



Chapter 3.
How to Promote Better ICH for
Sustainable Development?



Achieving Institutionalisation of Safeguarding ICH: Korean Experience

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For centuries, Korea had been a predominantly agricultural society; the overwhelming majority of its population engaged in farming. As a result of the rapid industrialisation that began in the 1960s, however, much of the population migrated from farming villages to cities. And during this period, American-centred, Western culture had an enormous impact. Owing to this simultaneous industrialisation, urbanisation, and westernisation, the older way of life was rapidly disappearing. The older arts, rituals, and other kinds of intangible cultural expression that articulated the formerly prevalent way of life were also in jeopardy of rapidly disappearing. The instigation of the intangible cultural heritage system was intended to designate the valuable forms of expression that were being pushed to extinction by modern civilisation, to protect them, and to ensure their continued transmission.

The term ‘intangible cultural heritage’ was defined as music, dance, drama, games, ceremonies, martial arts, and other related arts and crafts as well as the production techniques for food and other kinds of daily needs that historically, academically, and artistically had great value, including products that displayed local colour and intangible culture. This intangible cultural heritage, without fixed forms, was transmitted by arts and techniques that were seen and heard. To preserve and continue the transmission of this cultural heritage, therefore, the

most knowledgeable and skilled persons who maintained the particular art or technique was also recognised and encouraged to transmit their skills to others. The persons who maintained the accomplishments and skills of the important intangible cultural heritage were designated literally as ‘maintainers’, but the term by which they are known in Korean colloquial speech (*ingan munhwajae*), which literally means ‘human cultural heritage’ and is usually translated into English as ‘Living Human Treasurers’.

The institution of this system in the 1960s constituted a landmark in the development of the concept of intangible cultural heritage in the Republic of Korea. To many Korean people, ‘cultural heritage’ generally meant the buildings and other fixed and visible constructions of earlier eras, generally recognised for their outstanding artistry, and which ought to be preserved. According to that way of thinking, intangible cultural heritage lacked the durability of constructions and was always changing, which made it difficult to include along with fixed objects in the concept of cultural heritage.

Moreover, among the elements designated as intangible cultural heritage, Korea’s unique folklore comprises the majority. Most people regarded folklore to be very inferior to the high arts of the elite strata, considered it somewhat childish, and thought it wasn’t worth preserving. Because it was seen as a hindrance to development, many people advocated its destruction rather than its preservation. In consequence, few persons intended to learn folk arts, and their disappearance seemed an inevitable consequence of cultural development. And because folklore was closely connected with the life of the past, it too would disappear with that way of life being obliterated by the processes of urbanisation, industrialisation, and modernisation. Given these circumstances, I believe that many folk artistic performances would have disappeared if a system of intangible cultural heritage preservation and other policies had not been implemented to preserve them.

The Cultural Heritage Protection Act passed by the Republic of Korea’s government in 1962 constituted the legal basis of its cultural protection programme.¹ In this programme, the designation of individual cultural heritage

elements involves several steps. If an autonomous local group submits an application, experts are asked to conduct fieldwork and prepare a designation report. The Culture Heritage Committee of the Cultural Heritage Administration evaluates this report and judges whether the proposed item has significant historical, academic, and artistic value and whether it notably expresses local colour. If the report indicates that it does, the Committee designates it as a cultural heritage element. In addition, for the sake of continuing the transmission of the element, it gauges the functional and artistic value of its original form, and recognises the person who has best maintained these element as Living Human Treasurers. These persons are required to continue the performance or manufacture of the element. In the case of dramatic performances, ceremonies, and other collective activities whose artistic and functional qualities cannot be demonstrated by a single person, a number of individuals are collectively designated as the element’s Living Human Treasurers.

Another feature of the intangible cultural heritage system in the Republic of Korea is that in addition to designation of the elements, the system for continuing transmission of the elements is also taken into consideration. This transmission system is highly refined and structured. Those who are recognised as the Living Human Treasurers of intangible cultural heritage are required to train younger persons in the techniques of their art. In order that these younger persons can receive that special training at no charge, the Republic of Korean government gives the Living Human Treasurers an additional one million won (about \$900 U.S.) a month and other special privileges. These public privileges help to elevate the prestige of the Living Human Treasurers. In Korea’s past, artists were looked upon with contempt rather than esteem. However, the cultural heritage system now gives these performers not only economic compensation but also greater prestige and individual self-respect.

