine the comments on Chinese social media posts about the Spring Festival’s UNESCO inscription. The findings reveal a spectrum of responses among Chinese netizens, ranging from applause to criticism or just indifference. Many are delighted by the inscription, seeing it as the international community’s recognition of the Spring Festival and an affirmation of its Chinese culture ownership. Some criticize that China should not subject its own traditional festival to international evaluation and remove the festival’s Chinese features in the translation of its name. There are also those who, rather than focusing on the heritage inscription itself, take this opportunity to articulate concerns and appeals related to the festival.

One additional finding worth mentioning is that the UNESCO inscription of the Spring Festival evokes apparent nationalist reactions among the Chinese public. Firstly, it may arise from the festival’s longstanding role as a cultural cornerstone of Chinese identity, intrinsically tied to narratives of national unity and historical continuity. Secondly, it may stem from the Chinese government’s localized reinterpretation of ICH principles, wherein the framework has been strategically adapted to align with national socio-political agendas such as legitimizing state-led cultural revitalization. However, it should be noted that the responses of different individuals are diversified and not always consistent with the official discourse.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the UNESCO ICH inscription is received among Chinese netizens. It offers a reference point for future comparative studies on public responses to ICH-making. The study also enriches research about the Spring Festival by revealing a wide range of emotions and understandings that the festival holds for Chinese people. Yet, the study has several limitations. The analysis represents the perspectives of only a subset of Chinese netizens, primarily active social media users, which excludes less vocal or offline populations. This limitation is further compounded by the highly regulated nature of China’s digital space, where censorship may constrain the visibility of dissenting perspectives. Future

research could triangulate online data with offline interviews or surveys to capture a fuller spectrum of public opinion. In addition, the absence of demographic data such as age and gender makes it difficult to compare interpretations across different groups. Finally, the interpretation of themes is unavoidably influenced by researcher subjectivity, which is an inherent consideration in thematic analysis. The discussed limitations can serve as springboards for further studies.

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Data Availability Statement

The anonymized data generated and analyzed during the current study are available at <https://zenodo.org/records/16422585>. Identifiable information has been removed to protect privacy.

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