

Narratives of Tangible and Intangible Heritage in Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

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 Liliana 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.

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

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.

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.

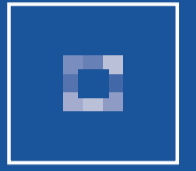
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Notes

- 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>

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Seoul National University Asia Center



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Best Kept Secret, Jomon Heritage of Contemporary Japan

Liliana Janik

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 re-evaluations or interruptions caused 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,¹ 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 (AD 250-710), which reflected the creation of statehood with keyhole-shaped tombs that dominated the landscape.

As Kaner has suggested, “Direct links are often drawn between archaeology /Jomon peoples and the images of traditional life that are actively propounded by a government ideology of *furusato*: stimulating feelings for one’s native place in an increasingly displaced, rootless society. These images render the discoveries of archaeology comprehensible to the public who are encouraged to view the people of the past as their ancestors: there is a direct connection between contemporary ‘salary man’ and his stone-age forebear.”² This is well illustrated by the song “Furusato” (“old home” or “hometown”) with its strong emotional and nostalgic links to the countryside. Despite it 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.

Where the mountains are green,
my old country home,
Where the waters are clear, my old
country home.
Back in the mountains I knew as a child
Fish filled the rivers and rabbits ran wild
Memories, I carry these wherever
I may roam
I hear it calling me, my country home
Mother and Fathers, how I miss you now
How are my friends I lost touch with
somehow?
When the rain falls or the wind blows
I feel so alone
I hear it calling me, my country home
I've got this dream and it keeps me away
When it comes true I'm going back there
someday
Crystal waters, mighty mountains blue
as emerald stone
I hear it calling me, my country home.³

The countryside is where people and their ancestors are. Inventing tradition is meant to anchor the nation to the archaeological landscape, which serves as “witness” /testimony of belonging to this land and its ancestors: it is a landscape of the common countryside that belongs to all. The Jomon period is signified by museums often located on the outskirts of towns or in the countryside; they do not differ from other buildings.

The Jomon period spans from c. 14,000-300 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.



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 Kaner).

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 obon holiday, when many families got together after three long years of the pandemic. In July 2021, 17 Jomon sites, including stone circles located in the north of Japan, were inscribed on the list of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites. As a heritage professional and archaeologist, I decided to visit them. As in previous years when I followed the Shinano River Jomon Heritage Trail, the Jomon sites were somewhat hidden for the foraging tourist. In contrast to the well-known historical sites in Kyoto, Tokyo, or Nara – where the English-based leaflets and brochures inform tourists of the historical, cultural, and often artistic importance of those locations – the Jomon sites are Japan-focused.

This is not, I suggest, due to any lack of contribution of worldwide impact by Jomon

peoples, such as technologies still used today. For example, we know that the first examples of lacquer use are from Jomon sites, and the first containers made of clay were created by the inhabitants of the area around the Sea of Japan / East Sea, also including China and the Russian Far East. Jomon cuisine, rituals, and continuity of occupation of particular locations have no equivalent among historical or contemporary foraging communities.

Jomon belongs to the Japanese people. Their material culture and associated archaeological narrative is now part of a grassroots heritage consciousness. The creativity of curators, educators, artists, and musicians who take part in the modern Jomon festivals across this region is inspired, and Jomon images are also part of the most popular genre of literature, manga. As foreigners, though, we do not easily see or hear it: Jomon remains one of Japan’s the best kept secrets.

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Notes

- Habu, J. & Fawcett, C. 2008. ‘Science or Narratives? Multiple Interpretations of the Sannai Maruyama Site, Japan’, in Habu, J., Fawcett, C., & Matsunaga, J.M. (eds.) *Evaluating Multiple Narratives*. New York, NY: Springer, pp. 91-117; Mizoguchi, K. 2013. *The Archaeology of Japan: From the Earliest Rice Farming Villages to the Rise of the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaner, S. 1996. ‘Beyond ethnicity and emergence in Japanese Archaeology’, in Denoon, D., Hudson, M., McCormack, G., & Morris-Suzuki, T. (eds.) *Multicultural Japan: Palaeolithic to Postmodern (Contemporary Japanese Society)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.46-59.
- The song was translated into English by Greg Irwin and this was published in the album called “Japan’s Best Loved Songs of the Season” in 1998.

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

Minjae Zoh

Pansori combines two Korean words: *Pan*, meaning “a place where people gather”; and *sori*, literally meaning “sound.” Essentially, *Pansori* is a passed-down oral tradition of epic stories and songs that were (and are) sung by a singer to the accompaniment of a drum, and along with the audience, who would provide the reaction. Thus, a triple act was formed, making every performance intimate and unique. The origin of *Pansori* is difficult to pinpoint by exact date and location, but the common understanding is that it began around the end of the 17th century through to the 19th century – during 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 until, eventually, they were recorded into literary compositions by a man named Shin Jae Hyo (1812-1884), who was a theorist and patron of the oral tradition. Shin Jae Hyo’s house in Gochang (in the North Jeolla Province) was used to teach and train *Pansori* singers. These very grounds, where Shin is known to have recorded and taught *Pansori*, are the present site of the Gochang *Pansori* Museum today. The annex where *Pansori* singers studied and trained became renovated and open to the public as part of the museum.

The Gochang *Pansori* Museum opened in 2001 to preserve and promote *Pansori*. The museum claims that its aim is to “collect, preserve, research, study, display,



Fig. 1 (left): A display of Shin Jae Hyo’s books and possessions in the Gochang Pansori Museum (Photo by Minjae Zoh, 2013).

Fig. 2 (right): The final display in the Gochang Pansori Museum (Photo by Minjae Zoh, 2013).

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 terms of its tangible evidence or validation of *Pansori* – are the twelve books of Shin Jae Hyo that can be seen as the first steps taken towards the tangible-isation of the intangible tradition, and also Shin Jae Hyo’s house that was an important physical location for *Pansori* trainees and singers. The museum, moreover, houses over 1000 artifacts related to *Pansori*, including personal possessions of Shin Jae Hyo 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 “Japanise” Korea, meaning that there were intentional efforts to erase anything that was intrinsically Korean. The history room at the Gochang *Pansori* Museum portrays, through tangible records and images, 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 shout into the microphone to check how loud they can shout. This is a reference to “teukum” training that *Pansori* singers had to undertake in order to pierce through the sound of the marketplace back in the 18th century.

Central to the museum are the preserved 12 books of Shin Jae Hyo. 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 first is that this oral tradition has been passed down from one singer to the next, and these photographs put a face to the intangible process. The second is that intentional blank frames have been put up to stress that *Pansori* is a living oral tradition; that the oral tradition goes on.

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 Jae Hyo, exploring the countless artifacts related to *Pansori*, and stepping on the grounds that were used to train *Pansori* singers in the past provide tangible evidence of the intangible tradition.

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Notes

- https://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/ATR/SI_EN_3_1_1_1.jsp?cid=1602363

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 normalcy, 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 steppe, valleys, and mountains of Mongolia, *Naadam* has been the thread that connects the modern Mongolian people to their ancient past.

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Fig. 1 (left): Boy participating in horse race at Naadam in Mongolia. Public domain Wikipedia.



Fig. 2 (right): The start of a Naadam horse riding event (Photo with permission of Joshua Wright).