
Notion of ICH Safeguarding from the Perspective of Sustainable Development

Kyung-Koo HAN
Professor
Seoul National University

I. Sustainable Human Development as a Problematique

The title I was given in the first place was ‘Notion of Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding from the Perspective of Sustainable Development’. But later, I found that the original idea of today’s conference was not simply sustainable development; it was sustainable human development. Adding ‘human’ between sustainable and development means that we have to be triply critical or critical in at least three stages or dimensions when we think about development.

The first stage now constitutes part of our common sense: criticism on the conventional idea of economic development. The second stage is familiar, too. One of the most widely quoted definitions of sustainable development is that it would ‘meet the basic needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’. However, we now realise that sustainable development can mean different things to different people. Critical reflections on the idea of sustainable development require us to think about class division and issues of power and inequality within the present generation. Many in the present generation do not believe that they can afford to neglect their present needs when their very survival is at stake. Even though we cherish the idea of sustainable development in our heart and mind, it does not provide ready answers when

protecting the environment and meeting human needs do not go hand in hand smoothly. The predicaments we face every day in the field may call for negotiations and compromises instead of principles.

When we move to the third stage, we really have to face the dynamic and often embarrassingly conflicting relationship between preservation of ICH on the one hand, and sustainable human development on the other. We know very well that the goal of sustainable development may conflict with that of human development, because the achievement of a higher level of human development might involve greater use of resources. This would alarm environmentalists and many others devoted to the idea of sustainable development, but our problem does not stop here.

We really have to ask whose human development we are talking about. ICH safeguarding is usually expected to help human development in the local community concerned, but this is not necessarily so. Depending on the choice of concrete measures and policies taken to safeguard particular intangible heritage, the implication on human development can be quite different. They can open or limit individual choices and careers, curving and channelling desires and energies by offering subsidies or economic incentives. The designation of human treasure status to certain individuals and groups may end up in generating preposterous advantages or monopolies and stifling creative competitions. Further, it might fossilise the intangible heritage and prevent it from developing further or withering away in an overzealous and often misguided effort to preserve what can be recorded, studied, and imitated, but not preserved. Still further, it might encourage individuals and local communities to depend further upon subsidies and incentives instead of developing strength and resources to become more self-reliant.

ICH safeguarding is a notion full of tension. The preservation of ICH is not something we can take for granted or expect everybody to agree without reservation. It is not simply because of the not infrequently found practices justifying gender inequality or undermining basic human rights in the name of tradition. On close observation, we find that the very idea of ICH safeguarding is full of potential conflicts and contentions because intangible heritage is premised on the existence of people, individuals, groups, and local communities.

II. The Human Factor: What Does It Mean to Sustain a Community or Preserve Cultural Heritage?

In a rapidly globalising environment where nations are engaged in competition for inscribing their local ICH as part of their national identity, ICH safeguarding may involve not only preparing legal and institutional frameworks but also exercising selective pressures, offering certain channels of development, and providing subsidies and incentives. The nation may have every reason to intervene in the lives of the members of the local community to enhance its prestige by jealously safeguarding its intangible heritage. However, it is the lives of the individuals, groups, and members of the local community that national governments and professionals want to influence. It is the individuals, groups, and members of the local community that are to make choices and decisions for their lives. This notion reveals the very nature of cultural process.

From the perspective of sustainable development or sustainable human development, ICH safeguarding presents unique challenges and opportunities. The relationship between the preservation of ICH on the one hand and sustainable human development on the other is dynamic and often embarrassingly conflicting.

Some of the most convenient ways to achieve a higher level of human development often involve greater use of natural resources and exploitation of environment. Those who we reject this course would search for a balance between development and environment. Of course, this aspiration for sustainable human development is not without problems. However, when it comes to safeguarding ICH, the question becomes far more complex. That some intangible heritage elements require exploitation of certain already endangered resources—for example killing a whale—might be a small problem compared to the huge task of deciding which individuals, groups, or local communities should be chosen to be helped to sustain their way of life for the purpose of safeguarding its ICH.

What we really have to think about is what it really means to safeguard ICH, which is fluid in nature and, therefore, must always be changing, developing further, or withering away. Is it really appropriate for outsiders with good intentions, be they government officials, scholars, or other professionals, to intervene in the lives of others by deciding which cultural heritage to preserve and

which not?

If it is deemed nice and proper to select individuals, groups, or local communities worthy to save, it implies that you can safely leave other individuals, groups, or local communities to fate in so doing. If it is deemed nice and proper to select certain ICH worthy enough to safeguard, it also means that you are leaving other cultural heritage to the vicissitudes of life.

So, safeguarding ICH runs the risk of making political decisions for other people's lives as well as their ways of life, using such leverages as prestigious international inscription, direct subsidies and other economic incentives, and most of all, cultural tourism.

III. Commercial Turn: A Case Study in the Tug-of-War in Dangjin

Cultural tourism has perhaps been one of the most popular answers to the question of providing material economic basis for the local communities and people who try to find the means to maintain their heritage in a world driven increasingly by market forces. Many successes and exemplary cases have been reported, and many national and local governments as well as scholars and other professionals seem to find in cultural tourism a lifeboat for cultural heritage in the latter's struggle for survival in the stormy sea of capitalism and globalisation.

However, there are doubts and concerns. What if cultural tourism brings about commercialisation and transformation? Will cultural heritage lose its life meaning and suffer corruption and degeneration? Tourists might be happy if parts and sequences of funerals, marriages, birthday parties, New Year celebrations, thanksgiving celebrations for harvests were staged at the same time in the same location.

