Keynote Speech

The Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Japan and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

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In this presentation I intend to give a summary of the system for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in Japan and to briefly outline its relation with the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,” which went into force in April 2006.

First of all, let me confirm what is meant by intangible cultural heritage and the different types of such heritage acknowledged in Japan. There are three categories of intangible cultural properties or matters relating to intangible cultural properties in Japan.

The first category consists of intangible cultural properties, and as specific administrative methods, the government designates those intangible skills that should be protected by the government as important intangible cultural properties or selects them as intangible skills that require measures such as documentation.

The second category consists of intangible folk cultural properties. Since the chief senior specialist for cultural properties of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the researchers of the Institute will explain each of these categories in detail, I will only give a brief summary here. With regard to these intangible folk cultural properties, also, administrative methods are taken to designate them as important intangible folk cultural properties or select them as intangible folk cultural properties that require measures such as documentation, and various measures are taken toward the protection of these properties.

Although the third category is not in itself acknowledged by the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties as cultural property, it consists of conservation techniques for cultural property, or as techniques or skills that are indispensable for the transmission of cultural properties. A certain framework for protection has been established for these techniques through the selection of conservation techniques, i.e. by selecting certain techniques as important techniques for the conservation of cultural
properties. In this sense, it may be said that these techniques are acknowledged, from the point of view of administration, as one category of intangible cultural heritage in Japan.

Now let us turn our attention to the actual number of these properties. First of all, in terms of important intangible cultural properties held by individuals, the so-called “individual recognition,” the total number is 82, of which 38 are performing arts and 44 are traditional craft techniques. Furthermore, the holders who specifically hold these intangible cultural properties total 111, of which 54 are holders of traditional performing arts and 57 are of traditional craft techniques. These numbers that have been taken from the website of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and may change at any time, for reasons such as the unfortunate death of an individual holder or the addition of newly recognized holders. The greatest characteristics of this system for the protection of intangible cultural properties is that while the system designates techniques and skills as cultural properties, it recognizes individuals or those that exemplify these techniques or skills as holders of these techniques or skills.

In addition to the above, there are also collective recognition and organizational recognition. By this method, groups consisting of a certain number of holders are recognized. In other words, the government, instead of recognizing the one-to-one relationship between an individual and a technique or skill, recognizes a group of people holding a certain technique or skill. In this category the total number of important intangible cultural properties is 25, of which 11 are performing arts and 14 are traditional craft techniques. The number of groups or groups with individuals who hold these techniques or skills total 25, of which 11 are traditional performing arts and 14 are traditional craft techniques.

Earlier I mentioned that in addition to those intangible cultural properties designated as such, there are those that are selected as intangible cultural properties that require measures such as documentation. Currently intangible cultural properties selected as requiring measures such as documentation total 30 for performing arts and 60 for traditional craft techniques. I would also like to note here that roughly 10% of the intangible cultural properties in this group have later been designated as important intangible cultural properties. Thus the list of designated important intangible cultural properties and that of selected intangible cultural properties overlap to a certain extent.

Now let us move on to intangible folk cultural properties. Cultural properties designated as important intangible folk cultural properties consist of three types: manners and customs, folk performing arts, and the newly designated category of folk techniques. There are 146 in folk performing arts, 97 in manners and customs, and 3 in
folk techniques. These numbers do not include the designations that have just recently been made by the government. In the case of folk cultural properties also, as it was the case with intangible cultural properties, there is a system for selecting intangible folk cultural properties that require measures such as documentation. Currently under this category, 346 folk performing arts, 214 manners and customs, and 0 folk techniques have been selected. Of these, roughly 30% have been designated as important intangible folk cultural properties after selection, and there are many such examples especially in the field of folk performing arts.

