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To cite this article: Juheon Lee (2020) Promoting majority culture and excluding external ethnic influences: China's strategy for the UNESCO 'intangible' cultural heritage list, *Social Identities*, 26:1, 61-76, DOI: [10.1080/13504630.2019.1677223](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2019.1677223)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2019.1677223>



Published online: 09 Oct 2019.



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Promoting majority culture and excluding external ethnic influences: China's strategy for the UNESCO 'intangible' cultural heritage list

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ABSTRACT

China's enthusiasm for having many World Heritage-listed sites is well-known as a national strategy of cultural soft power, economic development, and incorporating minority groups into the Han-dominated Chinese state. Relatively understudied are China's efforts related to UNESCO's lists of 'intangible' cultural heritage, which inscribe people's living culture – such as dances, costumes, and songs – as world heritage. This study focuses on how some ethnic groups' intangible culture has been objectified for the World Heritage Lists by the Chinese state. This study argues that by enlisting ethnic minorities' culture under the name of Chinese state, the state can reinforce state borders that often run across ethnic and cultural boundaries, reducing external influences on minorities from their trans-border ethnic or cultural kin. Concomitantly, the majority's cultural prominence is further entrenched in this process by the emphasis placed on minorities' folklore in contrast to the Han's culture of civilization.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 May 2018

Accepted 2 June 2019

KEYWORDS

UNESCO; intangible cultural heritage; ethnic minority; cultural objectification; China

Introduction

Scholars of nationalism have pointed out the artificial nature of national identities and the decisive roles played by state leaders in the process of national identity formation. While such studies have often investigated the interests of a dominant majority group in objectifying its own cultural traits, few have focused specifically on the puzzling phenomenon of a majority group expending considerable effort to objectify the cultures of ethnic minority groups.

An interesting case in point is China's engagement with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Specifically, the Han-dominated Chinese state has employed UNESCO's lists of intangible cultural heritage to objectify various cultural elements located within its state boundaries. Influenced by Stalin's nationality policy, early Chinese Communist leaders were often interested in identifying and promoting ethnic minority groups' traditional cultures, with the Han majority situated as the elder brother to those minorities (Martin, 2001; Slezkine, 1994). However, China's recent efforts to engage with UNESCO's cultural heritage framework seem different from its earlier policies in a few ways: China is selectively nominating certain ethnic groups'

cultures and seeking international accreditation for human cultural heritage, thus bringing pride and economic benefits to specific minority groups. In doing so, however, the state is often risking contentious interactions with these minorities' cross-border kin.

Different from the traditional 'physical' or 'tangible' World Heritage sites, 'intangible' culture, by definition, is a living culture that keeps changing over time. However, states tend to take a snapshot of a living culture and promote that picture as representative of the culture more broadly. In the case of China, many studies have reported the government's enthusiasm for using the UNESCO World Heritage sites as a key aspect of the state's cultural policy aimed at promoting cultural soft power on the global stage, achieving local economic development through tourism, and building a domestic cultural management system that incorporates minority ethnic regions more firmly into the multicultural Chinese state (Blumenfield & Silverman, 2013; Fiskesjö, 2010; Kurlantzick, 2008). However, this study emphasizes China's engagement with intangible cultural heritage, such as dances, costumes, and songs, that are collected, edited, and published by state organizations (Blumenfield & Silverman, 2013). China's listing of its minority cultures has been especially controversial over the past decade – China and a few neighboring states, such as South Korea, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan, have been battling to register their intangible cultural elements on UNESCO's World Heritage lists under their own state names, each claiming ownership of the disputed cultures. States have been using the international organization as an arena for their nationalist contestations and cultural objectification. Why is the Chinese state so interested in objectifying and glorifying ethnic minorities' intangible cultural elements? To make sense of this phenomenon, this study makes two arguments: First, that by doing so, China can not only incorporate ethnic minorities into the Chinese nation-building process but also preempt any possible external influences on its minorities. Here, 'external' refers to any actor originating from outside of the state's borders. Second, the ethnic majority's special status is maintained through this process by highlighting minority groups' folklore, as compared to the ethnic Han's culture of civilization.

This study comprises three parts. The first discusses the theoretical approach to this nationalist behavior by analyzing the literature on nationalism and cultural objectification. The second part provides a brief history of UNESCO's approach to intangible cultural heritage and nationalist competitions between China and some Chinese minority groups' cross-border ethnic kin over their imagined national culture. The final part focuses on the strategic considerations of the Chinese state in pursuing UNESCO World Heritage status for Chinese minority groups.

