

Three Worlds, One Laughter: Parallels in Folk Games of Thailand, China, And the Buryats of Inner Mongolia

¹Phra Paron Phunthasane (Jayanando Bhikkhu), ²Ananya Phunthasaen, Ph.D.,
³Pawalee Intarasompong*, Daoligeer

¹Ph.D student

Banzarov Buryat State University (BSU), Ulan-Ude, Russia

²Full time lecturer

Department of Marketing, MSME business school, Assumption University, Samuthprakarn, Thailand

³Ph.D students

East-Siberian State Institute of Culture (VSGIK), Ulan-Ude, Russia

*Corresponding author E-mail: pawalee.ru@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 06 Nov 2024

Revised: 24 Dec 2024

Accepted: 18 Jan 2025

ABSTRACT

Background: This comparative study examines how folk games in Thailand, China, and Buryat communities of Inner Mongolia constitute vital intangible cultural heritage. Despite contrasting environments—tropical lowlands, temperate farmlands, and vast steppes—these societies display remarkable parallels in children’s play, emphasizing minimal resources, intergenerational learning, and symbolic references to local beliefs.

Purpose: The research aims to identify shared structural features (e.g., chase-and-tag formats, team coordination) and uncover how ecological factors, religious traditions, and moral frameworks shape each group’s folk games. In highlighting universal themes alongside culture-specific adaptations, the study underscores folk games’ enduring significance in moral education and communal identity.

Methods: An integrative, literature-based qualitative approach underpins the inquiry. Sources include peer-reviewed articles, UNESCO reports, historical chronicles, and dissertations. A comparative matrix categorizes game types—chasing, object-tossing, racing—and documents associated social, pedagogical, and symbolic dimensions. Content analysis and triangulation procedures ensure consistent and reliable findings.

Findings: Results reveal that while Thai water-centric games reflect Buddhist renewal rites, Confucian ideals guide Chinese amusements such as touhu, and pastoral-nomadic heritage informs Buryat ankle-bone flicking. All three traditions historically rely on older generations to transmit rules and values, yet modern pressures—urbanization, digital media, and standardized events—pose challenges to their continuity.

Conclusion: By illuminating both universal and localized facets of children’s folk games, this study advocates adaptive preservation strategies. It highlights the importance of balancing authentic community-led practice with evolving social contexts, ensuring that these living traditions remain vibrant across generations.

Keyword: folk games, intangible cultural heritage, Thailand, China, Buryats, comparative anthropology

INTRODUCTION

Games have often been conceptualized as mirrors of a society's ethos, channels for enculturation, and vessels for preserving intangible heritage (Huizinga, 1955; Caillouis, 2001). In innumerable communities, play teaches children lessons in cooperation, ingenuity, physical prowess, and moral behavior. Rather than serving merely as fun diversions, games frequently contain coded norms, cosmological ideas, and historical experiences. Consequently, cross-cultural studies of folk games can illuminate how certain foundational tendencies in human play recur in diverse places while simultaneously underscoring the unique cultural patterns that shape local variations.

Within Asia, where rapid economic transformations and globalization have profoundly recast everyday routines, folk games persist as sites of social engagement and collective identity. Yet they struggle to compete with digital entertainment in many regions, generating worries that younger generations will sever direct connections to ancestral play customs (UNESCO, 2003). Efforts to sustain or revive these games, especially among children, have therefore attracted anthropologists, educators, and policymakers.

This article examines folk games in three particular cultural contexts: (1) Thailand in Southeast Asia, (2) China in East Asia, and (3) Buryat communities in Inner Mongolia in Northeast Asia. The selection of these groups rests on multiple considerations. First, Thailand, China, and the Buryat-populated areas of Inner Mongolia occupy markedly different ecosystems, ranging from tropical lowlands to temperate farmlands and vast grassland steppes. Second, each society possesses well-documented folk game traditions in ethnographies, local records, and intangible heritage catalogs (UNESCO Bangkok Office, 2012; Bulag, 1998). Third, they diverge significantly in religious orientation (Theravada Buddhism in Thailand; Confucian-inflected but multireligious China; and a shamanic-Buddhist, pastoral heritage among the Buryats), in languages, and in economic lifeways (agrarian versus nomadic). These contrasts make it possible to observe the varied local contexts influencing folk games while also identifying deeper universals of human play.