Finally, with regard to techniques for the conservation of cultural properties, the government has designated a number of techniques as conservation techniques for cultural properties, and the accompanying selection and recognition processes are relatively similar to those of important intangible cultural properties. In other words, the system selects certain techniques and then recognizes the holders or preservation groups of such techniques. In this case also, there is a system for recognizing individuals and a system for recognizing organizations as preservation groups. Currently the number of conservation techniques held by individuals is 46, while the number of individuals holding such techniques is 50. The number of conservation techniques held by preservation groups is 23, while the number of recognized preservation groups is 24.

During this symposium you will be hearing various reports by specialists in each field. However, as there is no presentation specifically dedicated to selected conservation techniques, I will take this opportunity to explain this system in a little more detail. Later in my presentation I will touch on this topic again when I outline the historical background, but it should be noted that this system of selecting conservation techniques did not exist at the time the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was first enacted in 1950. In fact, this concept was incorporated into the Law at a much later date. The designated conservation technique is provided for in Article 83-7 of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties as follows: “Those traditional techniques or skills which are indispensable for the conservation of cultural properties and must be preserved with positive measures may be selected as “selected conservation techniques.” The key concepts here are that the techniques and skills must be indispensable for the conservation of cultural properties and also that the techniques and skills must be traditional. These concepts are the very concepts that are enveloped in the broad sense of intangible cultural heritage as defined in the current Convention. In spite of the fact that Japan has not acknowledged conservation techniques as cultural properties, the above-mentioned definition in the Law is intended to show in Japan and abroad that
conservation techniques for cultural properties are also a part of intangible cultural heritage in Japan. This system is based on the belief that in order to support cultural properties, regardless of whether they are tangible or intangible, techniques, which are intangible, are required in various situations including the safeguarding, maintenance and restoration of cultural properties. In other words, it is extremely important in the sense that it expresses the idea that in order to hand down cultural properties, regardless of whether they are tangible or intangible, intangible skills are indispensable. I think that this fact needs to be communicated to the rest of the world.

Now I would like to explain how this present system for the protection of intangible cultural heritage in Japan came into being by briefly touching on its historical background. The initial Law for the Protection of Cultural Property was enacted in 1950. From this point on, Japan came to recognize cultural products that are intangible as cultural properties, and it was from this point on that the term “intangible cultural properties” entered the vocabulary. However, the concept of intangible cultural properties at this point was a little different from that of today in that the element of being “in danger of extinction” was extremely important. In other words, the concept of safeguarding against a critical situation, i.e. protecting intangible cultural properties, which, if left unprotected, would be lost forever, lay at the foundation of the concept of intangible cultural properties in the initial stage of the legal system for protection. In the revision to the Law that followed in 1954, the concept of intangible cultural properties was altered somewhat. This revision gave rise to the movement by the government to designate traditional performing arts and craft techniques with particularly high artistic or historic value as important intangible cultural properties. At this stage, the concept of being “in danger of extinction” may have been in the background, but it was no longer in the fore. With the adoption of the designation system in 1955, the concept of the government designating and protecting what is of historic or what is of artistic value to Japan became prevalent. The subjects for this designation were traditional craft techniques and traditional performing arts. The use of the term “other cultural products that are intangible” is an indication that, conceptually at least, the government considers the categories of intangible cultural properties to be not limited to performing arts and traditional craft techniques. However, in reality, the government had, for some time, only designated these two categories. The system of intangible cultural properties that require measures such as documentation, which was mentioned earlier, was established at the same time, as was the system for the selection of intangible cultural properties of value requiring special measures such as documentation.
Another major revision to the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties relating to intangible cultural heritage was made later, in 1975. With this revision, the concept of intangible folk cultural properties was added to the scope of the Law in addition to the conventional intangible cultural properties. At that time, this category encompassed manners and customs, folk performing arts. It did not include folk techniques yet. The basic thinking behind this revision was to protect folk materials, which were essential in expressing the changes in the Japanese people's modes of life, as intangible folk cultural properties and to designate the most important of these as important intangible folk cultural properties. Furthermore, the revision to the Law in 1975 also gave rise to the concept of protecting the techniques for conserving cultural properties, which was mentioned earlier. The concept behind this was that traditional techniques were necessary and indispensable for the restoration, preservation and handing down of cultural properties. Through this system, such techniques would be selected as conservation techniques for cultural properties and the selected conservation techniques would become subject to various measures for protection by the government. Furthermore, with regard to folk cultural properties, the system for selection as intangible folk cultural properties that require measures such as documentation also began in 1975. The main factor that separates selection from designation is the subject matter’s degree of importance; i.e. whether that cultural property is important or especially important. During the course of this symposium there will be various presentations concerning folk cultural properties, the actual problems encountered in their designation and selection and other administrative issues surrounding these processes. However it should be noted that the difference between these two processes would become evident from the standards for judging whether the materials are important or especially important.

