

Keynote Paper

Regional Collaboration for Safeguarding ICH in the Asia-Pacific Region: Tasks and Prospects

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I. Diverse Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has been described as diverse forms of culture infused with the rich history of humanity. It is precious heritage that is considered the foundation of people's identity, showing the creative human spirit.

The Asia-Pacific region has often been called an ICH treasure house because of the keen regional interest in, and the favourable social atmosphere of respect for, ICH. In addition, as the home to almost half of the world's population, the vast Asia-Pacific region developed a unique cultural heritage with various peoples, religions, history, and social backgrounds.

ICH in this region has adapted to its natural environment, ranging from grassland to ocean, and the cultural heritage has been transmitted from generation to generation. Furthermore, because many countries throughout the region were founded by multiple ethnic groups, varied cultures from these groups have been coexisting and flourishing. This intercultural mix can be seen in the regional

melding of religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and indigenous religions. These factors are why the Asia-Pacific region has also been regarded as a miniature version of World Cultural Diversity.

The diversity and volume of ICH in the region is also seen in the UNESCO ICH lists; 47 percent of the inscribed elements on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity come from this region. Although the number of registrations does not implicitly represent ICH distribution, it shows that the region has taken a keen interest in ICH.

II. Factors that Threaten Intangible Cultural Heritage

Even though ICH is considered the foundation of people's identity and demonstrates the creative human spirit, ICH is in danger.

For a long time, ICH has been placed behind tangible heritage in the field of culture. This may have resulted from people seeing beautiful historical architecture destroyed by wars and economic developments, alerting them of the urgent need to protect tangible cultural heritage. This is why protecting tangible cultural heritage has historically enjoyed priority, leaving intangible elements to languish.

Tangible and intangible heritage are not comparable subjects; however, it cannot be denied that there has been a de facto prioritisation system in place. Moreover, this imbalance is the main reason why discussions and cooperation for safeguarding ICH on the international level have been only lukewarm.

While people's interest focused on tangible heritage, the intangible heritage of humanity was disappearing, and not just in the wake of extreme circumstances, such as wars; rapid social changes have also not been favourable to safeguarding and transmitting ICH.

In particular, industrialisation and modernisation have been widespread, and the Asia-Pacific region has been affected without exception. Since these phenomena are still in progress, measures to safeguard ICH should be urgently undertaken. Through waves of rapid social change, traditional culture has been losing its natural ability of transmission. It is especially a shame that ICH is left

exposed and defenceless without any safeguarding measures.

Accelerated globalisation due to IT technology is an additional factor affecting ICH. Globalisation is often understood as westernisation. The inflow of foreign culture could easily standardise culture when a country has a tenuous capacity to safeguard its traditional culture. It is true that we have already experienced the widespread phenomenon of cultures being infused with western ideals due to globalisation, and it will be regretted if it continues to the point where everyone ends up enjoying the same music, dance, and food around the globe. Acknowledging that countries are rarely free from globalisation, it is essential for humankind to retain culture by safeguarding traditional culture against the strong power of westernisation.

Furthermore, ICH transmission has also been affected in recent years since the younger generations seldom try to learn about their traditional culture and ICH bearers are getting older. There are some popular ICH lists on one hand, but on the other hand, there are also ICH lists that only a few bearers can perpetuate or transmission is terminated because there is no one to learn. To improve this situation, visibility and public awareness of ICH need to be enhanced.

Lastly, I would like address the idea that the extinction of traditional culture is an unavoidable sacrifice in the name of economic development. Safeguarding ICH is not a matter of sacrificing economic development. Rather, it is a matter of our needing to have the wisdom to use ICH as a bridge towards sustainable development through community involvement. This is why we need to build policies to balance the value of ICH with economic development.

III. Efforts for Implementing the Convention for Safeguarding ICH

As everyone knows, UNESCO is an international organisation for education, science, and culture. Currently, 193 Member States have joined UNESCO to discuss and make decisions on international policies for education, science, and culture.