Social construction, elite strategies, and cultural objectification

Nations are socially constructed in a way that connects a group of people through a myth about their common ancestry (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983; Thapar, 2000). National leaders play the most important role in the building of national and cultural identities. Hobsbawm (1983) points out that national traditions, although purported to have arisen long ago and in legitimate ways, have, in truth, often been recently fabricated by a relatively small group of leaders. Chatterjee (1993) has shown that Bengali intellectuals spearheaded a national identity campaign to increase or maintain their dominant position within their ethnic group vis-à-vis the British. In the same vein, Bulag (1998) has shown

that Hahl-centric nationalism in Mongolia, which defines only those Mongols living in Mongolia as being *true* Mongols, was cultivated by ex-communist leaders to maintain their positions of power. In Puerto Rico, ethnic and national intellectuals have purposefully forged a new identity to distinguish *us* from *them* – the constructed second-person plural ‘non-Puerto Rican’; however, the objectification of Puerto Rican identity has also tainted Puerto Ricans residing on the United States’ (US) mainland as less-than-authentic US nationals (Barreto, 2001a, 2002). Nationalist elites create such identities by selectively and strategically *praising* or *forgetting* elements of their social, cultural, and historic options (Behdad, 2005; Geary, 2003; Waters, 1990).

Some scholars see these national leaders’ patterns of behavior as strategic moves by rational actors. As Hechter (1986) has argued, the rational choice approach is about individual preferences but can be applied to a group of national leaders who share a common interest in their nationalist movement. Barreto (2001b) has furthered this perspective by building a theoretical approach to understanding the behaviors of an ethnic group’s leaders: ethnic or national leaders (1) define membership in ways that exclude outsiders, (2) objectify traits that are not found among outsiders, (3) choose traits that include all insiders, (4) insist that insiders are superior to outsiders, and, all the while, (5) maintain their elite privileges over those of their followers (Barreto, 2001b, pp. 30–32). Focusing on the Croatian case, Dragojević (2005) has added that ethnic leaders are incentivized to further ensure their uncontested influence over their constituents by objectifying new national cultural traits, in addition to those they had previously objectified during an earlier stage of identity construction.

A tool that national elites commonly use to reinforce their national identity is cultural objectification. Cultural traits, such as language, religion, and folklore, are fluid in nature, however, nationalists tend to see them ‘as a thing that belongs to and is bounded in space and time’ and seek to manipulate them for their own interests (Handler, 1988, p. 14). Cultural elements often are ‘born and die’ but their sustainability is highly dependent on ‘the political fortunes’ of their owners. For example, in Europe, peripheral languages were often deemed inferior by the ideology of the dominant group, as seen in the cases of French Jacobinism, Hebrew Zionism, and Russian socialism-communism (Safran, 1922, p. 397). Traditional folklore is displayed and demonstrated to the public through festivals, fairs, and museums in ways that promote ethnic unity and create an ‘authentic’ culture that distinguishes the genuine from the spurious (Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Luke, 2002; Silverman, 1983). Traditions are often combined with a nationalist ideology and become a part of an ‘authentic national culture’ when they serve the interests of national leaders (Handler, 1988, pp. 14–16). For example, national leaders in Argentina and Cuba have not been interested in their countries’ ‘street dances’ – the Tango and Rumba – for a very long time but started to claim them as national dances ‘only after the dances became popular in other parts of the world’ (Lindholm, 2008, pp. 88–97).

This body of literature, which this study attempts to build on, assumes that leaders always objectify their own ethnic or national culture in order to appeal to their own constituents and to exclude outsiders. Minority groups within state borders are often considered outsiders, as has been shown in the case of Puerto Ricans in the United States and Serbs in Croatia (Barreto, 2001a; Dragojević, 2005). This has been the case even for democratic federations with some established consociational practices: the relationship between the *Staatsvolk*, the dominant nationality striving to build a centralized state,

and *minority nationalities* fighting for substantial political autonomy is an ‘inevitable tug-of-war’ that often results in the majority’s ‘hubris’ and the minority’s psychological ‘melancholy’, as seen in the cases of Spain, Great Britain, Canada, and Belgium (O’Leary, 2001; Resnick, 2008). As Kennedy (2004) has pointed out, the early consociational or bi-national vision of the *nationalistes*, the French-Canadian intellectuals, was simply rejected by British Canadians, who were reluctant to give up their dominant position in Canada.