I have just outlined the various types of cultural properties as a whole. Intangible cultural properties currently include traditional performing arts and craft techniques; intangible folk cultural properties include manners and customs, folk performing arts and the newly added traditional folk techniques; and conservation techniques for cultural property include traditional techniques necessary for the restoration and transmission of cultural properties. Among these, I believe that the newly added concept of folk techniques, under which the first three designations were made last year, will play a vital role in the world of intangible cultural heritage of Japan from now on. Folk techniques is an important concept that has some things in common with both traditional craft techniques, which are classified under intangible cultural properties, and conservation
techniques which are necessary for the protection of cultural properties. I think that unless this concept is skillfully administered and managed, massive confusion may result. The application of folk techniques has only just begun, and I feel that there is a need to fully weigh and consider the direction we are to take with regard to this category.

Next I would like to briefly explain what actual procedures are taken in designating important cultural heritage, recognizing their holders or selecting them. I will refrain from citing specific examples, since detailed presentations will be given by senior specialists of the Agency for the Cultural Affairs, who are actually involved with these procedures on-site. In the larger framework, first of all, before any designation or selection is made, thorough preliminary research and examinations are conducted. There are several stages of research beginning with general research and followed by research of potential candidates that have been narrowed down. Finally, based on the foregoing research, candidates are chosen and evaluated. After a series of domestic deliberative councils, designation or specification is made by the Japanese government. I believe that the Institute makes a number of contributions to the first stage, i.e. the basic research, of this process.

Next I would like to touch upon the methods of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in Japan. It should be noted that the method of protection varies from object to object. First of all, about the methods for the protection of intangible cultural properties and conservation techniques for cultural properties. As mentioned earlier, these two methods are quite similar in that in both techniques are designated or selected and that individuals or groups holding these techniques are publicly recognized by the government. Consequently, the methods for their protection are also similar to a certain extent. Basically, recognized individuals or groups receive support from the government in the form of government subsidies. In principle, yearly grants in fixed amounts are paid out. Moreover, successor-training programs are held at the National Theater for traditional performing arts and recognized as cultural properties by the government, although this applies only to performing arts. The government subsidizes such programs and from an overall perspective it may be said that the government runs as well as funds these successor-training programs. Furthermore, although limited mostly to the field of craft techniques so far, the government also directly documents the techniques. With regard to performing arts, documenting is left mostly to the National Theaters, which are both performing and recording organizations for performing arts.

Methods for the protection of folk cultural properties, on the other hand, differ significantly from the above-mentioned methods. In the case of folk cultural properties,
the people who transmit festivals, manners and customs, folk performing arts and folk
techniques in each region are, generally, not individuals but groups or communities,
which have been formed specifically for the purpose of their protection. The government
basically provides support in the form of subsidies to such groups or to the various
safeguarding programs conducted by municipalities in which these groups reside.
Specifically speaking, protection programs include, first and foremost, successor-training
programs, since folk cultural properties are transmitted from person to person.
Furthermore, even though they are intangible folk cultural properties, various tangible
objects are required for their preservation. For example, costumes, various tools used in
festivals and musical instruments are needed. The government provides subsidies to
programs to make any of the above or other objects newly or to repair the ones in use
necessary. Moreover, when there is a need to prepare visual images or pamphlets
introducing folk cultural properties, the government will provide subsidies toward the
expenses paid in producing these pamphlets and visual images that convey the value of
folk cultural properties to a wide audience. Moreover, we must remember that such folk
cultural properties cannot be protected by the holders of performing arts, folk techniques
or manners and customs alone. Wide dissemination of its value to the residents of the
surrounding areas or to the general public plays a crucial role in the protection of such
folk cultural properties. For this reason, the government supports various workshops and
other dissemination programs and seminars intended to familiarize the public with the
value of these folk cultural properties. So far I have spoken briefly on the system of
safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in Japan.

