

Enhancing the Capacity of NGOs for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage and the Role of the National Intangible Heritage Center

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Introduction

The Republic of Korea's effort towards preserving the original form of cultural heritage dates back to the enactment of the 1962 Cultural Heritage Protection Act. Intangible heritage embody many compound elements of human life, and are characterized by their tendency to change over time, unlike tangible cultural assets. Instituting systematic policies such as the active designation of intangible cultural heritage and support for the transmission thereof, South Korea has long been committed to the security of intangible heritage and effectively occupies a leadership position in the global endeavour to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.

Recent trends demonstrate the transition from the conventional model of conservation management led by state governments or public institutions to the greater prominence of various entities or NGOs in the private sector. Adopted in 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes participation on a regional level, while envisioning the role of NGOs as

consultative bodies in the field of intangible heritage.

The National Intangible Heritage Center (NITH) was established in 2013 as a comprehensive organization in the field of intangible cultural heritage. The NITH performs an array of functions such as the transmission of intangible heritage and support thereof; investigation and research; documentation of records; performances and exhibitions for the promotion of intangible heritage; as well as advancing opportunities for cooperation in Korea and abroad. This paper aims to describe the developments necessary to strengthen the capacity among NGOs for the protection of intangible heritage, based on the functions and roles of the NITH.

I. Role and Current Status of Intangible Heritage NGOs

Adopted in 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes participation on a regional level, while envisioning the role of NGOs as consultative bodies in the field of intangible heritage. As non-state actors, NGOs are able to lead broader and more comprehensive conservation efforts by drawing the participation of experts, regional elements, and the private sector, in comparison to the protection of intangible cultural heritage under government initiative.

In the case of Korea, officially approved NGOs include the Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation, Inter-City Intangible Cultural Cooperation Network (ICCN), World Martial Arts Union, and International Mask Arts & Culture Organization, among which the Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation is widely known for supporting the transmission and the wider dissemination of intangible cultural assets as its main objective through performances and exhibitions using intangible heritage contents.

The roles and functions of the government and NGOs towards the protection of intangible heritage are mutually complementary and require an organic standard of cooperation. The conventional model of government management towards intangible heritage policy became inadequate in covering the multitude of intangible heritage from each region. Unlike tangible heritage assets, intangible heritage vary wildly in terms of type and field, and contain a degree of complexity

formed through factors such as human culture and customs, ways of life, sensibilities, and natural environments unique to the region. This is because cultural heritage is expressed not only by individuals, but rather in combination with the longstanding tradition of culture and sentiments inherent in the surroundings, groups, and collectives within the region. The emphasis placed on the regional level by the Convention is logical in this context, and it is for this reason that the role of the NGO is beginning to surpass that of the government.

Categorizing NGOs into expert, regional, civic, practitioner, and international groups, each NGO must be able to perform functions such as list inscription, transmission, research, investigation, education, and consultation. Furthermore, said organizations must be capable of creating a complementary and organic system of cooperation and reflecting the results of their activities in government policy. For NGOs to fulfil such functions requires the establishment of a basis for activities and organization into a solid structure, whereas since NGOs are somewhat limited in their scope of action, a degree of government participation is also necessary. At present, Korea is facing a lack of systematic NGOs that correspond to the characteristics designated by UNESCO, with the exception of the four aforementioned organizations. However, a number of existing institutions and groups fulfil similar activities to an extent, and given capacity-building efforts and sufficient support, there is a potential for future development as NGOs.

Situated in each region in Korea, cultural centres are representative institutions that may potentially serve the functions of protection, transmission, education, and support towards intangible heritage. Cultural centres are largely divided into those established voluntarily by the residents of a particular region and those under the auspices of a larger organization, while the former type of organizations created occasionally conduct investigations and research into cultural heritage in the region. Similar efforts have been actively conducted for a significant length of time with regard to tangible heritage assets. Certain cultural centres in western coastal regions are also known to conduct the investigation and documentation of intangible heritage in the region. Other endeavours in the field include the protection of intangible heritage by cultural foundations, which are organizations under the purview of local governments that operate training centres for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage and offer relevant performances, exhibitions, and education. As of yet, there are no civic groups that represent the

interests of intangible cultural heritage, although civic groups for tangible cultural assets are already active in providing services such as the monitoring, protection and surveillance of cultural assets.

Most of the above types of organizations lack the adequate groundwork necessary for the protection of intangible heritage. Among a number of contributing factors for this limitation, main reasons include the fundamental structure of the organization, or insufficient human resources, budget, and collaborative network.

