

IRCI'S RESEARCH ACTIVITIES: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

The International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI) was established in October 2011 within the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage of Japan, and simultaneously, as a category 2 centre under the auspices of UNESCO.

There are four category 2 centres for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the Asia-Pacific region. These are the International Training Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (CRIHAP) in China, International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (ICHCAP) in Korea, Regional Research Centre for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in West and Central Asia (Tehran ICH Centre) in Iran and IRCI in Japan. The three centres in East Asia divide their tasks as follows: CRIHAP specialises in trainings and capacity building, ICHCAP focuses on information and networking and IRCI undertakes research as a means of safeguarding ICH.

The status of IRCI as a category 2 centre of UNESCO is based on an agreement between the government of Japan and UNESCO²; according to which, the objectives of IRCI are stipulated as follows (Article 5.1):

- (a) to promote the 2003 Convention and its implementation in the Asia-Pacific Region;
- (b) to enhance safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region, while developing and mobilizing research as a tool for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage in the sense of Article 2.3 of the 2003 Convention; and

1 International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI)

2 'Agreement between the government of Japan and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) regarding the continuation, in Japan, of an international research centre for intangible cultural heritage in the Asia-Pacific region under the auspices of UNESCO (Category 2)'

- (c) to foster, coordinate and develop scientific, technical and artistic studies, as well as research methodologies, in the sense of Article 13(c) of the 2003 Convention, in the Asia-Pacific Region.

To achieve these objectives, IRCI extensively works with various organisations within the region, including universities, research institutions, government sections and NGOs. Working with these organisations is extremely important for IRCI, not just because IRCI is a small organisation, but because inter-disciplinary cooperation is necessary for ICH research. More importantly, such cooperation could serve as a means of linking ICRI's research with the promotion and enhancement of ICH safeguarding in countries where the project was implemented.

RESEARCH PROJECTS OF IRCI OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS

Figure 1 depicts major research projects conducted by IRCI over the past 10 years. Since its establishment, IRCI has implemented a wide range of research projects in accordance with its long-term (10 years) and medium-term (5 years) programmes. Ten years of research conducted by IRCI can be divided into the following three phases:

- (1) 2011–2012, or the first two years since the establishment of IRCI
- (2) 2013–2015, in which the revised long- and medium-term programmes were applied