Now I will now move on to the relationship with the “Convention for the
Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” Although the Convention will be
explained in detail by Ms. Aikawa in her keynote speech, I would like to first comment
that there is a difference in the extent of coverage of intangible cultural heritage in Japan
and the extent to which the term intangible cultural heritage as defined in the
Convention covers. You fill find before you a copy of the Convention: an English copy for
our participants from overseas and a Japanese copy for our Japanese participants. Please
turn your attention to Article 2 of this Convention. According to this Article, “The
‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions,
knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces
associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals
recognize as part of their cultural heritage.” It defines intangible cultural heritage as
anything from practices to cultural spaces, but the most important part of the definition
is what follows: “that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.” I think this part is very important. The definition continue: “This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.” Needless to say, the three types of intangible cultural heritage in Japan, which I spoke of earlier, are contained in the above definition. However, it is also imperative for us, the Japanese people, to fully recognize that on a global basis, a far wider area, including areas that we have never even attempted to cover, is being acknowledged as intangible cultural heritage. In other words, it is not the intention of this Convention to merely safeguard the core portion. Instead, there is a prevailing school of thought that encompasses a wider range under the term of intangible cultural heritage: that, although at its foundation is the concept that intangible cultural heritage has many ways of manifesting itself, it is groups, communities and, in some cases, individuals that recognize it as being a part of their heritage; that from it people obtain their identity and continuity, which, in turn, promotes cultural diversity and human creativity. This way of thinking, I believe, seems to be lacking, directly at least, from the Japanese Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. It is also this area in which there is much room for expansion when we consider ways of protection in Japan in the future.

Then, based on this Convention, what should Japan do in the future? This is a topic, I hope, that will be discussed throughout this Symposium. I would now like to make a proposal about what I believe is one possible role.

Although Ms. Aikawa will make a presentation on the various aspects of the Convention including its history, current status and future outlook, its specific framework is still under construction although the Convention has been adopted. This involves, among other tasks, establishing criteria for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The first Intergovernmental Committee, which is the most important element of the Convention, met in Algeria last November. In September of this year, the second Intergovernmental Committee is scheduled to meet in Japan, with Japan at its chair. In the meantime, the Extraordinary Intergovernmental Committee will be held in China in May. Moreover, there will be a number of meetings of experts, which will lead to the drafting of the concrete standards. Thus, this year we have come to a crucial stage. In such circumstances, I feel strongly in favor of actively introducing the Japanese experience and way of thinking in the process of constructing this framework. Of course,
when I say this I do not mean to impose Japan’s system as the best way. Currently, many countries of the world, especially countries in Asia, are facing the rapid economic growth and urbanization that Japan once experienced. I feel that under such circumstances, it is necessary for us to offer Japan’s experiences, including the trials and errors, as reference for constructing this type of framework. In this process we would offer information relevant to various stages. For example, it would be appropriate for us to publicly declare that Japan, as mentioned earlier, conducts a certain amount of systematic research as prerequisite for the processes of designation and selection. Then we would offer information on specific research methods and the actual situation. Providing information on documentation is also important. Since intangible cultural heritage, by its very nature, does not leave behind anything that is tangible, documentation becomes an extremely important element in its transmission. We will be expected to actively offer Japan’s experience and relevant information on the methods of documentation and the thinking behind this process.