Significance of Studying Folk Games

Folk games carry layers of import for communities. They often function as pedagogical tools, social integrators, cultural repositories, and sometimes ceremonial activities. Scholars such as Tumen (2011) observe that these traditional amusements, whether or not explicitly framed as instructional, immerse children in practical skills and cultural narratives. When Thai children gather in temple courtyards to play circle-based singing games, for instance, they are developing rhythmic coordination and social empathy while referencing local spiritual beliefs (UNESCO Bangkok Office, 2012). In China, children strengthen agility and peer collaboration through the shuttlecock-kicking pastime known as *jianzi*. Buryat youth, meanwhile, engage in steppe-themed simulations of herding or “wolf versus sheep” chases that instill vigilance and group unity. Through these activities, children integrate communal values, folklore, and moral codes.

Folk games also serve as social integrators by blending age groups and extending respect to elders, whose presence can legitimize community gatherings. Equally significant, they act as repositories of cultural memory by embedding local lore, proverbs, or cosmological references that teach children about their environment and spiritual traditions. Ritual or ceremonial implications further enrich specific games, exemplified by Chinese dragon-boat racing or Thai water-splashing games during Songkran. While these activities are periodically rebranded as tourist attractions or festival events, they still spotlight how local knowledge is transmitted and dramatized. Notwithstanding their origins in particular locales, many such games exhibit notable similarities, including a preference for minimal equipment and an emphasis on moral conduct, aspects that likely stem from universal features of childhood play.

Threats to Continuity and Revitalization Efforts

With the proliferation of urban lifestyles and digital devices, intergenerational instruction in folk games has weakened. Parents face longer work hours, children devote more time to online pursuits, and formerly ubiquitous yard or street games are fading from everyday routines (Chan & Ma, 2019). Transnational media also overshadow homegrown oral traditions, especially in urban areas. A number

of projects aim to document or formalize folk games within cultural preservation frameworks. UNESCO's guidelines for intangible cultural heritage encourage communities to inventory and revitalize intangible traditions, including games (UNESCO, 2003).

In Thailand, some primary schools organize after-class clubs to promote local "ancient games," while in China, large-scale folk sports festivals feature games derived from various ethnic minority traditions (Wang, 2018; Tang, 2019). Among Buryats in Inner Mongolia, cultural centers stage events that showcase children's bone-shooting, youth wrestling, and ancestral rituals (Sneath, 2007). Nevertheless, attempts to institutionalize these games carry the potential risk of standardizing them to suit modern audiences, thereby threatening their fluid and child-led nature. Commercialization can also distort or reduce the meaningful spontaneity that once defined street or courtyard play. Researchers call for balanced approaches that encourage local involvement and innovation while preventing the ossification of what should remain a living cultural form (Smith & Akagawa, 2009; Malinowski, 1922).

OBJECTIVES

The study pursues three key objectives. First, it aims to document and compare a representative sample of historically significant (and in some cases still practiced) folk games from Thailand, China, and Buryat communities in Inner Mongolia. By examining their structural components, rules, equipment, and patterns of player interaction, the research endeavors to determine how different ecological, social, and cultural settings influence the form of these games.

Second, the study provides a functional and symbolic analysis of folk games in these societies, assessing how they have traditionally supported children's physical, moral, and cultural learning processes. This objective involves examining both overt educational values—for instance, the way games improve motor coordination—and implicit symbolic references to animals, spirits, or local lore.

Third, it identifies and interprets convergent and divergent elements across the three contexts. Convergences include recurring motifs such as cooperative chasing or improvised play objects, while divergences reflect distinct religious or environmental contexts (for example, water-based activities in Thailand, Confucian moral overtones in Chinese games, and pastoral references in Buryat play). Through these objectives, the research addresses how human creativity manifests similarly across different societies, yet remains uniquely rooted in each community's cultural landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Folk games are increasingly recognized as an essential component of intangible cultural heritage, in line with UNESCO's (2003) definition, which emphasizes the living, practice-based nature of traditions that communities inherit. Unlike static artifacts, intangible cultural heritage draws its strength from continual enactment by practitioners who transmit skills and knowledge across generations. Scholars such as Smith and Akagawa (2009) stress that mere documentation does not suffice to preserve these traditions; rather, they must be actively embodied and performed to retain their vitality. Anthropological analyses also clarify how intangible cultural expressions, from music to ritual practices, shape collective identities (Callan, 2017). While dance or musical forms may foreground performance and spectacle, folk games distinctly revolve around reciprocal involvement, competition, and adaptability. Huizinga (1955) frames these activities as "cultural microcosms," because they operate with rules that often reflect societal norms related to fairness, respect, and hierarchy. In certain Chinese contexts, for example, older children serve as mentors or leaders in traditional games, thus reinforcing established cultural structures (Chan & Ma, 2019).

