

Narratives of Tangible and Intangible Heritage in Northeast Asia

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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.

This approach is problematic because heritage, whether designated under “tangible” or “intangible,” comprises both aspects when it comes to validation, preservation, and promotion. All tangible heritage sites have intangible stories and messages that are key to their “Outstanding Universal Value.”¹ 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” heritages, both tangible and intangible, which are meant to be consumed internally (by the citizens of the People’s Republic of China) as well as externally (by the international community). However, not all heritage narratives are intended for the global stage, as Lilianna Janik of the University of Cambridge illustrates in “Best Kept Secret, Jomon Heritage of Contemporary Japan.” That the tangible and intangible elements of heritage are intertwined and mutually important is demonstrated in “The Tangible Validation, Preservation, and Promotion of South Korea’s Oral Tradition Pansori in The Gochang Pansori Museum” by Seoul National University Asia Center’s Minjae Zoh. The way in which the tangible plays a central role in reproducing the intangible is also addressed

by Emilie Jean Green from the University of Aberdeen, who touches upon how the physical gathering of people (which cannot take place in an online form) is crucial to practicing, maintaining, and transmitting the cultural knowledge associated with intangible heritage in “The Return of Naadam: A Celebration of Intangible Heritage in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

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Notes

- 1 For an overview of “Outstanding Universal Value”, as defined by UNESCO, see https://whc.unesco.org/en/compendium/action=list&id_faqs_themes=962.

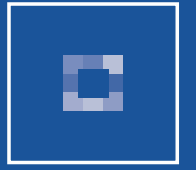
and control “minority” heritage. Of the four “traditions” from the PRC, two were firmly rooted in what was described as traditional “Han” culture, but the other two were from “minority” cultures – namely, the Uyghur 12 Muqam and the Urtlin Duu, a traditional folk song and a joint inscription with Mongolia. However, the increasing commodification and appropriation by the PRC of “minority arts,” especially music and dance, have also been subject to much criticism.

The growth of the Silk Road narrative to frame Eurasian heritage in UNESCO from the 1980s and the more recent politico-economic Belt and Road Initiative by the PRC have not only affected the approach to heritage in Chinese Central Asia. The division into steppe, sea, and land routes across Eurasia – made in a report presented to UNESCO by Japan in 1957 – 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, and Japan – started to challenge this by exploring the steppe and sea routes, which potentially could have bypassed China. Nevertheless, when a serial transnational nomination 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 2006, the PRC proposed a Chinese section of the Silk Road. This was rejected but was incorporated into the successful transnational inscription in 2014 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 Niya and Dandan-Uliq and Sino-French excavations at Karadong.

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China and Its Changing Narratives of Nationhood and Heritage

Susan Whitfield



Fig.1: A performance from the 2016 “Xinjiang National Unity and Progress Art Gala”

Since 1949, when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded, narratives of heritage have increasingly been used 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 activity, 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 stifling 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 – was also noted.

The potential to include cultural sites in colonized regions – those of the “ethnic minorities” – on the UNESCO list, and thus to some extent to assert ownership of them, was first realized with the inscription of the Potala Palace in Tibet in 1994. But the inscription and its management has not gone without criticism: it has been argued that a focus on the palace has enabled the destruction of much of the surrounding culture, inappropriate new buildings, and forced removals 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 Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.”¹

Since then the PRC has been very successful with UNESCO, attaining 56 inscribed sites by 2021, ranking it second in the world behind Italy (with 58). But very few are in contested regions, such as Tibet or Xinjiang. A 2001 UNESCO publication, *The First Proclamation of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage*,² which was to form the initial list of “Intangible Cultural Heritage” inscriptions in 2008, provided another opportunity to inscribe

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 changed. Xi’s terminology now describes them, for example, as “family-members linked to Chinese bloodlines,”³ implying a genetic relationship, and this is reinforced in school textbooks and “scientific” articles. On a visit to Xinjiang in 2022, he said that “Chinese civilisation is the root of the cultures of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang.”⁴ A corresponding denial of a diverse heritage is evident: the destruction or repurposing of shrines and mosques being an obvious example.

This denial and destruction is happening alongside the proliferation of archaeological discoveries throughout much of the rest of the PRC, the promotion of heritage tourism, and the reconstruction of “Chinese” heritage sites. Heritage and archaeology are thriving, but only those that fit a selected narrative.

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Notes

- 1 Tibetan Women’s Association letter to Kishore Rao, Director, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, June 15, 2013. Reproduced on <https://tibetanwomen.org/tag/united-nations>
- 2 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000124206>
- 3 新疆各民族是中华民族血脉相连的家庭成员 (Xinjiang ge minzu shi Zhonghua minzu xue mai xianglian de jiating chengyuan) Xi Jinping speech at 3rd Xinjiang Forum, Sept. 2020. Quoted and translated by James Millward, <https://twitter.com/JimMillward/status/1548313172192350208>
- 4 Source: Quoted in Xu Wei, “President sets out new vision for Xinjiang”, *China Daily*, 16 July, 2022. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202207/16/WS62d1a4cda310fd2b29e6ca56.html>