

# Country Report for Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding System in the Republic of Korea

---

Pilyoung Park  
Project Officer  
Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre  
for Asia and the Pacific  
Republic of Korea

## 1. Introduction

Cultural heritage is both tangible and intangible heritage, that have being preserved and maintained to the present. Intangible heritage is community, groups, individual's identity and embodiment for creation of humankind.

Over centuries, Korea had been a predominantly agricultural society, the majority of its population engaged in farming. But like many other countries, rapid industrialization began in the 1960s, much of the population have migrated from villages to cities in search of jobs. Currently, 47.2 % of Korean population live in the city that used to be 24.9% in 1960's. (Department of statistics in 2005)

Owing to industrialization and urbanization, traditional knowledge and customs was rapidly changing and disappearing in Korea. Korea's safeguarding legislation system institutionalized in 1962, known as Important Intangible Cultural Heritage Designation System, in several countries the title awarded it is also address as, 'Living National Treasure or Living Human Treasure'. That system is by designating a person or a group which is regarded as a national treasure while still alive. In 1950, the Government of Japan also began to designate certain individuals or groups who embodied intangible national cultural values as living human treasures, just as places or things of great cultural value are designated as national treasures, thus becoming eligible for special protection and support. Some of the ancient protected objects. Several countries such as France, Thailand, Philippines and Romania, also have these system. Republic of Korea's system is

not the only country that such a program exists in the world, but it has been regarded as highly successful in safeguarding cultural heritage that would have disappeared.

In this paper, I would like to focus on the Important Intangible Cultural Heritage System of the Republic of Korea.

## 2. Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding Measures

The Cultural Heritage Protection Act passed by the Republic of Korea's government in 1962, constituted the legal basis of its cultural protection program. The constitution of this system became a landmark in the development of the concept of intangible cultural heritage in the Republic of Korea. The instigation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage system was intended to designate the valuable cultural expressions that were facing extinction by modern civilization, to protect and safeguard them to pass down to our next generations.

This law is comprehensive legislation that covers both tangible and intangible heritage. Largely, they are classified into 'tangible heritage', 'intangible heritage', 'folklore materials', 'monuments', and 'traditional structures'. Cultural Heritage Protection law described the meaning of cultural heritage is defined as below:

“Cultural Heritage is naturally or artificially created heritages of nations, peoples, and the world which have high historic, artistic, academic and appreciative values. ....”

“.....the basic principle of the conservation, management, and utilization of any cultural heritage shall be to preserve them in their original form (Prototype)”

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 tangible forms, was transmitted by skills 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 were 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 “ICH holder,” 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 Treasurer.”

### 3. Designation of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Intangible Cultural Heritages elements are sub-categorised as seven domains such as drama, music, dance, folk game & rites, martial art, handicrafts, and cuisine. They have historical, academic, artistic values in distinctive local perspective. 'Intangible' in this case means artistic activities or skills that are formless. They are designated as intangible cultural heritage when actualised by the people or the organizations that hold artistic or technical skills. Simultaneously, such people are designated as 'ICH holders'.

<Protection and Management of the State Designated Cultural Heritage>

- ? Providing financial subsidies to the skill-holders of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
- ? Providing education for the transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage
- ? Supporting the public performance of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
- ? Building Inheritance Halls of Intangible Cultural Heritage
- ? Preservation of Records of Intangible Cultural Heritage

In this program, the designation of individual items of cultural heritage involves several steps. If an autonomous local group submits an application on that topic, they are asked to conduct fieldwork and prepare a designation report. The Culture Heritage Committee of the 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.

<Holders & Transmitters in the fields of Skills & the Arts> (October, 2009)

Field Type	Art Field			Technical Field	Total
	Individuals	Groups	Sub-total		
Number of Designated Item	16	47 (56 Groups)	63	51	114
Holders	30	86	116	66	182

Transmitters /Trainees	Apprentice	57	195	252	53	305
	Graduate	1,452	1,839	3,291	442	3,733
	Scholarship Students	22	-	15	62	77
	TOTAL	1,554	2,120	3,674	623	4,297

#### 4. Process of Designation

Apply for designation	Applications are submitted by local organizations, and the administrator of Cultural Heritage Administration can also use his authority to apply items for designation as well. The artistic skill holders must be included in the application.
Investigate for designation	Based on the data submitted by local organizations, a thorough examination is executed by experts in the selected sector.
Examine for designation	After examination, the Cultural Heritage Committee makes the decision whether the item is valid for designation or not.
Notice for designation	The Official Gazette announces notification of designation as an Intangible Cultural Heritage for more than 30 days.
Deliberate for designation	The Cultural Heritage Committee makes the decision after deliberation, whether the selected item is designated or cancelled.
Announce the designation	The result is announced by the Official

Institutional and policy measures for preserving and promoting intangible cultural properties in Korea have the Cultural Properties Protection Act as their legal grounding.

