

Interpreting Inner Mongolia's Cultural Heritage: A Study of *ChinaVine.Org*

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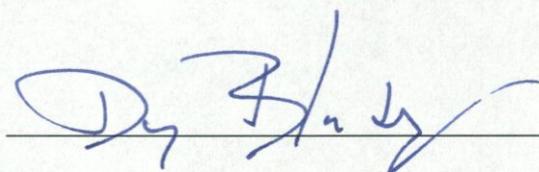
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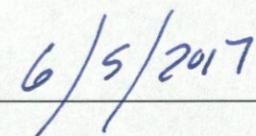
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## Abstract

My purpose in this study is to discuss the interpretation of China's culture heritage for educative purposes. The primary focus will be on the intangible cultural heritage of Inner Mongolia. Associated with this focus will be an analysis of the interpretation of the culture heritage of Inner Mongolia on *ChinaVine.org*.

## Interpreting China's Culture: A Study of *ChinaVine.org*

The study and appreciation of the world's cultural heritage is a global phenomenon. In part, this phenomenon can be attributed to the accessibility of electronic communication and the Internet. Blank, (2009) states that "The Internet is the new 'print' technology, duplicating our materials from the physical field and transferring them (though not necessarily always altering them) into an electronic vernacular." (p. 7). Blank recognizes the Internet as "a limitless frontier for contemporary scholastic possibilities." (p. 3). This "limitless frontier" provides the opportunity for such web-based projects as *ChinaVine*. *ChinaVine's* mission is to educate English-speaking/ reading children, youth, and adults about China's cultural heritage. Founded in 2006, *ChinaVine* offers an introduction to the complex and nuanced culture of China. This primarily occurs through the website *ChinaVine.org*. Through this website, scholars in the United States (US) and China, are committed to presenting a view of China's cultural heritage that moves beyond such well known cultural examples as Beijing opera, the Great Wall, and the Xian Tombs to include an exposition of less well known cultural forms associated with the multiple ethnic groups of China. This work on the part of scholars in the US and China is informed by folkloristic research methods coupled with policies and practices associated

with China's goals to identify, document, preserve, and sustain its cultural heritage within the context of a society undergoing a radical transformation due to economic growth with a corresponding urbanization.

The purpose of this study is to introduce readers to these policies and practices in order to describe how such policies and practices have influenced the interpretation of China's cultural heritage on *ChinaVine.org*. Particular attention will be paid to the interpretation of China's ethnic minority groups, particularly the culture found in Inner Mongolia. Emphasis will be placed on approaches associated with "intangible" cultural heritage.

### China's Cultural Heritage

Contemporary China is diverse geographically and ethnically. Geographically, China ranges from grasslands to forests, from desert to hills, and from plateaus to plains. Like the terrain, China's cultures are various and diverse. Across this geographical spectrum there are thirty-one provinces, five autonomous regions, four municipalities, and two administrative regions. According to the data of the Sixth Population Census, Han Chinese account for 92% of the overall Chinese population and the other fifty-five ethnic groups make up the remaining 8 % of the population. (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 2011)

Although the ethnic minority groups constitute less than ten percent of the population, these ethnic minorities live in more than sixty percent of China's land mass. The regions where the ethnic minorities are most concentrated are Northwest China including the Ningxia Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Province, and Qinghai Province; Northeast China includes Liaoning Province, Yangban Korean Autonomous Prefecture, and Hulunbeir; and Southwest China including Yunnan Province, Tibet, and Guizhou Province. Within China, such minority groups are referred to as "*Minzu*...shortened from the official term *shaoshu minzu*" meaning 'minority nationality', which can be translated as "ethnic minority". Within China Ethnic groups are identified on the basis of four characteristics (common territory, common language, common economic life and common psychological characteristics (culture)." (Blum, 2005, p. 175)

The history of the region now known as China is long and complex. Associated with this history are governmental and scholarly efforts to collect, sort, protect and sustain culture. As early as the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BC), the importance of respecting culture in order to consolidate power was recognized resulting in the establishment of ministries to collect and preserve local culture such as poetry, folk songs, and musical instruments (Wang, 2006, p. 169). During the The Qin (221-206 BC) Dynasty, Yuefu and Taiyue were established as music bureaus to

collect songs and poetry. The *Yongle Encyclopedia*, published during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) included numerous entries associated with culture. The *Siku Quanshu*, completed in 1782 during the Qing Dynasty, compiled a record of the history of China including a history of the region's culture including myths, legends, allegories, and folk songs among many other examples. s (Wang, 2006, p. 171-172).

