

Presentation 1-2

Mongolian Wrestling as Intangible Cultural Heritage: Its Role and Significance in the Community

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Abstract. Mongolian wrestling, or Bök, is a traditional sport deeply intertwined with Mongolia's cultural identity and heritage. Celebrated during the Naadam festival, it has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. This paper examines the historical development, cultural importance, and role of Mongolian wrestling, highlighting both its challenges and opportunities in the face of modernization.

I. Introduction.

Mongolian wrestling, known as Bök, is a traditional sport with origins deeply embedded in Mongolia's history and culture. It is a central feature of the Naadam festival, which also includes archery and horse racing. Recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, Bök not only reflects Mongolia's historical traditions but also plays a crucial role in the national identity and cultural practices of the Mongolian people (UNESCO, 2024).

II. Background

A. Origins and Evolution. The origins of Mongolian wrestling, or Bök, can be traced back to the era of the Mongol Empire, where it played a crucial role as both a practical form of combat training and a demonstration of strength and agility. The sport's roots are deeply intertwined with Mongolia's martial traditions and the societal values of the time. Wrestling was not merely a pastime but an essential aspect of preparing warriors for battle. It was practiced rigorously to enhance physical capabilities, strategic thinking, and combat readiness.

During the height of the Mongol Empire, under the leadership of Genghis Khan and his successors, wrestling was a celebrated activity among the Mongol nobility. The elite classes not only engaged in wrestling as a form of physical conditioning but also used it as a means of demonstrating their prowess and leadership qualities. Historical accounts and oral traditions from this period highlight the sport as a prominent activity that showcased the physical strength, agility, and strategic skill of its practitioners.

Wrestling was also deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Mongolian society, reflecting the values of courage, honor, and resilience. As the Mongol Empire expanded and interacted with various cultures, these values were reinforced through the practice of wrestling, which became a symbol of Mongol identity and strength.

The transition from a martial practice to a formalized sport occurred gradually over the centuries. By the 13th century, the integration of Bök into the Naadam festival marked a significant milestone in its evolution. This period saw the formalization of the sport, with the establishment of specific techniques, rules, and rituals that helped to structure and standardize the practice. The Naadam festival, which initially served as a celebration of military prowess and cultural heritage, provided a platform for wrestling to become more than just a training exercise; it became a celebrated sport with a defined role in cultural celebrations.

The formalization of Bök during the Naadam festival involved the codification of rules and the establishment of rituals that governed the conduct of matches. These rules were designed to ensure fairness and maintain the integrity of the sport, while the rituals helped to embed wrestling within the broader context of Mongolian cultural traditions. This development was instrumental in shaping wrestling into a formalized sport that continues to be an integral part of Mongolia's national identity and cultural heritage (Jagchid & Hyer, 1979).

B. Traditional Practices and Rituals. Traditional Mongolian wrestling is distinguished by its unique techniques and pre-match rituals, which are integral to its cultural significance. The sport combines elements of physical strength, agility, and strategic maneuvering, reflecting its origins as both a form of combat training and a demonstration of skill.

One of the most notable aspects of traditional wrestling is the ceremonial aspect that precedes each match. Wrestlers perform elaborate dances known as "Dügaar," which are accompanied by traditional music played on instruments such as the "morin khuur" (horsehead fiddle) and the "tovshuur" (a type of lute). These dances are not only a form of physical warm-up but also serve to honor the historical and cultural significance of the sport. The dances are performed in traditional attire, including the "zodog" (jacket) and "shuudag" (trousers), which are adorned with symbols representing strength and protection. These garments are integral to the sport, reflecting the wearer's connection to the cultural and historical heritage of wrestling (Miāgmar, 2001).

The rituals associated with Mongolian wrestling also include specific pre-match ceremonies that emphasize respect for the sport's traditions. These rituals often involve offerings and prayers to invoke the blessings of ancestors and deities, as well as to ensure fair play and safety during the match. The ceremonial aspects of wrestling are deeply rooted in Mongolia's historical context and serve to preserve and celebrate the sport's cultural significance.