Training for the transmission of an ICH element consists of three stages:

- 1. Initiates’ Education.** Living Human Treasurers seek out initiates and give them initial training. Upon recommendation from a Living Human Treasure, the best trainees are selected for scholarships. Those selected receive a fixed scholarship amount from the government.
- 2. Advanced Trainees’ Education.** Those who have received the initiate-

 1) Dawnhee Yim, ‘The Transmission, Preservation and Promotion Of Intangible Heritage’ The 1st UNESCO International Training Workshop on the Living Human Treasures System, Korean National Commission for UNESCO, Seoul Korea, pp 14 - 27. 1988.

level training are examined by the Living Human Treasure in their specialisation. The initiates who are judged to have attained a high level of functional or artistic skill are selected as advanced trainees.

3. Assistant Instructor of Initiates. The advanced students who have outstanding ability assist the Living Human Treasure by training the initiates and other advanced students. These Assistant Instructors also receive a fixed stipend from the government.

Ultimately, the successor's system provides for five levels: Initiates, Advanced Students, Assistant Instructors, Living Human Treasures, Emeritus Living Human Treasures. The last category is comprised of former Living Human Treasures who resigned because they suffered from debilitating illness or old age and were unable to be in charge of training successors.

Today, there are 126 items that have been selected as ICH element and 185 persons who have been designated as Living Human Treasures. There are also 299 Assistant Instructors, 4,017 Advanced Trainees, and 71 Initiates who receive scholarships.

The Living Human Treasures, both individuals and members of groups, give one public performance a year to show that they are maintaining and transmitting their accomplishments. In addition to this, the government also assists their transmission activities by constructing places for this purpose. By constructing these transmission places in the appropriate regions of the intangible cultural heritage, the transmission of that region's culture is attained. Of course, recordings are made as well. Visual and sound recordings as well as written descriptions are all made and permanently preserved.

Through such efforts over the past half-century, intangible cultural heritage that would otherwise have disappeared has been preserved and transmitted. In a public opinion poll conducted in 1999, 79 per cent of the citizens of the Republic of Korea responded that the Living Human Treasure system had contributed to the preservation of the nation's intangible cultural heritage.

No system, however, is perfect. After fifty years of accumulated experience with the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, new issues have started to

arise. Here are just three of them.²

First of all, some ask whether it is necessary to artificially preserve culture, especially intangible culture. Culture is like flowing water and is constantly changing. Change is only natural. It ought to be recognised that the disappearance of a cultural practice is natural when its functions are no longer needed. In place of the past culture that is disappearing, new culture is created. Thus, many people challenge the necessity of artificially preserving culture that is vanishing.

Those who advocate the artificial protection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage, however, offer a different logic. Their position is that generally much of the traditional culture that is disappearing from many societies often symbolically represents a people, their ethnic identity, and their state government. Non-Western societies emphasise this point most strongly. Of course there are many cases of old cultures disappearing in Western nations too. The situations of Western and non-Western nations, however, are different. Among the people of Western countries, disappearing culture may also be regarded as their own but newly created modern culture is also regarded as their own. Among the people of non-Western societies, however, the disappearing culture is regarded as their own, but the newly introduced culture is usually of foreign—and specifically Western—origins. A good example of this is traditional music. In Korea, one of the older forms of music is pansori, a kind of epic singing. In the 1960s, many people looked to the West and began to like Western music, such as opera and pop songs. Whereas there were few occasions when pansori singers were asked to perform, and this specialty became a hindrance to earning a livelihood, Korean singers of Western music and their audiences rapidly increased in number. Without the intangible cultural heritage policies of the government of the Republic of Korea, perhaps pansori would have disappeared. Today, even though many citizens still enjoy Western music more than pansori, they continue to regard the latter as Korean music and such genres as opera and pop song as Western music. Therefore, it is argued that much of the intangible cultural heritage has played an important role in preserving a group's unique cultural identity

Secondly, unlike elements of tangible cultural heritage, ICH elements cannot

2) Dawnhee Yim, 'Living Human Treasures: Experiences and Challenges in the Preservation and Transmission of Korea's Intangible Cultural Heritage,' Keynote Speech, ICOM 2004

usually be traced to a specific historical era. Instead, they constitute a heritage that lives through the continual possession and expression of a particular community. Therefore, continual change is one of their characteristics. But if an element is to be preserved, it is difficult to decide which form of it should be designated for preservation. One group of scholars has expressed the view that the element's form at the time of designation should be faithfully maintained and preserved. They contend that because it has to have a traditional form, and it has to keep the form it had at the time of designation as much as possible.

