

Living Human Treasures and the Protection of Intangible Culture Heritage: Experiences and Challenges

by Dawnhee Yim

Cultures are too often polarised into Western vs. non-Western, male vs. female, elite vs. folk, or tangible vs. intangible, with the former consistently privileged. Western cultures, particularly due to modernisation and the attendant expansion of the Western cultural world, are frequently considered more rational, valuable and superior to non-Western cultures and this has been exacerbated by globalisation.

> Similarly, as many feminists have pointed out, the culture of women has long been considered to have relatively less value and importance than that of men. And cultural critics have noted that folk cultures are often regarded as being old, outdated, and worthy only to be forgotten.

> Intangible cultural heritage has also been viewed as relatively less important than tangible cultural heritage. For example, although UNESCO adopted the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* in 1972, the scope of "cultural heritage" in the Convention was limited to tangible heritage, such as the pyramids at Giza or the Great Wall of China. A Convention for intangible cultural heritage was not adopted until 2003, 31 years later, and it still awaits approval by several participating countries.

> The unfairness of the above dichotomies has become increasingly apparent. Developments in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, folklore, and gender studies warn us against the injustices that often result from creating such cultural hierarchies. They show that all cultures are important and meaningful in their own way. UNESCO's *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001) conforms to this principle.

> In the light of these developments, this year's ICOM Conference in the Republic of Korea, on "Museums and Intangible Heritage", is most welcome. The Conference provides a concrete opportunity for us all to work together towards a more balanced understanding of world cultures.

> It does not seem coincidental that such a conference is being held here in the Republic of Korea, a nation that has taken active measures to preserve and protect its intangible cultural heritage. During the past few

decades, the Republic of Korea has also taken great interest in and contributed in significant ways to UNESCO's world intangible heritage conservation policies. The Republic of Korea's system of transferring intangible cultural heritage from generation to generation through its "Living Human Treasures" designation has been particularly effective. As a result, the Executive Board of UNESCO formally decided in 1993 that this system was

an effective method of conserving intangible cultural heritage, recommending that the system be adopted by all member states.

> The concept of intangible cultural heritage may be unfamiliar to some cultural policy professionals. Many nations, in fact, do not have an intangible heritage conservation policy. However, the importance of intangible cultural heritage in defining the cultural identity of a people or group cannot be overemphasised. And if no particular conservation policy is implemented in this age of globalisation, the danger of cultural extinction is a real one.

> I would like to give a brief account of the Republic of Korea's intangible cultural heritage preservation policies. Of course, this is not the only such programme in the world, but it has been regarded as highly successful in protecting much of the cultural heritage that would otherwise have disappeared. Moreover, unlike fixed tangible heritage, the preservation and transmission of intangible culture requires very different policies and methods. In the light of these considerations, it seems worthwhile to present a

brief discussion of the Republic of Korea's experience with its intangible cultural preservation policies and their significance.

The preservation of the intangible cultural heritage in Korea

> For centuries, Korea had been a predominantly agricultural society, with the overwhelming majority of its population engaged in farming. As a

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result of the rapid industrialisation that began in the 1960s, however, much of the population migrated from farming villages to the cities. And during this period, American-centred Western culture had an enormous impact. Owing to this simultaneous industrialisation, urbanisation, and westernisation, the traditional ways of life began to disappear rapidly along with the older arts, rituals, and other kinds of intangible cultural expression that articulated this way of life. The Intangible Cultural Heritage system was invented in order to designate the valuable forms of expression that were being pushed towards 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 displaying local colour. This intangible cultural heritage, without fixed form, was transmitted by styles and techniques that were visible and audible. To preserve and continue the transmission of this cultural heritage, therefore, the knowledgeable and skilled persons who maintained a particular art or technique were also identified and encouraged to transmit it to others. The persons perpetuating the accomplishments and skills of significant 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 Treasures”.

> 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” meant the buildings and other fixed and visible constructions of earlier eras, recognised for their outstanding artistry, and worth preserving. According to that way of thinking, intangible cultural heritage lacked the durability of constructions and was always changing, which made it difficult to include in the concept of cultural heritage along with fixed objects.

> Among the items designated as intangible cultural heritage, Korea’s unique folklore took pride of place. Most people regarded folklore as inferior to the high arts of the social elite, considering it somewhat childish and not worth preserving. Because it was seen as a hindrance to development, many people advocated its destruction rather than its preservation. Consequently, no one wished 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 as that way of life was obliterated by urbanisation, industrialisation, and modernisation. I believe that many folk performances would have disappeared if a system of intangible cultural heritage preservation and other policies had not been implemented to preserve them.

Korea’s Living Human Treasure system

> The *Cultural Heritage Protection Act* passed by the Republic of Korea’s government in 1962 constituted the legal basis for its cultural protection programme. In this programme, the designation of individual items of cultural heritage involves the following procedures. If an autonomous local group submits an application, specialists in the topic are asked to conduct fieldwork and prepare a designation report. The Cultural Heritage Committee of the Ministry of Culture considers this report and judges whether the proposed item has significant historical, academic, and artistic value, and notably whether it expresses local colour. If the report indicates that it does, the Committee designates the item as an important item of cultural heritage. In addition, in order to assure the transmission of the item, it gauges the functional and artistic value of its original form, and recognises the person who has best maintained these as a Living Human

Treasure, who is then required to continue the performance or manufacture of the item. In the case of drama, 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 Treasures.

