

INTRODUCTION: IRCI'S PROJECT 'RESEARCH ON ICH AFFECTED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'

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INTRODUCTION

From the first detection of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019, the spread of the disease quickly became a global menace, affecting people's livelihoods. As a protocol to prevent this highly infectious disease, measures such as border closures, staying at home, social distancing, and wearing masks were taken at local and national levels. These atypical lifestyles, which were mandatory in most areas, limited interactions among people and opportunities to socialize. These regulations, severely affected intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in a myriad of ways, as people play an integral role in ensuring the viability of ICH. The press reported the cancellation of annual festivals, closure of theatres, and suspension of performances, raising concerns about the risk to the continued practice and transmission of ICH.

In such circumstances, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) created an online platform² to call for testimonies from ICH stakeholders about their experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and undertook global initiatives to learn, exchange information, and inspire communities. More than 200 reports from over 70 countries were uploaded to the platform, attracting worldwide attention. The survey results were analysed and compiled into reports (UNESCO, 2020, 2021). They included cases of tragedies and difficulties faced by the ICH stakeholders during the pandemic, as well as new and alternative ways of ICH practice and transmission to continue their ICH (UNESCO, 2020, 2021). Recognizing the urgent situation of ICH, which was facing difficulties in continuing its practice and/or transmission, the International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI) implemented a project titled 'Research on ICH Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic' to closely document and study how various ICH and the related communities in the Asia-Pacific region were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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² Platform on living heritage experiences and the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/platform-on-living-heritage-experiences-and-covid-19-01123>

The project activities started with a questionnaire survey as part of the Research on ICH Safeguarding and Disaster Risk Management project in FY 2021 and was later developed as a stand-alone project to conduct further case studies in FY 2022–2023.

Case studies were conducted in the countries of: Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, the Republic of Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Papua New Guinea, and provided a detailed report of the findings in each country and vital documentation of ICH during the COVID-19 pandemic. This volume compiles the results of these case studies from nine Asia-Pacific countries. This chapter serves as an introduction and a brief guide to the following chapters by presenting the objectives and outline of the project, the overall activities, and its outcomes.

OBJECTIVES AND OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT

The project aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the practice, transmission, and safeguarding of ICH and to document the ever-changing situation of ICH in the course of the pandemic. Attention was particularly paid to changes and alterations in ICH practices brought about by COVID-19, which could be negative and/or positive and demonstrate the flexibility and adaptability of ICH and related stakeholders. The ultimate goal was to accumulate information and build knowledge on ICH in relation to the pandemic in general, enabling us to respond to future pandemics.

All research activities were conducted in the above-mentioned nine countries in cooperation with researchers and institutions in the respective countries, namely, Kuluipa Akmatova, Saruul Arslan, Janet Blake, Elizabeth Edwards, Hanhee Hahm, Mahirta, Ritu Sethi, Naomi Fail-Simet, and Saymon Zakaria, who have sincerely devoted themselves (with their team) to this project.

FY 2021 was dedicated to designing and conducting a questionnaire survey. In consultation with the cooperating researchers, a questionnaire was developed by IRCI in August 2021 and shared with researchers in the Asia-Pacific region to seek their cooperation in conducting the project. Nine researchers and their teams kindly agreed to participate, and the questionnaire was sent out in September 2021 and returned to IRCI by February 2022. The results of the questionnaire-based survey have been published as a preliminary report (IRCI, 2022) and a booklet (IRCI, 2023).

Subsequently, field research was conducted based on the results of the questionnaire survey. The guidelines developed by IRCI were distributed to the same cooperating researchers for further work. They developed a case study design for their respective countries, and field research was initiated in August 2022. Despite the difficult conditions imposed by the pandemic and unexpected severe

weather conditions in some areas that affected the research process, the researchers submitted reports compiling the findings of field research to IRCI by March 2023. IRCI had the opportunity to participate in field research conducted in Bangladesh and Indonesia. As one of the earliest field activities since the onset of the pandemic, IRCI staff members, together with local researchers, visited the site to observe the interviews and monitor the progress of the field research.

A regional conference was held in Osaka, Japan, in July 2023 to conclude the research activities conducted during FY 2021 and FY 2022. All cooperating researchers shared the results of the case studies and discussed the overall findings and lessons learned during the pandemic.

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

In the initial research stage, the project focused on gathering a wide range of information on ICH in the Asia-Pacific region during the COVID-19 pandemic. With reference to the UNESCO survey,³ IRCI designed and conducted a questionnaire-based survey as a preliminary study in FY 2021. Two types of questionnaires were developed by IRCI. Questionnaire A was intended for researchers and institutions to fill in the overall situation of ICH at the national and regional levels, whereas Questionnaire B was intended for ICH-related individuals or stakeholders such as communities, local people, and ICH practitioners to report their experiences and thoughts regarding ICH during the pandemic. Both questionnaires included questions about the situation of ICH during the pandemic, covering topics on the practice and transmission of ICH, particularly how and in what ways it differed from the pre-COVID era. Questionnaires also asked stakeholders how they reacted to ICH during the pandemic. IRCI carefully developed a questionnaire to provide neutral questions to elicit not only the negative effects but also the positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic on ICH.