Moreover since, intangible cultural heritage will not be transmitted to posterity unless we hand it down to the younger generation; and then it is handed down from that generation on to the next. Japan is engaged in activities to raise the social awareness of our youth. I also believe that we need to actively provide information, including our past experiences, about various methods employed in widely arousing the interests of the younger generation. With regard to successor-training programs, it must be noted that some areas are more prone to success than others. In the case of the performing arts, in the presence of a number of concrete forms to be transmitted, successor-training programs tend to be easier, but in the case of manners and customs or entire festivals, it becomes more difficult and Japan has not necessarily been successful all the time. There are also countless other difficulties we are facing. However, it would certainly be meaningful if we could to actively provide all the information, i.e. our difficulties as well as our successes, regarding training of successors.

Another task that I believe Japan needs to address is to actively promote the exchange of information, as is the case with this meeting, among experts from various countries. I am convinced that our Institute will be able to make a sizeable contribution in this respect.

Since we seem to have a little more time before going into the conclusion, I would like to confirm once again what is meant by “safeguarding” under the Convention. In the Convention, “safeguarding” is defined as measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage. These measures would include, for example, recognition,
which is similar to the system of recognition in Japan. Also included are documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement and transmission as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of intangible cultural heritage. This definition might give the impression that the scope covered is quite different from that of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties of Japan. However, in terms of what actually needs to be done in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, I think there are not so many differences. As mentioned earlier, the role of the government in supporting the acknowledgement and documentation, in training successors, or in raising the people’s awareness and revitalizing such heritage seem to be common around the world. There has been much discussion in various quarters on the differences or similarities between tangible and intangible cultural heritages. In the Institute there have been workshops in which, although most of the participants were those interested in world heritage that are intangible, tangible and intangible aspects of world heritage were combined. Of course there are similarities in that they both deal with cultural heritage, and we cannot proceed ignoring one or the other. As mentioned earlier, the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is virtually impossible when it is cut off from the tangible elements. I have also stated that the reverse also holds true in that even in the case of tangible heritages, like conservation techniques, the techniques required in order to maintain, repair and transmit them to posterity, which are intangible, cannot be ignored. Yet, as our Director General stated in his address, I also believe that in the case of intangible cultural heritages, there are vast differences in how they are envisioned within a country, race, history or tradition. That is why when we engage in an exchange of opinions in conferences such as this, we need to keep in mind the other party’s historical and traditional background, if we are to avoid utter incoherence in our discussions. Then we may ask: Is there no underlying similarity among the various intangible cultural heritages? Is there a certain essence that can be extracted? When I think about the very essence of intangible cultural heritage, I think that it is culture that is preserved and transmitted by those of us who are living now. In other words, the very essence of intangible cultural heritage is, I believe, that it is culture that those of us who are living in the moment transmit.

There will be presentations on the state of intangible cultural heritage in each country and discussions on ways to forge international cooperation. What needs to be at the core our proceedings is, in my opinion, our position as specialists. That is to say, we are not the actual successors who preserve and transmit intangible cultural heritage. Although one of our guests is an actual successor to an intangible cultural heritage, the
majority of us are researchers, or members of the Institute, or members of administrative organizations involved in the protection of intangible cultural heritage, such as the Agency for Cultural Affairs. There being a successor in our midst is more of an exception than the rule. When studying intangible cultural heritage, I often have to question myself if I am treating the actual successors of such heritage with due respect. If we lose this respect then our undertakings will simply become research for the sake of the researcher; or administration simply for the sake of the sake of protection, i.e. protection without taking heed to the voices of those who are actually involved in transmission. One of my fears is that we lose sight of the needs of successors or the position that they are in. As we listen to various presentation and take part in the general discussion to be held the day after tomorrow, it is my sincere hope that the Symposium will always be conducted with the respect toward those who are actually transmitting intangible cultural heritage in mind. It is with this request to keep in mind the respect for the successors of intangible cultural heritage that I would like to conclude my keynote speech. I think we are almost out of time, and this will conclude what has been intended as an opening act for the Symposium. Thank you for your attention.