

**The Commonality and Diversity-  
For the Asian values of Lacquer crafts culture and its safeguarding strategies**

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**Key matters on modern significance of intangible heritage and its preservation**

Intangible heritage is living cultural heritage which can express human's wisdom and sensibility intactly by this time. Even though some of them already disappeared, are about to disappear and would disappear not before long, there still remain many of them in our thoughts and experiences. Such heritage is the infinite future resources and traces of the past that human can enjoy in this digital era. The traditional cultures can play a more important role for us in feeling human's emotions and humanity in the era of digital because they contain old human's memories, and can be an economic means as well. These intangible heritage, in essence, may have the same function even though their forms are different. In particular, we can see that such cultures spread to neighboring regions, which led to a new form of culture created in a community that accepted them. This process is important as an asset for sharing humanity and at the same time becomes a meaningful source for each community to have its cultural identity as an expressional diversity of human thought.

Therefore, how to preserve the shared or coexisting intangible heritage among cultural communities is a key topic in the international society today. Meantime, there have been some cases where even though they are the same heritage, certain heritages in some areas were inscribed on the list of World Heritage but others were pushed aside, in spite of their equally excellent values. In today's fast-changing society, if it is neglected a little bit, it will disappear. Then, if it disappears, total amount of culture in that society will eventually shrink, which means that the future values will be lost. What is called culture inevitably come to vanish without those who use it, no matter how creative it is. In order to preserve traditional heritage that may disappear at any time, it is an essential process to persuade the society, develop modern utility and seek for strategic methods, deeply thinking of its future value of such heritage.

To preserve the intangible heritage, it is necessary to build the environment in which communities with such technological culture can keep working on new creative works. For this, each society has to make continuous efforts in cooperation with communities not to wither this heritage away. These efforts are important not only in terms of the transmission of tradition but also as sustainable cultural resource of a society in the digital era. Here, it is critical to note that we should prevent such intangible heritage from being fossilized, remaining fixed cultural system and eventually being eliminated from the reality. It should exist as one culture, but its way of expression should adapt to the senses and demands of a new generation by constantly making creative transformation. By doing so, the original form can be also preserved as a part of diversity. In other words, The practical benefit based on tradition is a prerequisite for the transmission through

generations. I think that making efforts for this is the spirit of the world intangible heritage system.

### **The continuity and uniqueness of intangible culture in Asia-Pacific Region**

The Asia-Pacific region is comprised of many countries and various cultures, which may have resulted from various geographical environments. It can be seen that there are distinctively different cultures because of the environmental difference despite of geographical continuity, and they have old traditions with long history. On the other hand, it is also true that human movements and cultural flows have been ceaselessly taken place for last 10,000 years in Asia-Pacific region, because of which there are many shared cultures in neighboring area. Especially residents in regions connected by transportation routes contact each other frequently and, as a result of it, they have often common culture. Therefore, in two aspects, intangible cultural heritage in the region can be a very informative model for preservation and utilization of cultural heritage in other regions of the world. Whereas the culture shows its cultural commonality or continuity, it can be identified that it has various forms and meanings although it appears even the same. Such an appearance of intangible cultural heritage in Asia-Pacific region is not only an important material for understanding the universality and regional characteristics of human cultures but also great advantages in seeking for ways of preservation. Additionally traditional culture can play a key role in the mutual understanding between communities.

Many traditional culture in Asia have been disappeared due to rapid social development today, yet indigenous cultures in many areas in Asia still are better preserved than those of advanced countries of the West. Considering today's rapidly changing society, provided actively finding methods to preserve intangible cultural heritage of each country in Asia-Pacific region based on the international cooperation, it can not only maintain cultural diversity but also greatly contribute to the stability and peace in this region as the sustainable development resources for the society. Within the region, there are some countries such as Korea, China and Japan to have made long and great deal of efforts for preservation of intangible heritage while there are other countries to just get started to put forth their efforts into intangible heritage preservation or still to neglect its preservation. The strategic cooperation between countries in this region can make its effective value enlarged. The lacquer culture in the region can be a good practice to establish such international cooperation and preservation strategies. Because it is widely prevalent in the region, and each country has its own unique features.

