



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Intangible
Cultural
Heritage

Urgent Safeguarding List

Original: English

CONVENTION FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMITTEE FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Fifth session
Kenya
November 2010

REPORT ON THE EXAMINATION OF NOMINATION FILES NO. 00304 FOR INSCRIPTION ON THE LIST OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN NEED OF URGENT SAFEGUARDING IN 2010

Name of the examiner: Rachel Harris
Name of the expert (if different):
Date of the examination: (revised on) 10 August 2010
Nomination file No. 00304 State Party: China Name of element: Meshrep
<p><i>Note: Information in italics in boxes is provided for the examiner's reference; it includes excerpts from the Operational Directives or from the explanations given to submitting States Parties in the nomination form. The examiner shall rely upon the information provided within the nomination file, including any photos, video or additional information that is made available as part of the nomination. The examiner shall bring to bear his/her personal and professional knowledge in assessing the credibility and completeness of the information provided within the nomination, but his/her report shall primarily address whether or not the submitting State, within the nomination, has adequately demonstrated that the criteria for inscription are satisfied. The examiner shall neither be a national of the State(s) Party(ies) submitting the nomination nor have any conflict of interest that could influence unduly the results of the examination.</i></p>

Excerpts from the Operational Directives

Examination of nominations:

5. *With a view to their evaluation by the Committee, nominations shall be examined by preferably more than one advisory organization accredited in conformity with Article 9.1 of the Convention. In conformity with Article 8.4, the Committee may invite public or private bodies and/or private persons with recognized competence in the field of intangible cultural heritage, in order to consult them on specific matters. No nomination will be examined by (a) national(s) of the State(s) Party(ies) submitting the nomination.*
6. *Examinations shall include assessment of the nomination's conformity with the inscription criteria.*
7. *Each examination shall include assessment of the viability of the element and of the feasibility and sufficiency of the safeguarding plan. It shall also include assessment of the risk of its disappearing, due, inter alia, to the lack of means for safeguarding and protecting it, or to processes of globalization and social or environmental transformation.*
8. *The reports of these examinations shall include a recommendation to the Committee to inscribe, or not to inscribe, the nominated element.*

Brief textual description of the nominated element

The examiner should provide a brief description of the nominated element, suitable for publication. This may draw upon item D of the Cover Sheet, but should also draw upon the nomination as a whole to provide a summary overview of the essential features of the element. The description should be prepared based on the information provided within the nomination file.

(175 to 225 words)

The practice of meshrep is widespread amongst the nine million strong Turkic Muslim Uyghurs of Xinjiang (Chinese Central Asia) and their diaspora. It is arguably the Uyghurs' most distinctive set of cultural practices and strongest marker of identity. It is loosely glossed as 'festivities, gatherings', but it subsumes a range of specific practices tied to different localities or sub-groups (the Dolan meshrep), life-cycle and calendric events (the Kok meshrep of Qumul). Meshrep typically incorporate ritual practices, performing arts especially music (including the Uyghur Muqam repertoire) and dance, religious instruction, and foodways. They are rooted in community networks of hospitality and reciprocity. They enforce community bonds and uphold local notions of morality.

'Traditional' practices in the core sense of the word, meshrep may also be re-invented and re-invested with contemporary relevance and meanings. Meshrep are maintained in rural and in urban settings. Key participants and transmitters include the organisers (yigit beshi) who maintain the rules and spirit of the gatherings, and the folk artists (musicians and dancers) who infuse them with life. Some local traditions of meshrep are exclusive and gendered male (the Ghulja meshrep), while others may include the whole community, and women may play more significant roles.

primarily music (including folk songs and Muqam traditions) and dance. Participation in meshrep demands a wide range of locally acquired knowledge, including ritual and religious, linguistic, custom and etiquette, norms of hierarchy and reciprocity, and play. As such they are key occasions which provide local communities with a sense of communal identity and continuity.

Criterion U.2 The element is in urgent need of safeguarding because its viability is at risk despite the efforts of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals and State(s) Party(ies) concerned.

Excerpts from the nomination form

Viability assessment (Not to exceed 500 words)

Describe the current level of viability of the element, particularly the frequency and extent of its practice, the strength of traditional modes of transmission, the demographics of practitioners and audiences and its sustainability.