In the early twentieth century, beginning with the New Cultural Movement (mid 1910s and 20s), scholars published a series of studies that documented China's cultural heritage. For example, Liu Bannong's (1891-1934) published a collection of ballads and folk songs in 1918. (Wang, 2006, p. 175). In 1920, Peking University established the Ballad Research Institute. Sun Yat-Sen University, Xiamen University, and Hangzhou University established institutes for collecting and preserving folk literature. (Wang, 2006, p. 180). In 1927, the Institute of Philology and History in Sun Yat-sen University was established in Guangzhou, there consists of many experts from linguistics, history, sociology, and ethnology, devoted to exploring and collecting the folk culture among minorities, including folk customs, folk habits, folk belief, language and script, and folk arts throughout the country. (Wang, 2006, p. 183). In 1942 the Yanan Literature and Art Conversazione launched activities known as *Caifeng* to collect and collate folk culture throughout the country (Wang, 2006, p. 188). In 1949, the

Institute of the Folk Literature and Art and Folklore Society were established in Chinese provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions. These institutes and organizations were committed to protecting China's culture heritage including the heritage associated with traditional minority cultures. (Wang, 2006, p. 197). During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70's, the folk culture was suppressed and the institutes disbanded. "For over ten years, the Cultural Revolution forcefully removed traditional cultural spaces (e.g. temples) and built modern infrastructures (e.g. schools and factories) on cultural relics. Traditional practices were almost completely destroyed; what remained was difficult to pass down. " (Gao, 2017, p.175) Following China's Cultural Revolution, many folklore institutes and college programs were founded or reestablished. This included the China Folklore Society and the Institute of China's Ethnic Minority's Literature founded in 1983 and 1980 respectively.

Currently the programs and initiatives of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are influential in the documentation and preservation of China's cultural heritage. China has adopted language from the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (1972), defining "cultural heritage" within three broad categories: monuments, groups of buildings, and sites. (p. 2). China signed the *Convention for Protecting the World Cultural and*

*Natural Heritage* in 1985. Exemplary of China's commitment to the convention is that as of 2016 there are fifty locations within China that have been approved by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites. This includes thirty-five cultural heritage sites, eleven natural heritage sites, and four sites that are both cultural and natural. China ranks second to Italy in its number of World Heritage Sites (UNESCO, n.d.). Readers will be familiar with such sites as the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, and the Forbidden City. Lesser known sites include Mogao Caves, Ancient City of Ping Yao, Temple of Heaven: an Imperial Sacrificial Altar in Brijing, and so forth.

Also relevant to sustaining China's cultural heritage is the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003). Intangible cultural heritage is defined by the convention as the :  
practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. 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.  
(UNESCO, 2003)

Given the above definition, China's intangible cultural heritage includes oral traditions, language, the performing arts, festivals, rituals, and crafts among others (UNESCO, 2003). China's intangible cultural heritage is a lived inheritance developing over time in a particular cultural space and as valued by a particular cultural community. The above examples of intangible cultural heritage are integrated into daily life and are passed from one generation to the next. As a result, the protection of China's intangible cultural heritage focuses first and foremost on the ability of people to maintain and practice their cultural traditions and the material culture, like in the examples above, associated with these traditions.

### *ChinaVine* and Heritage

ChinaVine.org includes numerous resources and examples of China's culture, including many that fall within the definition of intangible culture heritage. This includes examples of Thangka painting, Bayan Oboo Festival, Rao San Ling Festival, and Weifang Kites among others. From the beginning the scholars associated with *ChinaVine.org* recognized the opportunities presented by an online platform for cultural interpretation.

Congdon and Blandy (2011), articulate how *Chinvine.org* can benefit people from outside China by learning about Chinese culture in way that broadens their horizons and encouraging visitors to the site to be reflective of their own culture as they learn about the culture of others. In online learning, Congdon and Blandy (2011) recognize that people can participate without geographic limitations and that “Learning online optimizes a participatory learning environment.” (Condon & Blandy, 2011 p. 11) Their view is informed by Jenkins and Bertozzi (2007) who believe that when people get involved in learning about another country’ s culture, they usually want to share as well as talk about it with others. “Given the interactivity of the Internet, it is likely that these students, educators, and parents are using various types of social media to share their interpretations with others.” (Condon & Blandy, 2011, p. 12)

The great majority of the material interpreted on *ChinaVine.org* resulted from fieldwork on the part of scholars from the US and China. Scholars contributing to *ChinaVine.org* represent multiple fields including Art Education, Folklore, Philosophy, Art History, Ethnomusicology, and Art among others.