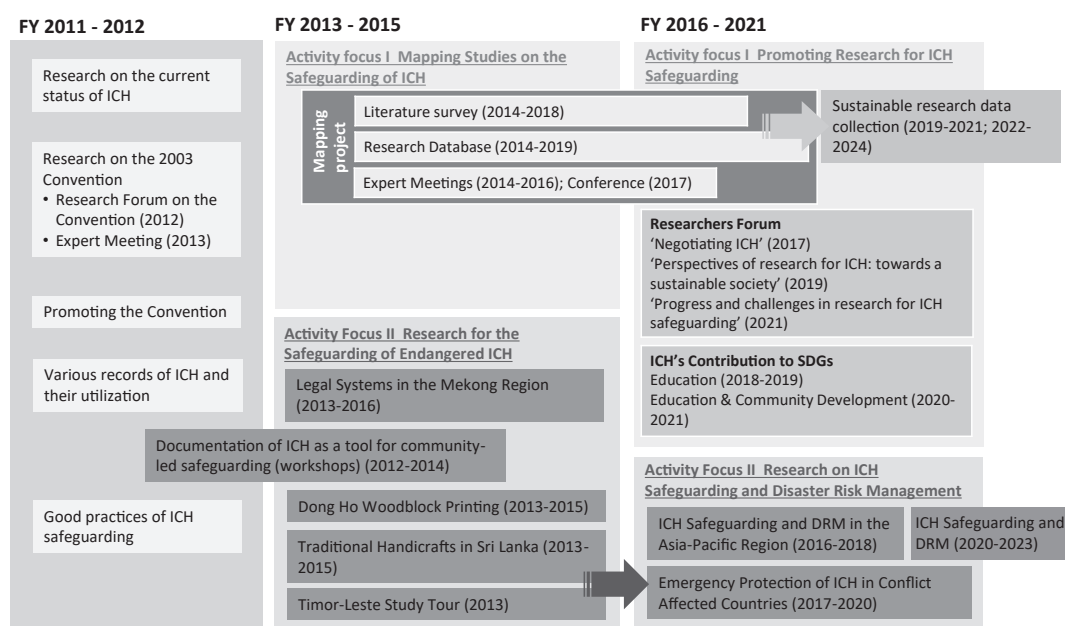


Figure 1 Development of IRCI's research projects over the past 10 years

- (3) 2016–2021, the implementation of projects under the Medium-Term Programme (2016–2021)³

The most notable change is in the transition from 2012 to 2013, when the existing research framework was reviewed and re-structured in relation to two major lines of activities, which were termed Activity Focuses I and II. These two pillars were maintained till date, although specific projects within each Activity Focus have transformed over time.

Activity Focus I aimed at promoting and instigating research for ICH safeguarding, and the Mapping Project, including three components or sub-projects, was at the core. Expert meetings held under this project were subsequently elaborated as the Researchers Forum. Some of the opinions expressed during the expert meeting led to the development of projects concerning the contribution of ICH to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) at a later stage. The development and management of the IRCI Research Database and the literature survey component of the Mapping Project were succeeded by the Sustainable Research Data Collection project. While Activity Focus I tried to understand or map out research related to ICH safeguarding in entirety, Activity Focus II accommodated a variety of case studies focusing on specific issues or ICH practices. From 2013 to 2015, various projects were implemented in relation to the overall theme of Research for the Safeguarding of Endangered ICH. From 2016 onward, the theme of Activity Focus II shifted to the Research on ICH Safeguarding and Disaster Risk Management, considering disasters to be a factor that threatens ICH, and two major projects, one on natural hazards and another on post-conflict, were implemented.

Starting-up of IRCI: 2011–2012

The first two years were a preparatory stage in which the IRCI sought direction for its research. During this period, major research activities were structured under the five pillars following the initial long-term programme of IRCI, in which one of the missions of IRCI was defined as ‘facilitating research and studies on intangible cultural heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region’, focusing on the following themes:

- (1) the current status of ICH, in particular, research and studies on ICH in urgent need of safeguarding
- (2) the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage

³ IRCI’s Medium-Term Programme (2016–2020) and the Long-Term Programme (2013–2020) were both extended to be effective until the end of FY 2021 with the approval of the Governing Board of IRCI, due to the emergency situation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

- (3) promoting the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage
- (4) various records of ICH and their utilization
- (5) good practices in safeguarding ICH

During this period, IRCI hosted two international expert meetings on the Convention (IRCI, 2012a, 2013). Basic research activities were performed in several countries to understand the current status of ICH and its safeguarding; some of these activities led to the development, in the following years, of projects and case studies that were related to the Safeguarding of Endangered ICH. The project, Documentation of Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Tool for Community's Safeguarding Activities (2012–2014) started with a researchers meeting focusing on the communities and the 2003 Convention (IRCI, 2012b).

A challenge faced by IRCI at the very beginning was understanding the nature of IRCI as a category 2 centre of UNESCO, so that its research should be consistent with the objectives of UNESCO and the 2003 Convention. To align its activities more clearly with UNESCO's strategic objectives and the Agreement, as well as to improve its coordination with UNESCO, IRCI revised its long- and medium-term programmes in 2013.⁴

Working with a New Framework: 2013–2015

In fiscal year 2013, IRCI started working with the revised Medium-Term Programme (2013–2015), in which two major activity focuses were set in the 'Specific Contents of Activities' section as follows:

- (1) Mapping of researchers and research institutions that are engaged in research on current status and various methodologies of safeguarding endangered intangible cultural heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region, with special attention to contribution to the Major Programme IV, Strategic Objective 2, MLA 2, Paragraph 4024 of UNESCO's Quadrennial Programme and Budget 37/C5 (2014–2017)
- (2) Research on current status and safeguarding measures of the endangered intangible cultural heritages in the Asia-Pacific region due to factors such as conflict, climate change and natural disasters, in accordance with the Article 13 (c) of the 2003 Convention and Strategic Objective 7 Paragraph 121 and 122 of UNESCO Medium-term Strategy 37C/4
(Medium-Term Programme 2013–2015)

⁴ This revision was approved at the 2nd Governing Board Meeting of IRCI held on 21 October 2013.

