

Preservation of intangible heritage and empowering non-native ethnic communities in Indian context

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1. Abstract

Urban memories, as collective intangible heritage, are crucial to the cultural fabric and identity of urban spaces. It encapsulates the narratives, traditions, and experiences of city inhabitants. In the Indian context, there is a significant gap in preserving these memories, especially for non-native ethnic communities, such as Kolkata's Chinese community. This study addresses this gap by examining how urban memories within this community capture cultural contributions, adaptation, and integration spanning generations. Considering the case study of the Chinese community in Kolkata, India, the study investigates the urban memories of the community members that combine social integration, culinary contributions, and cultural resiliency. By collecting viewpoints from a range of age groups, the study shows how urban memories differ. The results indicate that younger generations emphasize hybrid identities and modern expressions, while older generations recall migration and settlement difficulties. Findings highlight the role of urban memories in promoting social inclusion and mutual respect, as well as empowering marginalized communities. Key strategies for preservation include digital archiving and community storytelling initiatives like oral history programs and cultural festivals, which honour and maintain the community's heritage. By supporting these efforts, cities can become more welcoming places that value the accomplishments of ethnic groups which are not native to the area.

Keywords

Cultural resilience, Chinatown, Chinese community, Ethnocultural communities, Cultural heritage

2. Introduction

The term "cultural heritage" (CH) refers to artifacts, relics, architectural creations, landscapes, and national treasures that are connected to a country's past and cultural development (Thuc *et al.*, 2024). It represents a continuity of traditions and practices transmitted over generations, embodying the core of a society's collective memory (Banda *et al.*, 2024). It describes the items and concepts that members of a community or group have inherited from previous generations, are preserved in the present, and will be utilized by generations to come. Cultural heritage includes tangible forms, intangible forms, and natural heritage (Banda *et al.*, 2024). Historical sites, monuments, structures, artifacts, and other comparable items that are kept for preservation in the future are all regarded as belonging to the tangible cultural heritage (TCH). Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is another type of CH. In addition to related tools, objects, artifacts, and cultural locations, ICH includes practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and sometimes individuals recognize as being crucial to their cultural heritage (Qiu, 2023). This aspect includes traditions or living expressions that are transmitted from ancestors to

descendants, and includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, and knowledge related to nature and the universe, as well as the skills required for traditional crafts (Xiao *et al.*, 2023). ICH, as delineated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, pertains to 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – along with the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces linked to them – that communities, groups, and, in certain instances, individuals acknowledge as integral to their cultural heritage' (Xiao *et al.*, 2023; Zhao *et al.*, 2023). ICH is intricately embedded in the customs of communities. It serves as an essential link to the historical narrative and identity of a people, functioning as a nation's symbolic representation and brand (Zhao *et al.*, 2024). In heritage sites, ICH enhances social cohesiveness and promotes a sense of identity and belonging among locals while also enriching place identification and the travel experience for tourists (Qiu, 2023). It serves as both a reflection of historical traditions and a vital foundation for development and innovation (Arcos-Pumarola, Paquin and Sitges, 2023). For non-native ethnic populations, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) aids in the preservation of their distinct identities. It signifies not only cultural divergence but also a means of safeguarding their history within a predominantly dominant society.

The non-native ethnic communities face the dual challenge of integrating themselves into mainstream society while protecting the cultural practices that define their heritage (Samanta and Chattopadhyay, 2024). ICH provides these communities with a sense of continuity and belonging and reinforces ties to their ancestral roots despite geographic displacement. The performing arts, religious ceremonies, traditional festivals, storytelling, and culinary arts are all essential ways for passing down cultural values to future generations. These activities create unity within the group and establish a feeling of common identity. Protecting the intangible cultural resources is crucial as they make their way through the urban landscape. This is mostly because their social standards have been impacted by modernization and globalization. These communities face assimilation pressures, acculturative stress, social marginalization, or cultural dilution. Therefore, resilience towards these is required. The ability of these communities to maintain and modify their cultural practices while interacting with the larger socioeconomic and political structures of the host society is referred to here as cultural resilience. ICH is not simply a collection of historical traditions; it is a dynamic resource that enables communities to affirm their identity, maintain intergenerational connections, and develop solidarity in urban environments that frequently threaten their uniqueness.

