



การผสมผสานเครื่องมือเชิงนโยบายและกลไกการกำกับดูแล :
การวิเคราะห์การกำกับดูแลหลายระดับต่อการพัฒนานวัตกรรมผ้าปักชนชาติอี๋ เมืองฉู่หยง ประเทศจีน

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บทคัดย่อ : การศึกษาครั้งนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อมุ่งวิเคราะห์การออกแบบนโยบายการพัฒนางานผ้าปักของชนชาติอี๋ในเมืองฉู่หยง สาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีน เพื่อเติมเต็มช่องว่างที่สำคัญในการสร้างความเข้าใจว่าการสร้างนวัตกรรมด้านมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมที่จับต้องไม่ได้ (ICH) ถูกทำให้เป็นสถาบันภายใต้ระบบการกำกับดูแลหลายระดับอย่างไร โดยงานวิจัยนี้อาศัยกรอบแนวคิดเรื่อง เครื่องมือเชิงนโยบายและมุมมองการกำกับดูแลหลายระดับ และใช้การวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาแบบนิรนัยต่อเอกสารนโยบายจำนวน 72 ฉบับ ที่ครอบคลุมระดับชาติ ระดับมณฑล ระดับเขตปกครองตนเอง และระดับอำเภอในช่วงปี ค.ศ. 2015-2024 ซึ่ง ผลการวิจัยเผยให้เห็นถึงกลไกการกำกับดูแลที่เชื่อมโยงกันสามประการ ได้แก่ การทำให้เป็นมาตรฐาน การฝังตัวเชิงสถาบัน และการกระตุ้นตลาด จนก่อให้เกิดกลไก “รัฐ-องค์กร-ตลาด” โดยนโยบายระดับชาติให้ความสำคัญกับการสร้างมาตรฐาน ผ่านเครื่องมือทางกฎหมาย เช่น กรอบการรับรองมาตรฐาน ในขณะที่นโยบายระดับอำเภอให้ความสำคัญกับการกระตุ้นตลาด ผ่านเงินอุดหนุนด้านอีคอมเมิร์ซและสหกรณ์ช่างฝีมือ ซึ่งการจัดวางโครงสร้างแบบลำดับขั้นนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่านโยบายถูกออกแบบ ให้กระจายตัวอย่างเป็นระบบในแต่ละระดับเพื่อขับเคลื่อนนวัตกรรมมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมที่จับต้องไม่ได้ (ICH) อีกทั้งเมื่อมอง ตัวบทนโยบายเป็นสิ่งประดิษฐ์เชิงสถาบัน งานวิจัยนี้ยังวิเคราะห์ปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างภาษาทางเทคนิคโครงสร้างองค์กร-และ แรงจูงใจทางเศรษฐกิจที่มีต่อการเปลี่ยนแนวปฏิบัติทางวัฒนธรรม การวิเคราะห์ดังกล่าวยังนำเสนอกรอบเชิงโครงสร้าง สำหรับการออกแบบนโยบายวัฒนธรรมในพื้นที่ชนกลุ่มน้อยและเน้นย้ำถึงความจำเป็นในการตรวจสอบความสามารถในการประยุกต์ใช้-ของกลไกดังกล่าวในบริบทที่หลากหลายผ่านการศึกษาเชิงประจักษ์แบบข้ามบริบทต่อไป

คำสำคัญ : มรดกทางวัฒนธรรมที่จับต้องไม่ได้ (ICH); เครื่องมือเชิงนโยบาย; การกำกับดูแลหลายระดับ; การทำให้เป็น มาตรฐาน; ผ้าปักชนชาติอี๋

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Policy Instrument Mix and Governance Mechanisms: A Multi-level Governance Analysis of the Innovative Development of Chuxiong (China) Yi Embroidery

