Inventory Making Methodology for the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding: Korea's Experiences and Challenges

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According to the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by UNESCO in 2003, Article 12 of Chapter 3 states that “each State Party shall draw up, in a manner geared to its own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory. These inventories shall be regularly updated.” There is no standard or universal approach to making such inventories.

Chapter IV of the Convention, which deals with the international protection of intangible cultural heritage, however, calls for two different types of lists. The first is the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and the second is the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. In order to make inventories and develop programs for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, it is necessary to distinguish between these two types of lists and the kinds of cultural heritage that is appropriate to each.

In my presentation today, I would like to share with you a brief account of the Republic of Korea's experiences and challenges with its intangible cultural preservation policies for those items in need of urgent safeguarding.

For centuries, Korea had been a predominantly agricultural society, the overwhelming majority of its population engaged in farming. As a result of the rapid industrialization that began in the 1960s, however, much of the population migrated from farming villages to cities. And during this period, American-centered Western culture had an enormous impact. Owing to this simultaneous industrialization, urbanization, and westernization, 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 civilization, 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 color 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 recognized and encouraged to transmit it 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 (*in'gan munhwaje*) 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 recognized 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 items 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, no one intended to learn folk arts, and their disappearance seemed an inevitable 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 urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. 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 program. In this program, the designation of individual items of cultural heritage involves several steps. If an autonomous local group submits an application, specialists in that topic are asked to conduct fieldwork and prepare a designation report. The Culture Heritage Committee of the national Ministry of Culture considers this report and judges whether the proposed item has significant historical, academic, and artistic value, and whether it notably expresses local color. If the report indicates that it does, the Committee designates it as an important item of cultural heritage. In addition, for the sake of continuing the transmission of the item, it gauges the functional and artistic value of its original form, and recognizes the person who has best maintained these as the heritage item's Living Human Treasure, who is then required to continue the performance or manufacture of the item. 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 cultural item's Living Human Treasurers.

Another feature of the Republic of Korea's intangible cultural heritage system is that rather than regard the designation of items of heritage as its only goal, it also considers providing a system for continuing the transmission of the item. This transmission system is highly refined and structured. Those who are recognized as the Living Human Treasures of intangible cultural heritage are required to train younger persons in the techniques of their art. So 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-hundred thousand won (about 1000 U.S. dollars) a month, free medical treatment, and other special privileges. These public privileges help to elevate the prestige of the Living Human Treasures. 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 item of cultural heritage consists of three stages:
1. Initiates' Education. Living Human Treasures seek out initiates and give them initial training. Upon recommendation from a Living Human Treasure or a Living Human Treasure Group, 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-level training are examined by the Living Human Treasure or Treasures in the appropriate field. 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 six levels: Initiates, Advanced Students, Assistant Instructors, Living Human Treasure Candidates (those who will succeed the current Living Human Treasures), and honorary Living Human Treasures. This 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. Designating them as Honorary Living Human Treasures is designed to maintain their dignity.

Today, there are 109 items that have been selected as items of intangible cultural heritage and 212 persons who have been designated as Living Human Treasures. There are also 302 Assistant Instructors, 2,473 Advanced Trainees, and 92 Initiates who receive scholarships.

The Living Human Treasures, both individuals and members of troupes, give one public performance a year to maintain and show that they are 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 40 years, intangible cultural heritage that would otherwise have disappeared have been preserved and transmitted. In a public opinion poll conducted in 1999, 79% of 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 40 years of accumulated experience with the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, new issues have started to arise. Here are just three of them.

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 recognized that the disappearance of a culture 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 emphasize 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 too is 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 p’ansori, 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 p’ansori 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 p’ansori would have disappeared. Today, even though many citizens still enjoy Western music more than p’ansori, 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 items of tangible cultural heritage, items of intangible cultural heritage cannot usually be traced to a specific historical era. Instead, they constitute a heritage that lives through the continual possession and expression of a particular group. Therefore, continual change is one of their characteristics. But if an item of cultural heritage 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 item's form at the time of designation should be faithfully maintained and preserved. They contend that because it has to have a traditional form, it has to keep the form it had at the time of designation as much as possible.

This who oppose this view, however, put forth the criticism that not recognizing change is tantamount to petrifying intangible cultural heritage, or, like a taxidermist, making its items into stuffed animals. Changing social conditions related to an item of intangible cultural heritage should be evident in its public performance, they contend, and that public interest in the petrified form of an item of intangible cultural heritage 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 masked-dance dramas, the masks that were worn by the performers sarcastically criticized the ruling class, and the drama was expressed through dances and speech. This kind of folk drama quickly lost its popular appeal and was faced with the threat of extinction. In the 1960s, these dramas were designated as items of cultural heritage. 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 dramas. Among the young people
(especially college students) who received instruction and learned these masked-dance dramas, however, some maintained that the texts were too oriented toward the past and didn't appeal to modern youth. In order to make these dramas appealing to modern people, rather than satirize the ruling class of former times, they advocated criticizing 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 item of tangible cultural heritage is displayed in a museum as the product of a single era but future generations derive inspiration from it, so too can an item of intangible cultural heritage be recognized as the product of a past era but influence future recreations. If we recognize 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 masked-dance dramas became models for the dramas 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 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 masked-dance dramas maintain that these dramas have a history of changing to meet contemporary conditions and are merely continuing that process today. Unless these changes are recognized, the cultural heritage will appear dead and petrified to modern audiences.

As a result, opinions vary between 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 permitted, and to what degree changes should be permitted. In the future, the World Cultural Heritage items selected by UNESCO are likely to be challenged by these same considerations.

A third challenging issue arises from various breakdowns in the categorization of individual items of intangible cultural heritage. These items 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 item or a performer confers cultural authority. If the youth intend to learn the designated item, 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.
Of course, there are many other challenges to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage for those items in need of urgent safeguarding and the continuation of their transmission. I regret that I could include only three of them today. The experiences of protecting the intangible heritage that was disappearing more than 40 years ago and implementing the system of Living Human Treasures described above have brought many accomplishments. The intangible cultural protection policies that have been in effect for more than 40 years, however, have generated the new challenges, also described above, which we are now confronting.