## The history and regional diversity of lacquer culture in Asia-Pacific region

‘Chilgi(lacquerware in Korean)’ is a craft as a living art, not seen in Western society and has been produced and used constantly in various parts of Asia since ancient times. It is a tangible and intangible heritage to represent the universality of Asian culture. It is assumed that its history probably began in Neolithic period. As human began to settle down in the southern China, India and Southeastern Asia where lacquer trees flourished, they would have understood the characteristics of the tree and devised methods to use it. Given various functional features of lacquerware today, namely, the durability, artistry as sculpture, moisture-resistance and absorption and anti-bacterially, it could have been most effectively used in prehistoric life and by the time when the sculptural characteristics began to be used, its artistry would have begun to be applied to lacquerware in earnest. Of course it is true that now the artistic expressions on the objects such as furniture or tablewares raises the values of lacquerwares.

It is thought that people in the Neolithic Age were interested in using Otchil(lacquer or lacquer coating in Korean) as they began to settle down in the area where lacquer trees(*Toxicodendrum vernicifluua*, or *Rhus verniciflua* STOKES) grew up. Because information on native plants in the ecological environment surrounding them is closely related to survivals of those who managed their livelihood by agriculture and gathering. It is general adaptation process for prehistoric human to explore the resources continuously in surrounding environment to obtain food ingredients and medical materials or necessities for living. So, the evidence of lacquer having been used since Neolithic Age can be found. In Japan, the evidence of lacquer remains in the site of Jomong pottery period 10,000 years ago. That may be the same case for other regions. The relics and records on lacquerware remain a lot in China.

In China, it is evidenced that lacquerware has been used since Neolithic Age although it is later than that in Japan. The lacquer object known as the earliest one in Asia was thought to be a lacquer bowl unearthed at a site of Hemudu culture (c. 5,000BCE) in Zhejiang Province and a colored lacquer cup excavated from the site in Tuanjiecun(團結村), Wujiang(吳江) in Jiangsu Province of China, which dated back to 6,000~7,000 years ago.

According to records by Han Feizi(韓非子), the emperor Sun ordered to ‘use vessels with black lacquered outside and red lacquered inside for rites’, through which it can be thought that lacquerware has developed along with Chinese history. The lacquerware produced in Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period is highlighted as an artwork to show the essence of ancient Chinese culture. The lacquerware culture improved noticeably in Han Dynasty and lacquerware was of wide use with various purposes and a plenty of gorgeous lacquer objects remain. Lacquer was used to decorate the vessels for rites as well as musical instruments, weapons or chariots and its accessories. In addition, it is identified that various techniques already began to be used,

which was testified by archaeological artifacts

The decorations, patterns and drawings on those artifacts are also various, which shows the high level of artistic achievements and portrays life styles of the time. With a detailed list of names of people took part in the production process, we can find out that the process itself was very sophisticated and many techniques and labors were required in its production. In ancient times, it was so expensive as much as it was paid more than half of the salary of a high officer to buy a single bowl, even today lacquerware is still a luxury product. Therefore, it can be inferred that high technology and artistic senses were put into producing lacquerware and mainly upper class could use them.