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Abstract: This study investigates the policy design of Yi Embroidery development in Chuxiong, China. Addressing a critical gap in understanding how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) innovation is institutionalized within multi-level governance systems and grounded in policy instrument theory and a multi-tier governance perspective, the research employs deductive content analysis of 72 policy documents spanning national, provincial, prefectural, and county levels (2015–2024). Findings reveal three interconnected governance mechanisms—standardization, institutional embedding, and market activation—that form a “state–organization–market” continuum. National policies prioritize standardization through regulatory instruments (e.g., certification frameworks), while county-level initiatives drive market activation via e-commerce subsidies and artisan cooperatives. This hierarchical configuration demonstrates how policy instruments are structurally distributed across governance tiers to steer ICH innovation. By treating policy texts as institutional artifacts, the study decodes the interplay between technical language, organizational structures, and economic incentives in reshaping cultural practices. The analysis offers a structured framework for cultural policy design in ethnic regions and underscores the need to validate the mechanisms’ generalizability through cross-contextual empirical studies.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage (ICH); Policy instruments; Multi-level governance; Standardization; Yi Embroidery

政策工具组合与治理机制：中国楚雄彝绣创新发展的多层级治理分析

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摘要：本研究以中国楚雄彝绣的发展政策为对象，探讨非物质文化遗产（ICH）创新在多层级治理体系中如何实现制度化，从而回应现有研究在该领域理解不足的关键问题。基于政策工具理论与多层级治理视角，本研究对 2015–2024 年国家、省、州、县四级共 72 份政策文件进行演绎式内容分析。研究结果揭示了三个相互关联的治理机制——标准化、组织化嵌入与市场激活——共同构成了“国家—组织—市场”连续体。在治理层级结构中，国家层面的政策通过认证体系等规制型工具优先推动标准化；县级政策则通过电商补贴、合作社建设等举措强化市场激活。整体来看，不同类型的政策工具在治理层级上的结构性分布形成了对彝绣创新的多维度政策引导。将政策文本视为制度性载体，本研究进一步揭示了技术性政策语言、组织结构安排与经济激励机制之间的互动如何重塑文化实践。本研究所提出的分析框架为民族地区文化政策设计提供了结构化的参考，并强调未来需通过跨区域的实证研究来验证这些治理机制的普适性。

关键词：非物质文化遗产（ICH）；政策工具；多层级治理；标准化；彝绣

Introduction

In the context of advancing cultural governance, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has shifted from a primarily protected cultural resource to a governance object deeply intertwined with national strategies, local development, and the cultural industry. The UNESCO (2003) safeguarding framework institutionalized ICH, while China's policy practices in cultural revitalization and regional development have positioned traditional crafts at the intersection of administrative structures and industrial systems. Under the influence of institutional discourses and governance logics (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2014), as well as the economization of culture (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009), ICH has forged new developmental pathways shaped by both market demands and state intervention. This raises a critical question: how do policies shape the innovation trajectories and institutionalization processes of traditional crafts?

Current ICH literature primarily focuses on the following topics, namely cultural meanings, community practices, and social identity (Brumann, 2012), with some attention to the role of state in constructing cultural symbols and public narratives (Hafstein, 2018; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2014). Institutional studies examine how administrative systems—through evaluation, management, and policy processes—reshape ICH forms (Bendix & Hafstein, 2019), while cultural policy research highlights the governance logics embedded in policy texts (Ahearne, 2009). Further, cultural economy perspective reveals structural linkages among policy, organizations, and markets as crafts enter industrial circuits (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Chinese scholars have also noted local governments' coordination pressures and resource constraints in policy implementation (Wang, 2021b). Yet, limited attention has been focused on how policy instruments are structurally configured across multi-level governance tiers and how governance mechanisms are institutionally organized—leaving the institutional logic of ICH innovation underexplored.

Against this backdrop, Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture (楚雄彝族自治州), located in Yunnan Province in southwestern China, offers a compelling empirical site to examine the interaction between policy design and traditional craft development (Zhou & Huang, 2022). As an ethnic minority region with a high concentration of Yi communities (彝族聚居区), Chuxiong (楚雄) has experienced an intensification of heritage-oriented governance in recent years. Yi Embroidery (彝绣) refers to a range of textile practices traditionally produced by Yi women, characterized by regionally specific motifs and techniques, and officially recognized as an important form of intangible cultural heritage in China (He, 2020). Rooted in local Yi culture, Yi Embroidery (彝绣) has gradually been incorporated into industrial systems through policy initiatives related to heritage workshops, cooperative organizations, and cultural industries, thereby forming close connections between cultural expression and administrative action (Li et al., 2020). This institutional context makes Chuxiong Yi Embroidery (楚雄彝绣) particularly suitable for examining how policies structure pathways of cultural innovation.

