Narratives of Tangible and Intangible Heritage in Northeast Asia

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.

China and Its Changing Narratives of Nationhood and Heritage

Susan Whitfield

Since 1949, when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded, narratives of identity and heritage have been maintained by the Chinese Communist Party to create a cohesion among communities of China’s central plains and the surrounding colonized regions in order to present itself to the outside world as a nation-state. More recently, alongside archaeological narratives of heritage tourism, the PRC’s active role in UNESCO, a proliferation of inscribed sites, and the promotion of the Silk Road, there has been increasing use of Han-centric narratives to frame heritage. Such narratives are stilling and, in some cases, destroying diversity.

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 chronology of “Chinese” culture, ranging from Peking Man to the tomb of the First Emperor, from the Great Wall to palaces of the last two imperial dynasties, the Ming and Qing. The geographical focus was on the central plains, with the exception of the Buddhist rock-cut temple site of Dunhuang, which was situated on the northwestern edges of regimes in China for much of history. Dunhuang’s place on the Silk Road was mentioned in the recommendation documents. Its diversity — including its Islamic history and independence from regimes in central China — made it a potential candidate. The potential to include cultural sites in colonized regions — those of the “ethnic minorities” — on the UNESCO list, and to some extent to assert ownership of them, was first realized with the inscription of the Dunhuang Grottoes in Tibet in 1990. However, the inscription and its management has not gone without criticism: it has been argued that the policies on the palace has enabled the destruction of much of the surrounding culture, inappropriate new buildings, and forced removal of the population. There has also been concern about its conservation, especially following a fire. The inscription also presented an opportunity for local and other interested parties to assert their own rights to UNESCO. For example, in 2013, the Tibetan Women’s Association asked UNESCO to stop “the destruction and frightening modernization of Uasha, the capital of Tibet.”

Since then the PRC has been very active in the heritage field. The PRC’s cultural sites have been an obvious example of the importance of heritage in Chinese Central Asia. The division into steppe, sea, and land routes across central Asia — made in a report presented to UNESCO by Japan in 1959 — persisted in the UNESCO narrative. As the PRC and its Silk Road vision came to prominence in heritage discussions, other northeast Asian countries — Mongolia, Korea, Japan — started to challenge this by expanding the steppe and sea routes, which potentially could have bypassed China. Nevertheless, with the potential to draw more funds from a project for the Silk Road was proposed under UNESCO, it was the land route west from the PRC that was covered, excluding both Korea and Japan (although an extension to include “connecting seaways” is under discussion). In 2008, the PRC proposed a Chinese section of the Silk Road. This was rejected but was incorporated into the successful transnational inscription in 2019 of the “Chang’an-Tianshan corridor,” comprising Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan alongside the PRC. The PRC section includes sites around Turfan in Xinjiang. One of them, Yarkhoto/Jiaohe, had been proposed previously. Japanese funds had since helped with its preservation. This was not a lone example of international collaboration in the region: the Getty Conservation Institute’s collaboration with the Dunhuang Academy for site conservation and management active since 1989, continues today; in Xinjiang from the 1990s, there were several international collaborations on major excavations, such as Sino-Japanese work at Nijo and Dandan-Uul and Sino-French excavations at Karadag.

But in recent years, the context and climate has shifted. Xi Jinping has spoken often about the importance of heritage in Chinese consciousness and for China’s sense of nationhood. More recently, the portrayal of the Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongolians, and others living in the PRC as non-Han and less developed — and so benefitting from the civilizing influence of their colonizers — has also been subject to much criticism.