Fieldwork has concentrated on artists, art forms, and festivals using interview strategies that incorporate video, audio, and photographic documentation. Text video,

photographic, and audio materials collected in the field are developed and interpreted for the website and supporting social media. (Condon and Blandy, 2007, p.6-7)

As a cultural bridge between China and the US, *ChinaVine.org* is one of the earliest organizations beginning communication and cultural exchanges with china's folk cultural organizations since 2006. Between 2006 and 2017 research teams associated with *ChinaVine.org* visited municipalities such as Beijing and Shanghai; provinces including Shandong, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou; and autonomous regions associated with Inner Mongolia and the Tibetan plateau (Garzé). The intangible cultural heritage of the Han, Mongolian, Tibetan, Bai, and Miao people have been documented, interpreted, and posted to the website.

The strategies that *ChinaVine* uses to interpret China's heritage are fieldwork in China followed by interpretation of that fieldwork on the website. Eduvine, a subsite within *ChinaVine*, provides curricular suggestions related to the materials posted to *ChinaVine*.

#### Field work

Fieldwork associated with *ChinaVine* concentrates on artists, art forms, and festivals using interview strategies that incorporate video, audio and photographic documentation. Text, video, photographic, and audio

materials collected in the field are developed and interpreted for the website and supporting social media. (Congdon and Blandy, 2013) The majority of content posted on the *ChinaVine.org* is from *ChinaVine's* fieldwork in China, which is the primary resource recorded by *ChinaVine's* team over the decade. Fieldwork routinely includes US and Chinese scholars.

Fieldwork is typically motivated by a Chinese scholar's interests or recommendation concerning Chinese culture. Once a fieldwork focus has been identified, scholars in the US and China establish the time and places for the fieldwork, do background research using primary and secondary sources, and identify those scholars and students in the US and China who will participate. Typically, the Chinese members of the fieldwork team will plan the schedule for the fieldwork including confirmed dates, scheduling, booking accommodations, arranging on the ground transportation, selecting translators, and identifying examples of the areas cultural heritage and the inheritors (*ChuanChengRen*) associated with that heritage. Inheritors can be understood to be the keepers of culture. Fieldwork typically takes place over a ten to fourteen day period with each day being heavily scheduled and intensive. Multiple visits with inheritors will take place on each day and responsibilities of each of the fieldworkers is

assigned (interviewers, translators, photographers, videographers, archivists, etc.).

## Interpretation

In the months following the fieldwork, interpretation for the the materials to be posted on *ChinaVine.org* occurs. This involves collecting the raw materials from fieldwork, the organizing and classifying these materials based on the place or events, deciding on the focus of the interpretation, an assigning oversight of the interpretation to *ChinaVine* scholars associated with the fieldwork, designing the structure of the interpretation, and finally posting the interpretation to *ChinaVine.org*. Typically, each post contains a text describing the cultural context, an introduction to the artist and/or event followed by descriptive information about the artist and/or event. Each post generally includes short videos or several selective photos associated with the fieldwork. Prior to posting, interpretive materials are shared among fieldwork participants from the US and China for accuracy.

## Inner Mongolia: A Case Study

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, (*NeiMenGuzizhiqu* ) is located in the north of China on the border of Mongolia. Inner Mongolia is

the third largest province in China. According to the latest population census, many ethnic minorities are living in this region including Mongolian (4.2 million, 17.11%), Ewenki, Manchu, Hui people, Daur people, Korea, in whole 49 ethnic groups. (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 中国国家统计局, 2011). The capital of Inner Mongolia is Hohhot, meaning "green city" in Mongolian.

While Inner Mongolia includes urban areas, such as Hohhot, grasslands make up a large portion of the region. However, because of urbanization and the process of industrialization, rural and pasture areas are constantly being compromised or destroyed. This is resulting in unprecedented tensions between ethnic minority cultures and the social changes occurring around them. It is undeniable that more and more precious traditional culture forms are facing extinction or marginalization.

The cultural heritage of Inner Mongolia is rich and complex. The history of the region includes many ancient minorities' civilization such as the Huns, Mongols, Turks and other nomadic tribes. These cultures have left numerous traces, including heritage sites, which are listed by the government for protection. Cultural heritage sites and examples of cultural heritage are listed because of their contributions to the history, politics, economy, military, culture, arts, science. Moreover, Inner Mongolia has numerous examples of intangible culture heritage in a wide range of types

that include costume, foodways, lifestyles, artforms, architecture, festivals, music, oral traditions, literature, and religious observances among many others.