Objective

This study attempts to investigate how policy operates at the institutional level by examining how multi-level governments deploy and combine policy instruments to promote Yi Embroidery. Specifically, it addresses two questions:

- (1) What types of policy instruments do different governmental tiers employ, and how are they configured?
- (2) Through which governance mechanisms are these instruments configurations expected to drive Yi Embroidery's innovative development?

Scope of the study

Adopting a policy-design perspective this study examines how multi-level cultural policies promote innovation in Yi Embroidery (彝绣) through mixed policy instrument and their intended governance mechanisms. The temporal scope is spanning from 2015 to 2024 and the empirical setting is Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture (楚雄彝族自治州), Yunnan Province, China. The data consist of formally issued policy documents (laws and regulations, development plans, special action programs, implementation opinions, and supporting measures). The basic unit of analysis is the actionable “instrument unit” extracted from policy texts. Addressing the research question mentioned above, we employ deductive content analysis combining with thematic analysis to identify and compare three instrument types (supply-side, regulatory, and demand-side) and to map them onto three governance mechanisms (standardization, organizational embedding, and market activation).

Literature review

1. Research on Chuxiong Yi Embroidery: from cultural symbolism to policy context

Research on Chuxiong Yi Embroidery (楚雄彝绣) has progressed from cultural interpretation to development-oriented analysis. In the initial phase, scholars emphasized its role as a medium of Yi ethnic identity, examining symbolic motifs, aesthetic systems, and its embeddedness in local history and daily life (Zhou & Huang, 2022). These investigations also highlighted its gendered nature, noting that embroidery—primarily practiced by women—functions as a stable social practice within households and communities. Following China's adoption of the (UNESCO, 2003) framework, scholarship shifted toward the institutional effects of heritage designation, exploring how official recognition reshaped transmission practices, reconfigured bearer identities, and influenced local cultural self-perception (Zhang, 2018).

More recently, scholars' attention has turned to Yi Embroidery's integration into economic circuits through cooperatives, e-commerce, and cultural tourism, with studies assessing its contributions to household income and regional development (Chen, 2020; Wang, 2021a). In this emerging literature, policy is consistently framed as an enabling backdrop or external catalyst for transformation. Despite frequent references to policy, the internal architecture of policy design has rarely been subjected to systematic

analysis. Specifically, the mechanisms by which instruments are selected, configured, and distributed across multi-level governance tiers, these questions remain underexplored. Consequently, our understanding of the institutional logic through which innovation is deliberately organized remains insufficient.

2. Theoretical framework: policy tool theory and multi-level governance perspective

Before delving into the specific typologies of policy tools, it is crucial to clarify the institutional logic of ICH innovation and its theoretical affinity with policy tool theory. In the context of modern cultural governance, ICH innovation is no longer merely a spontaneous, grassroots cultural practice; rather, it has evolved into a highly institutionalized process of resource reorganization and standardization. This institutional logic exhibits a strong theoretical affinity with policy tool theory. Policy tools represent the specific, systematic interventions—such as supply-side capacity building, regulatory standardization, and demand-side market activation—through which the state integrates traditional crafts into modern economic and administrative networks. Therefore, policy tool theory serves not just as a classification framework, but as an analytical lens that perfectly captures how external administrative power reshapes cultural heritage. Consequently, the structural configuration of these policy tools across multi-level governance systems directly engenders the three core governance mechanisms examined in this study: standardization, organizational embedding, and market activation.

Integrating policy tool theory (Hood, 1983; Howlett, 2005) with a multi-tier governance perspective, this study seeks to analyze how policy instruments are configured and operationalized in the innovation of ICH. The policy tool framework provides a structured lens to categorize and examine the types of instruments—supply-side (e.g., capacity-building programs), regulatory (e.g., standards and certification), and demand-side (e.g., market incentives)—employed by different governance tiers. This is particularly relevant to ICH innovation, where policy interventions often involve complex institutional arrangements and cross-level coordination. Meanwhile, the multi-tier governance perspective emphasizes how policy design and implementation unfold across national, provincial, prefectural, and county levels, each with distinct mandates and capacities. Together, these theories form the foundation for identifying how policy instruments are selected, combined, and distributed across governance tiers, and how these configurations generate specific governance mechanisms.