In Thailand, folk games integrate physical play with spiritual and social values steeped in Buddhist traditions (Damrong Rajanubhab, 2001). Children in rural areas frequently craft handmade toys using readily available natural materials, such as coconut husks or banana stems. Circle games performed in village settings often include chanting and songs, many of which either invoke local deities or coincide with significant festivals like Songkran. This annual water festival holds immense symbolic importance for washing away negativity and welcoming renewal (UNESCO Bangkok Office, 2012). However, concerns have emerged about a gradual decline in these folk practices, owing largely to the

proliferation of digital entertainment devices among younger generations. Nevertheless, some Thai schools are now incorporating these age-old games into extracurricular activities, affirming their continued relevance for cultivating dexterity, empathy, and creative thinking.

China likewise has a long history of folk and traditional games, some tracing back more than two millennia (Gernet, 1962; Wang, 2018). Many of these games historically served to instill Confucian principles, exemplified by activities like *touhu*, which entails tossing arrows into a distant vessel to nurture focus and propriety. Significant diversity also exists in the folk amusements of China's numerous ethnic minorities, such as Mongols, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and the Zhuang, who showcase local variants including horse racing and intricate stilt-walking ceremonies (Roux, 1984). Meanwhile, in contemporary urban settings, street games like *Lao Ying Zhua Xiao Ji* ("Eagle Catches the Chicks") continue to be played, although mounting academic expectations can overshadow leisure time. Government-sponsored cultural events occasionally highlight minority folk sports, harnessing them to reinforce national unity. Yet, critics such as Tang (2019) argue that these official demonstrations risk transforming community-based games into performative spectacles that lose touch with the spontaneity of child-led play.

The Buryats of Inner Mongolia also demonstrate how folk games can merge regional and cultural dimensions, linking them to pastoral-nomadic traditions (Bulag, 1998). Buryat communities, sometimes associated with the Baikal region, extend into parts of Mongolia and China's Inner Mongolia. Their traditional amusements frequently incorporate equestrian skills, archery, and playful engagements with animal bones. *Shagai naadan*, or ankle-bone games, remain a vivid example: each face of the bone represents different livestock, turning a simple piece of bone into a multifaceted cultural symbol. In the twentieth century, political upheavals disrupted many indigenous customs, yet recent revival movements have reintroduced folk games at local festivals and community centers. These activities often become occasions for reaffirming ancestral ties, echoing Mead's (1930) observations on how collective play strengthens kinship and cultural bonds.

A closer look at folk games across Asian contexts reveals at least three significant overlaps. First, children's reliance on minimal resources—sticks, stones, seeds, or cloth scraps—underscores the inventive spirit shared among communities of various economic means (Caillois, 2001). Second, many of these games hinge on collaboration or teamwork, emphasizing communal harmony and imparting important lessons on unity and cooperation. Third, the presence of animistic imagery is striking, as young participants often imitate or reference animals—whether serpents, eagles, or wolves—rooted in local folklore (Tumen, 2011). Theorists like Mead (1934) and Elias and Dunning (1986) suggest that these parallels arise from universal needs for socialization, the honing of motor skills, and conflict resolution. Although local environments shape the themes and symbols unique to each culture, the foundational impulses of play exhibit considerable commonality.

Despite expanding interest, many existing studies focus on a single culture or region, while cross-cultural investigations more often examine formalized sports rather than everyday children's games (Geertz, 1973; Roux, 1984). Within English-language research, the Buryat case in particular remains relatively unexplored, as discussions tend to concentrate on adult-focused spectacles like wrestling or large-scale horse races. Consequently, an opportunity exists to develop comparative insights into Thailand, China, and Buryat communities by highlighting child-centered folk games. Understanding how young participants experience these practices can illuminate broader patterns of child development and knowledge transfer, while also capturing the distinctive cultural nuances that bring each folk tradition to life. By foregrounding the daily, playful routines of children, research can expand on both shared and diverging facets of these intangible cultural legacies, ultimately fostering a deeper appreciation for their ongoing relevance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an integrative, literature-based qualitative design that draws upon existing scholarship, institutional documents, and various historical chronicles to develop a comparative lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than conducting new fieldwork or gathering primary data, the research

relies on synthesizing previously published accounts, with cross-cultural methods described by Ember and Ember (2009) guiding the analysis of multiple societies. This framework makes it possible to investigate geographically dispersed areas within a single project, allowing for broad insights into folk game practices while acknowledging that the reliance on secondary sources limits the granularity of micro-level details. Nonetheless, by weaving together these diverse materials, the methodology seeks to highlight both parallels and distinctions in the role and form of children's folk games across distinct cultural contexts.

