

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

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. Historical 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 (Miagmar, 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 Bökh 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).

III. Cultural Significance

A. Role in Naadam Festival. Mongolian wrestling, or Bökh, 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).

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" (jacket) and "shuudag" (trousers), 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 (Dashtseren, 1997).

IV. Role in the Community

A. Cultural Preservation and National Pride. In Mongolia, wrestling continues to play a vital role in cultural life and national identity. The Naadam festival remains a major national event that captures the attention of the entire country. The enthusiasm surrounding the wrestling matches, both among participants and spectators, demonstrates the sport's enduring relevance and its role in fostering national pride and unity.

Wrestling is not just a sport but 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. The prominence of wrestling in public life underscores its significance as a symbol of national pride and cultural continuity.

B. Educational and Social Impact. Mongolian wrestling has a profound educational and social impact, extending beyond the realm of sports. Training programs and wrestling schools play a crucial role in preserving and promoting the sport. These programs provide young people with opportunities to engage with their cultural heritage while developing physical and mental skills. Through wrestling, participants learn valuable life lessons such as discipline, respect, and teamwork, which contribute to their personal growth and social development.

Additionally, wrestling serves as an educational tool in local communities and schools. By incorporating the sport into educational curricula, communities ensure that younger generations gain an appreciation for the significance of Bök and its role in Mongolia's cultural heritage. This approach helps to foster a deeper understanding of cultural traditions and reinforces the importance of preserving these practices for future generations (Sendenjav Dulam, 1999).

C. 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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