II. Roles and Functions of NITH

The National Intangible Heritage Center was officially launched on 1 October 2013 as a subsidiary institution to the Korea Cultural Heritage Administration. A comprehensive organization responsible for all functions and roles in relation to intangible cultural heritage, the NITH performs tasks including proliferating the value of various intangible heritage, enhancing the capacity among practitioners to transmit their talents, documentation of investigations and research, as well as exchanges and cooperation within Korea and overseas. To this end, the NITH aims to create a network among the general public, local authorities, private sector institutions, international organizations, NGOs, and practitioners in Korea and across the world. It contributes to the transmission of intangible heritage by providing support to practitioners and various related activities as well as establishing records, lists, and archives for receding intangible heritage. Moreover, performances and exhibitions hosted by the NITH offer an opportunity for practitioners and apprentices to demonstrate and transmit their skills. A representative aspect of support for transmission activities is the project to vitalize transmission education centres, which are established through local authorities to promote intangible heritage among the general public and to preserve such cultural assets. This is in combination with a specialized educational program on the subject of intangible cultural heritage, which is designed and offered by the NITH in order to develop a curriculum to enhance capacity among practitioners and to transmit intangible heritage to younger generations. The NITH's projects towards international cooperation include support for overseas practitioners and collaborative exchanges between related organizations.

While the NITH performs tasks such as the transmission, education, cooperation, and support for intangible cultural heritage, the Korea Cultural Heritage Administration is mainly responsible for the designation of intangible cultural assets and the formulation of relevant policy. As an umbrella organization, the latter seeks to improve the overall framework and system of policies as well as to approve and select important intangible cultural assets, whereas the NITH is largely charged with on-site tasks. This provides further justification for the participation of NGOs in safeguarding activities such as investigative research, documentation, and transmission.

Developed by the NITH in 2013, the Intangible Heritage Keepers project connotes the idea of the 'individuals' behind the 'safeguarding' and 'cooperation' towards intangible heritage, indicating the partnership between the government and the private sector in investigating, discovering, preserving, and fostering intangible heritage as well as the cooperative network for the purpose of intangible heritage protection. Inclusive of a wide variety of professions, age groups, and regions, there are currently sixty-four members of the Intangible Heritage Keepers who engage in activities similar to the role of NGOs, such as the investigation of regional intangible heritage and the status of transmission as well as the proposal of policy for the monitoring, discovery, and safeguarding of intangible heritage. By establishing regional networks for the protection of intangible heritage, the NITH is expected to potentially enable upward management from below. Although the enterprise remains in its infancy with minimal achievements, it is deemed to have the potential for future development. The enhancement of the capacity and the establishment of the groundwork with regard to the Intangible Heritage Keepers may require the intervention of the NITH to a degree. Although the group was created by the NITH, a national institution, the growth of the Intangible Heritage Keepers will require the temporary transfer of expertise in areas such as investigative methods, list inscription, and monitoring tasks. Furthermore, the creation of an organic system of cooperation by encouraging the full participation of practitioners, regions, civic groups, and experts in initiatives launched by the NITH will contribute to the organized and systematic protection of intangible heritage.

III. Role of the NITH in Building the Capacity of NGOs

The vitalization and capacity-building in relation to intangible heritage NGOs urgently requires the establishment of the groundwork for NGOs. While the self-directed efforts of the NGOs are vital to instituting the foundation for NGO activities, the role of the government is also a prerequisite to an extent. The organizations and groups discussed above face difficulties in terms of their workforce, finances and organizational structure, thereby posing limitations upon their pursuits. In particular, the expertise required for the protection of intangible heritage and relevant transmission activities is also insufficient, which also poses difficulties for the secondary object of international cooperation. As of yet, there is neither a system for mutual cooperation, nor a centralized point for the presentation of opinions on shared issues in relation to intangible heritage. Therefore, there must be an element to consolidate these individual factors, which may be effectively fulfilled by a government institution. This is an area in which the NITH can act as both a government institution and an overarching central point in the field of intangible heritage.

At the National Intangible Heritage Center, plans to enhance the capacity among this group is, firstly, to provide specialist education required for tasks such as listing, monitoring and investigation. Education towards NGO activists in the field of intangible heritage may provide opportunities for the analysis of relevant circumstances in Korea, the provision of related information, and inter-organization exchanges. Secondly, there must be a plan to expand participation in the tasks performed by the NITH. Other than high-profile opportunities such as performances and exhibitions, there are tasks such as the investigation and documentation of intangible heritage. The less prominent aspects of intangible heritage discovery are most familiar to the residents of the local area, whose knowledge and experience must be utilized for the discovery, investigation, and documentation of intangible heritage. Therefore, the NITH must disseminate skills such as the methods of list inscription or investigation, and encourage their usage. This may also be assisted by the provision of an online space in which the results of such assignments can be shared. Finally, there is a need for a mechanism to unite NGOs based in Korea, necessitating an organic system of cooperation centring on the NITH, through regular workshops and the establishment of an online contact system.

Currently under implementation by the NITH, the Intangible Heritage Keepers project is expected to provide a strong case study of the distribution of functions between the government and NGOs in the field of intangible heritage. The protection of intangible heritage is expected to greatly benefit from their future growth in terms of capacity, along with the establishment and vitalization of the relevant cooperative network.