Threat and risk assessment (Not to exceed 500 words)

This section should identify and describe the threats to the element's continued transmission and enactment and describe the severity and immediacy of those threats.

Nomination demonstrates that the element satisfies Criterion U.2:

Yes

No

Examiner's comments regarding whether the nomination demonstrates that the element is in urgent need of safeguarding

The examiner should address whether the submitting State has adequately demonstrated that the element's viability is at risk, that the community, group or, if applicable, individuals and State(s) Party(ies) concerned have made efforts to ensure its viability, and that it is consequently in urgent need of safeguarding.

(250 to 500 words)

Meshrep are community-based practices widespread amongst the Uyghur people in both urban and rural areas across the Xinjiang region and in diaspora communities in the Central Asian states and beyond. As an umbrella term, meshrep covers a wide range of more or less formalised gatherings. Extensive ethnographic fieldwork and documentation carried out by Xinjiang scholars over the last two decades bears testament to the variety and cultural richness of meshrep practices currently maintained around the region. At the least formalised end of the scale, meshrep are popular and frequent, and in no danger of dying out, but the submission rightly identifies the tendency within urban areas to practise simplified, small-scale forms of meshrep with less well-defined rules. With its active links with local cultural organs, reaching deep into rural areas across the region, the submitting body is well-placed to give an overview of the current state of practice in rural areas, and their suggestion that the number of competent transmitters of traditional meshrep in rural areas is sharply diminishing should be taken seriously.

Examiner’s assessment of the viability of the element

The examiner should address whether the submitting State’s assessment of the element’s viability is accurate, realistic and complete.

(150 to 300 words)

It is interesting that the submission states that current practice is impoverished compared to thirty years ago. This takes us back to 1979, just after the end of the Cultural Revolution, a period which saw sweeping government restrictions on traditional practices, famine and conflict. The respected Xinjiang musicologist Zhou Ji once commented to me that the situation of traditional Uyghur music-making seemed precarious in the 1980s as young Uyghurs embraced modernity, but the 1990s saw a major revival as part of renewed interest in Uyghur identity. Meshrep similarly have strong revival potential, and this should be an important factor in its status as intangible cultural heritage. However there are issues relating to meshrep revivals in recent years, where practice has been restricted by the authorities. This is clearly a concern for the viability of the practice of meshrep, and one which the submission does not address.

Examiner’s assessment of the risk of the element’s disappearing, due, inter alia, to the lack of means for safeguarding and protecting it, or to processes of globalization and social or environmental transformation

The examiner should address whether the submitting State’s assessment of the risk of the element’s disappearing is accurate, realistic and complete.

(150 to 300 words)

The risks detailed by the submission are recognisable and valid, and the drive for modernity in Xinjiang is certainly impacting on meshrep practices, although it is perhaps over simplistic to ascribe this to young people following fashion and losing interest in traditions. The report also cites as a risk the problem of rural young people migrating to Chinese cities for jobs, and this is currently a serious concern. Another major concern for the long-term viability of meshrep - linked to modernization but not mentioned by the submission - is the shift to Chinese language as a medium of teaching in schools. A more immediate risk is posed in some areas by the movement of Uyghur communities in order to make room for new development. Other immediate risks not covered in the submission include local restrictions on a range of community-based religious activities and on large public gatherings; these may be reasonably assumed to have a direct impact on the viability of meshrep gatherings.

Criterion U.3 Safeguarding measures are elaborated that may enable the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned to continue the practice and transmission of the element.

Excerpts from the nomination form

Safeguarding measures

Items 4.a. to 4.c. request the elaboration of a coherent set of safeguarding measures as called for in Criterion U.3. The safeguarding measures, if effectively implemented, should be expected to contribute substantially to the safeguarding of the element within a time-frame of approximately four years. They should include measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the element by enabling the community to continue its practice and transmission.

4.a. Current and recent efforts to safeguard the element (not to exceed 500 words)

Describe the current and recent efforts of the concerned community, group or, if

applicable individuals to ensure the viability of the element. Describe efforts of the concerned State(s) Party(ies) to safeguard the element, taking note of external or internal constraints such as limited resources.