This ancient Chinese lacquer technology was disseminated to the Korean Peninsula and has developed, and continuously spread to Japan and Southeast Asia. However, in this process of spread, new and unique techniques were developed by combining traditional technologies in each region. It can be said that this different development process resulted from the difference of cultural traditions and materials in each region. However, the theory that lacquerware in South east Asia was originated from China is based on the use of cinnabar which appears to have been imported from China. Therefore, it is highly possible that it was introduced by the Thai people in southwestern China, Guangxi or Guizhou, during their migrations, which is assumed to have been probably around the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

In South east Asia, while lacquerwork in Vietnam seems to have started through the exchanges with China early, but in Thailand, lacquerware was produced in northern mountainous area earlier on by the influence of China, and later it was spread to Myanmar around the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Many colorful lacquerwares were produced in South east Asia and especially, in Thailand, special production technique called Lai lot nam was developed and disseminated to the neighboring areas. Today, there can be seen many cases that lacquer products with traditional colors of each country were sold as a souvenir and it often become a local economic resources for living. Looking into the lacquer traditions in three countries in East Asia, each country has obviously formed its own unique lacquer culture, combining their own traditional techniques with techniques accepted from China. In case of China, as generations went by, 'Qidiao(漆雕)', called 'Tihongqi(剔紅漆, a kind of Qidiao colored in red)', carving on the thick lacquer coating was created; in Japan, 'Maki-e(蒔繪)', decorated with lacquer drawings, formed the mainstream. On the other hand, in Korea, lacquer is believed to have been used quite early and it seems to have begun to be used from Bronze Age on. Through Lelang Commandery, highly advanced Chinese lacquerware was introduced and since then, lacquerware have come into wide use in ancient society and were excavated from ancient tombs. In Goyeo Dynasty, Najeonchilgi(lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl) decorated with shells was produced distinctively from others, which indicates that even in the same lacquer culture, it has been developed with different artistic senses in each period. Lacquer crafts visibly reflects local characteristics in each region and time.

## **The potential function of lacquer crafts and its future through the technology fusion**

Lacquer must be a very mysterious material. Lacquer crafts is a comprehensive culture created by the science and art. An example of a scientific aspect is the mummy of a woman excavated from Mawangdui in Hunan Province, China, which was preserved in a lacquer coffin and its body was discovered with non-decay at all. Even it was reported that when giving an injection in it, the injection liquid flowing through blood vessel was examined. Lacquer seems to have carried out a special function for the organic components preservation. This example testifies to the insect-proof and antibiotic effectiveness of lacquer. Even in Korea where few of organic components is left, lacquered relics unearthed from ancient historic sites, representatively such as tombs in Lelang Commandery, Royal Tomb of King Muryeong, and the Hwangnamdaechong, eloquently show us the essence of the culture. Up to now, mainly the artistic aspect of lacquer has received attentions but it is believed that there is a good chance of developing lacquer for various purposes from now on because of its potential scientific functions. It is known that lacquer has many potential functions enough to be called commonly a mysterious material, and it is also expected to still remain unreproduced in many parts of it. In addition to moisture proof or moisture preservation functions, it is suggested that lacquer functions to prevent the occurrence of diseases caused by microorganism or electromagnetic waves in the modernized spaces. Donguibogam, an ancient medical book of Korea, also mentioned many medical books describing pharmacological actions of lacquer. Justly, its efficacy has to be verified through continuous experiments and there is a high possibility to be confirmed in the future.

Another potentiality of lacquer crafts is the complexity of the technology. The process of applying the lacquer techniques is divided into many technical steps and in each of steps an artisan group pertinent to each step is placed. Such traditions can be found in ancient records, too. It can be evaluated as the global values of lacquer culture that there are various materials and techniques applied respectively to each production step and such techniques are differently used in each country. In this point, each technique itself is worth being preserved and developed as intangible cultural heritage, and is a basic traditional intangible heritage that can create a new culture according to its combination. On the other hand, as already mentioned above that the lacquer technology has wide range of applications, it also can be applied to various objects by combining with almost all kinds of materials dealt with by human and raise the durability of each object or effectiveness of use and artistic values innovatively. Such features increase the potential values of lacquer.

