

## Mandate of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

Ref.: AL CHN 19/2025  
(Please use this reference in your reply)

31 July 2025

Excellency,

I have the honour to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 55/5.

In this connection, I would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information I have received concerning the **alleged disappearance of the Tibetan nomenclature from the signage of the Quai Branly and Guimet museums, and its replacement with terms such as such as "Xizang Autonomous Region" and "Himalayan World"**.

The Quai Branly Museum is located in Paris and contains collections of art related to Asian, Oceanian, African and American cultures. The Guimet Museum, also located in Paris, is the national museum of Asian arts. Both are public institutions.

According to the information received:

In 2023, the People's Republic of China adopted a systematic terminology shift, by which "Tibet", its inhabitants and everything related to it, was to be referred to as "Xizang" in all official documentation. The term is considered one of the many means through which China imposes the Sinicisation of the Tibetan territory, annexed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1950. This term is also used by China in all its international diplomatic exchanges.

It is reported that in 2024, changes have been made in the terminology used by the Quai Branly and Guimet museums. The word "Tibet" was replaced with other terminology, in both their catalogues of Tibetan artefacts and their exhibition rooms. These modifications, which occurred near the time when France wanted to celebrate 60 years of diplomatic relations with China, triggered many concerns within the Tibetan community, in France and beyond, concerning the preservation of their history and identity, and within the academic community, concerning the potential influence of China in French institutions.

On 31 August 2024, an open letter by a collective of researchers and academics was published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, denouncing how certain museums had succumbed to the foreign interference of the People's Republic of China, in the way to name and represent the cultures it wishes to suppress.

On 8 September 2024, both museums, as well as several influential figures such as the French Minister of Culture, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the mayors of Paris, the directors of the museums and the members of the Tibetan Support Group in the French Senate, received a letter raising concerns about the replacement of the name "Tibet" to "Xizang" and the "Himalayan World" in the

museums, and explaining that the historical and geographical misrepresentations contribute to the erasure of Tibetan's millennial culture and the legitimate claims for recognition of its people.

On 21 and 29 September 2024, demonstrations were held in Paris, near the Quai Branly and Guimet museums, gathering civil society organisations and academics, many specialised on Tibet and Chinese issues.

It is reported that museums directors are often faced with more or less insistent requests from governments, wishing to see changes made to the way works and artifacts from their territories are presented, or events about their history, recollected. As museums often depend on access to research areas and public archives, and on loans from museal institutions from other countries, to prepare their exhibitions, and as access and loans across borders, also from private owners or institutions, are overseen by public authorities, governments and their institutions are involved in international museal collaborations.

In 2023, it is reported that another French museum faced a Chinese government's tentative to interfere in its exhibition by censoring some names and historical facts, in exchange for the loan of certain objects from China.

#### Quai Branly museum

It is reported that in the Quai Branly museum, the name "Tibet" has been replaced by the Chinese name "Xizang autonomous region". Searches of the word "Tibet" in the online catalogue of the museum failed to correctly identify Tibetan artifacts primarily as Tibetan.

On 25 September 2024, Quai Branly held a meeting with Tibetan community leaders to discuss the matter. At its conclusion, representatives of the museum reportedly recognised the need to redress the changes that had been made in the museum's nomenclature. The museum committed to withdraw the term "Xizang" from its catalogue, and to fix the technical malfunction in their tool for disseminating online notices.

On 7 October 2024, the term "Xizang" had been effectively replaced by the term "Tibet" in the online database of the Quai Branly museums, correcting the misrepresentation.

#### Guimet museum

In 2023, the Guimet museum launched a major overhaul of the written mediation in the museum's galleries, to be completed by the end of 2025.

In this context, it is reported that the room dedicated to "Nepal-Tibet" has reopened under the name "Himalayan World". That geographical term covers regions of various countries, including Bhutan, India, Nepal and Tibet, and not only Tibet and Nepal.

The direction of the Guimet museum reportedly explained this change as the result of a scientific process, aiming to rethink the presentation of its collections by cultural areas. However, it is alleged by experts in this field that the name does not refer to any culturally definable area. In addition, of the entirety of the Tibetan territory, only about a quarter could be considered as being in the Himalaya, making the reference irrelevant for the majority of Tibetans, who do not particularly identify with it. Referring to Tibet under the heading of “Himalayan World” arguably reduces the geographical reality of the Tibetan cultural and historical presence, and contributes to its invisibility.