In this regard, this paper seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do urban memories differ between older and younger generations in non-native ethnic communities?
2. What are the key factors that influences the preservation of intangible cultural heritage among different age groups?
3. How have cultural practices evolved over time across generations?

This study is an attempt to ensure that the intangible cultural heritage of non-native ethnic communities not only survives but thrives in the rapidly changing urban context. Therefore, this study considers the case study of the Chinese community in Kolkata, India to provide insights into how cultural practices are preserved, changed, or even lost. This paper further emphasizes on the intergenerational dynamics within this non-native ethnic community. This research makes it possible to investigate how these communities' changing cultural memories influence their wider assimilation into urban settings while preserving their unique cultural identities. This paper also aims to identify effective strategies for empowering the Chinese community. The understanding of the factors that affect their cultural preservation will help the urban planners and policymakers to empower these communities through cultural resilience.

3. Literature review

3.1. Role of urban memories as an efficient agent to preserve intangible heritage

Urban memories play a vital role in the preservation of intangible heritage, and act as a dynamic and adaptive force that links the past to the present. They serve as a repository of cultural knowledge, practices, and values. They are cherished by people through collective and personal experiences within a city. Intangible heritages are kept alive through the everyday lives and memories of a community. In this context, urban memories act as the bridge that preserves and transmits this heritage across generations (Lak and Hakimian, 2019).

Urban environments are constantly changing. They are evolving due to changing landscapes, infrastructure, and demographics. People and the community still hold onto memories of cultural practices despite changes. These recollections are frequently connected to particular places, social gathering spots, or regular occasions that act as benchmarks for cultural celebrations and opportunities (Gurler and Ozer, 2013). People prefer to revisit these place as they occupy a strong place in their memories. Urban memories can sustain the continuity of intangible heritage by making sure that practices like festivals, rituals, or social gatherings, are remembered and passed on. These recollections ensure that traditions continue to be meaningful and relevant even when the physical surroundings change. The adaptability of urban memories is a crucial feature. This adaptability enables the preservation of intangible heritage while being sensitive to the demands and conditions of modern life. The memory is a vital resource to maintain attachments to remembered environments that people can no longer access (Huss, 2024).

According to earlier research, urban memories give people a feeling of belongingness, identity and attachment (Lak and Hakimian, 2019). These urban memories stimulate the brain. They are a powerful tool for transferring intangible cultural heritage from one generation to the next. The younger generation learn from the older generation. The customs and cultures are passed down. These are not written scriptures, but experiences that are carried forward. Younger generations rely heavily on older generations to preserve their memories of cultural customs, rituals, and practices. Even in urban environments where modern influences might predominate, the memories aid younger community members in connecting with their cultural heritage. Through oral traditions, storytelling, and participation in communal activities, urban memories ensure that intangible heritage is not lost, but rather adapted and retained across time. Urban memories also promote a deep sense of identity and belonging within communities (Bachleitner, 2022). Research shows that reconnecting with one's roots and heritage often happens through the act of remembering and participating in cultural traditions. Collective memory is essential to the formation of a national identity over time, even if (and maybe precisely because) it deviates from historical fact (Bachleitner, 2022). This shared memory strengthens the community's cultural resilience and ability to maintain its distinct identity in the face of a larger sociocultural context. People feel connected to their cultural past through these memories, which motivates them to keep traditions alive and pass them on. For minority or non-native ethnic communities who are facing challenges like assimilation or cultural dilution, this resilience is vital in safeguarding their intangible heritage (Huss, 2024). Why is it vital to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of these communities? Interestingly, this resilience is not just preservation, but also about ownership. The sense of ownership will organically help in keeping these ICH alive. In this situation, the participatory approach guarantees researchers that community-based intangible heritage preservation is not solely reliant on external organizations or official documentation. It is based on the actual experiences and actions of the people who make up the community.

