

Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Role of NGOs

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I. Significance of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

The term intangible cultural heritage (ICH) refers to the diverse knowledge, techniques, performance arts, and cultural expressions recreated endlessly by collectives and communities through the interactions with their surroundings, nature, and history. ICH is characterized by communal retention within a collective and comprises a living aspect of culture, which is inherited through the daily lives of people. As a result, the international community, including UNESCO, has begun to newly recognize the value of ICH, and although the international community is showing greater interest towards the protection of ICH, trends such as globalization and urbanization have led to the extinction of many intangible heritage assets. ICH is a field in which the loss of the capacity for continuation and cultural abandonment are risks with high potential. It is for these reasons that there is a grave necessity to imbue the field of ICH with renewed vitality.¹

¹ Kim, Kwang Hee, "A research for the safeguarding and utilization of intangible cultural heritage in Korea", doctoral dissertation submitted to the Korea University Graduate School, 2013, p. 1.

ICH symbolizes the fruit of the sagacity and wisdom within daily life. Inherited through tradition, ICH continues to affect our values in the present day. Under similar circumstances, it is highly conceivable that it will maintain a similar influence in the future, thereby presenting a potent rationale to support the transmission of ICH as intellectual property, which leads to the creation of tangible heritage. In this respect, ICH is none other than the valuable customs that can be applied both in present-day lives and projections of the future alike. ICH allows an understanding into the values, social conventions, worldviews and cosmic vision of our ancestors and serves a critical role in understanding modern mankind and foreseeing the future through the culture of the past.² Such reasons provide ample basis for the protection of ICH.

II. Characteristics and Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Although the concept of ICH varies in each country, ICH as the shared heritage of mankind shares a number of common traits, which can be summarized through the compilation of scholarly opinions presented to date in the following nine elements.³ ICH-related institutions and NGOs must acquire a firm understanding of the below characteristics in formulating a method of protection.

First, ICH requires an aspect of uniqueness, referring to the individuality and distinctiveness of a heritage asset. ICH exists in the form of art or cultural expression, demonstrating the inimitable creativity of the constituents of a particular ethnic group, nation or region and presenting a tangible product or a specific practice, conduct or custom, which testify to the unique individuality of each ethnic group or nation.

Second, ICH is notable for national representation. National or ethnic characteristics are represented through the distinct method of reasoning, wisdom, worldview, values, aesthetics, and sentiments of a nation, which cannot be

imitated or emulated by another. The dress code, cuisine, way of life, language, and traditions of a nation are constructs that evolve naturally, which are most significantly influenced by the natural habitat facing the ethnic group.

Third, ICH demonstrates historicity. Historicity indicates that ICH is not created overnight within a certain period. Instead, it is formed through the interminable progression of history, and therefore internalizes a diverse range of information regarding the politics, economics, society, history and culture prevalent throughout the process. Furthermore, the continued transmission of ICH accumulates the wisdom, artistic technique and creativity of past practitioners to create the essence of the wisdom inherent in an ethnic group. ICH conveys an abundance of historical information, and reflects the thoughts, sensibilities and values of the actual practitioners as well.

Fourth, ICH requires the transmission of its tradition. Transmissibility refers to the notion that the transference of ICH is only possible through continual efforts towards its preservation by successive generations. For ICH, the cessation of transmission activities equates to its extinction. Because ICH customarily transfers its functions, artistic skills, and techniques to subsequent generations by verbal education or practical training, the capacity for transmission is directly connected to the conservation of ICH.

Fifth, ICH is variable. Variability refers to the changes that occur through the transmission of ICH, which diverges from its original form. ICH is exclusively transferred to other ethnic groups, nations and regions through the conscious efforts by practitioners to teach and novices to learn, or through cultural exchange in the form of mutual study as a voluntary enterprise in the private sector. ICH changes simultaneously to its proliferation and transmission, incurring a distance from the original form.