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> 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. The transmission system is highly refined and structured. Those who are recognised as the Living Human Treasures of intangible cultural heritage are required to train younger persons in the techniques of their art. In order that these younger persons may receive that special training at no charge, the Republic of Korea’s government gives the Living Human Treasure an additional one-hundred thousand wŏn (about 850 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 is in three parts:

1. **Beginners:** Living Human Treasures seek out beginners and give them initial training. Upon recommendation from a Living Human Treasure or a Living Human Treasure Group, the best trainees are selected for government scholarships.

2. **Advanced:** those who have passed the beginners’ level are examined by the Living Human Treasure or Treasures in the appropriate field. Beginners who are judged to have attained a high level of functional or artistic skill are selected as advanced trainees.

3. **Assistant Instructors:** the advanced students who have outstanding ability assist the Living Human Treasure by training beginners and other advanced students. These Assistant Instructors also receive a fixed stipend from the government.

> Today, there are 109 items that have been selected as items of intangible cultural heritage and 213 persons who have been designated as Living Human Treasures. There are also 302 Assistant Instructors, 2,473 Advanced Trainees, and 92 Initiates receiving scholarships.

> The Living Human Treasures, both individuals and troupes, give one public performance a year to maintain their skills and show that they are transmitting them. In addition to this, the government assists this transmission by constructing specific places within relevant regions. Visual and sound recordings as well as written descriptions are also made, of course, and permanently preserved.

> Through such efforts over the past forty years, intangible cultural heritage that would otherwise have disappeared has 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.

Challenges to the preservation of intangible heritage

> No system, however, is perfect. After all these years of experience in 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. Change is only natural. It ought to be recognised that the disappearance of a culture is natural when it no longer performs a function. The past culture is replaced by a new culture. Hence, many people challenge the necessity of artificially preserving a culture that is vanishing.

> Those who advocate the artificial protection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage, however, put forward a different logic. Their position is that in general much of the traditional culture that is disappearing from societies symbolically represents a people, their ethnic identity, and their mode of government. Non-Western societies emphasise this point most strongly. 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 speciality affected their 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 altogether. 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 arguable that 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 usually cannot be traced back to a specific historical era. Instead, they constitute a heritage that lives through the continued possession and expression of a particular group. Hence continual change is one of their characteristics. But if an item of cultural heritage is to be preserved, it is difficult to decide in which form 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. Those who oppose this view, however, make the criticism that not recognising change is tantamount to petrifying intangible cultural heritage and like a taxidermist, making its objects into stuffed animals. They argue that changing social conditions manifested in an item of intangible cultural heritage should be evident in its public performance, and that public interest in the petrified form of an item of intangible cultural heritage will vanish because today's audiences do not have the same tastes of those of the past.

Preserving the Past / Adapting to the Future

> In the case of masked dance dramas, the masks worn by the performers criticised the ruling class. This kind of folk drama lost its popular appeal and was threatened with extinction. In the 1960s, these dramas were designated as items of cultural heritage and the persons best able to perform them were designated Living Human Treasures in order that they should train others. These Living Human Treasures faithfully performed and trained others in the dances and texts. Among the young people (especially college students) who received instruction and learned these masked-dance dramas, however, some maintained that the texts were too rooted in the past, with no relevance to the youth of today. In order to make these dramas appealing, they advocated criticising current politicians and the wealthy heads of vast conglomerates rather than satirising the ruling class of former times. And instead of using texts filled with archaic and unfamiliar vocabulary, they argued that texts using modern language should be substituted and transmitted.

> As for those who wanted intangible cultural heritage to be transmitted in the form in which they were originally designated, however, they argued 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 inspi-

ration from it, so too an item of intangible cultural heritage can 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. On university campuses during the 1970s and 1980s, 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*), became a model for the development of *salmunori* music, very popular among young people today.

> Even though scholars who support the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the forms adopted at the time of its designation reflect on this problem, they still take the view that in the rapidly changing Republic of Korea the traditional forms should be preserved or else they will disappear. What is the purpose of preservation, they ask, if new forms are designated while older traditional forms disappear?

> Young performers of the masked-dance dramas maintain that these dramas have a history of adapting to 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 between scholars, groups, and individuals as to whether the old forms of intangible cultural heritage should be maintained and performed without allowing any changes or whether and to what degree changes should be permitted. In the future, the World Cultural Heritage items selected by UNESCO are likely to face the same considerations.

> A third challenging issue arises from various breakdowns in the categorisation 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 young intend to learn the designated item, inheritors of the other versions will become scarce and the variant extinct. If there is an intention 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.

> From our experience in the Republic of Korea, we have learned that designation is only the beginning of the preservation of cultural heritage. New problems arise afterward. The Republic of Korea's experience managing its Living Human Treasure system, along with similar projects carried out in other countries, can contribute significantly to UNESCO's policy of safeguarding the world's intangible cultural heritage. The challenges that we have confronted are not unique to the Republic of Korea, and we hope that our experiences may offer suggestions to other nations.

> Thus far, museums have generally limited their conservation efforts to tangible cultural objects, but museum professionals have become increasingly interested in displaying intangible cultural heritage alongside the more usual exhibits. Different approaches are needed to preserve intangible cultural heritage and transmit it to future generations, however. Unlike objects of tangible cultural heritage, which are created during a certain period and are relatively static over time, intangible cultural heritage changes continually through its interaction with society. We need to share our ideas on how to face this conservation challenge, and I look forward to an exchange of views that will enable us to more effectively preserve and present intangible cultural heritage.

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