The international community centred on UNESCO has promoted various projects to safeguard cultural heritage. ICH safeguarding has been accelerating

since the adoption of the 2003 Convention at the thirty-second General Conference of UNESCO. There were a few key discussions before the Convention was adopted. These include the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore in 1989 and the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which was integrated into the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Among them, the Masterpieces project was considered a big success in terms of developing ICH visibility. The reason why visibility is important is that it contributes to establishing an environment conducive to transmitting living heritage. The Convention includes the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, focusing on the universal value of ICH. Both lists reject the ideas of *outstanding* universal value and authenticity, which are concepts emphasised with tangible cultural heritage, and instead focus on raising awareness of the importance of ICH and good safeguarding practices.

The 2003 Convention is a turning point for ICH in international society. Member States agreed that the 1989 Recommendation was limited in terms of safeguarding and promoted the adoption of a more powerful international instrument, which came in the form of the Convention. The Convention is an international agreement on collaborating to safeguard ICH, which is a common property of humanity.

Since the Convention was adopted, there have been various safeguarding activities at the national or regional level. First, in addition to the two lists just mentioned, the Convention also includes the Register of Best Safeguarding Practices for projects and activities that best reflect the principles and objectives of the Convention.

At the moment, there are 16 elements inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, 233 elements on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and 3 elements on the Register of Best Safeguarding Practices.¹ Inscribing elements on the lists increases the awareness of the importance of ICH and promotes preparation for

1 Results of the fifth Intergovernmental Committee in 2010

proper safeguarding methods.

Furthermore, UNESCO offices hold workshops to reinforce the implementation of the Convention. Since January 2011, these offices have organised a national capacity-building workshop for experts as well as meetings for inventory making and for the participation of communities and NGOs. These meetings have aimed towards contributing to building national ICH safeguarding capacity.

Next, UNESCO Category 2 Centres (C2 Centres) have been established for international collaboration to promote ICH safeguarding activities. C2 Centres were instituted through the suggestions of Member States' governments and approval of the UNESCO General Assembly. There are six C2 Centres in the ICH field: one Centre each in the South American and East European regions and four in the Asia-Pacific region. The main roles of the C2 Centres in the Asia-Pacific region are information and networking, education, and research, and the Centres will expand their activities into ICH safeguarding. In particular, C2 Centres are expected to contribute to regional ICH safeguarding by acting as a medium to reinforce collaboration between UNESCO and Member States.

The meaning for ICH safeguarding activities and the Convention can be summarised as follows: first, to increase awareness of ICH is as valuable as tangible(?) cultural heritage; second, to ease the regional imbalance in terms of ICH by increasing participation of non-western countries, where ICH has been not emphasised thus far;² and last but not least, to provide international consultation about ICH safeguarding.

IV. Regional Collaboration for ICH Safeguarding

The 2003 Convention emphasises the importance of individuals and communities

 2 There are 137 countries that have signed for the 2003 Convention: 16 countries in West Europe, 24 in East Europe, 27 in the Americas and the Caribbean, 24 in Asia and the Pacific region, 31 in Africa, and 31 in the Middle East. The Convention is the first international instrument and States Parties to the Convention ought to endeavour to safeguard ICH in their territory.

who transmit ICH. The local communities are primary actors in safeguarding efforts, and the Convention will build up the safeguarding capacity of local communities. Collaboration among bearers, local communities, governments, and stakeholders is a primary concern since it is impossible to safeguard ICH through individual efforts. Furthermore, international collaboration is essential not only to safeguard ICH but also to contribute to international peace. In other words, ICH safeguarding does not encourage nationalism, but it does reinforce a greater global community and an environment of understanding.

To achieve this, as stated in the Convention, international collaboration should have a comprehensive meaning to include exchanging information and experience, collaborating projects, and supporting systems for national ICH safeguarding efforts.³ Thus, governments should realise that ICH safeguarding is a common concern within domestic laws and should collaborate internationally and locally.

Although ICH does not have a set form, it flows all around the world through people. Sometimes various cultures coexist. If there is no understanding about local collaboration and cultural diversity, the character of ICH could create conflict. Therefore, it is important to construct a stable local collaboration system since collaborative efforts are necessary to create an environment for ICH safeguarding. In other words, stimulating collaboration is the key to overcoming challenges such as regional inequality in the ICH field.

ICH experts in the Asia-Pacific region gather to discuss regional collaboration for ICH safeguarding. Although every nation and sub-region has different circumstances, active discussion about ICH safeguarding methods is expected during the conference. In conclusion, I hope that all participants share their experience and suggest development directions.

3 "The Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH, the Fifth Chapter International Collaboration and Support