Sixth, ICH carries the trait of locality, which connotes that ICH is created based on the culture and natural environs of the region of origin. An ethnic group generally maintains a specific way of life and territory, while the natural surroundings of a region can sustain a considerable impact on the formation of ethnic particularities. In other words, the cultural characteristics of a people are often based on the natural habitat of the region. ICH conventionally refers to those created within a certain area and demonstrates close ties with the unique surroundings of the region.

² Kim, Kwang Hee, *ibid.*, p. 37.

³ 李世濤, 「試析“非物質文化遺產”的基本特點與性質」,《廣西民族研究》(3), (2007), pp. 184–187. 周小岩, 「“非遺”保護的“生態性”轉承」,《語文學刊》(11), (2011), pp. 112–113.

Seventh, ICH indicates collectivism. Collectivism, in this context, stands in relation to the fact that ICH is not merely the product of the individual practitioner, but rather the culmination of the wisdom and creativity of a collective. Although the transmission of ICH may appear to be an individual endeavour by the practitioner, from a holistic viewpoint, ICH is the product of a community.

Eighth, ICH can also be defined for its vivacity, which refers to the ceaseless evolution of ICH. ICH places great emphasis on the value of humanity as well as the active, the dynamic, and the mental. In effect, the expression and transmission of ICH is itself entirely a dynamic process.

Finally, ICH must be comprehensive in nature. ICH is an intellectual product encompassing a certain period, nature, environment, culture, etc. From the perspective of each constituent element, a wide variety of expressive methods are combined through ICH. For example, the prominent ICH form of theatre incorporates an array of expressive formats such as literature, dance, music, education, and art while, on the other hand, demonstrating multifaceted functions such as entertainment, leisure, appreciation, and education.⁴

Safeguarding activities by NGOs must be realized based on the abovementioned nine traits of ICH.

III. NGOs for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage

States Parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage are recommended to encourage the participation of NGOs in the discovery and definition of ICH; this is because NGOs are capable of the most direct form of communication with heritage communities.⁵ On the international level, NGOs approved by the ICH Convention serve in consultative roles towards the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. At present, 178 organizations have been designated as approved NGOs,

⁴ Kim, Kwang Hee, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵ In accordance with Article 11(b) of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, the participation of NGOs must be in concert with other entities, confirming and defining intangible heritage in the implementation of protection methods as specified by the convention.

including four based in South Korea, such as the Inter-City Intangible Cultural Cooperation network (ICCN), World Martial Arts Union, International Mask Culture & Arts Organization, and Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation.

At the outset, the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage instituted the Consultative Body composed of six representatives from approved NGOs and six experts both fulfilling year-long terms (reappointment possible) to perform responsibilities such as the assessment of ICH for inscription to the Urgent Safeguarding List, evaluation of proposals for the register of best safeguarding practices as well as the review of requests for international aid of over USD 25,000 in value. Furthermore, the Consultative Body was charged with submitting recommendations following assessment to the Intergovernmental Committee detailing whether to grant inscription or permission to the cases reviewed. However, the fifth General Assembly of the ICH Convention held at UNESCO headquarters (2 to 5 June 2014) resulted in the establishment of the Evaluation Body as a committee of twelve members combining the functions of the existing Subsidiary Body and Consultative Body to oversee the assessment of all inscription applications.⁶

The criteria for the approval of NGOs are: (a) NGOs recognized for their capacity, expert knowledge and experience in relation to the protection of ICH in more than one specific region; (b) NGOs with the appropriate local, regional, national or international characteristics; (c) NGOs with a purpose commensurate with the laws and regulations adhering to the spirit and goals of the UNESCO ICH Convention; and (d) NGOs encouraging the participation of local communities or organizations creating, enacting, and transmitting ICH, or otherwise individuals that create, enact, and transmit intangible cultural assets.⁷

With regards to the greater inclusion of participation by NGOs and other organizations, the Intergovernmental Committee presents the following specific recommendations: (a) enhancement of awareness towards ICH, (b) confirmation and definition of ICH, (c) organization of the list, (d) safeguarding, (e) research, (f) preparation of information required for recommendation, (g) cooperation and

⁶ The twelve members are comprised of six experts and six NGO representatives selected not by the Intergovernmental Committee, but by States Parties themselves.