Questionnaire A was completed by the collaborators from the nine countries, who also translated, distributed, and collected Questionnaire B. In addition, IRCI used an online questionnaire platform to distribute Questionnaire B to individual ICH stakeholders, which added responses from Cambodia, Japan, Myanmar, New Zealand, Palau, and Singapore. As a result, 55 responses were obtained for Questionnaire A and 145 valid responses were obtained for Questionnaire B, of which 18 responses were submitted through an online questionnaire.

The questionnaires revealed the difficulties and challenges faced by practitioners and locals in continuing ICH in the same manner as in the pre-COVID era. The

³ UNESCO's online survey. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/news/living-heritage-experiences-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-13261>

production of local handicrafts and goods that targeted tourists, as well as performances that could not be provided online, were at risk. Notably, the use of both full and supplemental online and digital technologies has expanded dramatically since the beginning of the pandemic. This helped local ICH practitioners broaden the connections between their communities and marketing spaces to sell products to a broader range of customers. However, in some cases, exposure of ICH products online to the public can pose a threat of plagiarism, copying, and counterfeiting.

In contrast, new attempts, reformations, and revivals of ICH elements were observed. Traditional knowledge related to healthcare and disease prevention has received great attention for building stronger immune systems and fighting diseases. Others reported that the time spent during the lockdown period was used to explore new designs for crafts, new lyrics for poems, and improved performance skills. Traditional foodways also became a trend when restaurants closed, and people were preparing their own food at home. Within family units, cooking traditional foods and transmitting recipes from older to younger generations were recorded. These practices among small groups of people or limited members enhanced the practice of ICH during the pandemic. Another tendency observed was the movement and reaction of the younger generation to their local ICH. Before the pandemic, younger people were enthusiastic about moving to urban areas for job opportunities. However, the pandemic prompted them to stay in their hometowns and engage in local crafts. In other areas, lockdowns and the closure of schools encouraged young people to become involved and practice their traditional ICH as family businesses.

Despite the severity of the pandemic on a global scale, the information collected through the questionnaire provided insights into understanding new aspects of ICH. The minor and major changes that occurred in the practice and transmission of ICH during the pandemic illustrate the nature of ICH; that is, ICH is practised by the people and can change over time. The strong force of the pandemic, especially in its early stages, has challenged us to understand and accept the ever-changing situation and to be creative in safeguarding ICH. These findings on ICH and its practitioners adapting to a new situation and the cases of ICH revived during the pandemic will, therefore, be valuable resources for similar scenarios in the future.

FIELD RESEARCH AND ITS FINDINGS

Based on the findings of the questionnaire survey, IRCI conducted case studies with collaborators from the same nine countries. The overall purpose of the case studies was to conduct field research on the selected ICH elements identified in the questionnaire and document in detail how they were being practised, trans-

mitted, and safeguarded. In parallel, the research also aimed to identify the additional impacts that ICH and related communities have experienced during the pandemic and in some areas in the post-pandemic situation, as compared to the results of the questionnaire survey conducted one year before. In line with this objective, the researchers individually designed their case studies based on their local situation by selecting ICH elements and considering specific themes, issues, and phenomena related to ICH during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Field research was conducted in situations where, on a global scale, social restrictions were beginning to be lifted, and the movement of people was gradually returning, although the severity of the spreading disease varied drastically from country to country or region to region, depending on local vaccine supplies and other preventive measures. Thus, the research documented the resumption of ICH practices that could not be carried out during the pandemic, especially rituals and performances that attracted large numbers of people, as well as practices that depended on tourism. It also discovered further progress in ICH practices that were initiated or enhanced during the pandemic, such as the online marketing of products, development of new designs and motifs for handicrafts, composition of new songs, and revival of traditional knowledge useful in combating viruses.

These findings showed the gradual return of ICH practices and the strong spirit of related community members, which exemplified resilience. Moreover, the re-emergence of ICH with additional changes and further efforts of related stakeholders compared to the pre-COVID era demonstrated the recovery of ICH, which resembles the quality of 'building back better' (UN, 2015).

REGIONAL CONFERENCE

As the final stage of the project, IRCI organized a regional conference, 'ICH Resilience and the COVID-19 Pandemic', in Osaka, Japan, from 27 to 29 July 2023, to wrap up the activities. The main objective of the conference was to share the results of the case studies conducted in each country among all nine researchers to grasp the overall findings of the field research and develop a general understanding of how ICH in the Asia-Pacific region was affected by COVID-19. It was also intended to initiate discussions on issues and themes that emerged from the overall conclusion to build a better understanding of the relationship between ICH and COVID-19 or epidemics in general. Research collaborators from nine countries and Japanese experts were invited to participate in the conference.

