CASE STUDY 26

Safeguarding measures for a New Year festival in China

The Qiang New Year festival was inscribed on the USL in 2009. It is celebrated by the Qiang ethnic group in China’s Sichuan Province on the first day of the tenth lunar month every year. Participants celebrate and offer thanks to the deities, seeking their continued benevolence for a fertile land, a prosperous population and a harmonious world. Through this ritual, the Qiang people seek to protect their environment as well as to promote social and family harmony. The celebration comprises a sacrifice to the mountain, a community celebration and sacrifices held in the family. A priest presides over the sacrifice to the mountain and prayers for favourable weather. The villagers dress in traditional costumes, sing and dance with great excitement and drink ‘sipped’ wine. Finally, the heads of families preside over ceremonies of family worship.

#### Threats to viability

Before the mid-1960s over 100 Qiang fortress villages used to celebrate the New Year festival. Today, that number has decreased to about 20 because of the disruption of the tradition during the Cultural Revolution, the more recent out-migration of workers from the villages and a declining interest in the festival among young people. A severe earthquake in 2008 caused the death of many tradition bearers and damaged places important for the rituals. Many ritual implements were also lost.

#### Safeguarding measures

For the sake of tourism, Qiang New Year festival activities were reintroduced in some villages. However, because the New Year festival activities in these villages had already ceased, local understanding of them and the level of participation have been low.

The preparation of the nomination file was preceded by the festival’s inscription, in June 2008, on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List and by the preparation by experts, at the request of the Sichuan Provincial Government, of a ‘Planning Outline for the Safeguarding of Qiang Culture’s Living Environment in an Experimental Area’ and a ‘Planning Outline for Post-earthquake Rescuing, Safeguarding and Reconstruction of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Sichuan Province’.

The following measures, aimed at revitalizing the Qiang New Year festival, have either been proposed or undertaken:

1. Cultural departments in the region carried out a field survey on the Qiang New Year festival to assess its viability after the earthquake.
2. The Sichuan Music and Dance Institute will establish a database: ‘Documentation on Inheritors of Qiang New Year’. From 2009 to 2011, Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding Centre of Sichuan Province has been allocated about US$250,000 to collect documentation pertaining to the festival. A series of studies on the Qiang New Year festival will be published by experts in Qiang culture.
3. Between 2009 and 2012, approximately US$33,000 were allocated annually to support twenty tradition bearers nominated by the Qiang people and approved by the National and Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding Experts Committee.
4. Tradition bearers were consulted to identify earthquake-damaged venues for Qiang New Year that was then restored by Qiang people skilled in traditional construction and decoration, with the assistance of their priests. Experienced craftspeople were invited to make utensils and objects used in the festival.
5. A Museum of Qiang New Year was constructed to raise awareness. The materials in the museum were supplied from research conducted by the Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding Centre of Sichuan Province.
6. Other museums and venues, promoting knowledge and awareness about the festival, will be built in villages of the region. Priests and tradition bearers will be invited to address audiences of different ages. Live demonstrations of the festival will be presented in museums.

For further information:

http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/USL/00305