In collecting data, four main types of sources were utilized. First, peer-reviewed journal articles and academic monographs—identified through databases such as JSTOR and Scopus—offered a variety of ethnographic and historical insights on children's folk games. The process involved searching for specific keywords, including “Thai folk games,” “Chinese children's games,” and “Buryat traditional play.” Out of approximately one hundred discovered items, forty-five were deemed relevant because they contained in-depth descriptions of children's games, their cultural significance, and contextual background. Second, UNESCO and NGO reports, notably from the UNESCO Bangkok Office (2012), provided detailed documentation on intangible heritage practices in Southeast Asia and selected regions of China. These institutional sources often presented game-specific details—such as nomenclature, formal structure, and associated cultural beliefs—thereby enhancing the contextual understanding of how these games function within broader cultural frameworks. Third, historical works, such as reprinted Thai chronicles and translations of Chinese classics, contributed references to early forms of children's leisure activities (Damrong Rajanubhab, 2001). For Buryat communities, oral traditions preserved in specialized local archives added insights into traditional steppe-based games, emphasizing how ecological factors shaped game mechanics. Fourth, a select number of anthropological and ethnomusicological dissertations granted more intimate depictions of how folk games operate in localized settings, though their scope was sometimes limited to a single village or specific family networks.

Sources were included based on their explicit coverage of children's folk games. This meant that texts needed to illustrate key aspects such as rules, participant demographics, and sociocultural context. Studies focusing on adult-oriented sports, or that referenced children's play only tangentially, were excluded to preserve clarity of focus. The project also incorporated older accounts, including pre-21st-century narratives, to trace historical developments and underlying cultural themes. More recent studies addressing revitalization efforts were included as well, in order to gauge how these traditional practices are evolving in response to modern influences. Thus, while the research remains anchored in historical perspectives, it also accommodates contemporary shifts in how these games are performed or perceived.

Data analysis procedures employed a structured coding approach adapted from Saldaña (2021), whereby each selected document was scrutinized for evidence relating to physical, social, symbolic, and material dimensions of play. Through a systematic coding system, the researcher captured details of game mechanics, ritual or religious functions, environmental factors affecting resource availability, and the symbolic narratives embedded within certain activities. A comparative matrix was then formulated, organizing data by cultural group—namely Thai, Chinese, and Buryat—along with game categories such as chase or tag games, tossing or throwing games, and specialized skill-based competitions. This matrix-based approach made it possible to track both repeated themes, such as minimal reliance on expensive resources, and unique features, such as the prominence of water-based activities in Thai communities or the steppe-centric orientation of Buryat games. Triangulation followed strategies articulated by Smith and Akagawa (2009), involving cross-referencing multiple sources to verify the consistency of any single game's reported details. If conflicting accounts appeared, they were either included as contested or excluded when their reliability could not be established.

Because the project does not involve direct human participants, ethical considerations primarily revolve around accurate representation and the respect for cultural heritage. In alignment with the American Anthropological Association (2012), the methodology aims to attribute ethnographic data to the original authors and avoid oversimplifying group identity. The analysis, for instance, refrains

from depicting Buryat or Thai communities as homogeneous, instead recognizing the diversity and fluidity within cultural groups. Furthermore, the study's secondary focus means that it avoids potential ethical pitfalls associated with fieldwork, such as concerns about informed consent or direct community engagement, although it does underscore that scholarship must acknowledge local agency and honor community ownership of cultural practices.

This secondary approach to data collection also introduces certain limitations. First, the absence of first-hand observation prevents researchers from verifying whether older documented games remain in continuous use. Second, English-language resources about Buryats in regions like Inner Mongolia are relatively scarce, introducing potential imbalances in the depth of coverage compared to Thai and Han Chinese materials. Third, the dynamic nature of contemporary society—especially with growing digital influences—means that any depiction of folk games is inherently partial and may be subject to swift evolution. Still, the methodology offers a valuable cross-cultural perspective on folk games' functional and structural traits, drawing upon a wide range of secondary sources. By emphasizing the fluidity of local traditions and acknowledging that different communities adapt their recreational practices over time, the study aims not for an exhaustive catalog but for an exploratory foundation that future, more focused research might deepen.