3.2. Intangible Cultural heritage (ICH) of Chinatown in Kolkata, India

India is a South Asian nation recognised for its cultural pluralism. Various non-indigenous ethnic groups, including the Chinese, Tibetan, Nepali, and Afghan communities, have settled over the ages. Among the various ethnocultural communities, the Chinese community has managed to maintain their identity owing to their unique tangible and intangible practices. Their presence is felt uniquely among the natives. The Chinatowns in Kolkata are the home to India's only and largest Chinese living community. However, rapid urbanization, socioeconomic change, and cultural homogenization pose a serious threat to their intangible heritage. The preservation of ICH is not only a cultural necessity but also a means to empower these communities to ensure that their cultural identities are not marginalized.

Food is considered Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which refers to a non-material legacy that is embodied and ritualized in everyday cooking. It is a way to express culture that goes beyond the tangible qualities of food to include the cultural symbolic aspects of stories, customs, embodied knowledge, and memories that link the past and present (Lee, 2023). Food memories are important, as the Chinese community influences the distinctive Indo-Chinese cuisine, which amalgamates traditional Chinese culinary methods with indigenous Indian ingredients. Hakka noodles, chilli chicken, and momo have become emblematic of Chinatown. They draw culinary enthusiasts from the city and its surroundings. These culinary customs include not only providing for basic needs but also preserving cultural identity through the use of group meals and cooking.



Figuur 1: Indo-Chinese food. Source: Authors

The cultural festivals are another significant ICH that ensures the preservation of traditional memories. They exemplify immaterial cultural heritage, as they are experiential goods that dissipate upon production. These festivals reflect the artistic innovations of the community members while also drawing upon historical, and cultural contexts, regarded as accumulated cultural capital (Del Barrio, Devesa and Herrero, 2012). The celebration of festivals is another vital aspect of intangible heritage in Chinatown. The Chinese celebrate their New Year on the streets of the city. Festivals such as Chinese New Year (Spring Festival), the Lantern Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival (Moon Festival), and the Hungry Ghost Festival unite the community in lively celebrations characterised by rituals, performances, and familial gatherings. People from different other communities come to witness the celebration. During these celebrations, traditional customs such as lantern lighting, dragon dances, and ancestral food offerings strengthen cultural connections and build a sense of continuity with history. The Chinese members dress themselves uniquely to represent their own traditions.



Figur 2: Chinese New Year celebration. Source: Authors

Additionally, the practice of Chinese calligraphy, papercutting, and the creation of lanterns serve as artistic expressions that keep alive centuries-old traditions. The calligraphies and papercuttings reflect the traditional Chinese art forms. They include the Chinese letters and fonts. They are distinct in the unique combination of red and black colour. These art forms are not only important cultural practices but also symbols of identity and creativity. They enrich the cultural fabric of Kolkata's Chinatown and ensure the continuity of Chinese intangible heritage in the city. However, the decline of skills, alterations in the

craftsmanship environment, and the ineffectiveness and challenges in advancing traditional pedagogical approaches significantly hinder the transmission and evolution of papercutting art (Silva *et al.*, 2019).



Figur 3: Chinese lanterns, papercuttings and calligraphies used in everyday lives. Source: Authors

4. Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive methodology to examine the role of intangible cultural heritage in sustaining urban memories within Kolkata's Chinatown. Data is collected from the third and fourth generation community members. The study seeks to identify intergenerational differences in cultural memory and attachment by using carefully selected indicators and gathering data from both older and younger generations. The research uses pairwise t-test to empirically investigate the determinants that affects the cultural resilience and the preservation of intangible heritage over generations within an urban diaspora group.