Since ancient times, lacquer has been applied to all materials, for instances organic materials such as paper, straws, thread, wood as well as iron, bronze and porcelain or earthenware and so forth. It can be used to coat not simply bowls but also stationery, furniture, carriage, musical instruments and even houses. That is why it is regarded as versatile technology that can be applied to every object for daily life. Lacquer craft was

established as the technology mixed together with various technological cultures and these combinations are different depending on regions, countries, groups and individuals. Therefore it has great expandibility of new combinations.

Additional great potential value of lacquer must be able to be grafted onto contemporary arts. Not only can the craftsmanship of each production process be artistic but also its colors and light reflective coverings are very distinctive and artistic. It is thought that lacquer can be developed into modern arts as a new genre in that colorful yet delicate glow arouses profound emotions, creating very unique colors and texture in expressions of modern arts because it has depth and high chroma. It can grow to another genre of modern art different from various motifs or expressions applied to ancient lacquerware as well as be a practical artworks for residential space in the modern urban life because, as mentioned above, it has many merits in aspect of practical science. This attempt has already started, but in the future, the development of new art genre will become a way to realize the potential value of lacquer crafts as intangible heritage. If the lacquer crafts, called differently such as Daqi(大漆) in Chinese, urushi(漆,うるし) in Japanese, San Mai in Vietnamese and Otchil(옻칠) in Korean, is broadened to the domain of modern art in earnest, its marketability would be greatly increased.

Lacquer crafts goes through various processes by diverse groups of artisans step-by-step and creates employment as it requires many laborer as a considerable time-consuming work. It is expected that the technology can be an intangible cultural heritage with high future value because it can create various demands ranging from objects for everyday life to art works.

### **The international cooperation strategy for the preservation and transmission**

It is the the most important to make it possible to apply technology of intangible heritage creatively to our everyday life to improve our lives, not to preserve it as it is. Among intangible cultural heritage, it is the lacquer crafts that is actively used as a sustainable way for communities in each country, because it is still highly practical even today. So, it is expected that relevant individual community is greatly interested in this crafts. Looking into how to use lacquer crafts in each country, it can be seen that each country uses it as a sustainable strategy for local economy, allowing individual community to use it as tourism resources and nationally protecting the groups of lacquer craftsmen. However, by and large, it is more common to preserve what is originally handed down rather than to make creative use of ancient technologies. In this aspect, it is desirable to develop and establish strategical measures for creative use so that each practitioner group of lacquer crafts can implement. As mentioned before, lacquer crafts has various techniques in each step, because of which it is necessary to develop strategies corresponding to the respective techniques, materials or purposes and make it publicly available. Therefore, this approach will hopefully contribute to build the sustainable society, which is the international agenda, through intangible heritage preservation, as lacquer crafts will

create lots of relevant jobs in the digital era in the future. Also, it is expected that the development as an art genre, not simply as technological expansion, can enlarge the scope of its application to various areas as practical art widely.

However, there are two problems in developing such practicality. They are the technological and economic gap between countries, so it is difficult to research and develop it unless these technologies can be of great use in actual life. In fact, in Korea, there is a precedent that a municipality has failed to operate a lacquer tree farm, which may be the matters of laborer and lack of long-term strategy. On the contrary, in case of countries where still have many traditional cultures, it is difficult to expect the development of new, creative and future-oriented designs or the expansion of practicality through scientific analysis.

Thus, if Asian countries can propose the strategical plans for lacquer crafts through mutual cooperation and development as a cooperative task, lacquer crafts is expected to greatly contribute to future society as a common intangible heritage in Asia. Lacquer handicrafts was the most precious objects in ancient and medieval times and each country has developed high quality technology and holds many beautiful masterpieces of art. Even today, each country has made great efforts for lacquer crafts preservation and has been continuously establishing strategies. Korea has also labored over developing strategy for global expansion of lacquer technology as an intangible cultural heritage for a long time. Based on such a reality, as the task of preservation and creative development of lacquer crafts in the future, it will be necessary to strengthen the cooperation unconditionally between Asian countries. In that the indigenous cultural characteristic of mysterious and colorful lacquer crafts enables to cultivate new markets in both Asia and the West, it is thought that the establishment of strategy for preservation and development in national level and at the same time the seeking for a new approach to international cooperation could be a way to sustain this ancient mysterious crafts.