The analytical focus lies in mapping policy instruments to three key governance mechanisms identified in cultural policy literature: standardization (e.g., institutionalizing quality norms through training and certification, as seen in Hafstein, 2018), organizational embedding (e.g., integrating ICH into cooperatives or industrial parks, reflecting practices documented by Bendix et al., 2018), and market activation (e.g., leveraging tourism and e-commerce to create demand, a pathway highlighted by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009). These mechanisms are not merely outcomes of policy but are actively shaped by the types and combinations of instruments deployed at each governance tier. By tracing how tools map

to mechanisms across levels, this study aims to reveal the institutional logic underpinning ICH innovation in policy frameworks.

Methodology

This study draws on policy tool theory (Hood, 1983; Howlett, 2005) and a multi-tier governance perspective. We employ a deductive content analysis. This framework helps us systematically clarify institutional arrangements across administrative tiers. It reveals how policy instruments are selected, integrated, and implemented in practice. This approach aligns closely with our goal: examining the institutional logic of ICH innovation. It ensures the theoretical coherence needed to interpret policy design patterns (Ahearne, 2009).

1. Data collection

Data collection Data were collected from formal policy documents issued between 2015 and 2024 by governmental bodies at four administrative levels: national, provincial, prefectural, and county. After carefully selecting, a total of 72 documents were collected, including strategic plans, funding guidelines, and regulatory frameworks explicitly addressing Chuxiong Yi Embroidery (楚雄彝绣) development. Documents were sourced from official websites of the State Council, Yunnan Provincial Government, Chuxiong Prefecture (楚雄州), and selected counties. To ensure a systematic and comprehensive retrieval of policy texts, a structured keyword search strategy was employed. The primary search keywords included “Yi Embroidery (彝绣)”, combined with broader cultural governance terms such as “Intangible Cultural Heritage”, “Traditional Crafts (传统工艺)”, and “Cultural Industry (文化产业)”. These keywords were cross-referenced with regional identifiers, including “Chuxiong (楚雄)” and “Yunnan (云南)”. The selection criteria strictly prioritized formally issued documents that contained these specific keywords in their titles or main texts. Excluded were informal communications and promotional materials to ensure focus on institutional design rather than implementation narratives.

2. Data analysis

To ensure a systematic interpretation of the policy configurations, we divided the analytical work into three interlinked stages.

In the first stage, we split the documents among ourselves to identify and classify the policy instruments. Using Hood’s (1983) typology as our base—and adapting it for cultural governance based on Ahearne (2009)—we each sorted our assigned texts into three categories: supply-side (e.g., training programs), regulatory (e.g., quality standards), and demand-side (e.g., market incentives). We didn’t just stop at broad labels; we dug deeper to see if supply tools targeted individual artisans or institutions like cooperatives, and whether regulatory rules were mandatory or just advisory. Afterward, we compared notes to ensure our coding was consistent across the team.

Next, we worked together to map these instruments to three governance mechanisms: standardization, organizational embedding, and market activation. Drawing on literature from Bendix (2018), Comaroff & Comaroff (2009), and Hafstein (2018), we discussed how specific tools actually functioned in practice. For instance, we agreed that certification frameworks were the main drivers of standardization, while programs promoting cooperatives were key to organizational embedding. This collaborative mapping helped us see how abstract tools translated into real institutional outcomes.

Finally, we conducted a cross-tier comparison by pooling our findings. By looking at the instrument configurations across different administrative levels side-by-side, we spotted clear variations in governance priorities. We noticed that national-level policies heavily emphasized standardization through top-down mandates, whereas county-level documents focused much more on localized strategies for market activation.

Through this shared analytical process, we were able to identify the underlying institutional logics. Our division of labor allowed us to cover more ground while our joint discussions ensured we didn't miss the bigger picture: how policy design actively shapes Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) innovation.

Research Results

1. Policy instrument configuration and institutional logic

1.1 Policy instrument distribution across governance levels

An analysis of 72 policy documents reveals distinct patterns in how policy instruments are deployed across different governance tiers. Supply-side instruments, such as training programs and capacity-building initiatives, dominate at the county level (accounting for 42% of all instruments), reflecting localized efforts to directly empower artisans. In contrast, regulatory instruments, including certification frameworks and quality standards, are most prevalent at the national and provincial levels (38% and 31%, respectively), underscoring top-down standardization strategies. Demand-side instruments, such as tourism promotion and market incentives, are relatively evenly distributed but show a slight concentration at the prefectural level (27%). These findings align with the multi-tier governance perspective: higher-level policies prioritize institutional coordination, while lower-level policies focus on localized execution.

