

Considering the Role of Researchers at Local Governments (as “Cultural Brokers”) in Japanese Cases of ICH

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History of the Policy for Preserving Intangible Folk Cultural Properties in Japan

The first law in Japan aimed toward the preservation of cultural properties is the Ancient Temples and Shrines Preservation Law (*Kosyaji hozonhō* 古社寺保存法), legislated in 1897. And after several waves of legislation and revision, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties (*Bunkazai hogohō* 文化財保護法, hereafter the Law) was established in 1950. This law has been in force for over 65 years and still has great influence.

This law, as is well known, has covered not only tangible but also intangible cultural properties from the very beginning¹. Along with these two categories, folk culture was also regarded as an object of protection, although its definition was very limited. The definition of tangible cultural properties in the first text of the law exemplified “folk materials” (*minzoku shiryō* 民俗資料) as one of the candidates for designation of important tangible cultural properties.

The first major amendment of the Law was established in 1954, adding a new category covering folk culture separated from tangible cultural properties. This new category covered both the tangible and intangible², even though the name of the category itself was “folk materials.” The reason why it was not called “folk cultural properties” (*minzoku bunkazai* 民俗文化財), in the same manner as other categories, seems to be that each item of folk materials had not been regarded as “property” that had its own value. The text of the Law defined folk materials as “indispensable for understanding the transition of the ways of life of the Japanese people,” which suggests they were regarded as important

1 Category of “intangible cultural properties” (*mukeni bunkazai* 無形文化財) consists of two sub-categories: “craft techniques” (*kōgei gijutsu* 工芸技術) and “performing arts” (*geinō* 芸能).

2 The object of preservation of “intangible folk materials” was regarded as “manners and customs” (*fūzoku kansyū* 風俗慣習) in the broad sense.

materials, namely resources, for comparative study to figure out the historical transition of “national” culture. It was the most significant subject of folklore studies in Japan at that time.

Furthermore, the law regarded intangible folk materials as possessing unique characteristics. Unlike tangible folk materials recognized for their need of conservation, intangible folk materials were not considered an object of conservation. The chairperson of the Secretariat of the National Commission for the Protection of Cultural Properties (*Bunkazai hogo iinkai* 文化財保護委員会, hereafter the Commission) gave an account why the Commission had not recognized the need for the conservation of intangible folk materials. According to that, it seemed impossible, or even meaningless to conserve intangible folk materials as they were, because their forms naturally varied in tandem with social change. With this reasoning, it was enough to conduct intensive research and to make accurate records or documentation of their existing states. As a consequence, intangible folk materials became an object of “selection” (*sentaku* 選択) as “folk materials requiring documentation and other measures that should be taken” (*kiroku sakusei tō no sochi wo kōzubeki mukei no minzoku siryō* 記録作成等の措置を講ずべき無形の民俗資料).

In 1975, the Law underwent its second major amendment, and folk materials were renamed “folk cultural properties” in a similar manner to other categories. At the same time, “intangible folk cultural properties” became an object of designation linked to the intention of conservation. This might mean the change of recognition that “the form of intangible folk cultural property naturally varies in tandem with social change”, as mentioned in previous paragraph. And in accordance with this amendment, folk performing arts which had been treated as intangible cultural properties till then came to be regarded as intangible folk cultural properties. In 2004, a new subcategory of “folk techniques” was added to intangible folk cultural properties. Thus, the current system of intangible folk cultural properties was established³.

3 It consists of three subcategories: “manners and customs” (*fūzoku kansyū* 風俗慣習), “folk performing arts” (*minzoku geinō* 民俗芸能) and “folk techniques” (*minzoku gijutsu* 民俗技術).

Distinctive Way and Procedure for Preserving Intangible Folk Cultural Properties

I had worked for 10 years as a researcher of the intangible folk cultural properties section at the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties Tokyo, which was established by the national government after a few years of the Law was legislated. While I was in that position, I attended some international meetings held by UNESCO or its cooperative organizations to establish the 2003 convention. On those occasions, I was sometimes asked about what is the difference between “intangible cultural properties” and “intangible folk cultural properties”, and why we differentiate those two categories. Many of the people who asked such questions may have thought that this distinction would regard folk culture as something low against high culture such as fine art. For such questions, I usually answered that the differences were in the way and procedures for preservation.

The biggest difference is that implementing bodies of preservation of folk cultural properties are mainly local governments, such as prefectures and municipalities. In many cases, even the project plans for preservation of nationally designated intangible folk cultural properties are usually made by the local government, although it should be made according to the general guidelines established by the national government, and they propose such projects to the agency for cultural affairs to get subsidies from national government. Intangible folk cultural properties are diverse and each of them has its own circumstances. To address these issues, it is necessary to develop and implement preservation from the perspective of local context. In this regard, the importance of the role of the “cultural brokers”, which is the theme of this session, becomes a problem.