For example, in 2003, *Morin Khuur*, as a masterpiece of oral and intangible cultural heritage was recognized by UNESCO. Morin Khuur is a traditional Mongolian instrument which has been popular among nomadic tribes for a long time. It is famous for the beautiful sounds that deeply moved the audience by the artist's passion and skill. Morin Khuur, also called Horse head fiddle, carries Mongolian wisdoms and emotion expressing love for the grasslands and a nomadic life that embedded within the environment. *Urtyn duu*, Mongolian long-tune folk song, is a vocal culture passed down from generation to generation. Urtyn duu is regarded as living example of Mongolian music and was listed by UNESCO in 2005 as an important example of the region's intangible cultural heritage. Within Inner Mongolia there are forty-nine traditional folk cultures recorded in national records of intangible culture heritage including folk music, folk dance, drama, painting, carving, crafts, food, costumes, festival and traditional customs.

The Inner Mongolia provincial government has passed several laws protecting the region's cultural heritage and produced documents and studies concerning culture heritage in Inner Mongolia since 2005. The

Center of the Inner Mongolia Culture Heritage (*neimenggu wenhua yichan zhongxin*) was founded in 2009. This center focus on protection, communication, and collaboration with international scholars for the purpose of investigating and reporting on the region's intangible culture heritage. Moreover, the region's government established "Grassland Culture Heritage Day" (*caoyuan wenhua ri*) to promote its culture and encourage the public to join protection and inheritance efforts. The government has also sponsored extensive research on culture heritage documenting amounts, types, distribution, and the situation of the region's culture heritage through text, video, and digital archive.

The ChinaVine research team visited Inner Mongolia from Jun 29 – July 15, 2013. The US team was led by Doug Blandy (UO) and Kristin Congdon (UCF). The Chinese field work team was led by Surna (Minzu University (MU)). Minzu University has a cooperative relationship with Inner Mongolian University, Inner Mongolian Normal University, and Ujimqin Minority High School. All of these Inner Mongolian institutions assisted in making local connections between *ChinaVine* and the local culture. Documentation through video and photographs was coordinated by Jonathan Lederman, a graduate student at the UO. Translation was conducted by Yu Chin (MU) and I (UO). Surna's research focuses on China's minority cultures including costumes, crafts, and social change.

Mongolian culture is one of her areas of specialization. Surna was instrumental in orienting the scholars from the UO to the intangible cultural heritage of Inner Mongolia, how current social conditions are influencing this heritage and efforts to preserve and sustain traditional minority culture.

Over the course of twelve days the *ChinaVine* research team visited and conducted research in Hohhot, the capital city of the Inner Mongolia, Baotou, Xilinhote, and Dongsheng; counties, such as Damao County, East Ujimqin County, and Yijinholo County; prairie areas, such as Xilamuren Grassland and Ujimqin Grassland. These locations were chosen because they contain a broad range of Mongolian examples of intangible culture heritage. The locations visited also included agricultural areas, semi-agriculture areas, and semi-pasturing areas, and grazing areas.

Characteristic of the locations visited were a range of life-styles both Mongolian and Han Chinese. For example, in Ujimqin, located on the border of China and Mongolia, many herders, living a nomadic lifestyle, move with the seasons. Herders in this area continue to reside in yurts made from felt. Herds consist of horses, camels, sheep, and cows. All of this livestock contributes to traditional Mongolian foodways such as horse milk koumiss. Ujimqin is also known for the Mongolian long-tune.

During the fieldwork in Inner Mongolia, the US scholars on the ChinaVine team were introduced to Mongolian culture through discussions with scholars in Inner Mongolia, visiting important heritage sites such as Genghis Khan Mausoleum and the Da Zhao Temple (*dazhao miao*), and witnessing local intangible culture heritage examples associated herding culture and a local festival among others.