1.1. Study area

The research examines the Chinatown regions of Kolkata, India, namely the neighbourhoods of Tiretta Bazaar and Tangra. These areas have historically been inhabited by Chinese immigrant communities. These regions are recognised for their abundant cultural history, traditional Chinese architecture, temples, and markets. The presence of TCH makes them appropriate sites for the exploration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in an urban context. The Chinese community in Kolkata has a historical presence since the 18th century, and its members persist in upholding cultural traditions and social events that strengthen their ethnic identity within the broader Indian socio-cultural context. Kolkata's Chinatown serves as an exemplary instance for examining the continuity and transformation of cultural legacy through generations.

1.2. Selection of indicators

The ICH indicators are selected for their significance to the cultural identity and memory of the Chinese community in Kolkata. Each indicator represents a significant cultural element that plays a role in shaping individual and collective memories. Ten indicators are selected, each addressing different aspects of cultural heritage, with corresponding descriptions:

Tabel 1: Selected indicators of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Code	Intangible Cultural Heritage	Description
ICH1	Cultural Festivities	The traditional Chinese festivals celebrated in Kolkata (e.g., Chinese New Year, Moon Festival) contribute significantly to my memories of the city
ICH2	Religious and Spiritual Spaces	The presence of Chinese temples and shrines in Kolkata holds a special place in shaping my connection to the city
ICH3	Social Gatherings and Community Events	Participating in Chinese community events in Kolkata strengthens my emotional ties and memories of the urban environment
ICH4	Culinary Heritage	Experiencing authentic Chinese food in my home enhances my sense of belonging and connection to my community
ICH5	Language and Communication	Hearing Chinese dialects spoken within the community in Kolkata plays a vital role in maintaining my urban memories
ICH6	Intercultural Exchange	My interactions with other ethnic communities in Kolkata influence the way I remember and perceive the city's social fabric
ICH7	Traditional Chinese Arts and Crafts	The preservation of Chinese art forms (e.g., calligraphy, martial arts) in Kolkata is important for my memories of the city
ICH8	Family Heritage and Ancestral Stories	The stories passed down through my family about our life in Kolkata are central to my sense of connection with the city
ICH9	Neighbourhood Familiarity	Walking through Chinese neighbourhoods in Kolkata evokes strong emotional memories tied to my experiences in the city
ICH10	Sense of Safety and Security	Feeling safe and secure within the Chinese community spaces in Kolkata enhances my positive memories of the urban environment

1.3. Data collection

A structured survey questionnaire based on the ten indicators of intangible cultural heritage was used to gather data. Questions on a 5-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," were used to evaluate each indicator. The purpose of the survey was to find out how participants felt each indicator influenced their recollections and sense of belonging to Kolkata.

The survey was conducted with two age groups:

- i. Older Generation: Ages 46 and above

ii. Younger Generation: Ages 15 to 45

Sampling was necessary for analysing the data using pairwise t-test, with responses gathered by household surveys utilising a pre-designed questionnaire based on the 10 selected intangible cultural heritage indicators (Refer Tabel 1). Utilising Slovin's formula (Dey and Mandal, 2024), the sample size was calculated for the Chinese community, which have lesser than 1500 population in the city (Biswas, 2019). Taking an average household size of 4.1 for India (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2021), the approximate number of Chinese households in Kolkata is 365. We are considering a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. The margin of error will be represented in the formula as 5/100, or 0.05. The equation is as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{(1 + Ne^2)}$$

Where,

n = Number of samples, N = Total population and e = margin of error.

The calculation of sample size resulted in estimated sample of 191. A total of 195 participants completed the survey, that provided insights into how urban memories and intangible cultural heritage are perceived and maintained across generations within Kolkata's Chinatown. The sample includes individuals are born and raised in Kolkata's Chinese community and represents a cross-sectional view of age-based perceptions.