Local Government Workers as Cultural Brokers

When considering the role of cultural brokers or intermediaries, the involvement of NGOs seems to have become a topic in recent international discussions.⁴ In this regard, Japan seems to be behind the world. NGO activities related to the preservation of ICH have begun to emerge slightly, but it is difficult to say that they are very active. This

⁴ See, for example, Lewis, David. 2014. “Understanding the Role of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) as Cultural Brokers.” *VOLKSKUNDE*, no. 3: 293–98.

situation, however, means that local administrative support, established in the long history and with a great deal of experience as described above, is still functioning appropriately. In this presentation, I would like to reevaluate their efforts. And I would like to get perspective for considering how to make them more effective and broaden their potential through that work.

I can find two types of typical cultural brokers in Japanese cultural properties system. The first are the public officers in charge of cultural properties at local government. Currently there are 47 prefectures and more than 1800 municipalities nationwide. Every local government has at least one, or sometimes a few, persons in charge of preserving cultural properties in its administrative area. Many of them are researchers of archaeology, anthropology and/or folklore. They may not necessarily be professional scholars (although some of them have more results than professors in universities), but in many cases, they have studied these disciplines at graduate schools.

The second are the curators of local museums which is mostly established by the local government. It is said that there are more than a thousand of local museums of history and/or folklife over the nation. About 780 museums among them belong to the Japanese Liaison Council of History and Folk Museums.⁵ Many of them are public museums and have been established by the subsidy by the agency for cultural affairs since 1970. These museums are powerful institutions of employment for postgraduate students of field science, especially of folklore studies. These widely allocated human resources and their organizations are one of the distinctive characteristics of “cultural heritage regime”⁶ in Japan.

Hereafter I would like to consider the role and importance of them as “cultural brokers” by focusing on three points that may attract our attention.

(1) Local Government Workers as a Member of the Community of Practice

In today’s social circumstances in Japan, involvement of local government workers

5 全国歴史民俗系博物館協議会 <http://www.rekimin.com>

6 Bendix, Regina F., Aditya Eggert, and Arnika Peselmann. 2013. “Introduction: Heritage Regimes and the State.” In *Heritage Regimes and the State*, edited by Regina F. Bendix, Aditya Eggert, and Arnika Peselmann, Göttingen:11–20. Universitätsverlag Göttingen.

is almost indispensable to practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage (intangible folk cultural properties). It is not just that economic support from the local government is necessary. Various miscellaneous services such as permission to use facilities, publicity, advertisement, traffic regulation, and so on, which are indispensable to realize events, festivals, and performing arts, is commonly conducted through local government workers. Also, local government workers are often involved in training successors and raising awareness among residents. Their existence is essential, especially when considering the succession and education to younger generations. Because in many cases, the people in charge of cultural properties belong to the same board of education as they would take over school education among local governments.

I usually engage in academic research on performing arts. And from my experience, it is difficult to accept the idea that the essentials of performing arts will be attributed only to performers. The more deeply you know about performing arts, the more you can't ignore the importance of the people who helped behind the scenes. This must be the same for events or festivals.

It would be productive to think of community that is the holder of intangible cultural heritage as a community that appears through the practices of cultural expressions or cultural activities as a whole, rather than thinking as a group of specific essential attributes. By taking this way, the government workers should also be regarded as a member of the “community of practice”⁷ that transmits the intangible cultural heritage.

(2) Importance of “Cross-Community” Point of View

In the discussion on cultural heritage, the gap in recognition between different socio-political layers is often problematic. Everyday life in the world of local communities is far from the argument that is made in the state's policy and the international organization. The word “glocal”, another keyword of this symposium, is likely to be the intention of connecting such different scale or layer. When talking about the international convention of intangible cultural heritage, we usually focus on the cultural broker's role

7 Originally conceptualized by Lave and Wenger (Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.), but here I referred to Japanese anthropologist Kyōnosuke Hirai's book. Hirai, Kyōnosuke. 2012. *Jissen to Shite no Komyunithi: Idō, Kokka, Undō*. Kyōto: Kyōto Daigaku Syuppankyoku.

of bridging such different layers. Of course, this is a very important role, and needless to say, the researchers of local government play the role of that kind.

On the other hand, if we think about their day-to-day work, they may have another role of brokerage. They are generally involved in various types of intangible cultural heritage, such as dances, dramas, shrine festivals, Buddhist ceremonies, New Year celebration events, funerals, or craft techniques with regional characteristics, and so on so forth, in a defined area. There are also examples that same type of performing arts or festivals are distributed in a certain area, but these groups do not always interact actively with each other group. In some cases, they are competitors that scramble for local audience or opportunity of performance. They are strongly concerned about the activities of neighboring groups, but there are limited opportunities to exchange information with each other.