⁷ Operational Guidelines, p. 91.

networking, and (h) education towards the management and protection of ICH.⁸

NGOs must actively strive to respond to requests from UNESCO and States Parties and to safeguard ICH to the full extent of their duties and capability in cooperation with regional communities. Further activities include the creation of a list of intangible cultural assets within a given region as well as the regular update and management of the said list, adhering to methods apt to the situation in Member States. Although inscription to the list can be from individuals, relevant institutions, or public entities, it is recommended that communities, organizations, and individuals on the local level participate in the process along with related NGOs. By participating in the process, local communities are led to greater awareness towards the importance of ICH within their possession and to hold a sense of duty and pride. However, if the list inscription process neglects minority ICH or discriminates in its treatment of various expressions of ICH, this may exacerbate the problem of social and cultural disparity. Due to the tendency for States Parties to wish to conduct the list inscription tasks by themselves, the process requires the appointment of experts who are fully cognizant of the factors commensurate to the identification of ICH. In effect, we must re-examine the definition of ICH, which is closely related to the agenda of recognition towards ICH as an issue that must be determined within the relevant local communities. This provides the crucial grounds for the roles of related NGOs and local communities in the process of drafting the ICH list. NGOs must also explore methods for the protection of ICH within local communities and organizations, continuing its responsibility of verifying the ICH list while formulating and implementing research and protective measures. In order to institute safeguarding measures with local communities, NGOs must combine their efforts with publicity and marketing to stimulate the transmission of ICH.

NGOs must also contribute to research towards the specific elements of ICH. By studying the relevant history and significance, the role of ICH in terms of social, cultural, and economic aspects as well as the actual status of ICH transmission, the groundwork for the field of ICH must be solidified and the modern significance of ICH must be identified. At the same time, such research efforts must be shared through cooperation and networking among NGOs; by sharing past and present

⁸ Ibid., p. 90.

experiences with proficient NGOs in terms of research results, confirmation, definition, and documentation of ICH, valuable insight into the protection of ICH can be shared for the ultimate goal of contributing to the progress of human civilization. In addition, valuable information must be collated and selected in order to provide the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage with recommendation data to be used for the inscription of the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

Furthermore, NGOs must support the local community when there is a need for education regarding the management and protection of ICH, and also educate local community members and ICH practitioners with regards to appropriate methods for the documentation and safeguarding of ICH elements and the use of relevant data and resources.

IV. Case Study of Activities by UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage NGOs

This paper aims to describe the NGO activities of the Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation towards the protection and promotion of ICH.

A. Activities for the Promotion of ICH

The Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation aims to support the field of intangible heritage and expand the practitioner base through a variety of means, such as providing support for transmission activities led by practitioners, training for the utilization of ICH transmission centres, and events planned around ICH skills and performances. In effect, the diversified range of support contributes to the activities of individual practitioners, practicing groups, and transmission training experts towards the preservation of key intangible cultural assets. Moreover, the Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation supports events hosted by practitioners such as performances and exhibitions, with the focus on mainly bringing such opportunities to culturally-isolated areas. In 2012, 246 cases were supported, with preferential weight given to the number of cases supported in minor fields in order

to promote the balanced development of ICH transmission.