1.2 Mapping instruments to governance mechanisms

Policy instruments exhibit a profound systemic coupling with three core governance mechanisms: standardization, organizational embedding, and market activation. At the national and provincial levels, regulatory instruments—such as certification prerequisites and quality benchmarks—are deployed directly to serve standardization, aiming to establish uniform norms for ICH practices. Specifically, while national policies delineate technical red lines for embroidery techniques, provincial frameworks introduce digital certification platforms; together, they construct a top-down standardization architecture.

Far from operating in isolation, policy instruments are systematically configured into specific instrument mixes that actively shape these three governance mechanisms (see Table 1). The genesis of

these mechanisms relies not merely on the policy goals declared in textual documents but, more fundamentally, on the structural interactions among supply-side, regulatory, and demand-side tools across diverse governance tiers. This process reflects a distinct logic of top-down institutional control, resonating strongly with Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2009) thesis on “state-led cultural homogenization”.

At the micro-execution level, county-level supply-side instruments (e.g., establishing village cooperatives, conducting skills training) correspond primarily to organizational embedding, dedicated to building institutionalized platforms for artisan collaboration. Municipal policies advance this objective by establishing regional training hubs, thereby facilitating knowledge flows and exchange between artisans and designers. Concurrently, demand-side instruments implemented at both municipal and county levels—such as tourism branding (旅游品牌建设) and e-commerce subsidies (电商补贴)—serve as powerful drivers for market activation. For instance, e-commerce subsidies do more than help artisans access urban consumers; they fundamentally effect a value reconstruction, repositioning ICH from mere “cultural heritage” to a viable “commercial asset”. The interplay of these policy tools weaves a rigorous institutional architecture: standardization lays the foundational rules, organizational embedding constructs the operational infrastructure, and market activation provides external legitimacy validation. Mutually reinforcing, these three elements form a complete governance closed loop.

Table 1 The Configuration Matrix of Policy Instruments and Governance Mechanisms

Governance Mechanism	Primary Policy Tool Mix (The Logic)	Upper-Tier Configuration (National/ Provincial)	Lower-Tier Configuration (Prefectural/ County)	Institutional Logic: How Tools Constitute Mechanisms
Standardization	Regulatory + Supply-side	National Technical guidelines; Provincial Digital Certification platforms.	County-level embroiderer skill workshops to operationalize abstract norms.	Regulatory tools establish institutional quality benchmarks, while local supply-side capacity-building (training) ensures artisans can physically achieve these standardized metrics.
Institutional Embedding	Supply-side + Regulatory	Provincial ICH Heritage Demonstration Parks providing Infrastructural	Prefectural Yi Embroidery Industrial Parks; County Artisan Cooperatives.	Supply-side tools inject spatial and financial resources to aggregate dispersed artisans, utilizing regulatory frameworks to formalize these

Governance Mechanism	Primary Policy Tool Mix (The Logic)	Upper-Tier Configuration (National/ Provincial)	Lower-Tier Configuration (Prefectural/ County)	Institutional Logic: How Tools Constitute Mechanisms
		support.		networks into stable cooperatives.
Market Activation	Demand-side + Supply-side	Provincial top-down “ICH + Tourism” Development blueprints.	Prefectural cultural-tourism corridors; County e-commerce subsidies and artisan markets.	Demand-side tools (subsidies, tourism routes) directly create consumer scenarios, while local supply-side tools adapt traditional products into viable commodities for market entry.

1.3 Cross-level comparisons and institutional logics

A cross-tier comparative perspective reveals a distinct stratification of institutional priorities within China’s ICH governance.

At the national level, the policy logic is dominated by regulatory instruments aimed at establishing a standardization paradigm. The overarching goal is to achieve cultural preservation through the homogenization of practices. However, this top-down pursuit of uniformity carries an inherent risk of marginalizing local knowledge systems. The resistance and strategic bargaining exhibited by artisan groups against rigid certification procedures serve as a vivid testament to such implementation bottlenecks. In contrast, provincial governments exhibit a hybrid governance logic, seeking a delicate balance between regulatory standardization and organizational embedding. Taking Yunnan Province as a case in point, its regional training hubs function as critical “policy converters”. These intermediaries not only absorb macro-level regulatory mandates from the state but also translate them into concrete action guidelines for county-level executors. This practice empirically validates Hafstein’s (2018) assertion: intermediate tiers are not mere transmission belts; rather, they are the pivotal hubs that transform abstract policy objectives into context-specific, localized actions.