The growth of the Silk Road narrative to frame vandalism is underway in UNESCO in the 1980s and the more recent politico-economic belt and road Initiative by the PRC has not only affected the approach to heritage in Chinese Central Asia. The division into steppe, sea, and land routes across central Asia — made in a report presented to UNESCO by Japan in 1959 — persisted in the UNESCO narrative. As the PRC and its Silk Road vision came to prominence in heritage discussions, other northeast Asian countries — Mongolia, Korea, Japan — started to challenge this by expanding the steppe and sea routes, which potentially could have bypassed China. Nevertheless, with the potential to draw more funds from a project for the Silk Road was proposed under UNESCO, it was the land route west from the PRC that was covered, excluding both Korea and Japan (although an extension to include “connecting seaways” is under discussion). In 2008, the PRC proposed a Chinese section of the Silk Road. This was rejected but was incorporated into the successful transnational inscription in 2019 of the “Chang’an-Tianshan corridor,” comprising Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan alongside the PRC. The PRC section includes sites around Turfan in Xinjiang. One of them, Yarkhoto/Jiaohe, had been proposed previously. Japanese funds had since helped with its preservation. This was not a lone example of international collaboration in the region: the Getty Conservation Institute’s collaboration with the Dunhuang Academy for site conservation and management active since 1989, continues today; in Xinjiang from the 1990s, there were several international collaborations on major excavations, such as Sino-Japanese work at Nijo and Dandan-Uul and Sino-French excavations at Karadag.

Notes


2. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000124206

3. News from Northeast Asia Regional Editor, “Chang’an-Tianshan corridor,” comprising Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan alongside the PRC. The PRC section includes sites around Turfan in Xinjiang. One of them, Yarkhoto/Jiaohe, had been proposed previously. Japanese funds had since helped with its preservation. This was not a lone example of international collaboration in the region: the Getty Conservation Institute’s collaboration with the Dunhuang Academy for site conservation and management active since 1989, continues today; in Xinjiang from the 1990s, there were several international collaborations on major excavations, such as Sino-Japanese work at Nijo and Dandan-Uul and Sino-French excavations at Karadag.

The current heritage of Japan has been changed by a number of factors, one of which is the most important being the transfer of focus from the emperor to the people. After World War II, Japan underwent several radical modifications or interruptions caused by the occupying power (i.e., the United States), one of which was the reassessment of its system of belonging and identity via the use of archaeological heritage.

The invention of new heritage took place, and we can see an interruption to previous heritage narratives. These narratives had been linked to the legacy of the Meiji period and the emperor – partly related to the embodiment of the state – and to the Kofun period (300–710), which reflected the creation of statehood with kego-type-tomb shapes that dominated the landscape. As Kaner has suggested, “Direct links are often drawn between archaeology/Joan peoples and the images of traditional life that are actively promoted by a government ideology of furusato: stimulating feelings for one’s native place in an increasingly disill. aced, restless society. These images render the discoveries of archaeology comprehensible to the public with the help of images, conquests of the past as their ancestors: there is a direct connection between contemporary ‘sakuran’ and ‘hamato’.”

This is well illustrated by the song “Furusato” (‘old home’ or ‘hometown’) with its strong connection to the countryside. Despite being a children’s song created in 1914, it took on a new status as a national song performed during the closing ceremony of the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano.

For many, this summer is the first year since 2019 that travel to Japan has been possible, and my visit coincided with the period of the August holiday. Through this, visitors are able to pay homage to the sites that were somewhat hidden for the foraging tourist. In contrast to the well-known historical sites in Kyoto, Tokyo, or Nara – where the public is encouraged to press the button which holds the name of the artist or the location in which it was practiced. This display merges the tangible (buttons) and the intangible (audio). A large section of the museum is dedicated to the History of Pansori, and visitors are able to hear the different dialects and styles of Pansori, depending on the region in which it was practiced. This display is the tangible part of the museum.

The Jomon period spans from c. 14,000-10,000 BCE. The prehistoric inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago made a wide range of material objects, remarkable for fisher-hunter-gatherers. Their ceramic creations, which include figurines as well as pottery vessels for food preparation and consumption, are of particular interest given their sophistication and variety.