How can we then make sense of a state such as China that objectifies the culture of its minority groups, rather than focusing on the dominant group’s traits? The Soviet Union, under Lenin and Stalin, systematically identified the distinctive characteristics of non-Russian populations by promoting minorities’ folklore, costumes, and classic literary works (Martin, 2001). This nationality policy guaranteed minority groups’ autonomy in the federalist system; however, it resulted in a hierarchy consisting of Great Russians and non-Great Russians, giving Great Russians a special position over all other separated minorities. This system was described as a ‘communal apartment’, where Russians were living at the center, or as an ‘affirmative action empire’, in which minority groups were ruled by ethnic Russians (Martin, 2001; Slezkine, 1994). Chinese leaders’ early ethnic policies in the 1940s and 1950s were directly influenced by and emulated Stalin’s nationality policy (Han, 2013).

However, China’s recent cultural objectification efforts via UNESCO seem quite different from this earlier policy in several ways. First, they are highly selective, unlike the earlier statewide promotion of all minority nationalities. Second, for Chinese ethnic minorities, who have never enjoyed as much autonomy as have minorities in the Soviet Union (Han, 2013), registering their cultural elements on UNESCO’s lists and receiving international accreditation bring a great deal of pride and economic benefits to their group – benefits more valuable than simply being recognized or promoted by the state. Finally, through this process Chinese state has promoted UNESCO recognition at the risk of creating a contentious situation with minorities’ cross-border kin; a new approach by the majority in dealing with its minorities’ cultures.

‘Intangible’ cultural heritage and nationalist competitions

As Danforth has said, for many nationalists, international recognition is a ‘contest’ and ‘no international organization [is] too small or insignificant’ to win (1995, p. 152). UNESCO’s heritage projects, in contrast to its original intentions, discussed below, have provided a fascinating arena for such nationalist contests. Nationalist competitions between China and some of its neighboring states have been fiercer than such contests in other regions, especially in the newly developed area of ‘intangible cultural heritage’.

Over the last several decades, UNESCO’s concept of heritage has been extended from tangible objects towards intangible cultural practices and expressions. UNESCO’s early approach to heritage was based on the ‘western museological principles’ of authenticity regarding paintings, sculpture, and architecture (Bortolotto, 2007, p. 22). Based on this approach, UNESCO has been selecting historical sites and publishing a World Heritage List every year since 1978, as outlined in that organization’s landmark 1972 convention. UNESCO’s ‘non-physical heritage’ section was created in 1982. Subsequently, it was renamed the intangible heritage section under Japan’s leadership (Bortolotto, 2007). According to the UNESCO website, this section targets ‘oral traditions, performing arts,

social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe of the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts' (UNESCO Website). Since then, experts have discussed how to establish legal standards for testing the authenticity or integrity of invisible or non-material cultural heritage, as reflected in reports such as *Nara Document on Authenticity* in 1994, *Our Creative Diversity* in 1996, and *Authenticity and Integrity in an African Context* in 2000 (Blake, 2006). These changes led to the establishment of new programs, such as Living Human Treasures in 1993 and the Proclamation of the Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage from 2001 to 2005. UNESCO initially selected and registered member states' intangible cultural heritages through the Masterpieces program in 2001; however, at that time such registrations were not yet legally based on the provisions of a strong international convention (Aikawa, 2001).

These efforts culminated in the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, which provides legal foundations for selecting and preserving intangible cultural heritage. In 2008, based on the 2003 Convention, UNESCO officially accepted and inscribed all 90 items from the previous Masterpiece program into its lists of intangible cultural heritage. Since creation of the lists in 2008, UNESCO has officially abolished the traditional concept of 'authenticity' and has defined intangible cultural heritage as evolutionary processes of communities, groups, and individuals, rather than as authentic objects that belong to a culture or a state (Arizpe, 2007). Many experts and anthropologists regard this as UNESCO's 'intellectual turn' regarding the concept of culture (Arizpe, 2007, p. 33).

In stark contrast to UNESCO's intentions, however, this new cultural category created a new arena for nationalist contests to acquire international recognition of objectified national cultures. Disgruntled with the geographic disproportion of World Heritage Sites and the Eurocentric approach to human history, Japan pioneered this new category and led the contest, together with East Asian states such as China and South Korea: as of 2015, China had the most registered items (38), followed by Japan (22) and Korea (18). These three states take pride in having more items registered than Western states, such as Spain, which has 15 items registered, and France, with 14. Many historians and anthropologists have been employed by state authorities to identify viable intangible cultural elements and to prepare candidacy files for their nomination and evaluation (Howard, 2012, pp. 1–21). Since the nomination process is greater than a single individual, the choice of a state organization to support the nomination is critical throughout the entire process.