The foundation also utilizes ICH training centres to provide training for the propagation of ICH, allowing practitioners and organization representatives located at ICH training centres to host free ICH education programs aimed towards the general public. In 2012, 115 programs were supported, thereby contributing to the expansion of the activity scope of practitioners and cultural access for the general public.⁹

Other agendas for the foundation include the vitalization of ICH exhibitions, greater distribution of craft items, and operation of youth training programs. Operating under the auspices of the Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation, Training Centers for Important Intangible Cultural Properties offer youth-oriented educational programs along with exhibitions of products crafted by practitioners, thereby showcasing around 50 fields of important ICH. In 2013, the training centres attracted 17,026 visitors, and hosting 30 sessions of the 'After School Traditional Culture Classroom,' which invites practitioners of fields selected as important ICH to provide an opportunity for students to experience intangible heritage properties first hand. In addition, elementary school curricula were analysed with the assistance of experts in various fields in order to establish the 'ICH in Textbooks' classes as a new approach to learning, which were hosted over 37 sessions. The number of participants in educational programs reached 3,298 in 2013; a survey directed towards participants yielded a highly positive response with over 90 percent of respondents specifying the standard of the classes as 'satisfactory.' Aside from such educational efforts, the foundation aims to popularize craft-related ICH by annually hosting events such as the Invitational Exhibition of Important Intangible Cultural Properties, Exhibition of Important ICH Practitioners, and other ICH-related special exhibitions.

In terms of ICH-related performing arts, new talents are continually being fostered through opportunities such as open contests. This project aims to contribute to the utilization and vitalization of intangible cultural properties by raising the interest in traditional culture among children and encouraging transmission activities. In 2013, the 12th Children's Korean Folk Music Festival saw the participation of 516 practitioners in 110 groups. In addition, the National

⁹ Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation, "2012 Annual Report," p. 21.

Collegiate Madangnori Festival continues to be held on an annual basis, attracting the participation of fourteen colleges in 2013.

The Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation endeavours for the invigoration of ICH through myriad performance-based events such as regular performances at ICH training centres, annual Inherited Artistic Spirit performances, Let's Go See the Gut performances, as well as regular and special performances held at the Korea Cultural House (KOUS). In particular, Let's Go See the Gut performances have successfully contributed to expanding the opportunity for residents in culturally isolated areas to enjoy traditional culture and arts. Hosted over eight sessions from May to November 2013, Let's Go See the Gut performances took place in Gunsan of Jeollabuk-do, Seongju of Gyeongsangbuk-do, Busan Metropolitan City, Chungju of Chungcheongbuk-do, Suncheon of Jeollabuk-do, Gimcheon of Gyeongsangbuk-do, Seochon of Chungcheongnam-do and Pocheon of Gyeonggi-do, which attracted an audience of 7,562 in total.

B. Activities for Public Education of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Established under the purview of the Korea Cultural House (KOUS), the Korea Traditional Crafts and Architecture School operates ICH-related educational programs for the expansion of transmission training for ICH. The curriculum at the school consists of a year-long course of practical training in traditional handicraft, which encourages students to familiarize themselves with the traditional crafts carrying relevance in real life and aims to contribute to the cultivation of new talent along with the distribution and dissemination of traditional crafts. In 2013, 657 students enrolled through 58 classes in 14 subject areas. Furthermore, the foundation has established educational opportunities such as traditional handicraft design lectures, traditional heritage-related vocational training for teaching staff, and cultural heritage repair engineering classes, in order to enhance education in the field of ICH.

C. Activities for International Networking in the Field of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation aims to promote networking and information exchange in the global field of ICH by publicizing ICH-related issues

through its English-language ICH NGOs Newsletter and the foundation website, and also strives to serve as the mediator between practitioners and international organizations.

The foundation's contributions towards enhancing the profile of the issues of ICH include a succession of international symposiums along a variety of themes, such as defining the role of the UNESCO ICH Consultative Body and plans for collaboration (2011), the role of the UNESCO ICH Consultative Body in relation to the promotion of intangible heritage (2012), and the culture of kimchi and gimjang (2013). Participants included representatives from the UNESCO Offices in Bangkok and a wide range of countries, such as, Egypt, India, Bulgaria, Mongolia, the Philippines, Mexico, and South Africa. Moreover, the 2013 conference was coupled with the publication of a book titled *The Culture of Kimchi and Gimjang* available in both Korean and English.

