

Cultural Value of Archery: Tenacious Vitality Based on Universality and Diversity

Seunghwan Lee

Council Member of Korean Traditional Archery (*Hwalssoji*¹) Culture Society,
Former Director of UNESCO/APCEIU(Asia-Pacific Center of Education for International Understanding)

Introduction

Archery is one of humanity's greatest cultural heritages, with a long and rich history. It is estimated that humans began using bows and arrows about 65,000 years ago. As a highly universal culture found almost everywhere in the world, archery has developed in various ways, influenced by regional conditions and needs.

Archery revolutionized human capabilities, playing a crucial role in hunting and warfare. Its significance often extends beyond the mere function of a weapon; it has become an important element of rituals and festivals in many countries. It has also evolved into a sport and leisure activity, as well as a form of mental and physical education. In this way, archery has become deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of humanity.

The principles of archery are simple, allowing it to develop as one of the most universal cultural practices. The purpose and use of archery have expanded, with diverse types of bows and arrows being devised. Communities have identified and developed various potentials of archery, advancing it as a significant cultural practice. These efforts continue to this day, making archery deserving of the title of a living cultural heritage.

After the introduction of firearms in the 16th and 17th centuries, the importance of archery as weaponry declined rapidly around the world. However, the cultural vitality inherent in archery did not vanish. Despite various historical, social, and cultural challenges, the vitality of archery remains strong in many parts of the world. Various archery traditions have persisted, evolved, or even been revived after periods of discontinuity. This enduring vitality highlights the value of archery as a representative living cultural heritage of humanity.

In this presentation, I will first examine some cases that demonstrate the resilience of archery culture. Then, I will suggest two important characteristics of archery: its universality and diversity, which I believe are the sources of its vitality. Finally, I will share the significance of the designation of Korean Traditional Archery as a national intangible cultural heritage and discuss our tasks and challenges in this regard, particularly in relation to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage inscription program.

I. The Enduring Vitality of Archery Culture

Some European countries and the United States initiated the transformation of traditional archery into an international sport. It was adopted as one of the 19 sports in the second Olympic Games held in Paris in 1900. However, it was dropped from the Olympics after four events from 1900 to 1920 due to confusion over the rules and a lack of organizational

¹ Hwalssoji is Korean term for archery.

capacity.

In 1931, the World Archery (WA) was founded, and through continuous efforts such as standardizing equipment and game rules, archery successfully re-entered the Olympics at the Munich Games in 1972. The WA also increased interest by adopting exciting tournament formats. In addition to organizing Olympic archery events, the WA hosts the World Archery Championships every two years. It has diversified its events to include compound bows, barebows, and has expanded archery styles to include indoor and field archery, thereby broadening its appeal. Starting with seven countries in 1931, the WA has grown to more than 160 affiliated member associations representing around 30 million archers worldwide. Here, we see the successful transition of war archery into a popular international sport. It's important to remember that this transformation has had a positive impact by drawing attention to various traditional archery cultures around the world. An increasing number of countries and regions are showing greater interest in their traditional archery cultures, making efforts to identify, respect, preserve, and develop unique identities within their own archery traditions.

In recent years, traditional archery has experienced a notable resurgence across Europe, with many people drawn to it as a way to reconnect with their cultural heritage. Numerous countries have rich archery traditions, and the revival of interest in historical events has spurred greater participation. The European Historical Open (EHO) is a significant event in the traditional and historical archery calendar. It is an annual competition that gathers archers from across Europe and beyond to compete using traditional bows and arrows, often replicating historical designs.

Last August, the European Historical Open (EHO) 2024 was held in Poland, with participation from over 200 archers representing 17 different countries.

In Asia, traditional archery is also thriving.

The Asian region, with its long history and diverse cultures, has a rich tradition of archery. Although many of these traditions were once prominent, they lost their competitiveness as weapons with the advent of firearms. In most cases, traditional archery was forgotten and disregarded as a marginal cultural practice, and its value was not properly recognized. Fortunately, there have been efforts to repurpose archery as a leisure or sports activity, as well as a cultural and educational pursuit. Interest in traditional archery cultures has been increasing, and efforts to recognize its cultural value and revive it are steadily being made. These initiatives are expected to help achieve a deeper and more complete understanding of traditional archery as a proud cultural heritage of humanity. I would now like to briefly explore the vitality of archery culture as it has developed in some parts of Asia.

Mongolia and Central Asia

In Mongolia, following its independence in 1911, archery rapidly regained popularity as one of the three traditional games practiced at the Naadam festival, along with wrestling and horse racing. In 2010, the Mongolian Naadam festival was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Recently, Central Asian countries have shown a keen interest in their traditional archery practices. In 2012, Turkic-speaking countries decided to host the "World Nomad Games (WNGs)" with support from UNESCO. The games were hosted in Kyrgyzstan up to the third Games, and in 2022, Türkiye hosted the fourth Games. The fifth Games were successfully held in September 2024 in Astana, Kazakhstan, with around 300 archers from 35 countries participating in traditional target archery events. The World Nomad Games are expected to play a significant role in the international revitalization of traditional archery.