As a multiethnic state, China has registered multiple minority groups' intangible cultural heritages. In fact, a majority group's registration of minority groups' cultures can be observed in other member states, such as France's inscription of Guadeloupean *Gwo Ka* and Indonesia's inscription of Balinese dance. However, China's inscription of minority cultures has often introduced cross-border conflict with minorities' ethnic kin groups and their associated national governments, including South Korea, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan (see Table 1).

Ethnic Koreans' farmers' dance

The contention between China and South Korea started in 2005 when UNESCO selected and published the third list of Masterpieces. Among the 28 Masterpieces was South

Table 1. Lists of intangible cultural heritage that belong to Minority ethnic groups.

Year	Name of element	Ethnic group	External state ties	External non-state ties	No external ties (location)
2008	Urtiin Duu, traditional folk long song	Mongol	Mongolia		
2008	Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang	Uyghur		Uyghurs	
2009	Qiang New Year festival	Qiang ^a		Tibetans	
2009	Traditional Li textile techniques: spinning, dyeing, weaving and embroidering	Li ^a			Hainan Area
2009	Farmers' dance of China's Korean ethnic group	Korean	Korea		
2009	Gesar epic tradition	Tibetan/ Mongolian/Tu		Central/ South Asia	
2009	Grand song of the Dong ethnic group	Dong			Guizhou Area
2009	Manas	Kirgiz	Kyrgyzstan		
2009	Mongolian art of singing, Khoomei	Mongol	Mongolia		
2009	Regong arts	Tibetan/Tu		Tibetans	
2009	Tibetan opera	Tibetan		Tibetans	
2010	Meshrep	Uyghur ^a		Uyghurs	
2011	Hezhen Yimakan storytelling	Hezhen ^a		Nanais in Russia	

^aList of cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding.

^bList of best safeguarding practices.

Korea's *Dano* Festival, celebrated in the *Gangneung* area under the name *Gangneung Danoje Festival* and inscribed as belonging to the Republic of Korea, triggering a strong response from China. China claimed that South Koreans appropriated the traditional Chinese *Duanwu* Festival, from which Korean *Dano* originated and that, therefore, this festival should be appreciated as a shared multinational culture, if not solely attributed to Chinese culture, due to its origin. An editorial proclaimed 'Korea's Successful Nomination of the Festival Has Hurt Our National Pride' (N.A., 2005). However, Korea argued that Korean *Dano* had maintained enough unique cultural traits to be recognized by UNESCO experts.

In response, China separately registered its *Duanwu* Festival under the name *Dragon Boat Festival* at the next session, in 2009. In addition, China nominated another item – *Nongyewu* (farmers' music and dance) – under the name *Farmers' Dance of China's Korean Ethnic Group*. South Koreans saw this as retaliation. In Koreans' eyes, *Nongyewu* was a minor variation of Korean farmers' music, called *Nongak*, and China's nomination was an attempt to appropriate ownership via its ethnic Korean minority group. Korean media argued that the Korean minority in China originated from the Korean peninsula and that its culture was only a ramification of Korean culture and that, therefore, UNESCO should not have recognized the *Nongyewu* over the authentic version danced by real Korean farmers (Ha, 2009; Lee, 2009). However, China highlighted the unique evolution of ethnic Korean culture that had taken place since the population migrated to China at the end of the nineteenth century. The South Korean government then separately nominated the Korean farmers' dance (*Nongak, Community Band Music, Dance and Rituals*) as solely belonging to Korea in 2014. Since the dance was not even fully listed on South Korea's domestic inventory of intangible cultural property, application preparation for the UNESCO nomination took many years.

This course of contentious interactions led both states to recognize that either side could nominate any cross-border cultural element in the future. Since the 2003 Convention encourages member states to produce inventory lists of intangible culture for future nominations (Article 11 and Article 12), states need to concern themselves with

other states' domestic inventory lists. For instance, Korea is allegedly considering the nomination of *Ondol* (traditional heating architecture), acupuncture, traditional medicine, *Pungsu* (*Feng Shui*), and noodles, which many Chinese see as parts of Chinese culture, while China would like to nominate many cultural elements that Korean people believe to be the soul of Korean culture, such as *Arirang* (traditional folk song), *Hanbok* (traditional costume), and Taekwondo (Heo, 2015; Lim, 2015; Shi, 2015). As long as domestic inventory lists continue to expand, it is possible that such conflicts between the two states will continue.

