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North-East Asia

Regional Collaboration for Safeguarding ICH in the Asia-Pacific Context: Overview, Tasks, and Strategies in North-East Asia

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I. Overview of the Status of Intangible Cultural Heritage in North-East Asia

Intangible cultural heritage presents an important form of living cultural heritage. It covers fundamental, yet extremely vulnerable aspects of living culture and tradition embodied in the spiritual life, traditional knowledge, skills, and practices of communities. It presents one of the most vivid and colourful forms in which the world's cultural diversity is expressed and preserved.

North-East Asia, which includes for UNESCO the five countries under the responsibility of the UNESCO Beijing Office, is afforded a wealth of variety in the way intangible heritage manifests itself, from oral traditions, performing arts, customs, and rituals to festivals, clothing, crafts, and food. This sub-region is a land of great beauty and striking contrasts, and it has a particularly rich and diverse cultural landscape with more than 70 different ethnic groups and 250 spoken languages. As the cradle of some of the most ancient civilisations, North-East Asia has developed its own diverse culture and traditions for preserving its

cultural heritage throughout the centuries.

North-East Asia has a long tradition of cooperation and engagement with UNESCO through various means for preserving, safeguarding, and promoting intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee for continuing creativity. To name a few examples:

- The Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU), based in Tokyo, Japan, has, since its inception in 1971, implemented manifold regional cooperative programmes in the field of capacity building and inventorying of intangible heritage.
- The Republic of Korea has been instrumental for many years in strengthening and promoting the UNESCO Living Human Treasures system to ensure that the bearers of intangible heritage continue to transmit their knowledge and skills to younger generations.
- China has, for several decades, devoted its efforts in identifying and inventorying elements of intangible cultural heritage. China has also organised the annual International Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, since 2007 to further raise awareness about the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.
- Mongolia established a dedicated national ICH centre several years ago to be responsible for safeguarding living heritage at the national level and for raising awareness.

Today is an opportune occasion to congratulate the five countries from North-East Asia, four of which were among the first twenty States Parties to ratify the ICH Convention in 2004 and 2005. This demonstrates the high-level interest of their respective governments to safeguard and promote expressions of intangible cultural heritage. North-East Asia has been instrumental in the elaboration of the 2003 Convention and in the early stages of implementing it. Between 2001 and 2005, North-East Asia submitted eleven elements to the UNESCO Masterpieces flagship programme, and these elements were proclaimed Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Since the ICH Convention entered into force in 2006, North-East Asia has emerged at the forefront of international efforts to protect and promote intangible

heritage. As of 2011, Japan, China, and the Republic of Korea are all members of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Furthermore, seventy-one elements from the sub-region have been inscribed on the two ICH lists, including sixty-three on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and eight on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. As we speak, new elements have just been inscribed at the Sixth Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage currently being held in Bali, Indonesia. This represents almost one-third of the total number of inscriptions and hence demonstrates the active commitment of North-East Asia for safeguarding living heritage by implementing the Convention.

II. Strategic Action for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in North-East Asia

Intense social changes, globalisation, and rapid urbanisation are increasingly affecting the traditions on which North-East Asian societies are based. The survival of their living heritage is increasingly threatened. In an era of globalisation, urbanisation, and migration, efforts to safeguard ICH face many challenges arising from the need not only to collect, document, and archive cultural information but also to protect and support the individuals, groups, and communities who use, re-shape, and transmit such information.

The ICH Convention provides a common platform for safeguarding intangible heritage in North-East Asia. And the Convention is supported by a wide range of national legislative and administrative regulations that have been developed over the past forty years in all five countries.

- In 1962 a system of safeguarding ICH was introduced into the Cultural Heritage Protection Act of the Republic of Korea, providing the legal and administrative basis for safeguarding ICH.
- To safeguard Mongolian intangible heritage despite the rapidly changing societal organisation from which many traditions originate, the Mongolian government enacted the Law for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in 2003,

based on which the “Rule for Identifying and Registering the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Designating its Bearers” was adopted.

- The Korean Association for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was established in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in 2010 with the primary responsibility to initiate and coordinate the inventorying and transmission of Korean living heritage.
- Earlier this year, the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage was promulgated. This law set a comprehensive normative framework for identification, inventorying, and safeguarding measures in China.

Based on its longstanding traditions of recognition and legal protection of intangible cultural heritage and in researching heritage and its transmission as well as networking activities of various institutions and organisations, North-East Asia has great potential to showcase good practices in safeguarding as well as in international cooperation.

This has prompted the Republic of Korea, China, and Japan to jointly agree in 2008 to establish in each country an intangible cultural heritage centre for the Asia-Pacific region under the auspices of UNESCO to promote ICH safeguarding in the region.

- The Centre in the People’s Republic of China is based in Beijing and focuses on capacity building. It is foreseen to be launched in early 2012.
- The Centre in Japan was established in October 2011 in Osaka with the mandate of fostering, coordinating, and developing scientific, technical, and artistic studies as well as research methodologies.
- The Centre in the Republic of Korea, currently based in Daejeon, is specialised in information and networking. ICHCAP will be officially inaugurated later this afternoon in the presence of the UNESCO Director-General.

With the knowledge accumulated on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the past decades by North-East Asian governments, the role of the three Category 2 Centres will be instrumental in enhancing the regional capacities to

develop and implement a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to safeguard intangible heritage against disappearance, discontinuation, fragmentation, and standardisation.