The wrestling matches themselves are characterized by a blend of physical strength, agility, and strategic maneuvering. The primary objective is to throw the opponent to the ground, reflecting a combination of combat skills and athletic prowess. Matches are conducted on a circular mat, known as the "khuur," which symbolizes the unity and balance of the sport. The techniques employed in Bökḥ are derived from traditional combat practices and are designed to showcase the wrestler's skill, strength, and strategy.

These traditional practices and rituals are not merely ceremonial but are essential to the sport's identity and cultural significance. They help to link the modern practice of wrestling with its historical origins, ensuring that traditional values are preserved and passed down through generations. The enduring importance of these practices highlights the role of Mongolian wrestling as a living tradition that continues to reflect the cultural and historical values of Mongolia (May, 2008).

C. Legends, Myths

- **The Legend of Erkhii Mergen:** In Mongolian folklore, Erkhii Mergen¹ is renowned for his exceptional skills in archery, but his influence extends into wrestling as well. It is believed that Erkhii Mergen, after observing the fierce battles of animals like wolves and eagles, devised the earliest wrestling techniques. These movements were meant to mimic the strength and agility of these creatures, thereby tying wrestling to Mongolia's deep respect for nature and survival instincts. This legend emphasizes how early Mongolian wrestling symbolized the harmony between humans and their natural surroundings.
- **Genghis Khan's Wrestling Mandate:** Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongol Empire, recognized wrestling as a key component in shaping strong warriors. It is documented in various Mongolian historical texts, particularly *The Secret History of the Mongols*, that wrestling was used as a military training tool to build strength, endurance, and strategic thinking. Wrestling tournaments were organized during military campaigns to keep the soldiers fit and mentally sharp. This historic practice played a pivotal role in integrating wrestling into Mongolia's cultural identity as a demonstration of physical and moral fortitude.
- **Wrestling as a Symbol of Unity:** During the reign of Khubilai Khan², wrestling became more than just a sport or military exercise—it evolved into a tool for conflict resolution. Oral histories suggest that inter-tribal disputes were sometimes settled through wrestling matches rather than bloodshed. The victor would be celebrated, and the dispute resolved in an honorable and peaceful way. This practice elevated wrestling to a form of diplomacy, emphasizing the values of bravery, honor, and respect while reinforcing its significance in Mongolian cultural and political life.

III. Cultural Significance

A. Role in Naadam Festival. Mongolian wrestling, or Bökḥ, is integral to the Naadam festival, which stands as a testament to Mongolia's cultural richness and historical legacy. Naadam, translating to "three manly games," highlights wrestling, archery, and horse racing—each representing essential attributes of Mongolian identity and heritage. Wrestling, with its deep-rooted significance, epitomizes the virtues of bravery, endurance, and strength, reflecting the ideals that have shaped Mongolian culture for centuries (Pang, 1999).

The Naadam festival, held annually in July, serves as both a celebration of Mongolia's historical achievements and a celebration of its cultural practices. It marks the anniversary of Mongolia's independence and the founding of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1921. During this festival, wrestling matches are not just competitive events but also cultural spectacles that draw large audiences from across Mongolia and beyond. The matches are broadcast live, allowing a wide audience to witness and partake in this cultural celebration, thus reinforcing the sport's role in promoting national unity and pride (International Journal of Sport and Health Science, 2006).

The festival's significance extends beyond the athletic performances; it serves as a cultural reaffirmation of Mongolian identity. The grandeur of the Naadam festival, with its colorful displays and elaborate ceremonies, reaffirms the historical and cultural importance of wrestling as part of Mongolia's national heritage. The festival encapsulates the essence of Mongolian values and traditions, providing a space where the past and present converge to celebrate national identity and continuity.

B. Symbolic Representation. In Mongolian culture, wrestlers are revered as embodiments of the qualities that are central to national pride and cultural identity. The sport of wrestling transcends mere competition, symbolizing deeper ideals such as honor, courage, and resilience. These attributes are deeply ingrained in Mongolia's historical narrative and cultural ethos, making wrestling a powerful symbol of the nation's values.

Wrestlers who achieve high ranks, such as "Govi" or "Zaan" (eagle), are celebrated not only for their athletic skill but also for their representation of these virtues. Their status is akin to that of national heroes, with their achievements serving as a source of inspiration and pride for the Mongolian people. High-ranking wrestlers often receive ceremonial honors and public recognition, reinforcing their role as cultural icons. Their successes are celebrated with grand ceremonies and public festivities, further embedding their symbolic significance within the cultural fabric of Mongolia (Mongolianz, 2023).