Many academic and practicing anthropologists are involved in cultural tourism. But anthropological literature on tourism is also full of pathetic situations and embarrassing problems that people and local communities have experienced when they have had to make changes in their rituals and performances in terms of time, frequency, length, location, material, dress, participants, etc. in an effort to attract more tourists.

Some changes have been acceptable and tolerable, if not always welcome; but

other changes have been found to be too much for some individuals and groups to swallow. Some were hurt and angry; they were afraid that such changes would alter the identity of the ritual or performance itself permanently.

Perhaps commoditisation and commercialisation are the two most frequently used expressions to describe and criticise the situation. However, it is not only scholars that lament commoditisation and commercialisation. Many government officials and other professionals view cultural accomplishment as antithetical to commoditisation and commercialisation. The result is a tendency to regard cultural heritage as something to be protected from the destructive and contaminative effects of commoditisation and commercialisation.

However, some cultural heritage elements developed in the process or as result commodity production and commerce. We should not forget that many people in traditional societies were engaged in production for markets and commerce, if not capitalist production and distribution. The tug-of-war in Dangjin that I am going to mention below provides an interesting case. It seems that commercial interests, among many other reasons, played a rather large role in the development of this cultural heritage.

This means that we should be extremely careful when we denounce cultural tourist practices as commercialised and, therefore, corrupted and no longer genuine. Not all the practices that make the best commercial use of cultural heritage are bad. There are simply good practices and poor practices, I believe.

The tug-of-war in the Dangjin area was designated as Important Intangible Heritage by the Korean government in 1982. Now the municipal office and the people of Dangjin are interested in inscribing it on the UNESCO Representative List, and they hosted a special conference on multinational inscription in June 2012 together with ICHCAP.

When I began to look at the materials on the tug-of-war of Dangjin to prepare for my presentation at that conference, I came to note some interesting passages in the report prepared by a folklorist. There are several different stories about the origin of the tug-of-war in Dangin, but they usually agree on the express reason why the tug-of-war was introduced—it was a means to pacify the earth or the spirits residing in the earth that were responsible for an earthquake and tsunami that happened long ago and killed many people and destroyed villages and towns, forever changing the landscape of Dangjin. This is why there are Confucian and

shamanistic rituals during the tug-of-war festival period.

What intrigued me was the records and recollections, which were corroborated by many old participants living and dead, that the people of the nearby agricultural villages were responsible for providing the material (rice straw) and the actual making of the rope by using some traditional weaving machine made of wood, which was kept in a pond for future use after the rope twisting was over while the merchants in the town of Dangjin would contribute rice or money.

Twisting the huge rope took a month or more, and the rope would be carried to several different places before it was finally hauled over a pass to its final destination where the tug-of-war was going to take place. Many people say that the hauling of the huge rope up the pass was quite strenuous, and a huge crowd from all over the province would gather to take a look at the spectacle and cheer those who were hauling the rope up the hill. Food and drinks were offered to help the effort, and more food and drinks were consumed after the rope reached the battleground.

The actual tug-of-war was very short. When the winner and the loser were declared, the crowd would hurry to the rope to cut and take a piece of the rope and bring it home for consumption in the belief that it would bring fortune and health. As it was said that they would have a good harvest if the villages on the upper side won and that they would enjoy national peace if the villages on the down side won; it does not seem that those who tugged the rope in the tug-of-war did not really care. What really mattered was that they had a good time. It must have been great for the people of Dangjin to attract a huge number of people from towns and villages from far and near. Dangjin was a very old town with a long history in shipping and trading. Small and large merchants, including inn keepers and restaurant owners must have enjoyed good business during the whole event and would have gone very far to attract a crowd as huge as possible and have a festive and memorable event as big and successful as possible.

Tug-of-war in Dangjin seems to me to have developed and patronised, if not originated, in the spirit of commercialism in traditional Korea. It is not a purely ritualistic event performed to pray for safety and peace in a traditional society. It was an event organised with some conscious design on the part of the merchants of Dangjin to attract people to boost business and increase the prestige of Dangjin.

If this is so, it would not be a serious problem for the municipal government

to increase the frequency of the event from once in four years to once every year. Such a measure would help the tug-of-war in Dangjin take position in the calendar of tourist agencies as an annual event, contributing to the increase of tourists to Dangjin.

Nor would it be a problem at all if the municipal government asks and organises the participation of college students in the same province and soldiers from army units stationed in the area. The traditional spirit of the tug-of-war in Dangjin would be better served if we can have the tourists themselves participate in the tug-of-war.

IV. Concluding Remarks

If the individuals, groups, and local communities are the ones who decide whether to sustain themselves or safeguard their cultural heritage as well as how to do it, they should be able to find human and economic resources needed for it. If they decide not to sustain themselves or safeguard their cultural heritage, we might feel very sorry, but we have to respect their decision, provided that it is an enlightened and democratic one.

Whether they choose non-commercial methods or the way of commoditisation and/or commercialisation in their decision for the future of their cultural heritage, we have to respect such decisions. We may help them make wise and informed decisions by providing moral support and/or professional help, but we must refrain from criticising them for corruption or loss of genuineness or exercising undue pressures to influence their choice.

Cultures do change, and we have to admit that ICH does change. We should not attempt to make decisions for them in the name safeguarding cultural heritage or sustaining and developing them and their communities. We can only hope to help individuals, groups, and local communities in their efforts to sustain and develop themselves by helping them make wise and informed decisions.