RESULTS

The findings are organized around three thematic axes: (1) the major folk game types in Thailand, China, and Buryat communities, (2) their social and pedagogical functions, and (3) their symbolic or ritual dimensions.

Types of Folk Games

Chase-and-tag or circle-based activities appear prominently in all three contexts. In Thailand, a game known as Mon Son Pha centers on stealthily placing a cloth behind one of the seated players, who must then chase the “mon” to reclaim the spot. China's Lao Ying Zhua Xiao Ji (“Eagle Catches the Chicks”) involves an “eagle” at one end of the line and a “mother hen” protecting her “chicks.” A structurally similar game in Buryat areas, often labeled “Wolf and Lambs,” dramatizes pastoral threats by casting one child as a “wolf” lunging at a row of “sheep.”

Throwing or flicking objects is another widespread motif. Thai children may use small seeds or fruits for shooting or marble-style contests, while Chinese folk tradition has the refined arrow-tossing game touhu as well as beanbag-throwing variants. Buryat youngsters perfect the art of flicking sheep ankle bones (shagai), turning them into miniature missiles aimed at targets lined up on the ground. Across all three societies, these tossing activities cultivate hand–eye coordination, precision, and focus.

Racing and strength contests are likewise common, although they differ in their cultural references. Thailand features footraces that sometimes weave among bamboo poles, while Chinese village sports might involve rope-pulling or short sprints during festival days. Buryat culture highlights a triad of “manly” sports (wrestling, archery, horse racing), with children emulating adult champions through simplified versions that prepare them for the rigors of pastoral life.

All three traditions emphasize minimalist resources. Whether the children are using cloth scraps in Thai chase games, seeds in Chinese street play, or animal bones in Buryat flicking contests, the emphasis remains on creativity and communal engagement rather than elaborate equipment.

Social and Pedagogical Functions

Physical development is a universal outcome, as chase games and racing activities build stamina and agility, while tossing or flicking games sharpen fine motor skills. Social cohesion and moral instruction are also woven into these amusements. Honor-system rules require honesty about who was tagged first or whose shot landed accurately. In many Buryat communities, older siblings mentor younger ones in bone-shooting, modeling intergenerational support.

These games further offer outlets for creative expression. Thai circle games integrate chanting and singing, allowing children to mesh dance, music, and collective improvisation. Chinese folk amusements sometimes incorporate humorous rhymes or teasing songs, while Buryat youngsters might carve horse heads into wood or decorate ankle bones, merging artistry with play.

Folk games also help to channel and resolve conflict. In Thai villages, elders historically encouraged boisterous children to compete in footraces or cloth-tag, averting real fights by shifting tensions into regulated play. Among Buryats, friendly rivalries over who can flick a bone farther serve to defuse potential disputes. China's diverse regions similarly harness structured team activities so that children can learn about fair turns and leadership in a context of minimal risk or penalty.

Symbolic and Ritual Dimensions

Religious and cosmological themes surface in Thailand through references to Buddhist festivals, in China via legends of dragons or phoenixes, and in Buryatia through shamanic invocations and pastoral imagery. In Thai Songkran water-play, the playful dousing of friends aligns with New Year purification rites. Chinese *touhu* once carried a symbolic link to Confucian decorum, as properly landing an arrow in a narrow-necked vessel signified moral self-discipline. Buryat gatherings sometimes begin with a simple invocation to ancestral or local spirits, situating the game in a cosmic and genealogical context.

Animal totems represent another point of thematic overlap. Predatory and prey roles—eagle and chicks, wolf and lambs, or tiger and smaller creatures—teach alertness and cooperation, reflecting local fauna and daily experiences. Steppe communities are intimately familiar with the possibility of wolves targeting sheep, so the game becomes an imaginative rehearsal for pastoral vigilance. Children in parts of Thailand may reference serpent deities believed to guard certain waters, or they may evoke protective dragons in games that mimic “snake chasing.”

Seasonal anchors enrich these practices. During Chinese Lunar New Year school breaks, children revert to open-ended street games and kite-flying. Thai youth intensify water-themed play at Songkran, while Buryat festivals in summer feature children's versions of adult racing or wrestling. Though shaped by festal calendars, these amusements maintain an undercurrent of everyday enjoyment and collectively reinforce communal bonds.