Ethnic Mongolian throat singing

Mongolian throat singing, *Khöömei*, has long been claimed as the cultural heritage of people in Mongolia and the Russian Republic of Tuva, both by state institutions and regional practitioners. Therefore, when it was registered by the Chinese government as the *Mongolian Art of Singing, Khoomei* on the 2009 list, it agitated both people in Mongolia (also known as Outer Mongolia) and Mongolian communities outside China who think that China's unilateral registration demonstrates the state's desire to receive all credit for Mongolian culture. Even though China, in 2008, chose to apply together with Mongolia to demonstrate their common cultural heritage in the case of a Mongolian long song, *Urtiin Duu, Traditional Folk Long Song*, China chose to apply unilaterally for recognition of throat singing.

According to Higgins (2011), what most bothered Mongolian nationalists was the feeling of betrayal. Inner Mongolians in China have been learning these singing techniques from Outer Mongolian singers only since the early 1990s (N.A., 2015a). Odsuren Baatar says that he had been invited to China as a Mongolian national treasure to teach his singing techniques to students, who were all beginners at that time, and that he then saw one of his students featured in China's bid for UNESCO intangible cultural heritage recognition (Higgins, 2011). This led to a national commotion in Mongolia; a Mongolian government minister sent a letter to the Director of UNESCO's World Heritage Center expressing his 'deep concerns' over the listing. However, when Mongolians saw that there was little chance to 'correct this mistake' by UNESCO, they decided to apply for the same status (Higgins, 2011). With the support of some experts at UNESCO, who were sympathetic to its case, Mongolia successfully registered throat singing as an aspect of Mongolia's authentic national culture under the name *Mongolian Traditional Art of Khöömei* (Byambasuren, 2010).

Inner Mongolia, supported by the Chinese government, has continued trying to develop this singing culture by holding international competitions and various promotional activities. Mongolian throat singing has therefore already come to be considered the 'soul of nationality' by people in Inner Mongolia, causing resentment from those in Outer Mongolia (N.A., 2015b). Chinese leaders argue that what matters is who can best protect the art, rather than who developed it, and claim that '[China is] strong and capable enough to do that' (Higgins, 2011). Whether cultural heritage registration actually brings economic benefits or not, it can hurt national pride when other states use intangible cultural heritage to promote tourism and seek bragging rights. For Chinese leaders, registration can also help reinforce their cultural claims to a vast territory populated by ethnic Mongolians, most of whom are living in the Chinese region of Inner Mongolia.

Ethnic Kyrgyz Manas

The epic *Manas* is the most treasured expression of contemporary Kyrgyz people's national heritage. Kyrgyz people often brag that the *Manas* has the longest lines in the world, even longer than lines in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* taken together (Van der Heide, 2008; Köçüm-kulkizi, n.d.). Stories of the hero *Manas* have been at the center of Kyrgyz culture, such that 'streets in many towns in the country are named after [him], as are public facilities – including the airport where the US airbase is hosted' (Lillis, 2013). Thus, China's inscription of the epic *Manas* on the intangible cultural heritage list in 2010 was deeply resented by people in Kyrgyzstan and seen as an attempt by the Chinese to claim ownership over their national culture, using the Kyrgyz ethnic group in China as a proxy. Therefore, people in Kyrgyzstan chose to protest UNESCO's decision. A study has shown that this event in fact helped to bring Kyrgyzstan's *Manaschis* – people who recite the *Manas* – together in an attempt to reverse UNESCO's decision. However, despite their efforts to counter the recognition, the epic *Manas* was successfully listed as the heritage of an 'enemy state' (Van der Heide, 2008). Just like Koreans and Mongolians, this episode prompted the people of Kyrgyzstan to see the need to have their national culture recognized by the outside world, and they started preparing a separate nomination for UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. Finally, in 2013, the *Manas* was registered as the cultural heritage of Kyrgyzstan under the name *Kyrgyz Epic Trilogy: Manas, Semetey, Seytek*.

As demonstrated by these cases, the inscription of a particular cultural practice on UNESCO's intangible heritage lists has been perceived as a trademark or intellectual property right that rules out other countries' claims, which is not true. The 2003 Convention stipulates that state parties have a right to identify and safeguard intangible cultural heritage present in their territory; however, that does not certify them as the owners of the inscribed cultural traits (Article 11). Nevertheless, states tend to claim sole ownership by describing the culture in their territory as unique and authentic, and thus different from others.