Türkiye

Türkiye has a long history of archery, with traditional archery well documented by the Ottoman Turks (1299–1922). In the Ottoman era, archery was not just for warfare but also an important means of training the body and mind. However, this culture rapidly declined with the fall of the Empire. Recently, efforts to preserve and revive traditional archery have led to its registration on the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019.

Bhutan

Since joining the United Nations in 1971, Bhutan has adopted archery as its national sport and has promoted it nationwide. Traditional archery has become the most beloved sport and a significant cultural element for all Bhutanese. Bhutan's success in recognizing and promoting the intrinsic value of traditional archery as both a national sport and a cultural heritage is exemplary.

Southeast Asia

Interest in traditional archery is also increasing in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, the traditional archery practice known as *jemparingan*, which began in the 18th century in Yogyakarta on the island of Java, continues to this day. This style of archery is characterized by a unique sitting posture with legs crossed and requires traditional Javanese attire.

In Malaysia, there is also growing interest in traditional archery. Recently, the official recognition of the Traditional Archery Association Malaysia (TAAM) marks an increase in governmental support for the sport.

Japan

Japan has developed a unique art of archery using an asymmetrical longbow known as the *yumi*. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, archery was systematized for educational purposes and was introduced as a subject in school curricula in 1895. It was then promoted and spread among the general public. The practice was renamed from *Kyujutsu* (archery technique) to *Kyudo* (the way of the bow), emphasizing the philosophical and disciplined aspects of the art.

China

China boasts a long and rich archery culture. However, with the advent of firearms, the use of the bow diminished, leading to a decline in the status of archery after the Opium Wars. The

Cultural Revolution (1966–76) nearly wiped out traditional bow-making workshops.

Fortunately, in the late 20th century, passionate efforts to restore and revive traditional archery began. In 1998, artisans rediscovered Yang Wentong, the ninth-generation bowyer of the traditional bow workshop *Ju Yuan Hao* (聚元號), and supported the revival of traditional bow and arrow production. *Ju Yuan Hao* has since been registered as a "Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage," and extensive efforts have been made to revive traditional archery culture, including the restoration of rituals such as the *Xiangshe* (鄉射) ceremony from the Zhou dynasty.

Traditional archery has been adopted as an educational subject in many universities and schools, and in 2019, the "China Education Modernization 2035" plan explicitly mentioned the promotion of traditional archery in physical education.

Korean Traditional Archery

The history of archery among the Korean people is long and rich. Depictions of archery can be found in the *Bangudae* Petroglyphs in *Ulsan*, estimated to be from 7,000 years ago, as well as in the Hunting Mural from the *Goguryeo* tombs of the 5th century. Many historical records describe the Korean people as skilled in both making and using bows. Notably, the *gakgung* (Korean horn bow) is praised for its exceptional performance and elegant design. Korean archery played a crucial role in military contexts, yielding outstanding results. However, its significance extended beyond military functions, evolving to serve ceremonial purposes as well. Archery became a key element in communal rituals and festivals, enjoyed by all community members regardless of age or gender.

The educational significance of archery has also been recognized and increasingly emphasized. During the *Goguryeo* period (37 BC–AD 668), young students at *Gyeongdang* (youth schools) were taught both the Confucian classics and archery. During the *Joseon* Dynasty (AD 1392–1897), archery was further developed not only for training the mind and body but also for cultivating a righteous spirit.

By the latter part of the *Joseon* Dynasty, civil archery fields known as "*Hwalteo*" began to emerge. These unique spaces allowed people to practice archery for various purposes, including leisure, sport, education, and social activities. This diversity of functions is a significant reason why Korean archery has survived without interruption. In "*Hwalteo*," archers shoot arrows at targets set 145 meters away, one of the longest distances in target archery worldwide. This long-range practice is thought to be effective for forgetting the target and focusing the mind.

Most *Hwalteos* are managed by their members with some support from local governments. As of 2023, there are 393 such ranges across the country, with 32 of them being over 100 years old. Although archery is flourishing, the focus has recently shifted toward competitive target shooting, raising concerns that the cultural and educational values inherent in traditional archery are gradually being lost.

Fortunately, the government recognized the cultural significance of Korean archery by

designating it as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage on July 30, 2020. This was an important step toward preserving and advancing the cultural value of Korean archery.

II. The Source of Archery Culture's Vitality: Universality and Diversity

As previously discussed, the popularity of modern archery, including Olympic archery, is increasing day by day. Alongside this trend, traditional archery is also experiencing a resurgence. Its various values, beyond its function as a weapon, are being reexamined and reevaluated. Where does the vitality and resilience of archery culture, even after long periods of neglect, come from? I believe the source of this vitality lies in the immense universality and diversity of archery itself. Let me begin with the universality of archery.