Table 1 List of major research projects in FY 2013–2015

Activity Focus I: Mapping Studies on the Safeguarding of ICH	Mapping Research for the Safeguarding of ICH in the Asia-Pacific Region (Mapping Project) <i>International Experts Meeting/Researchers Forums</i> (2013–16); <i>International Conference</i> (2017) <i>Literature Survey on ICH Safeguarding Research in the Asia-Pacific Countries</i> (2014–18) <i>Research Data Collection on ICH Safeguarding in the Asia-Pacific Region and Optimisation of its Use / IRCI Research Database</i> (2014–19)
Activity Focus II: Research for the Safeguarding of Endangered ICH	Documentation of ICH as a Tool for Community-Led Safeguarding (2012–2014)
	Safeguarding the ICH for the Promotion of Cultural Identity and Community Resilience in Timor-Leste (2013)
	Study of Legal Systems related to Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Greater Mekong Region (2013–2016)
	Research for Endangered Traditional Handicrafts in Post-Conflict States (Sri Lanka) (2013–2015)
	Research for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage on the Verge of Extinction: Vietnamese ICH Element Dong Ho Woodblock Printing (2013–2015)

The first item corresponded to Activity Focus I: Mapping Studies on the Safeguarding of ICH, and three interrelated activities of Expert Meetings, Literature Survey on ICH Safeguarding Research in the Asia-Pacific Countries, and IRCI Research Database were conducted as part of the Mapping Project. The second part corresponded to Activity Focus II: Research for the Safeguarding of Endangered ICH for which various case studies were implemented (Table 1).

The Mapping Project was considered a core project of IRCI. The initial objective of the project was to identify or map what sort of research had been done, where it had been done and by whom, as well as to understand the present condition of research for ICH safeguarding in the Asia-Pacific region. This part was facilitated by the Literature Survey, and the information that was collected was shared through the IRCI Research Database, which is available online.⁵ The project was implemented to understand the state of the ICH research and identify key issues in safeguarding ICH in the Asia-Pacific region by analysing collected information with ICH experts and holding Expert Meetings involving researchers who undertook surveys in different countries.

It was not easy for IRCI to conduct these tasks at that time, as its network among ICH researchers in the Asia-Pacific region was not as extensive as it is today; however, IRCI gradually expanded the geographic coverage of its literature survey by identifying researchers to join the project. The Mapping Project allowed IRCI

⁵ <https://www.irci.jp/ichdb/>

to expand its network among the ICH researchers in the region. Many issues were raised in the Expert Meetings; among them was the differential understandings of the concepts of 'intangible cultural heritage' and 'safeguarding', which reflect how the Convention has been implemented in different countries. It proved difficult to distinguish 'research on safeguarding' from 'research on ICH'. This differential understanding of key concepts and each researcher's field of study significantly affected the kind of research information that was collected and analysed. Despite these difficulties and challenges, IRCI began to initiate region-wide discussions on the research for ICH safeguarding, which was further elaborated in the following years (IRCI, 2016, 2017). At this relatively early stage of IRCI operations, the Mapping Project set out activities that were continued and further elaborated in later years. The IRCI Research Database, which was at first merely a by-product of the Mapping Project, became a focus of further elaboration, and information on resources in various languages was intensively collected and gradually enriched with a high number of accumulated entries.