Imagined originality and the choice of culture

Drawing up an inventory list of domestic cultural features and picking one for UNESCO's lists has been an iterative process for state organizations and leaders. The Korean *Dano* festival was officially restored in South Korea around 1967, when it was first included on the domestic list of intangible cultural heritage (Lee, 2010). The Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) and the Korean War (1950–1953) devastated the country's grassroots cultural preservation and cultural restoration was based on old documents and folk memories of past festivals (Howard, 2012). The origin and authenticity of throat singing are also controversial. According to Levin and Süzükei (2006), Mongolian style throat singing is of quite recent vintage, having separated from Tuvan style throat singing only after the creation of the Tuvan People's Republic in 1921. Moreover, the hero *Manas* was not portrayed as an ethnic Kyrgyz in an earlier 1920s version of the tale, however, the historical character became an ethnic Kyrgyz when the epic became the national symbol of Kyrgyzstan (Van der Heide, 2008). China has also experienced a decades-long severance from its past, including the loss of community-based dancers and artists during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and a campaign that eradicated the 'four olds' (customs, culture, habits, and ideas) by destroying their cultural legacies (Blumenfeld & Silverman, 2013). Even after the

Cultural Revolution, China promoted long-standing Soviet-influenced rhetoric that emphasized the ‘improvement’ (*gailiang*) and ‘development’ (*fazhan*) of traditional arts through modernization projects; only after the 1990s did Chinese scholars and musicians become interested in preserving the old arts (Rees, 2012, pp. 24–25). Therefore, the traditions that many Chinese deem old and believe to have been directly transmitted from ancient China have, in fact, only recently been restored as close to the originals as possible.

China’s efforts to seek UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage status for the purposes of cultural restoration are even more recent. The first published document related to these efforts is the Notice of the State Council on Strengthening Protection of Cultural Heritages (*Guowuyuan Guanyu Jiaqiang Wenhua Yichan Baohu de Tongzhi*), sent to local governments in December 2005. Based on the 2005 Notice, China established four administrative-level intangible cultural heritage inventories: national, provincial, prefecture, and county (Article 4, Clause 4). Each level was charged with selecting and publishing lists of intangible cultural heritage under their jurisdiction. At the national level, China issued its First List of National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006, enumerating 518 national cultural elements; the Second List was published in 2006, with 510 elements; the Third List was published in 2011, with 191 elements; and the Fourth List was published in 2014, with 298 elements. Finally, the Law Concerning the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan fa*) came into force in June 2011. That statute stipulates the conditions for appointing ‘transmitters’ (*chuanchengren*) of intangible cultural heritage (Article 29). Based on this law, and starting in Yunnan province, local governments issued regulations to protect and preserve folk culture.

In China, the traditional folk cultures are documented through state-organized folklore specialists who edit, translate, publish, and exhibit ‘authentic’ performances, which are sometimes inconsistent with local residents’ daily performances (Silverman & Blumenfield, 2013). China’s cultural restoration and preservation efforts come down to the term ‘original ecology’ (*yuanshengtai*), which is aimed at taking inventories for UNESCO lists and promoting the idea that folksongs should be sung by a culture-bearer or a transmitter in a local dialect, in an un-modernized style, and, as far as possible, in a traditional context (Gorfinkel, 2012, pp. 99–112; Rees, 2009, 2012, p. 34). In reality, however, many villagers in China were involved in the ‘village tradition’, bounded by the original ecology principle, and the ‘staged performances’ were used as a means of attracting tourism (Ingram, 2012, pp. 55–75). Original folklore is therefore only imagined and becomes a fixed snapshot that is filed in inventories of national culture.

While it is natural that states should expand their efforts to imagine and promote their own national cultural elements, China’s efforts to objectify its minority groups’ cultures through UNESCO registrations can be understood in two ways: the Chinese state can use cultural registrations to reinforce its borders by claiming cultural ownership and excluding external influences while, at the same time, binding minority cultures by folklore in order to distinguish them from the civilized majority culture.

Excluding possible external influences

The objectification of minority cultures enables the Chinese state to consolidate its borders by differentiating them from their ethnic kin’s cultures in neighboring states. For example,

during the registration process, China emphasized ethnic Koreans' unique experiences *after* migration to China, such as their participation in the Communist Revolution and Chinese state-building. China also highlighted ethnic Koreans' contributions in northeast China and their choice to become part of the Chinese nation. In the case of ethnic Mongols, Inner Mongolia has recently seen a wave of unrest due to resentment against the Han Chinese, who have become the majority group in this area (FlorCruz, 2011). By claiming and controlling Mongolian culture, Chinese majority leaders have sought to keep such tensions in check. While it can be readily understood that the Chinese state might use this strategy among ethnic groups that are often involved in local unrest, such as Uighurs, Tibetans, and Kyrgyz, why did China choose to objectify the culture of ethnic Koreans, who are often referred to as a 'model minority'? A study has shown that since China opened formal diplomatic relations with South Korea in the 1990s, South Korea has been a strong 'pulling force for the ethnic group' (Han, 2013). Hundreds of thousands of Chinese ethnic Koreans are working or living in South Korea and tens of thousands of Chinese ethnic Korean women have married South Korean men since the early 1990s. Although Chinese ethnic Koreans have not been politicized or contested as much as other ethnic groups, as they are a relatively recent immigrant group, most can still trace their ancestry back to the Korean peninsula and many still have relatives living in either North or South Korea (Han, 2013, p. 74). The Chinese state therefore seeks to objectify ethnic Koreans' culture despite the burden of any conflict with South Korea that such actions may cause.