The strategy in North-East Asia recognises as guiding principles that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is crucial to recognising and enhancing our rich cultural diversity. Safeguarding fosters local development because of its unifying capacity, and it continues transmission and re-creates knowledge within these societies. This knowledge is the core around which social cohesion is maintained and which makes locally driven development possible.

Such a strategy of safeguarding living heritage shall aim to promote the implementation of the 2003 Convention; increase the participation of communities, groups, and individuals; and enhance the capacity of the States Parties at all levels in safeguarding ICH through training, exchanges, and research.

Furthermore, as you are aware, the 2003 Convention attaches great importance to cooperation among its States Parties. The five North-East Asian countries are inextricably linked historically and culturally. With this in mind, a concerted strategy in North-East Asia should therefore take into consideration the concept of shared heritage. The 2003 Convention “acknowledges the equal respect due to all forms of living heritage”, and therefore all living heritage is deemed to be worthy of being preserved according to the wishes of the communities. The 2003 Convention explicitly encourages multinational nominations. North-East Asia shall play a leading role to demonstrate that cultural cooperation transcends geographical boundaries and political barriers. Stemming from this realisation, in 2011, the governments of Mongolia and China established a joint ICH committee that is responsible to periodically examine opportunities for cooperation between the two countries, including the possibility of jointly submitting nominations to the UNESCO ICH Committee.

In this context, the paramount role of the three Category 2 Centres deserves to be highlighted to facilitate the complex task of coordination and consultation in North-East Asia.

III. Tasks for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in North-East Asia

An effective heritage strategy requires a shared understanding of both heritage and strategy. It needs to be guided by a mission, a vision, and a clear definition of tasks to be carried out.

With this in mind, identifying, inventorying, and documenting ICH information and traditions, including the development and dissemination of best practices, shall be set as one of the key priorities. Furthermore, given the experience of countries such as the Republic of Korea, China, or Japan in this field, I believe that such an endeavour would benefit greatly from collaboration at the sub-regional and regional levels. To this end, it would be desirable to establish a standard information system to support the identification and documentation of intangible heritage elements and tradition bearers as well as institutions and individuals actively involved in the preservation of traditions. In this context, the use of new technologies for the digitisation of archival documents and living heritage offer immense possibilities in the future.

To compensate for the lack of human resources or technical know-how necessary to efficiently safeguard living heritage, strong emphasis shall be put on building capacity with the Category 2 Centre in China as the leading institution with the organisation of a wide range of accessible training courses addressed to various groups of stakeholders and related to different aspects of heritage safeguarding. As often as possible, training activities shall draw upon regional and local expertise in the spirit of encouraging sub-regional and regional exchanges. Instigating distance-learning opportunities would also encourage the dissemination of appropriate methodologies to a wider number of professionals.

Beyond the initial identification and inventorying stage, one of the most effective ways to achieve sustainable ICH safeguarding would be to guarantee that the bearers of that heritage continue to develop their knowledge and skills and transmit them to younger generations. The bearers of the ICH must be identified, among whom some will be given official recognition and encouraged to continue to develop and transmit their knowledge and skills. As previously mentioned, the Republic of Korea has already devoted much effort in this area and, for instance, assisted Mongolia in establishing a national Living Human Treasures system.

In the field of research on practices and methodologies of ICH safeguarding North-East Asia, collaboration at the sub-regional level could be strengthened under the impetus of the Category 2 Centre based in Japan. Focus shall be put on endangered living heritage. Also, linkages shall be established among research institutions within the sub-region and with other regions. Investment in research will revitalise interest in the appreciation of cultural heritage and ultimately benefit its safeguarding.

ICH safeguarding can only be achieved with the commitment and active participation of all stakeholders, in particular governments and local communities. Therefore, celebrating ICH at local, provincial, national, and international levels and recognising individuals, groups, and communities who carry on intangible heritage traditions shall be further encouraged to sensitise all stakeholders, especially local communities. Sub-regional initiatives would further contribute to mutual understanding and the development of a culture of peace in North-East Asia. The Category 2 Centre in the Republic of Korea shall continue to play a leading role in this area.

The 2003 Convention has established two mechanisms to ensure greater visibility of intangible heritage and to encourage adequate safeguarding measures for endangered elements: the nominations of the elements to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. In the wider context of shared heritage, multinational nominations shall be continuously encouraged and supported. To fulfil this objective, regular consultation shall be organised among relevant institutions in North-East Asia to identify opportunities for cooperation, ensure synergies, and avoid misunderstandings.

In conclusion, I would like to commend the sustained attention of all five governments in North-East Asia in safeguarding their ICH and supporting international cooperation in implementing the 2003 Convention. In this regard, the tenth anniversary of the UNESCO Convention in 2013 will represent a platform to celebrate these achievements and to reflect on a way forward to foster international collaboration for the concerted ICH safeguarding. Both China and Mongolia have proposed several events for 2013 that will be examined tomorrow by the ICH Committee in Bali. I take this opportunity to appeal to other countries in the North-East Asian cluster to actively join them in this celebration.

The recent establishment of three Category 2 Centres in North-East Asia responsible for the entire Asia-Pacific region constitutes a unique opportunity for the sub-region to play a leading role in safeguarding living heritage and to constitute a reservoir of good practices in the field. However, this also means that North-East Asia has the responsibility to be a catalyst for cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

Let me conclude with the wise words of Mahatma Gandhi on the importance of cooperation and exchange for the benefit of culture:

“No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive.” – Mahatma Gandhi