### **Lacquer Crafts, Cultural excellency and diversity**

The lacquer crafts shared in Asia has formed unique traditional culture by each country according to its diversity of technical processes and expressions. Lacquer crafts is the one type of crafts but its diversity results from its technically intricate production processes as well as superior artistry. A Chinese expressed Najeonchilgi as "Semilgagwi(細密可貴, so sophisticated enough to say to be very precious)" after seeing the Najeonchilgi made in Medieval times in Korea, which was probably because it contained the spirit as high as high-level technology. Lacquer has universality as Asian indigenous culture and, in another aspect, it represents cultural diversity very well because its style and technology is different from country to country. It has been regarded as the best crafts art since ancient times and even in modern times because it has high value with its technological complexity and high-degree of artistry.

However, it is very common in human cultural history that unused cultures were easily

culled and fossilized. Culture is accumulated and newly changed through convergence. If its utility is not modernized, it is natural to disappear. It is a really difficult task for human to revitalize disappearing intangible culture. Fortunately, lacquer techniques and art have still its practicality and artistic values as well as infinite development possibility so, I believe that it could become promising technology and a genre of art if there are cross-social attentions and development strategy.

In the past, lacquer crafts may have contributed to the economic stabilization of the society as a kind of profession which many people engaged in, as there has been continuous demands for lacquer crafts as high-end culture from the upper class. Also in Korea, in the past, 12 workshops in Tongyeong used to prepare funds for workshop operation by managing the groups of lacquer professionals. As lacquerware, socially receiving high praise with its artistic value and practicality, got treated preciously, the continuous demands for it played a certain degree of role in creating economic flows in the region. If such a value circulation system is restored in modern society, lacquer crafts is expected to play a greater role in forming the foothold for sustainable social development. Also its range of application is wide to the point of being unlimited and considering its potential practicality, it is expected to be economically highly useful in modern society.

Thus, if Asian countries cooperate to enlarge cultural diversity and develop practicality creatively in modern times, lacquer craft can be transmitted as Asian intangible heritage permanently and such development may be one of the reasons why the World Intangible Heritage system exists. It is important to improve the durability or increase artistry by applying the converged technology, modern and new designs or ancient lacquer technology to various modern objects. In order to achieve such things, it is also critical to establish cooperative strategies and implement them, creating an international organization. If various plans, for instances, international exhibition of modern lacquer art, organization of international expo of lacquer culture or the establishment of a international lacquer information exchange center, are designed, they will contribute to not only wide use of lacquerware but also awareness-raising of artistic values and practicality of lacquerware for people with high purchasing power in developed countries and play a role as a permanent way for preserving lacquer culture.

### **Lacquer crafts, the icon of Asian cultural community**

Today's society is called global society where, in fact, the common language is the very economy. Making better-off country is all countries' highest concern. Accordingly, in the modern digital society, each country has checked and competed fiercely with each other, while information and migration have been enlarged in this globalized world. In this global situation, developing common cultural language can be the seed for regional security and peace. Music like K-pop, films or soap operas can play an important role in communicating with each other even without any words, which contributes to forming the bond of sympathy beyond borders. In Asia, the continuity of lacquer culture and its regional diversity, as the result of cultural behaviors with long history, can become a common intangible heritage which can bring cultural sympathy and resonance among the public. If the preservation and use of this culture are strategically carried out to make the world enjoy it, it is expected that lacquer culture can be contributory to strengthening the spiritual bond as well as social prosperity as an icon of Asian culture.

**From the art book, '2000 years of Korean lacquerware' (1989)**

Distribution of lacquer trees in Asia and the areas of lacquer culture

亞細亞의 主要 漆나무 분포 및 漆文化圈