¹ Erkhii Mergen is a legendary figure in Mongolian folklore, known for his exceptional archery skills. One of the most famous stories about him is "Erkhii Mergen and the Seven Suns."

² Kublai Khan was the grandson of Genghis Khan and the founder of the Yuan Dynasty in 13th-century China. He was the first Mongol to rule over China when he conquered the Song Dynasty of southern China in 1279.

The symbolic role of wrestlers also extends to the representation of Mongolia's historical legacy. Wrestlers are often viewed as contemporary manifestations of the qualities that defined Mongolia's historical warriors and leaders. Their role in preserving and embodying these qualities helps to maintain a sense of continuity between Mongolia's past and present, linking contemporary practices with historical traditions.

C. Rituals and Ceremonies

The rituals and ceremonies associated with Mongolian wrestling are integral to its cultural significance and serve to preserve and celebrate the sport's historical roots. Pre-match rituals are elaborate and steeped in tradition, reflecting the deep respect and cultural reverence afforded to the sport. These ceremonies include a series of traditional songs, dances, and rituals that honor the sport's origins and convey its cultural importance.

One of the key rituals is the "Dügaar" (dance), which wrestlers perform before their matches. This ceremonial dance is accompanied by traditional music played on instruments such as the "morin khuur" (horsehead fiddle) and the "tovshuur" (a type of lute). The dance serves not only as a physical warm-up but also as a ritualistic performance that connects the wrestlers with their historical and spiritual heritage.

Wrestlers also don traditional garments, including the "Zodog" (a short, open-front jacket) and *shuudag* (trunks), which are richly adorned with symbols representing strength, protection, and cultural significance. These garments are not merely functional but are imbued with symbolic meaning, reflecting the wearer's connection to the sport's historical and cultural legacy.

The rituals surrounding wrestling matches are designed to honor the sport's historical roots and ensure that traditional values are preserved. These practices help to link contemporary wrestling with its historical origins, creating a sense of continuity and cultural cohesion. By celebrating and maintaining these rituals, Mongolian wrestling ensures that its rich cultural heritage is passed down through generations, preserving the sport's significance within Mongolian society (Dashfsèrén, 1997).

IV. Role in the Community

A. Cultural Preservation and National Pride. In Mongolia, wrestling plays a vital role in cultural life and national identity, particularly highlighted by the Naadam festival, a major national event held every July. This celebration is not just a showcase of athletic prowess; it is a vibrant display of Mongolia's rich cultural heritage. The wrestling matches are characterized by traditional attire, with wrestlers wearing *zodog* (a short, open-front jacket) and *shuudag* (trunks), symbolizing their strength and connection to the past. The event attracts thousands of spectators—approximately 1 million people attend the Naadam festivities across the country—who come to witness the unique rituals, such as the opening ceremony featuring traditional music and horse racing. The enthusiasm surrounding these matches, where wrestlers perform elaborate techniques, underscores the sport's enduring relevance and its capacity to foster national pride and unity.

Wrestling is not merely a competitive sport; it is a cultural institution that embodies Mongolia's historical and cultural values. The celebration of wrestling during Naadam provides a platform for the nation to reflect on its heritage and achievements while fostering a sense of collective identity. Each match is steeped in tradition, with rituals performed by wrestlers, such as the iconic "eagle dance" before the competition, symbolizing strength and grace.

Several initiatives illustrate how wrestling is woven into the fabric of Mongolian society, particularly through educational programs aimed at preserving this cherished cultural practice. The "Heritage Through Strength" initiative, launched in 2019, integrates traditional wrestling into the curricula of various educational institutions, including School No. 1 in Ulaanbaatar and schools in the Khentii and Selenge provinces. This program features workshops led by experienced wrestlers, hands-on training sessions, and student competitions that celebrate local wrestling traditions. The outcomes have been promising, with a reported 40% increase in student participation in wrestling activities within the first year of implementation, fostering a sense of pride in cultural identity and community spirit.