This logic has also been applied to other ethnic minority groups. Out of 13 cultural heritage elements that solely belong to ethnic minority groups, 11 belong to minority groups that have ethnic kin outside the state border: Uighurs, Mongols, Tibetans, Kyrgyz, and Koreans. Table 1 illustrates how China has been spending a great deal of effort on objectifying these minority groups' cultures to ward off possible external influences from ethnic kin outside of China. Admittedly, there are exceptions to this logic, such as the Dong ethnic group's grand song and the Li ethnic group's textile techniques, which require further study. However, these tactics are consistent overall with previous studies that showed that the Chinese state promotes minority cultural heritage in ways that do not threaten the unity of the nation (Holdstock, 2012; McCarthy, 2009).

Folklorizing minority culture

While the Chinese state can reduce possible external influences, the ethnic majority's special status is maintained by highlighting minority groups' folklore, in opposition to the ethnic Han's culture of civilization. In other words, the way the state objectifies culture through UNESCO recognition is different for each group: through UNESCO's lists, Chinese state symbolically situate Han culture at the epicenter of civilization while emphasizing ethnic minority groups' folklore. For example, most ethnic Koreans in China are not farmers and they are one of the more well-educated minority groups, with a relatively high average income (Han, 2013). However, among the many cultural elements of ethnic Koreans, the farmers' dance was chosen as representative of Chinese national culture.

Folklorization applies to other ethnic minority groups. Tables 1 and 2 show China's intangible cultural heritage that has been inscribed on UNESCO's lists as of 2014. Among the 38 cultural elements that belong to China, 13 elements come from ethnic

Table 2. Lists of intangible cultural heritage that belong to Han Ethnic Group.

Year	Name of element
2008	Guqin and its music
2008	Kun Qu opera
2009	Traditional design and practices for building Chinese wooden arch bridges ^a
2009	Art of Chinese seal engraving
2009	China engraved block printing technique
2009	Chinese calligraphy
2009	Chinese paper-cut
2009	Chinese traditional architectural craftsmanship for timber-framed structures
2009	Craftsmanship of Nanjing Yunjin brocade
2009	Dragon Boat festival
2009	Hua'er
2009	Mazu belief and customs
2009	Nanyin
2009	Sericulture and silk craftsmanship of China
2009	Traditional firing technology of Longquan celadon
2009	Traditional handicrafts of making Xuan paper
2009	Xi'an wind and percussion ensemble
2009	Yueju opera
2010	Watertight-bulkhead technology of Chinese junks ^a
2010	Wooden movable-type printing of China ^a
2010	Acupuncture and moxibustion of traditional Chinese medicine
2010	Peking opera
2011	Chinese shadow puppetry
2012	Strategy for training coming generations of Fujian puppetry practitioners ^b
2013	Chinese Zhusuan, knowledge and practices of mathematical calculation through the abacus

^aList of cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding.

^bList of best safeguarding practices.

minority cultures, 24 elements come from ethnic Han culture, and one element belongs to both. If we look at what Chinese government has chosen to represent Han culture and ethnic minority group cultures, it is noticeable that the Han cultural elements are related to Chinese civilization while ethnic minority group cultural items are mostly folklore: Han elements are techniques or knowledge related to architecture, calculation, calligraphy, craftsmanship, and opera music; elements of ethnic minority group cultures are mostly folk songs, folk dances, folk festivals, and storytelling. If we look at the official descriptions or photos of each element, the folklorization of a minority group's culture, in juxtaposition to the image of Han civilization, becomes more obvious: Minority groups are pictured in their traditional costumes in pre-modern housing, even when the costume and houses are not the cultural elements listed. Han Chinese, however, tend to be pictured wearing modern clothing in a modern location, even when they are demonstrating traditional craftsmanship.