In sum, the results highlight both widespread structural parallels—chase, throw, race, and team collaboration—and distinctive local resonances shaped by environment, religious heritage, and social history. These observations set the stage for a deeper discussion on the tension between universal childhood impulses and culturally specific interpretations of play.

DISCUSSION

A unifying theme emerging from this cross-cultural examination of Thai, Chinese, and Buryat folk games is the remarkable consistency with which children, regardless of geographic location, gravitate toward playful activities that cultivate not only physical prowess but also social understanding and moral orientation. Such congruities strongly support the anthropological proposition that the human capacity for structured play is near-universal, reflecting fundamental developmental imperatives (Mead, 1934; Caillois, 2001; Malinowski, 1922). At the same time, each cultural setting infuses these amusements with unique motifs and symbolic layers, underscoring how folk games function simultaneously as universal expressions of childhood curiosity and as distinctly localized windows into collective identity.

Universal Dynamics of Childhood Play

From Thailand's circle-based singing contests to Buryat ankle-bone flicking challenges and China's “Eagle Catches the Chicks,” a shared pattern emerges: children transform minimal resources—cloth scraps, seeds, or bones—into vehicles for complex social interaction. The dynamic of chase games, for instance, echoes Huizinga's (1955) concept of the “play-element in culture,” in which participants embrace a structured yet improvisational scenario that cultivates cooperation, agility, and enjoyment. Evidence from these three contexts indicates that such rudimentary but imaginative setups can encourage children to explore hierarchies of leadership, practice emotional regulation, and learn the ethics of fair play. Across societies, youngsters internalize moral and social codes by adhering to rules and community norms, thereby blending excitement with enculturation (Elias & Dunning, 1986).

Cultural Inflections and Environmental Shaping

Although fundamental structures like chasing or object-tossing appear widely, the specific expressions of these games vary with local ecologies and belief systems. Thailand's tropical climate and monsoon cycles facilitate water-themed festivities such as Songkran, lending spiritual weight to the act of splashing friends in a communal rite of renewal (UNESCO Bangkok Office, 2012). In Buryat territories, the pastoral emphasis on animal husbandry informs the prominence of shagai naadan (ankle-bone games), as children creatively integrate the bones of sheep or goats into flicking and target competitions that mirror pastoral life (Bulag, 1998). China's historical traditions, shaped by Confucian ideals, situate leisure activities like touhu—a refined arrow-tossing contest—in the realm of disciplined self-improvement (Gernet, 1962). Thus, nature, religion, and social structures jointly transform a universal tendency to play into a culturally specific matrix of meaning and technique.

Persistence in a Digital Age

Modern technological influences pose intriguing questions for the continuity of these folk games. Digital devices, online gaming, and compressed schedules in urban areas can divert attention from traditional play forms that once flourished in communal courtyards (Chan & Ma, 2019). Yet the resilience of folk games is also demonstrated by numerous revival and preservation efforts. Thai educators introduce circle-tag or seed-shooting activities into after-school programs, blending informal heritage with contemporary curricula. Chinese festivals occasionally feature child-friendly demonstrations of lesser-known minority games, highlighting their educational and cultural value (Tang, 2019). In Buryat locales, heritage centers and local gatherings continue to champion communal amusements, often weaving them into annual festivals and seasonal celebrations. These initiatives illustrate how adaptive, living traditions can still thrive in a rapidly changing world. By infusing folk games with modern presentation methods—while respecting their original spontaneity—local communities are preserving both the practice and the ethos underpinning it (UNESCO, 2003; Smith & Akagawa, 2009).

Anthropological Insights into Continuity and Transformation

The parallels discovered among Thai, Chinese, and Buryat folk games lend support to the concept that fundamental patterns of play are driven by a blend of innate developmental drives and cultural shaping. Anthropologists have long noted that children's activities, however mundane or "recreational" they might appear, encode social norms, hierarchical relationships, and cosmological references (Mead, 1930; Roux, 1984). The data presented here affirm that even seemingly simple pastimes—like the rhythmic chanting in Thai circle games or the coordinated team maneuvers in Chinese street games—function as microcosms of broader cultural philosophies. Meanwhile, the Buryat focus on archery, horseback riding, and bone-flicking attests to how ecologically grounded practices can continue to animate social life and intergenerational bonds (Sneath, 2007).

