The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 was a pivotal point for traditions and customs around the world in terms of their recognition, status, value, preservation, and promotion. However, this convention, which followed the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972, has arguably led to an almost black-and-white understanding of heritage being either tangible or intangible.

In 1985, when the PRC ratified the World Heritage Convention, the many destructions of the Cultural Revolution were in recent memory. The PRC readily mastered the vocabulary and practices of UNESCO and succeeded in having five sites inscribed in 1987. These encompassed the whole world in terms of their recognition, status, value, preservation, and promotion. All tangible heritage sites have intangible stories and messages that are key to their “Outstanding Universal Value.” When it comes to the validation of intangible heritage, despite the emphasis on act and practice, there is also a strong reliance on tangible evidence and associated objects.

This edition of News from Northeast Asia looks into the narratives of tangible and intangible heritage in Northeast Asia. In “China and Its Changing Narratives of Nationhood and Heritage,” Susan Whitfield of the University of East Anglia traces China’s changing narratives of its “minority” heritage, both tangible and intangible, which are meant to be consumed internally by the citizens of China. As well as externally by the international community. However, not all heritage narratives are intended for the global stage, as Liliana Janik of the University of Cambridge illustrates in “Best Kept Secret, forgotten heritage of the Communist, Japan: That the tangible and intangible elements of heritage are intertwined and mutually influence is demonstrated in “The Chinese Validation, Preservation, and Promotion of South Korea’s Oral Tradition Pansori in The Gochang Pansori Masters’ National University Asia Center’s Minjoo Zhe. The way in which the tangible plays a central role in reproducing the intangible is also addressed by Emilia Jean Green from the University of Aberdeen, who touches upon how the physical gathering of people (which cannot take place in an online event) is crucial to practicing, maintaining, and transmitting the cultural knowledge associated with intangible heritage in the “Turbulence of Naomi: A Celebration of Intangible Heritage in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

The growth of the Silk Road narrative to frame cultural heritage in UNESCO from the 1980s and the more recent politico-economic Belt and Road Initiative by the PRC has largely affected the approach to heritage in China. The division into steppe, sea, and land routes across the ancient state has been made in a report presented to UNESCO by Japan in 1957 – persisted in the UNESCO narrative. As the PRC and its Belt and Road Initiative came to the fore, the potential to include cultural sites in these narratives is also acknowledged by the PRC, two were firmly rooted in what was described as traditional “Han” culture, but the other two were not. The term “minority” cultures – namely, the Uyghur 12 Muqam and the Urtlin Duu, a traditional folk song and a joint inscription with Mongolia. However, the growing commodification and appropriation by the PRC of “minority arts,” especially music and dance, have also been subject to much criticism.

The potential to include cultural sites in the Silk Road narrative is now recognized in UNESCO. The inscription also presented an opportunity for local and international collaboration in heritage conservation and management, active since 1989, continues today; in Xinjiang, one of them, Yarkhoto/Turfan in Xinjiang. One of them, Yarkhoto/Turfan in Xinjiang. One of them, Yarkhoto/Turfan in Xinjiang. One of them, Yarkhoto/Turfan in Xinjiang. One of them, Yarkhoto/Turfan in Xinjiang.

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