To establish the credibility of *ChinaVine*, *ChinaVine's* team did a public presentation to faculty at Inner Mongolian Normal University along with additional presentations to those local people interviewed in the course of the research. Such presentations were significant to gaining trust by Chinese scholars and others by providing a better understanding of *ChinaVine's* approach to cultural documentation and online education. At Inner Mongolian Normal University the US team was introduced to China's scholars who have conducted research on Mongolian culture over several decades. These scholars provided the *ChinaVine* team with important professional suggestions and recommendations to assist in selecting fieldwork sites as well as providing contextual information that could guide the interpretation of examples of the intangible cultural heritage for possible posting on *ChinaVine*. Most importantly, these scholars had connections with artists and inheritors associated with Mongolian intangible culture heritage who they could provide access to the

*ChinaVine* team. In conversing with these scholars, the US members of the *ChinaVine* team could ascertain those factors important to document in representing the intangible cultural heritage of the region.

During the period in which the *ChinaVine* team worked in Inner Mongolia they visited many places providing an intensive in depth experience of Mongolian culture and life. Through looking at different locations conveying Mongolian history, civilization, and culture, the *ChinaVine* researchers were able to experience the importance of the grasslands to the Mongolian people and the relationship of living on these grasslands to culture. Through site visits and interviews the US scholars saw how local people worship Genghis Khan as God and are proud of his cultural and political legacy. Site visits and interviews were also chosen to reinforce the relationships between the grasslands, the sky god, and herding.

Based on the fieldwork, the *ChinaVine* team selected several examples of Inner Mongolia's intangible cultural heritage for interpretation on *ChinaVine*. This included an overview of Inner Mongolia, camel herding, the ritualized butchering of a sheep followed by a meal, and a local night market. Each example posted to *ChinaVine* contains text and photos or a short video captured during the field work. Typical is the post titled "A Day in the Life." This post includes a detailed description and vivid digital

documents to demonstrate a Mongolian herders everyday life conveying to the viewers the idea that the herder's lifestyle is based upon the ecological balance of human and nature. Documented is how herders continue to live in a traditional way, holding their shamanistic beliefs associated with respecting the grassland as the holy mother, sky as the spiritual father, and horse milk as the saintliest offering to the God. Visitors to *ChinaVine* will find documentation and interpretation associated with feeding and killing livestock, yurts, and herding on the grasslands. Foodways are represented through cooking traditional Mongolian food called *bukhel makh*, making Mongolian cheese, drinking culture, table manners and taboos, special cutlery made by ox horn and silver bowl, dairy food and Mongolian salty milk tea. Music includes folk songs, Mongolian long-tune, Morin kuru, and other instruments.

Bingzhong (2017) argues that

the goals of Intangible Culture Heritage's Convention are to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned, to raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof "(p.172)

Following the goals of the Convention, the *ChinaVine* research team documented a broad range of intangible culture heritage during the Inner Mongolian fieldwork. A primary means through which this was accomplished was by interviewing artists and inheritors associated with Inner Mongolia's intangible cultural heritage. These interviews were documented through field notes, photographs, and video. Of particular note in this regard is the interpretation on *ChinaVine* of the Bayan Oboo Festival (*bayan aobao jisi*); Mongolian Calligraphy: Chao Luo Meng (Colmon); and Saran's Tailor shop. For example, during the Bayan Festival, the US members of *ChinaVine* research team were invited to make Oboo offerings and attend the Nadam Fair to show their respect to Mongolian folk belief as well as record the entire process of the offering. This is a very important Mongolian festival. Many participants dress in traditional costumes and come from throughout the region for the purpose of praying for rain on grasslands, family happiness, and good luck. Another example is the interview with Colmon about Mongolian calligraphy. The Mongolian script is on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in need of urgent safeguarding. (UNESCO, 2017). Additionally the interview with Saran about her tailor shop explores the younger generation's attitude towards traditional culture and the etiquette around costumes.

## Conclusion

*ChinaVine* meets its mission by exploring China's diverse cultures through postings to its website and an interpretive strategy that takes into account intangible culture. Important to its mission is representing China's minority cultures.

Using an intensive fieldwork model involving scholars and students from the US and China, interpretive materials on *ChinaVine* can only begin to suggest the intangible cultural heritage of the regions and cultures represented. In this regard, *Chinavine* does not come near to including all aspects of the intangible cultural heritage of Inner Mongolia. However, it is my opinion that what is represented, as described above and on *ChinaVine.org*, is consistent with a conception of culture that includes the intangible as defined earlier in this study. It is important to recognize that *ChinaVine*, as an early effort to communicate about China's cultural heritage, does assist an English speaking and reading audience to a view of China that is respectful of Chinese scholarship and the commitment to the intangible aspects of culture. Through the academic and cultural exchange associated with *ChinaVine* the awareness of protecting traditional culture meets the intention of ICH's Conventions.

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