Descending to the municipal and county levels, the policy focus shifts markedly toward market activation and micro-level organizational embedding. While demand-side tools—such as e-commerce subsidies and artisan fairs—can rapidly boost short-term economic performance, their excessive pursuit of commercial efficiency may inadvertently erode the authenticity of ICH, triggering the paradox of “destructive preservation (破坏性保护)”. Such strategies underscore the critical value of local autonomy

in policy adaptation: only by granting grassroots authorities sufficient discretionary power can policy instruments achieve precise coupling with local economic ecosystems (Bendix, 2018).

Viewing the entire process of central-local interaction, a dynamically evolving governance system emerges. Higher-level governments set directional anchors, while lower-level governments engage in adaptive reconstruction based on local realities. This multi-level interactive landscape profoundly aligns with the cross-scale governance theory proposed by Allen et al. (2023), policy coherence does not stem from the rigid control of bureaucratic hierarchies; rather, it is born out of continuous negotiation, strategic bargaining, and iterative adaptation among multi-level actors.

2. Governance mechanisms analysis

2.1 Standardization mechanism

The standardization mechanism in ICH governance is not a product of linear, top-down directives; rather, it emerges from a dynamic coupling between regulatory instruments (institutional design, technical specifications) and localized supply-side tools (capacity building, training empowerment). This process transcends rigid rule-setting, exhibiting distinct characteristics of adaptive evolution. At the macro-architectural level, national policies establish a normative foundation through “process specifications”, “quality benchmarks”, and “cultural inventory systems”. For instance, while China Intangible Cultural Heritage Law (《中国非遗法》) constructs a general framework for “classified protection (分类保护)”, provincial regulations refine these into regionally adaptive technical guidelines. Such top-down institutional transmission is far from a unidirectional mechanical execution; instead, it is deeply co-constructed with local practices. The Yunnan Province Regulations on the Identification and Management of ICH Practitioners, which incorporates adaptive adjustments for Yi embroidery (彝绣), vividly illustrates the dialectical balance between regulatory uniformity and regional specificity.

At the meso- and micro-levels, capacity building serves as the critical anchor for grounding standardized frameworks. County-level governments frequently leverage “artisan training programs” and “skill certification systems” to translate abstract norms into actionable practices. The “Embroiderer Skill Workshops (刺绣工坊)” in Shuangbai County (双柏县) exemplify this logic: by converting the provincial mandate for “standardized workshop construction” into tangible productive outcomes, they have established a governance closed-loop of “institutional design - capacity empowerment - production standardization”. This practice resonates profoundly with O’Toole Jr.’s (2003) implementation theory, while national strategy provides directional guidance, the ultimate efficacy of execution depends on whether local actors can flexibly reshape and adapt implementation processes based on on-the-ground realities (or local conditions).

Furthermore, standardization mechanisms do not operate in isolation but undergo cross-fertilization with diverse governance tools. At the provincial level in Yunnan, policy strategies bundle “cultural industry clusters” with “standardized workshop construction”, while prefectural policies embed “skill certification (技能认证)” directly into production quality control chains. This policy mix approach not only reinforces

the rigid constraints of institutions but also preserves elastic space for market-driven innovation. It precisely embodies the “flexible embedding” governance paradigm proposed by Howlett (2019), maintaining institutional rationality while responding to complex socio-economic realities through the flexible configuration of policy tools.

2.2 Institutional embedding mechanism

Integrating dispersed practitioners into institutional networks marks a profound “organizational transformation”, driven by the precise configuration of supply-side tools within a regulatory framework. Policy instruments like cooperatives and industrial parks facilitate a shift from “atomized” fragmentation to systematic collaboration. For instance, Chuxiong Industrial Park (楚雄工业园) functions as a reconstructed value network with deep institutional embeddedness, while Shuangbai Cooperative Consortium (双柏合作联盟) resolves the structural dislocation between small-scale production and market demands through context-specific innovation.