This study's cross-cultural lens reveals that while external forces such as urban migration, formal education policies, and mass media have introduced new leisure preferences, folk games persist through adaptive changes. Local communities, educational stakeholders, and cultural organizations frequently recognize that these play traditions serve as more than mere entertainment; they are pathways for passing down moral lessons, ancestral knowledge, and communal solidarity (Elias & Dunning, 1986). As a result, many institutions proactively incorporate folk games into cultural festivals, extracurricular clubs, or even tourism initiatives, underscoring their enduring resonance (UNESCO Bangkok Office, 2012).

Practical Applications and Educational Engagement

Given the demonstrable value of folk games in fostering collaboration, empathy, and physical development, implementing them in school settings offers tangible educational benefits. Teachers might adapt chase-and-tag games as group-building exercises, using symbolic narratives—like the "wolf-and-lambs" scenario—for teaching conflict resolution and alertness. Child-friendly songs from Thai courtyard play can be integrated into music or language classes, highlighting melodic skills, phonetic practice, and cultural literacy. Similarly, the precision required in Buryat ankle-bone flicking

aligns well with lessons in physics or spatial reasoning, transforming an age-old pastime into a stimulating classroom activity (Damrong Rajanubhab, 2001; Wang, 2018).

On a broader scale, policymakers can collaborate with local leaders to embed folk games into community centers and youth programs, thereby fostering intergenerational bonds. In many contexts, older adults or grandparents may still recall traditional amusements and can serve as invaluable mentors to younger participants. Such a model not only revitalizes intangible heritage but also fortifies social cohesion by bringing different age groups together in shared, joyful pursuit (Malinowski, 1922/2014). Local tourism boards, too, might respectfully feature demonstrations of these games, ensuring that their unique cultural essence remains intact rather than being diluted into mere spectacle (Smith & Akagawa, 2009).

Future Horizons in Folk Game Research

Possibilities for further investigation extend to examining how children combine digital technologies with age-old play patterns, potentially blending smartphone-based storytelling with physical group activities. Additionally, localized ethnographies could reveal subtle variations in how different communities interpret the same fundamental mechanics of chase or toss games. Researchers might delve into how children adapt the rules to suit new environments, or how religious and philosophical discourses merge with playful forms to create evolving hybrids of tradition and innovation (Callan, 2017). Across all these avenues, a focus on the lived experience of play—where meaning emerges as children negotiate roles and respond to environmental cues—promises to enrich our understanding of how cultural knowledge is continually recreated.

Concluding Reflections

The evidence from Thailand, China, and Buryat communities in Inner Mongolia highlights both the remarkable resilience of folk games and their capacity to evolve in tandem with societal change. These amusements endure not only because they satisfy core developmental drives for movement, expression, and group interaction, but also because they perpetuate cherished values, narratives, and cosmological perspectives unique to each locality. Indeed, the joy observed in these games resonates far beyond childhood: it connects past and present, weaving individuals into a broader communal tapestry. As globalization accelerates and new forms of technology reshape daily life, the vitality of folk games stands as a testament to human adaptability and creativity, reminding us that the simplest forms of play can hold profound significance for cultural identity, moral formation, and the collective future.

CONCLUSION

In bringing this comparative study of Thai, Chinese, and Buryat folk games to a close, it becomes evident that these traditions serve as vibrant microcosms of cultural identity, moral instruction, and communal bonding. Although each community emerges from distinct ecological settings—ranging from Thailand’s tropical lowlands to the temperate farmland regions of China and the vast steppes of Inner Mongolia—their children’s folk games exhibit core similarities that speak to shared developmental impulses. As earlier sections show, such games often revolve around minimal-resource mechanics (throwing seeds, flicking ankle bones, or chasing a cloth) and feature structured interactions that hone social negotiation skills. Drawing on Huizinga’s (1955) depiction of play as a “cultural microcosm” and Caillois’s (2001) classification of structured amusements, this study substantiates the view that childhood games are never merely diversions but instead constitute significant threads in a community’s social fabric.