Those who oppose this view, however, put forth the criticism that not recognising change is tantamount to petrifying intangible cultural heritage, or, like a taxidermist, making its items into stuffed animals. Changing social conditions related to an ICH element should be evident in its public performance, they contend, and that public interest in the petrified form of an ICH element will vanish because today's audiences do not maintain the same tastes of those of the past.

In the case of many folk arts, such as the mask dance plays, the masks that were worn by the performers satirically criticised the ruling class, and the play was expressed through dances and speech. This kind of folk play quickly lost its popular appeal and was faced with the threat of extinction. In the 1960s, these play were designated as cultural heritage elements. The persons best able to perform them were designated Living Human Treasures in order that they could train others. These Living Human Treasures faithfully re-performed and trained others in the dances and texts of the designated forms of these plays. Among the young people (especially college students) who received instruction and learned these mask dance plays, however, some maintained that the texts were too oriented towards the past and didn't appeal to modern youth. In order to make these plays appealing to the modern people, rather than satirise the ruling class of former times, they advocated criticising current politicians and the wealthy heads of giant conglomerates. And instead of using the texts filled with archaic vocabulary, which was difficult for youth to understand, they argued, texts that used modern language should be substituted and transmitted.

As for those who wanted the forms of intangible cultural heritage to be transmitted in the form in which it was officially designated, however, their logic was that just as an tangible cultural heritage element is displayed in a museum as

the product of a single era, but future generations derive inspiration from it, so too can an ICH element be recognised as the product of a past era but influence future recreations. If we recognise change and transmit the changed form, the old form will disappear, they argued. On university campuses during the 1970s and 1980s, in fact, the old forms of mask dance plays became models for the plays of the anti-establishment People's (Minjung) Culture Movement, and farmer's band music (nongak), another category of intangible cultural heritage, became a model for the development of samulnori music that became very popular among the modern youth.

Even though scholars who support the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the forms which they had at the time of their respective designations consider this problem, they still take the view that in the rapidly changing Republic of Korea the traditional forms have to be preserved or else they will disappear. What is the purpose of preservation, they ask, if the new forms are designated while the older traditional forms disappear?

Young performers of the mask dance plays maintain that these dramas have a history of changing to meet contemporary conditions and are merely continuing that process today. Unless these changes are recognised, the cultural heritage will appear dead and petrified to modern audiences.

As a result, opinions vary among scholars, groups, and individuals as to whether the old forms of intangible cultural heritage should be maintained and performed without allowing any changes, whether changes should be accepted, and to what degree changes should be permitted.

A third challenging issue arises from various breakdowns in the categorisation of individual ICH elements. These elements exist in various forms. Similar variations differ regionally, and each performer transmits his or her own version. If one of these diverse versions is designated as part of the nationally designated cultural heritage and its most artistic performer declared a Living Human Treasure, there is a high probability that the designated version will be transmitted to the exclusion of other regional and individual variants. This is because national recognition of an element or a performer confers cultural authority. If the youth intend to learn the designated element, inheritors of the other versions will become scarce and the variant extinct. If there is an intention is to preserve greater diversity among the folk arts, consideration ought to be given to a method for

transcending the relationship between designated and undesignated as well as perpetuating diversity.

These challenges have now gained support from UNESCO. As I mentioned earlier, Korean ICH safeguarding started in 1962, decades before UNESCO instituted a Convention for Safeguarding ICH in 2003. This convention advocated fundamentally new approaches to safeguarding. When Korea joined the convention, its rethinking of its own safeguarding system was further stimulated.

First, the UNESCO Convention recognised two categories of ICH and instituted two categories for designation. One category of ICH is assigned to a Representative List, and the second to ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. Whereas the Korean safeguarding system has been oriented towards ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, the Korean Cultural Heritage Administration is considering more attention to ICH which is not in danger of disappearing. Much of Korea's ICH is actively performed and practiced by Koreans. This ICH can be collected and methods of safeguarding it can be developed.

Also, the UNESCO convention too recognises that changes in ICH result from the passage of time, new social and material contexts, new lifestyles, and many other developments. The Korean policies until now have not allowed changes in its designated ICH, however. Henceforth, the Korean government is thinking about abandoning its position that designated heritage should remain unchanged. However, as I discussed above, the opinions on allowing change and the degree of that change will continue to be discussed in the future.

Thus, Korea's institutionalisation of safeguarding ICH is flexibly responding to important changes in the nation and to new scholarship throughout the world.