This system operates via a “gradient governance” model. Prefectural authorities focus on top-level design (e.g., “workshop-plus-e-commerce”), whereas county governments prioritize micro-execution (e.g., order-based training). Together, they form a coupled “Platform–Workshop–Individual” structure: provincial parks provide infrastructure, prefectural hubs enable incubation, and county cooperatives act as grassroots production cells. This layered nesting ensures policy coherence while preserving local adaptive space, embodying the Chinese governance wisdom of “combining unity with flexibility”.

2.3 Market activation mechanism

Market activation hinges on “scene reconstruction” –a policy-driven reconfiguration of consumption spaces and cultural experiences, engineered primarily through demand-side policy instruments paired with supportive supply-side adaptations. Terms like “sales exhibitions”, “cultural tourism routes”, and “brand development” in policy texts reveal how demand-side tools drive a paradigm shift from passive production to proactive marketing. Chuxiong Prefecture “Yi Embroidery Cultural-Tourism Corridor” (楚雄州彝绣文化旅游长廊), for instance, transcends conventional tourism planning by embedding ICH elements into dining, accommodation, and transportation, creating a “culture-tourism composite ecosystem”. This innovation is not arbitrary but rooted in localized resource mobilization: Shuangbai County “Artisan Market” (双柏工艺集市) transforms traditional craftsmanship into tangible consumer experiences, shifting ICH products from “museum artifacts” to “living commodities”.

Inter-tier collaboration is pivotal in this mechanism. Prefectural governments often assume the role of “strategic architects”, as seen in Yunnan’s “ICH + Tourism” development blueprint, while county-level authorities act as “implementers”, materializing goals through initiatives like “rural exhibition points”. This division is not static but adaptive: when provincial-level “interregional exhibitions” face low engagement, Shuangbai “rural cultural tourism routes” (双柏 “乡村文旅路线”) emerge as alternative market activation channels. Such “bottom-up feedback” mechanisms underscore that market activation is not a unilateral push but an iterative dialogue between policy and practice.

Conclusion

This study examines the configuration of policy instruments within a multi-level governance framework, using the case of Yi Embroidery (彝绣) development in Chuxiong to explore how ICH innovation is institutionalized through policy design. By integrating policy tool theory and multi-level governance perspectives, the research offers a structured analytical approach to understanding how ICH is organized and guided within formal governance systems.

Discussion

This study identifies the multi-level policy structure formed by the types of policy instruments, inter-level configuration differences, and instrument combination patterns. Furthermore, this study reveals how these instruments point to three governance mechanisms—standardization, institutional embedding, and market activation—within policy texts. These findings not only outline the institutional design logic of Yi Embroidery innovation policies but also provide new analytical perspectives for understanding the operational mechanisms of cultural policies within a multi-level governance system. Based on this, the following discussion will center on three aspects, namely policy instruments, multi-level governance, and governance mechanisms.

1. Implication for policy tool theory

This study reveals that policy instruments are not isolated choices made by single actors, but rather a structured layout formed through stable division of labor across national, provincial, prefectural, and county governance systems. While higher-level policies focus on laying an institutional foundation through regulatory instruments (such as ICH protection regulations), local levels drive organizational development and market expansion via the synergistic coordination of supply-side and demand-side instruments (e.g., artisan training and market promotion). This finding revises Howlett's (2005) view of tool selection as a purely technical process by uncovering the essence of policy tools as being deeply embedded within bureaucratic governance systems. Moreover, the results not only corroborate Schneider & Ingram's (1990) assertion that "tools reflect governance logic and power structures" but also echo Salamon's (2002) perspective of tools as "governance configurations". Empirical evidence shows that specific institutional contexts endow policy tool combinations with distinct characteristics of path dependency and mechanism orientation. By emphasizing the structural embedding of tools within multi-level governance, this research expands the boundaries of existing theory. It not only enriches the tool function framework of Howlett and Ramesh (2006) but also highlights the critical role of cross-level coordination.