4.b. Safeguarding measures proposed (not to exceed 2,000 words)

This section should identify and describe a coherent set of safeguarding measures that, within a time-frame of approximately four years, could substantially enhance the viability of the element, if implemented, and provide detailed information as follows:

- a) What primary objective(s) will be addressed and what concrete results will be expected?
- b) What are the key activities to be carried out in order to achieve these expected results? Please describe the activities in detail and in their best sequence, addressing their feasibility.
- c) Management and implementation: describe the mechanisms for the full participation of communities, groups or, if appropriate, individuals in the proposed safeguarding measures. Describe the implementing organization or body (name, background, etc.) and the human resources available for implementing the project.
- d) Timetable and budget: provide a timetable for the proposed activities and estimate the funds required for their implementation, identifying any available resources (governmental sources, in-kind community inputs, etc.).

4.c. Commitments of States and of communities, groups or individuals concerned (not to exceed 500 words)

The feasibility of safeguarding depends in large part on the aspirations and commitment of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned and the support and cooperation of the State Party concerned. This section should demonstrate that the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned have the will and commitment to safeguard the element if conditions are favourable and that the State Party concerned has the commitment to support the safeguarding effort by creating favourable conditions for its implementation.

Nomination demonstrates that the element satisfies Criterion U.3:

Yes

No

Examiner's assessment of the feasibility and sufficiency of the safeguarding plan

The examiner should address whether the submitting State has elaborated a coherent set of safeguarding measures that can reasonably be expected to strengthen the viability of the element within the coming four years, and assess whether they reflect the priorities and aspirations of the communities concerned, whether the measures are feasible, and whether the communities and States are adequately committed to their implementation.

(250 to 500 words)

In my report on the nomination presented in 2009, I raised concerns over the balance of funding, noting greater funding allocated for documentation and international conferences than for representative inheritors. The state party has responded positively to this point, detailing subsidies already in place for transmitters. However, I am concerned at the apparent disparity between figures given in the August 2009 resubmission and in the revised version submitted in April 2010. In the August 2009 resubmission, the money designated for transmitters rises to 3.2 million yuan, but in the April revised file, it has fallen back to 2.4 million yuan.

The proposal to establish zones of cultural preservation and safeguarding agencies, with the largest allocated budget seems potentially a positive area of activity, linked to 'eco-safeguarding zones' where development and industrialisation will be restricted. Would tourism, then, become an aspect of these zones, and if so, would the meshrep promoted in these areas tend to

transform into folkloric displays?

As stated in my previous report, I am concerned that adequate monitoring systems are put in place to ensure that monies allocated to practitioners and transmitters reach their intended beneficiaries in full. The state party has not responded to this point. It is also still a concern that the 'NGOs' listed in the nomination file are directly or closely linked to the State structure. Overall, my impression is that meshrep in the nomination tends towards a folkloric style of presentation and understanding (for example, section 2 states 'the maxirap is an organized folkloric event'; in section 3.b. the elements of meshrep reported to be lost are singing, juggling and games). I would suggest that this folklorising tendency does not represent an ideal approach to the safeguarding of intangible heritage.

Criterion U.4 The element has been nominated following the widest possible participation of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned and with their free, prior and informed consent.

Excerpts from the nomination form

a. Participation of communities, groups and individuals

Describe how the community, group and, if applicable, individuals concerned have participated in the nomination process at all stages, as required by Criterion R.4. States Parties are further encouraged to prepare nominations with the participation of a wide variety of other concerned parties, including where appropriate local and regional governments, neighbouring communities, NGOs, research institutes, centres of expertise and other interested parties.

b. Free, prior and informed consent

The free, prior and informed consent of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned may be demonstrated through written or recorded concurrence, or through other means, according to the legal regimens of the State Party and the infinite variety of communities and groups concerned. The Committee will welcome a broad range of demonstrations or attestations of community consent rather than specifying any single standard.

c. Respect for customary practices governing access

Demonstrate that inscription and implementation of the safeguarding measures fully respects customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage, if such practices exist (cf. Article 13). Describe any specific measures that might need to be taken to ensure such respect.

Nomination demonstrates that the element satisfies Criterion U.4:

Yes

No

Examiner's assessment of the participation of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned

The examiner should assess whether the community, group or individuals concerned have participated fully in the nomination process at all stages and whether the nomination reflects their participation.