As an attempt to deepen cooperative exchanges with NGO experts, the foundation invites ICH planning experts on an annual basis. This project aims to share and promulgate the operational know-how required for the protection and promotion of ICH in Korea, thereby contributing to the protection of ICH for all of mankind. Exchanges in 2012 included India, Bulgaria, and Mongolia, while exchanges in 2013 invited ICH-related experts from Kenya, Bulgaria and Colombia. To date, a total of twenty-one researchers from eleven countries have participated in the visitation program.

V. Role of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage NGOs

The role of UNESCO accredited NGOs is a necessity for the protection and promotion of ICH. As accredited by UNESCO, the said role consists of ICH-related tasks such as raising awareness towards ICH, verification and definition of ICH, organization of ICH lists, safeguarding, research, preparation of recommendation data, cooperation, and networking as well as education towards the management and protection of ICH.

Based on the above functions, this paper seeks to present the following as practical alternatives for UNESCO accredited NGOs. First, the creation of an inventory for ICH must be bolstered. Relevant information and knowledge must

be compiled and shared not only as the sole purview of researchers, but to be open to the general public, with regards to non-designated ICH as well as officially designated ICH. Such information must contain various criteria such as the main agent of transmission, transmitted region, contents, origins and history.

Second, each approved ICH NGO must establish an internal ICH support centre. The average age of ICH practitioners exceeds sixty, outside of actively transmitted fields. As a result, elderly practitioners face difficulties in operating the online administrative system¹⁰ used to support ICH in Korea. Therefore, ICH support centres must provide administrative support in order to allow practitioners to focus entirely on transmission activities. Also, the active intervention of NGOs is required for areas of support such as providing consultation in relation to the welfare or business start-up efforts by practitioners.

Third, items listed on the Representative List require follow-up management. Usually reserved for the inscription of the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the first week of December reminds Koreans of Olympic figure skater Kim Yuna as was the case with 'Arirang' in 2012 and gimjang culture in 2013. The inscription of sixteen items to the Representative List was always met with an air of festivity; however, such interest is often much diminished subsequent to the initial inscription. In response, there is a need for efforts towards the protection and promotion of ICH after the inscription. For example, the 'Arirang Globalization Group' (hypothetical) may advance projects such as organizing performances, exhibitions, research, symposiums, archives, and international exchange to promote Arirang as an intangible cultural property. To this end, the protection and global promotion of inscribed ICH also requires the involvement of NGOs.

Fourth, there is a need for active exchange and cooperation among UNESCO ICH NGOs, which number at 178 to date. Exchange methods may involve performances, exhibitions, jointly-hosted festivals, and symposiums for the safeguarding of ICH. In particular, experiences from exemplary cases of ICH protection and promotion must be shared to strive for the mutual safeguarding and

¹⁰ The cultural heritage working portal encompasses over ten sections in total, including functions such as yearly curricular schedules, registration of education results, performance scheduling, open events, application forms for visiting intangible cultural properties, and outcome reports.

advancement of ICH. NGOs must promote exchanges in order to raise their profile and secure the right to be heard at the Intergovernmental Committee and General Assembly of UNESCO.

Fifth, NGOs must keenly partake in the activities of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Naturally including NGOs comprising the Evaluation Body responsible for the assessment of all inscription requests, all UNESCO-approved NGOs must be active in their participation and operation within NGO forums currently under process as well as other tasks such as inscription of ICH onto the Representative List or assessment of items for the Urgent Safeguarding List.

Culture is at once a way of life, an intellectual method of reasoning, and specifically a work of art. Therefore the true transmission of ICH necessarily requires the acceptance of the intellectual values innate within culture to be practiced in the scene of life, alongside the ceaseless production of works of creativity. Practitioners and groups possessing techniques and artistic skills of intangible cultural heritage, as well as all those in related fields, must unite their capabilities in creating the overarching symbol for the respect towards artistic integrity and becoming the cultural origin of the nation. The role of NGOs is to be the faithful watcher safeguarding this cultural origin.