2. Implications for multi-level governance theory

This study argues that the multi-level governance structure of Yi embroidery policies (彝绣政策) exhibits a distinct hierarchical logic in the allocation of policy instruments. Governments at all levels have formed a sequential division of responsibilities in policy implementation. Higher-level governments focus on establishing directional frameworks and institutional designs; mid-level agencies are responsible for translating policies into specific organizational arrangements and resource allocations; while grassroots departments rely on training, project implementation, and market activities to put these plans into practice. This top-down process of “policy translation” not only corroborates the perspective in cultural governance theory that “institutional logic permeates local administrative systems through policy texts” (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2020), but also resonates with the arguments by UNESCO (2003) and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2014) regarding the contextual reconstruction and practical reinterpretation of cultural policies across different scales. Thus, the multi-level architecture of Yi embroidery policies not only reflects the stratified characteristics of China’s administrative system but also provides a solid empirical sample for understanding the operational dynamics of cultural policies within the “state-local” continuum.

Furthermore, the “instrument-mechanism” chain proposed in this study offers a new perspective for analyzing the internal logic of multi-level governance. The distribution of the three major mechanisms—standardization, institutional embedding, and market activation—displays a clear sequential pattern. Institutional standardization is concentrated at the upper levels, organizational embedding occurs primarily at the regional level, while market-oriented actions are deeply rooted at the grassroots. This path of progressive descent along the policy chain supports Comaroff & Comaroff’s (2009) view that cultural policies rely on multi-level actors to co-construct governance fields in practice; it also aligns closely with the framework of Dovers and Hezri (2010), which views policy implementation as an interactive process among institutional mandates, organizational networks, and adaptive adjustments. From this perspective, the deployment of policy instruments is not merely a product of strategic choice, but a collective outcome shaped by tier-specific roles, resource endowments, and operational scopes. These findings reveal how cultural policies generate a vertically coherent policy logic within bureaucratic systems.

3. Theoretical implications of the identified governance mechanisms

The three governance mechanisms identified in this study—standardization, institutional embedding, and market activation—offer a novel analytical lens for understanding the institutionalization of ICH within modern governance systems. As Hafstein (2018) and Bendix (2018) note, cultural heritage often undergoes reconfiguration through standardization, evaluation procedures, and administrative frameworks, transforming into an object recognizable and manageable by institutional systems. In this context, the mechanisms observed in Yi Embroidery policies (彝绣政策) are not mere aggregations of policy measures but illustrate how institutions intervene in traditional practices through technical language, organizational forms, and

economic incentives. Together, these mechanisms delineate the institutional pathways through which policy shapes cultural practices, while also revealing the conditions under which Yi Embroidery (彝绣) gains new developmental trajectories within formal governance structures.

When examined holistically, the three mechanisms function as an interdependent governance chain rather than operating in isolation. Standardization mechanisms establish operational norms for administrative systems, enabling institutional coherence; institutional embedding builds cooperative structures (e.g., cooperatives, workshops, and industrial parks) that consolidate fragmented production activities into stable networks; and market activation mechanisms subsequently drive cultural consumption, brand dissemination, and economic transformation. This sequential logic—from institutional regulation to organizational integration and finally market engagement—forms a “state–organization–market” continuum that aligns with Blumenfield’s (2018) emphasis on organizational and discursive frameworks in cultural governance and Ahearne’s (2009) analysis of how policies construct mutually reinforcing structural relationships during industrialization. It underscores how cultural policies can systematically embed traditional practices into modern economic and administrative systems.

The operation of these mechanisms is not automatic but contingent on structural factors such as cultural agency, local organizational capacity, and market conditions. As Zhang (2018) and Wang (2021b) observe, ICH initiatives often face constraints from community identity, resource allocation, and consumer preferences during institutionalization. In the case of Chuxiong (楚雄), the implementation of standardized frameworks, organizational structures, or market-oriented strategies must balance cultural authenticity, organizational sustainability, and market viability. For instance, while national-level standardization may prioritize heritage preservation, local actors must adapt these norms to community-specific practices and market demands. This tension highlights the need for future research to explore how governance mechanisms are reinterpreted, adjusted, and localized during policy implementation, particularly in contexts where institutional expectations clash with grassroots realities.

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List of Contributors

Yong Zhang: conceptualization; data collection and curation; coding and data analysis; visualization of results; writing—original draft; Kanokporn Numtong: supervision; methodological guidance; validation of

analysis; writing—review and editing; correspondence with the journal; Warisa Asavaratana: writing—review and editing; manuscript revision support.

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