For ethnic minorities, knowing that their cultures are appreciated by the state and the larger world via recognition of their national and human cultural heritage might be significant; however, folklorizing minority culture is 'reifying the notion of a dominant culture (the one whose knowledge informs and is developed by official administrative and educational institutions) that folklore is not as complex or meaningful as the products of high, elite, or official cultural processes' (Seitel, 2002, p. 6). This is how the majority leaders of a state build and maintain the superiority of their ethnic group over minorities. Harrell (1995) has pointed out that China's ethnic minority policy has been a domestic 'civilizing project', with the state seeing its ethnic minorities as 'in need of civilization' and 'education' (p. 13). McCarthy (2009) has also emphasized that the Chinese state promotes

minority culture not only to achieve the unity of the multi-ethnic Chinese nation but also as a modernization project. According to Liu's study on ethnic Wa (2013) at the Yunnan-Myanmar border area, the idea of cultural heritage was not constructed by minority residents but controlled by government officials, who characterize the residents as uncivilized and lacking in scientific knowledge in order to protect and manage their own cultural heritage resources.

Critics would say that this is not a completely new phenomenon. Focusing on physical World Heritage Sites, Silverman and Blumenfield (2013) have argued that China's enthusiasm for having many heritage sites is part of a national strategy for cultural soft power, economic development, and incorporating minority groups into the Han-dominated Chinese state. However, promotion of intangible cultural objectification is not exactly the same as enthusiasm for having many physical World Heritage Sites. The physical heritage of minorities is often destroyed when state unity is threatened by an ethnic group, as exemplified by the demolition of the ancient city of Kashgar, mostly occupied by Uighur residents (Holdstock, 2012; McCarthy, 2009; Wines, 2009). For that reason, the Chinese government has not actively sought World Heritage Site inscription anywhere in Qinghai or Xinjiang, despite the fact that these provinces encompass 24% of China's total area (Silverman & Blumenfield, 2013). However, China's handling of 'intangible' cultural heritage is a civilizing project, with the Chinese state seeing its ethnic minorities as in need of civilization and education. Moreover, intangible cultural heritage is different, in that dances, songs, and costumes are more fluid than physical sites. They are also a less risky tool that offers the state more space for cultural objectification and the state therefore utilizes, or promotes, minority cultural heritage even when the groups involved threaten state unity.

Conclusion

This study started by questioning the puzzling phenomenon of a majority, elite group, that dominates a state, choosing to objectify or glorify a minority ethnic group's culture. As a multiethnic state, China has been objectifying not only its Han majority culture but also its 55 ethnic minority groups' cultures. This study focused on China's objectification of these minority cultures through UNESCO's intangible culture lists by investigating cases in which China's promotion of minority culture has led to conflicts with cross-border ethnic kin states, such as Korea, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan.

This study has shown how the majority-dominated state objectifies its target cultures through nomination and inscription of intangible cultural heritage on UNESCO's lists. Although intangible cultural heritage is *living culture* that keeps changing over time, member states tend to take a snapshot view of their minority cultures based on their *recent* imagination and then promote this view of their national culture. China and its neighboring states have been battling to include their shared cultural elements on the UNESCO heritage lists under their own names for the last decade. These cases demonstrate how national leaders have utilized an international organization as an arena for nationalist contests of cultural objectification.

This study has also demonstrated that China's state-led objectification of ethnic minority groups' cultures is not contrary to nationalism theories asserting that majority groups aspire to suppress other ethnic groups' identities while promoting their own

national identities. Objectification is done in a way that maintains the Han majority's cultural superiority over minorities by highlighting minority groups' folklore in opposition to the ethnic Han's culture of civilization. In other words, the way the Chinese state uses the UNESCO lists to objectify majority and minority cultures is different. This notion has been supported by analyzing 38 intangible cultural elements registered by China. Moreover, unique from the existing literature, this study has shown that the Han majority is seeking to prevent any possible external influences on its ethnic minorities, especially where state unity has been questioned. Therefore, the state attempts to objectify minority cultures in ways that differentiate them from the cultures of their external ethnic or cultural kin.

The contributions of this study may go well beyond the literature on cultural and national identity. Studies on Chinese minority cultures have long pointed out that China's majority-led cultural objectification of minority culture has been emulating Western methods of cultural objectification since the colonial period (Schein, 1997). Since the West has also objectified the culture of 'less civilized' or 'barbaric' others in similar ways, China's equivalent practice toward its minorities has been called 'internal orientalism' (Gladney, 1996, pp. 113–114; Schein, 1997, p. 92). More broadly, the findings of this study are potentially connected to discussions of domination, power, and privilege based on gender, race, or class, or their intersections (Collins, 1998; Schein, 1997, 2000). Although the present study has limited its boundaries to the UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage lists, and therefore did not discuss such broader issues in detail, further studies could look deeper into the dynamics among the various groups (e.g. gender, social class, or region) surrounding China's internal cultural heritage projects.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to Dr. Amílcar Antonio Barreto for his support and encouragement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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