The overriding principle, for all activities involved protecting and managing cultural properties and reviving them as living culture, is preserving these heritages in their original forms.

However, in the case of intangible cultural properties, due to their very nature, existing and transmitted in oral forms, they are especially vulnerable and endangered in today's fast-evolving, industrialized and urbanized society. Ensuring their continuity through time is accordingly more particularly challenging and requires active interventions.

Therefore, the state and local governments select and categories of intangible cultural properties comparatively more severely threatened than others by changing social environments, and provide support for transmission activities by holders and transmitters of skills and arts to guarantee the continuity of traditions and the cultural identity of the nation.

The intangible cultural properties under the Korean system are divided into 7 sub-categories; music, dance, drama, folk games, rites, martial arts, handicrafts

and cuisine. The following are the summary statistics of important intangible cultural properties protected by October in 2009.

## 5. Training for the Transmission

Characteristic of the intangible cultural heritage system in the Republic of Korea's is 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. That these younger persons can receive that special training at no charge the Republic of Korean government gives the Living Human Treasures an additional one-hundred thousand won (about 1080 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.

Three stages of element of intangible cultural heritage elements are as below:

- ? Initiates' Education. Living Human Treasures seek out those 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.
- ? Advanced Trainees' Education. Those who have received initiate-level training are examined by the Living Human Treasure or those 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.
- ? 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), 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.

## 6. Outcomes of the Projects

Intangible Cultural Heritage selected as national assets are designated by the nation, and local cultural assets are designated by states or provinces. Only 31 items were designated Important Intangible Cultural Heritage by the nation in 1964. However, that number has significantly increased to 114 items in 2009.

Intangible Cultural Heritage are learned, practiced, and inherited by people and organizations. The authorized individual (holders) or groups on with skill or ability is encouraged and supported to succeed in maintaining and preserving the traditional culture.

An Inheritance Educational Center has been established in order for people to easily become acquainted with intangible cultural assets. It is used as a tour resource by the local community, and is especially helpful for adolescents to experience traditional culture. Additionally, various cultural tour souvenirs have been developed and conventional performances are held at local folk festivals and are used as cultural tour resources, maximizing the opportunity for enjoying local cultural assets.

In addition, 11 ICH elements have been nominated under UNESCO lists as follows;

Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity	Year
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>? Daemokjang, traditional wooden architecture</li> <li>? Falconry, a living human heritage</li> <li>? Gagok, lyric song cycles accompanied by an orchestra</li> </ul>	2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>? Cheoyongmu</li> <li>? Ganggangsullae</li> <li>? Jeju Chilmeoridang Yeongdeunggut</li> <li>? Namsadang Nori</li> <li>? Yeongsanjae</li> </ul>	2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>? The Gangneung Danoje Festival</li> <li>? The Pansori Epic Chant</li> <li>? The Royal Ancestral Ritual in the Jongmyo Shrine and its Music</li> </ul>	2008

The Cultural Properties Protection Act defines intangible cultural property as cultural manifestations of intangible nature with high historical and artistic significance, such as theatrical and musical performing arts, and crafts and skills. The act, furthermore, distinguishes intangible cultural properties into two

different types: important intangible cultural properties designated by the state or provincial intangible cultural properties designated by local and regional governments. The number of Important Intangible Cultural Properties was 31 in 1964, and tripled to 114 as of September in 2010. By December 2006, 110 items had been selected as items of intangible cultural heritage and 255 persons had been designated as Living Human Treasures. There were 102 Assistant Instructors, 2,740 Advanced Trainees, and 102 Initiates who receive scholarships.

The Living Human Treasures, both individuals and members of groups, 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 45 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 45 years of accumulated experience with the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, new issues have started arise. Here are just three of them.

Also, other challenges come from UNESCO's "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage." At the 32nd General Conference of UNESCO held from September 29 to October 17, 2003, the Convention was adopted by a majority vote of the State Parties (i.e., Member States). Since the Convention has been passed, the world's intangible heritage will be safeguarded by international law. Korea ratified the convention and now follows the convention's rule. Article 2 of the convention states that "... This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history. . . ." Here, we see that convention clearly states the non-static characteristics of intangible heritage. But the spirit of local culture is contained in the intangible cultural heritage, it is critical to preserve it and furthermore, make it alive among members of the society. It is also critical for cultural diversity in the global society.