While Activity Focus I dealt with research for the safeguarding of ICH, the projects implemented under Activity Focus II included various case studies on safeguarding endangered ICH and its revitalisation (see Table 1). Some of them were comparative studies that focused on the methodologies of safeguarding ICH, such as legal systems and community-based documentation, whereas others, such as the projects on Dong Ho woodblock printings and the revitalisation of traditional handicrafts in Sri Lanka, were case studies that focused on particular ICH elements/domains and conducted in collaboration with its counterparts in target countries (i.e. Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Art Studies, Craft Revival Trust in India and National Crafts Council of Sri Lanka). During this period, some projects were implemented in response to requests from the target country, as was the case for the Dong Ho project. Similarly, a study tour for Timor-Leste cultural officials was requested by the UNESCO Jakarta office.

Development of IRCI under the Medium-Term Programme 2016–2021

From 2016 to 2021, IRCI worked under the second medium-term programme, in which the Activity Focus was defined as follows:

- (1) Promote research for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, through conducting the following activities regarding the practices and methodologies of safeguarding, in cooperation with research institutions and researchers working in the Asia-Pacific region:
 - (i) Instigate research activities and develop the researchers' community through international conferences, experts meetings, and publications;
 - (ii) Examine and develop strategies for optimizing the use of research

- data, while collecting research information.
- (2) Conduct research on the current status and the cases of the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in the Asia-Pacific region that are endangered by disasters such as natural hazards, as well as research on the role of ICH for disaster preparedness and in the post-disaster recovery process, in consideration of UNESCO's focus in the Medium-Term Strategy (37C/4) on the response to post-conflict and post-disaster situations (PCPD).

(Medium-Term Programme 2016–2021)

Over the last six years, there has been a significant development in research conducted by IRCI. Continuing the Mapping Project, Activity Focus I was re-defined as Promoting Research for ICH Safeguarding. The literature survey and research database components of the Mapping Project were further elaborated and moved forward to seek a sustainable mechanism for collecting and sharing of research information. An international symposium held in 2016 under the Mapping Project was the first collaborative initiative with a Japanese university (Center for Glocal Studies & IRCI, 2017), which accelerated institutional collaboration through a new framework for academic and inter-disciplinary discussions in the form of the IRCI Researchers Forum held in Japan in 2017 and 2019 (IRCI, 2018, 2020b). The present symposium is the third such event.

In contrast, the Activity Focus II was specifically dedicated to disaster, and two major projects were implemented during this period, one on natural hazards and another on post-conflict situations (Table 2).

The new project, Research on ICH Safeguarding and the Disaster Risk Management in the Asia-Pacific Region attracted considerable attention, in parallel with the development of discussions of UNESCO on the theme of ICH in emergency. Partly reflecting UNESCO's interest, this project pursued two aspects of ICH in the context of disasters:

- (1) disaster is a risk threatening ICH, so ICH should be safeguarded from disasters; and
- (2) ICH has an active role to play in disaster risk management (DRM), and thus, ICH should be promoted in this context.

For the first two years, basic data collection and case studies were conducted in five countries, namely, Fiji, Myanmar, Philippines, Vanuatu and Vietnam (Iwamoto, Ohnuki, & Nojima, 2018). IRCI staff members, including the author, were actively involved in the research process. IRCI was engaged in this project not merely as a project coordinator but as a researcher and actively interacted with various stakeholders, including communities, which enabled IRCI to better

Table 2 List of research projects in FY 2016–2021

Activity Focus I: Promoting Research for ICH Safeguarding	Mapping Project <i>International Experts Meeting/Researchers Forums</i> (2013–2016); <i>International Conference</i> (2017) <i>Literature Survey on ICH Safeguarding Research in the Asia-Pacific Countries</i> (2014–2018) <i>Research Data Collection on ICH Safeguarding in the Asia-Pacific Region and Optimisation of its Use/IRCI Research Database</i> (2014–2019)
	IRCI Researchers Forum on ICH Safeguarding in the Asia-Pacific Region <i>Negotiating Intangible Cultural Heritage</i> (2017) <i>Perspectives of Research for Intangible Cultural Heritage—Towards a Sustainable Society</i> (2019) <i>Progress and Challenges in the Research for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage—Towards a Sustainable Future</i> (2021)
	Multi-disciplinary Study of ICH’s Contribution to Sustainable Development—Focusing on Education (2018–2019)
	Research on ICH’s Contribution to SDGs—Education and Community Development (2020–2021)
Activity Focus II: Research on ICH Safeguarding and the Disaster Risk Management	Research on ICH Safeguarding and the Disaster Risk Management in the Asia-Pacific Region (2016–2017)(2020–2023)
	Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop on ICH and Natural Disasters (2018)
	Study of Emergency Protection of ICH in Conflict-Affected Countries in Asia (2017–2020)