The Guimet museum dedicated the year 2024 to China, marking the Franco-Chinese Year of Cultural Tourism and the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. 4 special exhibitions and numerous events were organised throughout the year, requiring intense collaborations with museal institutions from across China, and with the Chinese authorities. In order to make the exhibitions available to the general public, the direction of the museum reportedly stated that the aim had been to find a consensus acceptable to the Chinese representatives, while maintaining scientific accuracy.

Without wishing to prejudice the accuracy of the information received, I express my concern towards the changes in the Tibetan nomenclature in some French museal institutions. I am deeply concerned that the removal of the Tibetan-preferred terminology in favour of denominations that are more acceptable to the Chinese authority undermines the Tibetan rights to enjoy cultural heritage and to self-determination, through the presentation of a mistaken representation of their history, territory and cultural heritage. I am also concerned about the fact that the denomination changes seem to serve the sinicisation policy of Tibetan heritage as implemented by the Chinese authorities.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is my responsibility, under the mandate provided to me by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to my attention, I would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please explain the circumstances and conditions of the museal collaboration between the Musée du Quai Branly, the Musée Guimet, and Your Excellency’s government, including any conditions for lending Chinese museal pieces for their exhibitions and concerning in particular works from the Tibetan region. Please clarify if the Chinese authorities suggested nomenclature for the Tibetan works, and how these are compatible with human rights law standards and obligations mentioned in the Annex.

3. Please indicate what steps were taken and are being taken to protect the cultural heritage and historic memory of Tibet in accordance with international obligations, as well as to maintain the historical and cultural integrity of Tibetan works.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, I urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

Please note that similar letters concerning the above-mentioned allegations have been sent to the Government of France, to Quai Branly Museum, for information, and to the Guimet Museum, for consideration and action.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Alexandra Xanthaki  
Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

## Annex

### Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, I would like to draw your Excellency's Government attention to its international obligations relevant to this case.

In accordance with article 1 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (CESCR), which was ratified by China on 27 March 2001, all peoples have the right to self-determination. This right guarantees they can determine their political status and ensure freely their economic, social and cultural development.

In accordance with articles 2.2 and 15 of the CESCR, everyone has the right to participate in cultural life without discrimination. As stated by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its general comment No. 21 on this right (E/C.12/GC/21), "Participation encompasses in particular the right of everyone – alone, in association with others or within a community – to act freely, to choose their own identity, to identify or not with one or more given communities or to change this choice, to take part in political life, to exercise their own cultural practices and to express themselves in the language of their choice. Everyone also has the right to seek and develop cultural knowledge and expressions and to share them with others, as well as to act creatively and take part in creative activities."

The Committee also emphasized the right to take part in the development of the community to which a person belongs, as well as in the definition, development, and implementation of policies and decisions that impact the exercise of a person's cultural rights (para. 15.c).

According to the Committee, article 15, paragraph 1(a) of the Covenant "also recognizes the right of minorities and persons belonging to minorities to take part in the cultural life of society and to maintain, promote, and develop their own culture. This right entails the obligation of States parties to recognize, respect, and protect minority cultures as an essential element of their identity. Accordingly, minorities have the right to their cultural diversity, traditions, customs, religion, forms of education, languages, media (press, radio, television, Internet), and other manifestations of their cultural identity and belonging" (para. 32). Furthermore, the Committee emphasized the obligation of States to respect and protect cultural heritage in all its forms. Cultural heritage must be preserved, developed, enriched and transmitted to future generations, as a testimony to human experience and aspirations, in order to encourage creativity in all its diversity and inspire genuine dialogue among cultures (para. 50.a).

In this regard, we wish to draw the attention of Your Excellency's Government to the reports of the successive Special Rapporteurs in the field of cultural rights, relating to the right of access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage (A/HRC/17/38) and the protection of cultural heritage (A/HRC/31/59 and A/71/317). These reports have highlighted the importance of access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage for individuals and communities, as resources for their collective identity and development processes. They have emphasized that the right to participate in cultural life implies that individuals and communities have access to and can benefit from cultural heritage that

is meaningful to them, and that their freedom to continuously (re)create cultural heritage and transmit it to future generations must be protected.

The mandate holders emphasized that the right to access and enjoy cultural heritage includes: (a) the right to know, understand, enter, visit, use, maintain, exchange and develop cultural heritage, as well as to benefit from the cultural heritage and creation of others; and (b) the right to participate in the identification, interpretation and development of cultural heritage. In this regard, they recommended that States recognize and value the diversity of cultural heritage present in their territory and under their jurisdiction, and recognize, respect and protect the rights of individuals and groups to feel associated (or not) with specific elements of cultural heritage; to access, enjoy and (re)create on an ongoing basis the cultural heritage that is meaningful to them; and to transmit this heritage to future generations. They reiterated that the right to access, participate in and contribute to cultural heritage also encompasses history and memory (A/HRC/17/38, paras. 4-8) and recommended that “States should (...) acknowledge, respect and protect the possible diverging interpretations that may arise over cultural heritage” (A/HRC/17/38, para. 80).