The discussion revolved around the following points: 1) the overall impact of COVID-19 on ICH elements in the Asia-Pacific region, especially the positive and

negative aspects; 2) the resilience of ICH, as demonstrated in the field research; 3) the role of community members and practitioners of ICH, local and national governments, and international organizations in the field of ICH and epidemics in general; and 4) ways to share research results and bring them back to the communities involved in ICH. In the course of the discussion, the following issues were brought to the attention of the researchers, among other issues that need to be considered independent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, digital technologies were highlighted as key resources to be considered and taken care of cautiously because of their multidimensional characteristics. On the bright side, practitioners themselves set up their own businesses or online shops and, in some cases, started marketing products through private enterprises with the support of government organizations. Online platforms such as Zoom, which became popular during the pandemic, have become useful tools for holding classes on ICH elements. These new practices have created a huge chance for ICH transmission, especially to the younger generation, who are mostly digitally literate.

However, the limitations of online technologies and digital platforms were also considered. A good digital environment and infrastructure, such as a stable internet connection and access to certain websites and applications for individuals, are not guaranteed in all regions, especially in rural areas. The online selling of products can also expose authentic designs and original goods to the public, which can lead to copying and counterfeiting, as mentioned earlier. One participant mentioned language barriers to the use of online tools and programmes, saying that available language variations were limited and suggested providing materials in the local dialects of the practitioners. Recognizing the benefits and local needs, further consideration and caution are needed when applying digital technologies in the context of ICH.

Discussions also focused on the resilience of ICH and its future sustainability in relation to the Convention, which defines ‘safeguarding’ as ‘measures aimed at ensuring the viability of ICH’.⁴ To safeguard and build the resilience of ICH in the face of pandemics and epidemics in general, preventive measures such as 1) understanding the role of each stakeholder, 2) documentation and capacity building to preserve knowledge, and 3) collaboration and networking among stakeholders were proposed, emphasising the importance of ensuring practitioners’ preparedness.

Referring to previous projects conducted in local areas in Asia and the Pacific, the

⁴ Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003 Convention). <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>

researchers emphasised the importance of involving multiple sectors in programmes, as each has its own unique role to play; for instance, the private sector for funding as well as children to bring fresh, interesting ideas. The roles of researchers in the field of ICH were reaffirmed, such as: 1) recording and documenting information to be passed on to the next generation, 2) providing data to influence government agencies concerned with supporting ICH and the community, and 3) acting as key personnel and facilitators linking stakeholders at different levels.

Other general challenges and issues for safeguarding ICH that have been acknowledged through the experience of the pandemic were also discussed. The urgent need to document ICH practitioners, for instance, using a system such as Living Human Treasures, was expressed as they were mostly older adults. Difficulties related to the digitalization and publicization of materials on ICH and the protection of original products and goods were highlighted, particularly ways to protect local practitioners' artistic skills and knowledge through legislation and government policies from being plagiarized. Increasing the understanding of ICH in society, especially among practitioners, is crucial.

The overall discussion addressed the vulnerability and evolving nature of ICH and simultaneously provided us with insights into the most recent situations of ICH at the local level. Reflecting on these subjects, the methods and responsibilities of stakeholders to continue safeguarding ICH despite the difficulties caused by the pandemic were considered.

PANEL EXHIBITION

In addition to publishing the preliminary report and booklet, IRCI organized a panel exhibition⁵ in cooperation with the Sakai City Government to disseminate the research results to the public. The Sakai City Museum, where IRCI is located, offered a space for panels to be displayed. With IRCI's analysis and summary of the project, photos and short video clips of ICH elements captured during field research by our cooperating researchers are displayed with Japanese captions. This exhibition, in cooperation with the Sakai City, has provided an opportunity for IRCI to widely publicize its research results, as well as for citizens to learn more about ICH.

⁵ A Panel Exhibition 'ICH Resilience amid COVID-19 Pandemic' was held at the Sakai City Museum from 7 November 2023 to 31 March 2024.

CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, merely continuing our daily lives posed a significant challenge for all of us. ICH, which involves interactions between individuals, was particularly difficult. IRCI's project on ICH and the COVID-19 pandemic investigated the status of selected ICH elements during the pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region and has revealed various aspects of ICH that were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, both negatively and positively. Over the course of the project, while the pandemic was constantly changing, unstable, and harsh in most areas, difficulties in continuing ICH practices were highlighted. Nevertheless, new attempts to improve the practice and transmission of ICH have attracted our attention.

What makes a pandemic different from other disasters is that it suffocates the entire world, not just specific areas. People have become desperate to meet their own needs and found it challenging to help others. In these situations, ICH and related communities are critical in finding ways to continue its practice and transmission. The results of these case studies, presented in the following chapters, illustrate the vitality and resilience of ICH and its stakeholders, even in challenging situations. These reports on ICH elements amid COVID-19 bring insight into the powerful spirit shown by ICH and its related community members, which will become a vital resource for understanding past events as well as addressing further improvements that all stakeholders could discuss to continue the safeguarding of ICH.

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