manage the project implementation. The Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop on ICH and Natural Disasters in 2018 culminated three years of project activities, and it successfully ended with the adoption of the Statements and Recommendations for Safeguarding ICH in Disasters and Mobilising ICH for Disaster Risk Reduction (Iwamoto & Nojima, 2019). Following these recommendations, IRCI started Phase 2 of the project in 2020, and a survey is currently ongoing to estimate the potential risks and effective aspects of ICH. The project is intended to develop practical methods to incorporate ICH in community’s risk reduction by working closely with communities and enhancing collaboration between ICH and DRM researchers.

ICH’s Contribution to SDGs is a recent initiative by IRCI. For the first two years, the project focused on education, and two case studies: one on incorporating ICH in formal education in Vietnam, and another on the case of non-formal education in the Philippines; in both cases, guidelines were developed as an output (IRCI, 2020a). In 2020, the project started to investigate the linkage between ICH in education (SDG 4) and community development (SDG 11), in collaboration with NGOs in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Kyrgyzstan. The project is expected to provide valuable insights on inter-relatedness of SDGs, how ICH could contribute to SDGs, and how ICH can be promoted and safeguarded in this process.

Achievement, Challenges, and IRCI's Research in the Next 10 Years

Over the last 10 years, IRCI has expanded its cooperative ties within the region and beyond, which has gradually but significantly improved the performance of IRCI to implement various research projects with concrete outputs. This, in turn, contributed to the increased visibility of IRCI. Collaborative relationships and partnerships with various research institutions in the Asia-Pacific region are expected to become more important, as IRCI further develops as a research centre.

The first decade of IRCI since its establishment could be understood as a process in which the organisation gradually established its status as a UNESCO category 2 centre in the field of intangible cultural heritage, specialising in research in the Asia-Pacific region. There was a gap between what IRCI could do/should be doing and the expectation of the project partners, who frequently hoped that IRCI would provide trainings for safeguarding ICH. This issue was resolved by framing such activities as part of the case study. As activities of IRCI are research-oriented, the major challenge was and has been how to link project outcomes with actual practices of ICH safeguarding at both national and community levels. At the national level, it is important for research outputs to be reflected in the policies for safeguarding and promoting ICH. Considering that communities are the central actor for safeguarding ICH, enabling the research output to reach local communities and influence the practice of ICH on the ground is also critical. IRCI should undertake additional efforts to seek a reciprocal relationship between the research and communities.

IRCI is beginning a new decade with new long- and medium-term programmes. Most importantly, IRCI continues to promote research for safeguarding ICH by providing a common platform for discussions and information sharing. IRCI intends to further strengthen its cooperative ties with researchers and organisations in the region and its capacity as a research centre. In addition, IRCI will develop research projects under a new Activity Focus, ICH Safeguarding for Sustainable and Resilient Societies, by expanding on what it has done in previous SDGs and DRM projects. From a technical viewpoint, this is consistent with ongoing and interrelated international frameworks, namely, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs), Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Within this framework, IRCI implements various cases studies to produce practical outputs. It is important to emphasise that ICH is not just an instrument for achieving SDGs or DRM; they are excellent opportunities to recognise and promote safeguarding ICH. In implementing various case studies under this Activity Focus, IRCI should work in close collaboration with communities that are at the centre of the safeguarding of ICH with the intention that its research could benefit these communities. One important role of IRCI would be to bridge

global trends in safeguarding ICH through the Convention with the local ICH practices.

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