Foremost among the insights gleaned here is the pedagogical strength of folk games. As exemplified in Thailand, where older siblings guide younger participants through circle-tag rituals, and in Buryat communities where shagai naadan fosters dexterity under intergenerational mentorship, these games facilitate embodied learning that supplements formal schooling. Whether it is Confucian values shaping China’s touhu arrow-toss or Buddhist symbolism underlying Thai water-splashing festivities, each context situates the act of play within broader moral and cosmological frameworks. In doing so, these games act as conduits for transmitting deeply rooted religious beliefs and communal ethics to rising generations. Their capacity to reinforce community cohesion and cultural identity aligns

with the anthropological consensus that intangible heritage thrives on live, ongoing practice rather than mere documentation.

Nevertheless, the study also illuminates pressing challenges. Urbanization and digital media consumption have reconfigured leisure time in ways that may diminish opportunities for open-ended outdoor play. More structured approaches—such as school clubs or organized folk game festivals—risk formalizing what was once spontaneous and child-led, thereby potentially diluting cultural authenticity. Discrepancies in the availability of English-language sources, particularly concerning the Buryats in Inner Mongolia, present additional difficulties for comprehensive research, leaving certain regional nuances underexplored. Moreover, these issues of representation connect to a larger ethical imperative: ensuring that revitalization efforts respect local agency, avoid commodification, and include community voices across generational lines.

In light of these complexities, the comparative lens used here offers both a cautionary and an optimistic note. On one hand, it underscores the need for sensitive, adaptive measures if folk games are to remain vital in modern contexts. Government or NGO-led initiatives might do well to partner with local educators, elders, and children themselves, balancing heritage preservation with the evolving realities of everyday life. On the other hand, the resilience of these games—some of which have persisted through political upheavals, economic shifts, and demographic changes—suggests a remarkable capacity for reinvention. This resilience finds its roots in fundamental human drives for playful exploration, social exchange, and cultural expression.

Ultimately, the parallels observed across Thai, Chinese, and Buryat folk games demonstrate the universal resonance of childhood play as a vehicle for transmitting values, forging social ties, and grounding communities in their ancestral legacies. Attentive stewardship of these living traditions can help ensure that future generations continue to learn, laugh, and connect through these time-honored practices. Equally, ongoing research—through ethnographic fieldwork, longitudinal studies, and cross-disciplinary collaboration—can further illuminate how folk games adapt under the pressures and possibilities of the twenty-first century, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of both cultural continuity and change.

REFERENCES

- [1] American Anthropological Association. (2012). Statement on ethics. <https://americananthro.org>
- [2] Bulag, U. E. (1998). *Nationalism and hybridity in Mongolia*. Clarendon Press.
- [3] Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, play, and games* (M. Barash, Trans.). University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1958)
- [4] Callan, H. (2017). *The International encyclopedia of anthropology*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396>
- [5] Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- [6] Damrong Rajanubhab, Prince. (2001). *The chronicle of our wars with the Burmese*. White Lotus Press.
- [7] Elias, N., & Dunning, E. (1986). *Quest for excitement: Sport and leisure in the civilizing process*. Basil Blackwell.
- [8] Ember, C. R., & Ember, M. (2009). *Cross-cultural research methods* (2nd ed.). AltaMira Press.
- [9] Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- [10] Gernet, J. (1962). *Daily life in China on the eve of the Mongol invasion, 1250–1276*. Stanford University Press.
- [11] Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Beacon Press.
- [12] Malinowski, B. (1922/2014). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315772158>
- [13] Mead, M. (1930). *Growing up in New Guinea*. William Morrow.
- [14] Mead, M. (1934). The Samoan concept of play. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 43(1), 33–47.

- [15] Roux, J. P. (1984). Games, sports, and pastimes in Central Asian nomad cultures. In D. Sinor (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of early Inner Asia* (pp. 594–608). Cambridge University Press.
- [16] Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- [17] Smith, L., & Akagawa, N. (2009). *Intangible heritage*. Routledge.
- [18] Sneath, D. (2007). *The headless state: Aristocratic orders, kinship society, and misrepresentations of nomadic Inner Asia*. Columbia University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7312/snea14054>
- [19] Tang, L. (2019). Revival of temple fairs and traditional children's games in rural China. *Asian Ethnology*, 78(1), 103–121.
- [20] Tumen, D. (2011). Insights into pastoralism and games in Mongolian ethnoarchaeology. *Nomadic Peoples*, 15(2), 91–108.
- [21] UNESCO. (2003). *Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.
<https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>
- [22] UNESCO Bangkok Office. (2012). *Mapping intangible cultural heritage in Southeast Asian education*. <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/mapping-ich>
- [23] Wang, S. (2018). From cuju to soccer: The long history of a ball game in China. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 35(2), 155–172.