In such a situation, the role expected to the researcher of local government is large. When a tradition faces a crisis, the core members of the community of practice will be interested in what the other groups that may be in similar circumstances are doing. In such a case, researchers of local governments, who are involved in across various communities as a marginal member, would be the best person who facilitate dialogue between the groups. In other words, researchers of local government can play a role of bridging not only over the different socio-political layers (the world and the state and the community) vertically, but also across various practices at the same level and make people have more general perspective.⁸

(3) Expected Versatility: Utilizing Cultural Properties/Heritage System

For those who have heard my presentation so far, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage led by UNESCO and preserving intangible (folk) cultural properties in Japan might be understood as almost the same system with same purpose. In fact, however, there is quite a little difference between those two concepts. The concept of intangible cultural heritage that has spread from UNESCO’s efforts is to respect the autonomy of traditional culture, and aims to revitalize the entire dynamic process that transmit ICH

8 Cf. Kitō, Syūichi. 1998. “Kankyō Undō/Kankyō Rinen Kenkyū ni okeru ‘Yosomono’ Ron no Syatei: Isahaya Wan to Amami Oshima no ‘Shizen no Kenri’ Sosyō no Jirei wo Tyūshin ni.” *Kankyō Syakaigaku Kenkyū*, no. 4: 44-59.

to the next generation. It is distinct from Japanese concept of protection of cultural properties, derived from protection of tangible culture, which aims to conserve certain styles as much as possible.⁹ Such a concept of ICH should be highly appreciated.

However, the philosophy or principles of convention do not always effect directly on the site of tradition facing crises or difficulties. What is important is not to infuse the philosophy and principles of the convention to the local community. For the researchers of local governments confronting the difficulties of tradition, a new development of concept of cultural heritage is meaningless unless it appears as the expansion of the measures of support that can be taken on people's request.

In recent years in Japan, political measures related to preservation and promotion of regional culture have rapidly diversified. It goes beyond past cultural policies, cooperating with tourism, regional development, agricultural promotion, and so on. The Agency for Cultural Affairs launched "Japan Heritage"¹⁰ in 2015, which might be influenced by the concept of UNESCO's cultural heritage, and may compete with cultural properties system.

Governmental organizations for cultural policies are vertically structured, but when it comes down to the tail end, only a few persons in charge have direct contact with local communities. They are required to have versatile ability to manipulate various programs for preserving or promoting local culture by their discretion. There is no one-size-fits-all way in safeguarding tradition. Rather, it is important for them to have a wide range of choices in order to fully respond to the people's expectations. And to achieve this, it is necessary not only to promote dialogue between communities, but they themselves also have active relationships with researchers in other regions and exchange their experiences.

We recently launched a study group concerned with administration of folk cultural properties. Members are all folklorists or anthropologists, but among them only two

9 See, Hyōki, Satoru. 2015. "'Mamoru-beki Mono' kara Manabu-beki Koto: Minzoku Geinō Kenkyū no Furonthia to shiteno Mukei Bunka Isan." *Minzoku Geinō Kenkyū*, no. 59: 56–75.

10 「日本遺産(Japan Heritage)について」http://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/bunkazai/nihon_isan/

belong to universities, and others are public officers of local government or curators of local museums. They have rich on-site experience, but from now on we need to share the experience and try to establish methodologies.

Conclusion

The idea of dichotomy between the world or the state and the community of holders of ICH is unproductive. Rather it is necessary to look at the importance of the researchers of local governments that bridge over the gap of different layers. In case of preservation of ICH, especially intangible folk cultural properties, the role of researchers of local government, those who have already been allocated over the nation, cannot ignore when we think about the importance of cultural brokers. This system and organization that has been prepared for a long time is an invaluable resource.

Their roles are complex and multivalent. In the sense that many intangible cultural heritage is difficult to be held without their engagement, they are members of the community of practice of ICH concerned. At the same time, they can also give community members more general perspective by cross-community involvement with various types of practice. In addition, they are required to have versatile ability to operate various programs provided by higher administrative organizations by listening to the voices of their communities constantly to fulfill their demands.

What I argued about here is ideal in a sense. In fact, it may not be said that researchers of local governments are always fulfilling their role in every case. Rather, it can be said their abilities are not fully demonstrated in various restrictions, and there are many of them who are unconscious of their role and importance. But I believe that they have such potential. That is why researchers like us and higher-level administrative agencies must consider how we can encourage them to display their potential, and create an environment that can be fulfilled. Unfortunately, Japanese bureaucracy system seems to be required to consider “what must not be done”, rather than “what can be done”. That is why there is a need for organizations that are not subject to administrative restrictions such as NGOs. However, as previously mentioned, the human resources that have already been allocated nationwide are important assets of system that safeguard cultural heritage in Japan. How to manage their potential is an important issue for the practical challenges of the “safeguarding” of intangible cultural heritage in this country.

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