1. Universality: Archery for All

The principles of archery are simple and easy to grasp. You attach a string to a long stick, push the stick with one hand, pull the string with the other, and release the arrow. That's all. This simplicity makes archery accessible to everyone, everywhere. The bow serves not only as an effective weapon but also as a recreational tool and toy that people of all ages and genders can enjoy. In many myths and old stories, we see babies, children, adults, and the elderly engaging in archery. This inclusivity sets archery apart from other weapons like swords and spears.

In fact, archery was the first sport to include a women's event at the St. Louis Olympics in 1904. In the 19th century, many women's colleges in the United States actively promoted archery as part of physical education. In many Hwalteo, the traditional Korean archery fields, you can see women, children, and older individuals all participating in archery.

Archery was also featured in the first Paralympic Games held in Rome in 1960, playing a pioneering role in the development of the Paralympic movement. Archery had already proven effective in the rehabilitation of injured soldiers after World War II. In the Paralympics, individuals with various disabilities, including spinal injuries, visual impairments, and cerebral palsy, can participate in archery. More recently, archery has been used not only for physical rehabilitation but also for enhancing psychological well-being, such as boosting confidence and improving concentration.

2. Diversity

Another key characteristic of archery is its diversity. Archery has evolved in highly varied ways, adapting to the environments and needs of different regions, and this diversification continues today. The uses of archery have expanded considerably. Although its military role has disappeared, archery has grown into an important international sport and is becoming increasingly popular in hunting and leisure activities. It also plays a central role in community festivals and is valued for its educational benefits, including physical and mental training. Its applications even extend to health improvement and therapy. There is great diversity not only in bows and arrows but also in archery techniques, styles, shooting methods, locations, distances, and targets.

There are few regions without myths or legends related to archery, and there is significant

variation in archery festivals, games, equipment, attire, rules, procedures, and the etiquette and culture of archery. This diversity is a source of archery culture's vitality and resilience and is believed to be a driving force for the creative development of archery culture in the future. The revival and innovative advancement of diverse traditional archery practices can greatly enrich humanity's future, representing a significant blessing.

III. The Significance of Korean Archery's Designation as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage and Future Challenges

On July 30, 2020, Korean traditional archery was designated as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage. Although the gungsijang (craftsman of bows and arrows) had been designated as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009, this was the first time that archery itself received such recognition.

The Cultural Heritage Administration stated, "Archery is a cultural practice that exists not only in our country but also worldwide. However, Korean archery has uniquely maintained its traditions from ancient times to the present day. The methods of making and handling bows, the techniques of shooting, and the attitudes and mindset during archery all represent the cultural heritage unique to our nation."

The Administration also expressed its intention to actively support traditional archery, stating, "We plan to promote academic research and programs to revitalize archery as a cultural heritage, allowing the public to share its value and participate in its preservation."

Many archery organizations and members, including the Korea Traditional Archery Association, warmly welcomed the designation. They hope that this recognition will increase interest and pride in the cultural aspects of Korean archery and facilitate the widespread sharing of archery culture both domestically and internationally.

In 2021, the Korea Traditional Archery Society was established to promote research and educational activities for the preservation and development of archery culture. The society is also working to strengthen international cooperation in the field of traditional archery. Last September, it organized a Korean delegation to participate in the 5th World Nomad Games Target Archery Competition in Astana and co-organized a special seminar on traditional archery as a shared heritage in cooperation with UNESCO ICHCAP.

Korean Traditional Archery Communities' Interest in UNESCO Intangible Heritage Listing
Korean traditional archery communities have shown a strong interest in pursuing UNESCO Intangible Heritage status. This designation is of great significance as it could substantially boost both domestic and international recognition of Korean archery culture, as well as increase government interest and support. However, there is intense competition among various cultural heritage candidates within the country seeking UNESCO listing, which requires significant resources and time for preparation.

When considering the approach for UNESCO listing, it may be worthwhile to explore the possibility of collaborating with other countries that share a common archery culture to pursue a joint inscription. Korean archery shares several similarities with the archery traditions of Central Asia, including the use of the gakgung (horn bow), dangung (short bow),

and the thumb-draw technique, suggesting a history of significant cultural exchange between these regions.

In the nomadic cultures of the northern regions, mounted archery was highly valued, which necessitated the use of short bows. The gakgung was a powerful short bow, and the thumb draw technique was developed to safely draw such a strong bow. Beyond these shared characteristics in bows and techniques, there are also numerous myths and stories related to archery. Archery plays a vital role in community rituals and festivals, and it has served various educational functions, including physical and mental training.

Currently, information about these shared archery cultures remains basic and limited.

Therefore, joint efforts are needed to conduct more diverse, in-depth, and systematic research and comparative studies, particularly focusing on regions with shared cultural heritage. Such research would not only support future efforts to achieve a joint UNESCO intangible heritage listing but also foster a sense of historical and cultural solidarity. It would help strengthen ties among countries in these regions that have been forgotten or have lost their connections.

Thank you.