(150 to 300 words)

The nomination takes pride in the numbers of participants mobilised to take part in this project. In practical terms, the government network of cultural organs which reach right into Xinjiang's villages is the only feasible mechanism for interventions of this nature, and the active participation of the peasantry in this region is still to a large extent dependent on the support and approval of these government organisations. The proposing body is in a strong position to co-ordinate and oversee the proposed safeguarding activities, and has strong relations with the state local-level cultural network, who in turn work closely with local practitioners of meshrep. It

is to be hoped that these practitioners will be given insofar as possible an active role in the planning and implementation of the proposed measures.

Examiner's comments on their free, prior and informed consent

The examiner should assess whether the submitting State has provided satisfactory evidence of the free, prior and informed consent of the community, group or individuals concerned.

(150 to 300 words)

The submission draws together a number of individually named transmitters and scholars who have expressed support for the proposal and who are committed to its implementation, and provides a number of signed letters from transmitters, couched in generic terms, expressing support for the proposal. I would suggest that the format of dual language (Chinese-English) letters signed by the key transmitters is less than ideal, given that these Uyghur peasants are not very likely to read Chinese, and are of course very unlikely to read English. It may have been explained to them what they were signing, but personal statements more demonstrably written or dictated in their native Uyghur tongue would surely have been more appropriate and signaled a more active involvement from these key participants in the safeguarding process.

Examiner's comments on respect for customary practices governing access to the element, if applicable

The examiner should comment on whether the submitting State has adequately addressed the question of any customary practices that might govern access to the element.

(not to exceed 300 words)

It is still a concern that the only mention of the word 'Muslim' in the entire document comes under this section regarding respect for the custom of ritual washing. Will similar respect be offered to other Muslim practices which may take place at meshrep: for example communal prayers and sermons?

Criterion U.5 The element is included in an inventory of the intangible cultural heritage present in the territory(ies) of the submitting State(s) Party(ies) as defined in Articles 11 and 12.

Excerpts from the nomination form

The submitting State should identify the inventory in which the element has been included and the office, agency, organization or body responsible for maintaining that inventory. The description also should demonstrate that the inventory has been drawn up in conformity with Articles 11 and 12, in particular Article 11(b) that stipulates that intangible cultural heritage shall be identified and defined 'with the participation of communities, groups, and relevant non-governmental organizations' and Article 12 requiring that inventories be regularly updated.

The nominated element's inclusion in an inventory should not in any way imply or require that the inventory(ies) should have been completed prior to nomination. Rather, a submitting State Party may be in the process of completing or updating one or more inventories, but has already duly included the nominated element on an inventory-in-progress.

Nomination demonstrates that the element satisfies Criterion U.5:

Yes

No

Examiner’s comments on the nomination’s conformity with Criterion U.5

The examiner should comment on whether the submitting State has adequately demonstrated that the element is included within an inventory, and has shown that the inventory was drawn up in conformity with the Convention, especially Article 11(b) requiring the participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations.

(100 to 200 words)

The submission details three local traditions of meshrep which have been included in China’s formidable national intangible cultural heritage lists.

The state party responded to my earlier comments concerning the use of Chinese pinyin transliterations by changing ‘maxirap’ to ‘meshrep’ in the August resubmission, but the April revised submission reverts to ‘maxirap’. No other terms have been amended in either document.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATION

The examination report shall include ‘a recommendation to the Committee to inscribe, or not to inscribe, the nominated element’.

Recommend to inscribe:

Recommend not to inscribe:

Examiner’s comments on the overall recommendation

To be inscribed on the Urgent Safeguarding List, an element must satisfy all of the criteria. If the examiner concludes that any criterion is not satisfied, the overall recommendation cannot be to inscribe the element. The examiner may wish to offer further explanation of any such negative conclusions, or may wish to suggest to the Committee certain conditions it might consider attaching to a favourable decision to inscribe the element.

(150 to 300 words)

Although my previous report was in principle supportive of this initiative in spite of some serious concerns, my reservations about the project have unfortunately been increased by the resubmission file. The state party has not responded adequately to the major concerns raised in the previous report, and doubts must be raised as to the viability of any grassroots preservation efforts aimed at meshrep. It seems likely that this initiative will contribute to the promotion and preservation of folklorised representations of meshrep traditions, while grassroots practice remains subject to the threats detailed above. On the more technical side, it is of concern that the two files submitted over the past year (August 2009 and April 2010) have several discrepancies concerning terminology and finances, suggesting that earlier revisions were not taken into account in the later version.