1.4. Sample profile

The sample comprised 195 individuals, with about equal representation from both older and younger generations. Basic demographic information, covering age, gender, education, and duration of residence in Kolkata's Chinatown, was gathered to contextualise the investigation. The participants are inhabitants of Chinatown, which ensured that their replies accurately represented genuine experiences and recollections pertaining to the community's intangible cultural heritage..

1.5. Data analysis

A t-test was performed for each of the ten indicators to assess intergenerational differences in views of intangible cultural heritage. The t-test is suitable for comparing the means of two independent groups in order to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the older and younger generations' perceptions of the significance of specific intangible heritage items. If the resulting t-value was lower than the critical t-value, it indicated that the perceptions on ICH among the different generations are not statistically different. The goal of the analysis is to identify any generational differences or similarities in urban memories related to religious sites, cultural celebrations, language use, culinary heritage, and other markers. This will provide light on the tenacity of cultural heritage within the Chinese community in Kolkata by enabling insights into how these aspects are valued across generations.

5. Results and discussion

The paired t-test is a statistical technique utilised to compare the means of two groups or conditions. The analysis of survey and observation data, conducted using the paired t-test, explains the distinct impacts of intergenerational experiences on urban memories. Random sampling methods are employed to get a substantial sample size of 195 people, that is in consistent with the assumptions of the paired t-test.

Tabel 2: Results of t-test

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
ICH1	Equal variances assumed	-17.523	198	.000	-2.07770	.11857
	Equal variances not assumed	-17.446	189.236	.000	-2.07770	.11909
ICH2	Equal variances assumed	-25.534	198	.000	-2.47705	.09701
	Equal variances not assumed	-26.459	182.060	.000	-2.47705	.09362
ICH3	Equal variances assumed	3.750	198	.000	.52496	.14000
	Equal variances not assumed	3.664	165.663	.000	.52496	.14328
ICH4	Equal variances assumed	-9.288	198	.000	-1.12721	.12136
	Equal variances not assumed	-9.285	192.697	.000	-1.12721	.12140
ICH5	Equal variances assumed	-42.851	198	.000	-2.98671	.06970
	Equal variances not assumed	-42.829	192.569	.000	-2.98671	.06974
ICH6	Equal variances assumed	10.139	198	.000	1.40217	.13829
	Equal variances not assumed	9.923	167.889	.000	1.40217	.14131
ICH7	Equal variances assumed	-29.277	198	.000	-2.58253	.08821
	Equal variances not assumed	-28.764	173.396	.000	-2.58253	.08978
ICH8	Equal variances assumed	-14.652	198	.000	-1.40378	.09581
	Equal variances not assumed	-14.111	144.199	.000	-1.40378	.09948
ICH9	Equal variances assumed	-41.203	198	.000	-2.93035	.07112
	Equal variances not assumed	-41.198	192.890	.000	-2.93035	.07113
ICH10	Equal variances assumed	-5.402	198	.000	-.51087	.09458
	Equal variances not assumed	-5.208	145.963	.000	-.51087	.09809

The findings show that people aged 46 and up have better emotional ties to the city's intangible cultural heritage. This is especially true when it comes to cultural events, religious sites, language, and knowing the area well. Conversely, the younger generation (15–45 years old) relies more on social gatherings and cross-cultural interactions to recall their urban experiences. The older group (46 years and up) and the younger group (15–45 years) both play important parts in protecting the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of the Chinese community in Kolkata.

Older Group (46 and Above):

- Cultural Festivities and Religious Spaces: Traditional Chinese festivals, temples, and shrines are maintained in large part by the elder generation. They actively participate in these practices and passes down rituals and traditions to the younger generation to preserve the spiritual and cultural essence of the community.