There was no “script” for Pansori recitals; they were very much impromptu performances. Stories were passed down by word of mouth until, eventually, they were recorded into literary compositions. As Kaner has suggested, “Direct links are often drawn between archaeology/Joan peoples and the images of traditional life that are actively promoted by a government ideology of furusato: stimulating feelings for one’s native place in an increasingly disill. aced, restless society. These images render the discoveries of archaeology comprehensible to the public with the help of images, conquests of the past as their ancestors: there is a direct connection between contemporary ‘sakuran’ and ‘hamato’.”

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The Return of Naadam: A Celebration of Intangible Heritage in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Emilie Jean Green

After being cancelled in 2021 because of the rising cases of COVID-19, this year Ulaanbaatar and the other provinces of Mongolia saw the grand return of Naadam, one of Mongolia’s oldest and most celebrated cultural events. Over the last two years, the absence of Naadam has been sorely felt, and this summer there was a palpable sense of excitement and anticipation in the build-up to the celebrations. The pandemic changed much of the world in a very short amount of time; in many aspects of our lives, we had to learn to adapt and overcome these changes, and intangible heritage was no exception to this.

Intangible heritage relies upon “actors” and “agents” to practice, maintain, and transmit this cultural knowledge, in many cases depending upon people and groups gathering together to share and celebrate cultural traditions. The festival consists of distinct features of Mongolia’s nomadic culture and traditions. Unlike many events which could be adapted onto an online platform, Naadam did not translate appropriately to such forums. Naadam, like many other intangible cultural heritage events, requires the congregation of people, and the act of togetherness is as important as the games themselves.

Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010, Naadam is a three-day event, the origins of which date back to the Mongol period. Naadam is a celebration of not only Mongolian culture and heritage, but of nature and the relationship the Mongolian people have with their environment. The event consists of three main traditional sporting events: horse riding, archery, and wrestling. Included within the celebrations and events of Naadam are traditional singing, dancing, artistry, and food. In preparation for the games and events of Naadam, the participants prepare and finely hone their skills over many years. Traditions, skills, and knowledge are transferred from generation to generation, and in more recent years schools have emerged in which young Mongolians can train for participation in the events of the festival. Steeped in cultural and historical significance, the events of Naadam are evocative for observers, as seen in the brightly coloured traditional garments, the ceremonies, and the sense of monumentality that comes with the occasion. In all these things, Naadam itself is deeply symbolic, promoting feelings of solidarity and togetherness – feelings that have only become more appreciated over the last two years.

A true amalgamation of many intangible cultural traditions, practices, crafts, and sporting events, Naadam can be seen as encapsulating the spirit of entanglement that connects people and landscapes across vast distances from the farthest provinces from all corners of Mongolia. Intangible heritage events and festivals have many different facets and elements which emphasise their importance, from the reinforcement of social bonds within and between groups to the perpetuation of skills, knowledge, practices, living traditions, and shared cultural memory. Not only is Naadam a celebration of the cultural history of Mongolia, but it is also a celebration of its people, their lifeways, and the deep tether that connects them to their environment.

Increasing numbers of Mongolian people are now living within cities such as the bustling Ulaanbaatar. Through the celebration of Naadam and the facets which constitute this great event, the Mongolian people gather and take a step away from their everyday lives to celebrate, maintain, and preserve this connection to the past. With the growth of cultural tourism within Mongolia, many have returned to the country this year to enjoy and observe the events of Naadam. Through this, Mongolian culture is celebrated and stands proudly on the global stage. As Mongolia continues to grow and change, Naadam is an opportunity to celebrate heritage, and as the world becomes increasingly globalised, the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage has only become more apparent.

Whilst COVID-19 remains in many ways a large part of our lives, it is encouraging to see a return to a greater degree of normality, wherein events such as Naadam can be celebrated, maintained, and safeguarded by current and future generations in their full capacity once more. The return of festivals and large-scale events such as Naadam has been an important part of the celebration of culture and heritage. Since the days of the early nomadic states who traversed the steppes, valleys, and mountains of Mongolia, Naadam has been the thread that connects the modern Mongolian people to their ancient past.

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