My mandate has observed that cultural heritage can protect cultural diversity but may also be recognized “selectively to force individuals and communities to assimilate into a mainstream community/society”. It is acknowledged that dominant cultural symbols might be glorified, and historical narratives distorted for political purposes. Diverging community interpretations are often overlooked, and preservation efforts can emphasize or omit parts of the past to shape public opinion. In this context, limited access to heritage may be used to apply social or political pressure. (A/HRC/17/38, para. 11).

Furthermore, “Competing claims and interests over cultural heritage may lead to controversy and conflict. Different individuals, communities and/or the State may claim ownership of, interest in, and rights to certain cultural heritage” (A/HRC/17/38, para. 12). The Special Rapporteur warns that “the dominant homogenizing discourse obscures diversity, ignores the cultural heritage of all those outside the ruling group, thus depriving the majority of the opportunity to understand the complexity of a country” (A/68/296, para. 31), and emphasizes that processes of social debate, commemoration or history teaching about past events should not aim to unify perspectives at the national level into a homogeneous – hermetic – discourse or identity, but rather to provide those affected, including victims but also the rest of society, with the necessary spaces to articulate narratives, share perspectives and promote interaction and understanding among individuals and communities, where respect for human rights and acceptance of diversity constitute the cornerstone of shared identities.

I would like to remind your Excellency’s Government of the Human Rights Council resolution (HRC/RES/43/29) wherein it was sought to recognise “the importance of preserving historic memory, without distortion, relating to gross human rights violations, abuses and serious violations of international humanitarian law through the conservation of archives, oral histories and other forms of evidence relating to those violations”. The resolution also acknowledged the “necessity to protect the cultural heritage of persons belonging to minorities from intentional destruction aimed at erasing evidence of their presence as a key factor for preservation of their identity”.

I would also like to reiterate to your Excellency's Government General Assembly Resolution (UNGA/RES/76/162) which emphasizes how states should resist any efforts to enforce 'uniculturalism' or impose specific social and cultural models. Instead, they should foster dialogue among civilizations, promote a culture of peace, tolerance, and interfaith understanding, and contribute to peace, security, and development (para. 11). The resolution also recognizes how respect for cultural rights of all enhances cultural pluralism "contributing to a wider exchange of knowledge and understanding of cultural background, advancing the application and enjoyment of universally accepted human rights throughout the world and fostering stable, friendly relations among peoples and nations worldwide" (para. 13). The resolution further urges States to "ensure that their political and legal systems reflect the multicultural diversity within their societies and, where necessary, to improve democratic institutions so that they are more fully participatory and avoid marginalization and exclusion of, and discrimination against, specific sectors of society" (para. 18).

I would also like to remind your Excellency's Government of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, ratified by China on 2 December 2004, where article 13(d)(i, ii, iii) stipulates the steps states should take to "ensure the safeguarding, development and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory". These include

- “(i) fostering the creation or strengthening of institutions for training in the management of the intangible cultural heritage and the transmission of such heritage through forums and spaces intended for the performance or expression thereof;
- (ii) ensuring access to the intangible cultural heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage;
- (iii) establishing documentation institutions for the intangible cultural heritage and facilitating access to them.”

Furthermore article 15 of the same Convention, expands on the need for wide and active "Participation of communities, groups and individuals" in the pursuit of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

I would also like to draw your Excellency's Government to article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, establishing that states should recognise that "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms", which should be undertaken in manner that allows all persons to participate to "promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

I would also like to draw your Excellency's Government to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, particularly article 26, which requires states to acknowledge that "all persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law", which expands to include that there

should be no discrimination before the law on grounds such as “language”, “religion”, “national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.

In addition, the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, encourages states in article 1(1) to “protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity” (GA RES/47/135). Additionally, the right for persons belonging to minorities to enjoy their culture in all spaces, without discrimination is found in article 2(1). Furthermore article 4(2) outlines measures states should consider when allowing persons belonging to minorities to express elements of their culture, with the only exception of practices that are not in compliance with national and international law. This includes, as article 4(4) stipulates, promotion in fields such as education where, states should encourage cultures of persons belonging to minorities.