- **Culinary Heritage:** The older generation often supports real Chinese food by keeping family-owned restaurants open or teaching traditional recipes. This helps to keep the food practices alive.
- **Language and Communication:** The older generation ensures the preservation of linguistic heritage by frequently using and teaching Chinese dialect. This is a critical component of cultural identity.
- **Traditional Arts and Crafts:** Chinese arts like calligraphy and martial arts are still practiced and taught by many elderly people. This ensures that the knowledge of these traditional art forms is passed to the next generation.
- **Family Heritage and Ancestral Stories:** The older generation shares stories about their ancestors to keep the cultural memories alive. They share stories about their previous generation's history of migration and how their family tradition has been kept alive.

Younger Group (15-45):

- **Social Gatherings and Community Events:** The younger generation actively participates in community events and gatherings. Their engagement often attracts wider audiences that keeps the community's traditions alive in a more contemporary format.
- **Intercultural Exchange:** This group encourages people of different ethnicities to get to know each other and mix beliefs and cultural practices to fit the diverse city environment. Their willingness to talk to people from other cultures helps people understand each other and work together, and it also makes cultural history easier for more people to access.
- **Technological Preservation:** Young people often use digital tools and social media to share, promote, and record their heritage, such as cultural events, culinary adventures, and artistic acts. This digitization helps keep traditional practices alive in a way that future generations can understand.

In summary, while the older group focuses on maintaining the core traditions, language, and rituals that directly link the community to its heritage, the younger group leverages modern tools, social events, and intercultural exchanges to adapt and spread awareness of these traditions, to ensure their survival in a changing urban environment. Together, both groups contribute significantly to the ongoing preservation and evolution of the community's Intangible Cultural Heritage in Kolkata. The preservation efforts of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) by both the older and younger age groups play a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining urban memories within Kolkata's Chinese community. For the older generation, participating in cultural festivities, maintaining religious spaces, and preserving language and traditional arts anchors their memories deeply within the city's landscape. These efforts provide a tangible link to their heritage and reinforce a strong emotional connection to their surroundings, embedding their sense of identity and belonging within Kolkata's cultural fabric. They keep adding personal and group histories to the city's memory through activities like culinary heritage and family stories. These give the city additional levels of significance that relate to both the past and the present. For the younger generation, engaging in social gatherings, promoting intercultural exchange, and using digital platforms to document and share heritage not only connects them to their roots but also allows them to create new, adaptive urban memories. Their efforts to integrate ICH within modern and multicultural contexts bring traditional practices into the everyday lives of both community members and the broader public, enriching the city's collective memory. Together, these intergenerational preservation activities transform urban spaces into

lived memory sites where cultural continuity, adaptation, and shared experiences reinforce Kolkata's identity as a home for diverse heritage.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) by Kolkata's Chinese community highlights that cultural practices play a significant role in shaping and sustaining urban memories across generations. The older generations keep their basic traditions alive through languages, festivals, stories passed down through families, and food practices. Conversely, the younger generation uses digital platforms to make heritage accessible to a wider audience. They adapt and revitalizes their traditions in modern settings, and attempts to engage in intercultural exchanges. Together, these initiatives support the community's feeling of continuity, identity, and belonging in Kolkata's multicultural setting. ICH preservation strengthens the city's identity as a patchwork of memories, histories, and shared cultural experiences by incorporating customs into the urban landscape and interacting with locals and the general public. Future programs that emphasizes on digital documentation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and culturally designated areas will further ensure that the Chinese community's heritage remains a vibrant, living part of Kolkata's urban environment.

Future efforts to preserve Kolkata's Chinese community's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) might concentrate on developing organized intergenerational programs in which elders guide younger members and guarantee the smooth transfer of traditional knowledge, including language, culinary arts, and festival customs. The conservation architects can take initiatives for digital archiving efforts to include and share customs, celebrations, and ancestors' stories on online forums would make the legacy more accessible for current and future generations as well as people all over the world. Lastly, working with city officials to make cultural areas in the city would allow cultural events, art shows, and interactions between people of different cultures to continue.

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