The current heritage of Japan has been changed by a number of factors, one of the most important being the transfer of focus from the emperor to the people. After World War II, Japan underwent several rapid reconstructions or interruptions of its traditional culture by the occupying power (i.e., the United States), one of which was the reassessment of its sense 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 Jōmon period, which reflected the ancestors of their ancestors: there is a huge board with a map, and consumption, are of particular interest to the patrons of Pansori. The creativity of curators, educators, artists, and theoreticians has been passed down from one generation to the next.

Pansori contains two key words: Pan, meaning “a place where people sing”, and sori, literally meaning “sound.” Essentially, Pansori is a passed-down oral tradition of epic stories and songs that are accompanied by the accompaniment of a drum, and along with the audience, who would provide the reaction. Thus, a triple act was formed, making every recital a very much impromptu performance. The Tangible Validation, Preservation, and Promotion of South Korea’s Oral Tradition Pansori in the Gochang Pansori Museum

Pansori is difficult to pinpoint by exact date and location. It is believed that the origins of Pansori are in the early 19th century, as a kind of oral transmission that began around the end of the 17th century through to the 19th century – as the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) – around southwest Korea.

There was no “script” for Pansori recitals; they were very much impromptu performances. Stories were passed down by word of mouth and by song. It is recorded into literary compositions by a man named Shin Joon Hye (1812-1880), who was a scholar and a poet of the oral tradition. Shin Joon Hye’s house in Gochang (in the North Jeolla Province) was used to teach and train Pansori singers. These very grounds, where Pansori is passed-down, has become a living oral tradition. Pansori singers study and trained became regular visitors to the open space of the museum. The Gochang Pansori Museum was opened in 2001 to preserve and promote Pansori. The museum claims that its aim is to “collect, preserve, research, study, display, and analyse tangible and intangible cultural items related to Pansori in order to educate the general public and to provide people with opportunities to appreciate Pansori.”

At the core of the museum – in the form of tangible items related to Pansori – is a collection of Pansori singers. The museum, moreover, houses over 1000 artifacts related to Pansori, including collections of Shin Joon Hye as well as Pansori-related objects owned by renowned Pansori singers such as Kim So Hee. The Gochang Pansori Museum has used various methods not only to validate and preserve the oral tradition, but also to pay respect to the patrons of Pansori and to educate the public about it. Walking in, there is a huge board with a map, and numerous buttons are attached to specific locations within the map. Visitors are encouraged to press the button which holds recordings of Pansori recitals from different parts of Korea. Through this, visitors are able to hear the different dialects and styles of Pansori, depending on the region 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 learn about the Pansori singers during the Joseon dynasty as well as how the oral tradition was preserved leading up to, during, and following the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) in Korea. This was when the Japanese tried to “Japanize” Korea, meaning that there were intentional efforts to eradicate cultural traditions that were uniquely Korean. The history room at the Gochang Pansori Museum portrays, through tangible recordings and objects, how the Korean oral tradition was preserved and passed down amid times of threat to Korean culture. Small 3D artworks have also been used to depict scenes from Pansori recitals back in the Joseon dynasty for visitors to imagine what a Pansori performance would have been like. The more interactive parts of the museum are the audio booths containing recordings of Pansori recitals and also the volume-check room where visitors can plug into the machine to check how loud they can shout. This is a reference to “tteukum” training that Pansori singers undergo in order to learn to shout through the sound of the marketplace back in the 18th century.

The Gochang Pansori Museum is the preserved 12 books of Shin Joon Hye. Five of these books became registered and designated as Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008 by UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. As visitors head towards the exit, there is a wall with photographs of Pansori singers throughout the years. A few points are communicated through this display. The oral tradition has been passed down from one singer to the next, and these photographs put a face to these “unknown” predecessors. The intention is that intentional blank frames have been put up to stress that Pansori is a living oral tradition.

The Gochang Pansori Museum can be used to understand how the tangible has an important role in validating, preserving, and promoting intangible heritage, and vice versa. In many respects, seeing the books of Shin Joon Hye, exploring the countless artifacts related to Pansori, and stepping on the grounds that were used to train Pansori singers in the past helps with tangible evidence of the intangible tradition.

Notes

3. The song was translated into English by Greg yarn and this was published in the album called “Japan’s Best Loved Songs of the Season” in 1998.

Fig. 1 (above): Use of Jomon figurine from Sannai Maruyama by a local bar to convey COVID-19 restrictions to the customers. Aomori, Japan. (Photo by Simon Kower)

Fig. 1 (left): A display of Shin Joon Hye’s book and paintings in the Gochang Pansori Museum. (Photo by Minjoo Zoh, 2015).

Fig. 2 (right): The final display in the Gochang Pansori Museum. (Photo by Minjoo Zoh, 2015).

News from Northeast Asia
Narratives of Tangible and Intangible Heritage in Northeast Asia

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Minjoo Zoh

The Tangible Validation, Preservation, and Promotion of South Korea’s Oral Tradition Pansori in the Gochang Pansori Museum

Minjoo Zoh

The creative narrative and associated archaeological narrative is now part of a grassroots heritage consciousness. The creation of the museum and the efforts of the museum staff, the visitors, and the museum itself have helped to create a grassroots heritage consciousness. The creativity of curators, educators, artists, and theoreticians has been passed down from one generation to the next. The museum provides an important role in validating, preserving, and promoting intangible heritage, and vice versa. In many respects, seeing the books of Shin Joon Hye, exploring the countless artifacts related to Pansori, and stepping on the grounds that were used to train Pansori singers in the past helps with tangible evidence of the intangible tradition.