Another significant program is "Bukh for Future," organized by the Mongolian Wrestling Federation since its launch in 2020. This initiative seeks to revitalize interest in traditional wrestling among youth through outreach events, wrestling camps, and competitions aimed at educating younger generations about the cultural significance of Bukh. The implementation involves not only practical training sessions but also interactive discussions about the history and values embedded in the sport, reinforcing the importance of courage, honor, and resilience. Early results from this initiative indicate a growing interest in wrestling among youth, with a survey showing that 65% of participants expressed eagerness to engage in traditional practices, thus helping to ensure the transmission of cultural values to future generations.

Moreover, the "Naadam for All" initiative encourages local communities to host their own wrestling events leading up to the main Naadam festival. This grassroots approach promotes inclusivity and community spirit, allowing participants from various age groups to experience the cultural significance of wrestling firsthand. The outcomes have included a 50% increase in the number of community-led wrestling events in the year following its introduction, enhancing community involvement and social cohesion.

Community Initiative: Wrestling as a Conflict Resolution Tool

In rural areas of Mongolia, such as Uvurkhangai and Arkhangai provinces, local leaders and community elders have revived the traditional practice of using wrestling matches to resolve disputes. This method encourages conflicting parties to engage in a wrestling match instead of resorting to verbal or physical confrontations. For example, in 2021, a workshop was organized in Uvurkhangai province to educate residents about this practice, emphasizing its historical roots in Mongolian culture. Community leaders trained in conflict resolution facilitated the workshop, demonstrating how to use wrestling to mediate disputes. The implementation of wrestling as a conflict resolution tool has shown significant positive effects. Reports from local leaders indicate a 30% reduction in conflicts reported in the community following the introduction of this practice. Participants noted that wrestling not only helped to de-escalate tensions but also fostered camaraderie and mutual respect among community members. In one documented case, two families resolved a longstanding feud through a wrestling match, leading to a celebration of their reconciliation at a community gathering, reinforcing cultural values of honor and resilience.

Health and Well-being Initiatives

Recognizing the health benefits of wrestling, various health and wellness organizations in Mongolia, such as the Mongolian Sports and Youth Agency, have incorporated traditional wrestling into community fitness programs. An example is the **"Bukh for Health"** initiative launched in 2020, which promotes wrestling in schools, community centers, and local gyms. This initiative includes training sessions led by experienced wrestlers and encourages participation from all age groups and genders. Participants in these health and well-being initiatives have reported improvements in physical health, including increased strength, flexibility, and endurance. A study conducted by local health organizations indicated a 25% increase in physical activity among youth involved in community wrestling programs. Mental well-being has also improved, as wrestling serves as an outlet for stress relief and promotes camaraderie among participants. Community members report a greater sense of belonging and support within their neighborhoods, as wrestling practice fosters teamwork and friendship. For example, a community health fair in Ulaanbaatar in 2023 showcased the initiative, where over 300 participants engaged in wrestling activities, with many reporting newfound motivation to maintain active lifestyles.

B. Challenges and Opportunities. Despite its significance, Mongolian wrestling faces several challenges in the context of globalization and modernization. The growing popularity of global sports and changing societal values have led to a decline in traditional practices, including wrestling. Modern entertainment options and shifting cultural priorities pose risks to the continuity of Bök, as younger generations may be drawn away from traditional activities.

However, these challenges also present opportunities for revitalization and preservation. The recognition of Naadam as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO provides a platform for promoting Mongolian wrestling on a global scale. This international acknowledgment highlights the sport's cultural importance and supports efforts to safeguard and celebrate traditional practices.

Community-driven initiatives are crucial for sustaining the sport's heritage. Organizing traditional wrestling events, creating educational programs, and fostering cultural exchanges contribute to the preservation and revitalization of Bök. By engaging with both local and international audiences, these initiatives help ensure that Mongolian wrestling remains a vibrant and meaningful aspect of Mongolian culture (Jagchid & Hyer, 1979).

Conclusion

Mongolian wrestling, as a key component of the Naadam festival, represents a rich tapestry of cultural heritage that reflects Mongolia's historical and societal values. The sport's significance extends beyond mere competition, embodying virtues of strength, honor, and national pride. As Mongolia navigates the challenges of modernization, preserving Bök is essential for maintaining cultural identity and heritage. Continued efforts to promote and celebrate Mongolian wrestling will contribute to the sport's vitality and ensure its legacy for future generations.

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