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 safeguarding

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 digital era because they contain old human’s memories, and can be an economic means as well. These intangible heritages, in essence, may have the same function even though their forms are different. In particular, we can see that certain cultures spread to neighboring regions, which led to the creation of a new form of culture 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 expression of 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 in which even though they are the same kind of 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 culture is neglected even 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 comes 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 favorable 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 cultural resource to form sustainability for a society in the digital era. Here, we should pay keen attentions to preventing such intangible heritage from being fossilized, remaining fixed cultural system and eventually being eliminated. Intangible heritage 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 such efforts for this is the spirit of the World Intangible Heritage system.

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

The Asia-Pacific region is comprised of various countries with various cultures, which may have resulted from various geographical environments. Because of the environmental difference despite of geographical continuity, we can see that cultures in Asia are distinctively different from each other. On the other hand, it is also true that human movements and cultural flows have been ceaselessly taken place for the last 10,000 years in the Asia-Pacific region, because of which there are many shared cultures in neighboring areas. Especially, residents connected by transportation routes in these areas contacted each other frequently and, as a result of it, they had often common culture. Therefore, in these two aspects, intangible cultural heritages in this region can be a very informative model for preservation and utilization of cultural heritage in other regions of the world. The cultures show their commonality or continuity and, at the same time, different forms and meanings although they appear even the same. This appearance of intangible cultural heritage in the Asia-Pacific region can become not only an important material for understanding the universality and regional uniqueness 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 cultures in Asia have been disappeared due to the rapid social development today, but indigenous cultures in many areas in Asia still are better preserved than those of advanced countries of the West. In today's rapidly changing society, provided that each country in the Asia-Pacific region tries to actively find methods to preserve its intangible cultural heritage based on the international cooperation, it could 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 other countries just get started to put forth their efforts into intangible heritage preservation or still to neglect it. So, the strategic cooperation between these countries in the region can make its utility value as universal heritage in modern society enlarged. It is expected that the lacquer culture in the region can be a good practice to establish such an international cooperation and preservation strategies. Because it is widely prevalent in the region and each country has its own unique features at the same time.

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

‘Chilgi(lacquerware in Korean)’ is a craft as a living art not seen in Western society. Lacquer has been produced and used constantly in various parts of Asia since ancient times. So, it can be said that it is tangible and intangible heritage to represent the universality of Asian culture. It should be assumed that its history probably began in Neolithic period. Since human began to settle down in southern China, India and Southeastern Asia where lacquer trees flourished,
they would have understood the characteristics of lacquer trees and devised methods to use it. Considering various functional features of lacquerware such as durability, artistry as sculpture, moisture-resistance and absorption, and anti-bacteriality, it could have been most effectively used in prehistoric life, and by the time the sculpturesque characteristics of lacquer began to be emphasized, its artistry to be made with reflected lights would have been added to lacquerware in earnest. Of course, it is true that today, the value of lacquer as living art, which are expressed on the objects such as furniture or tablewares, increases much more.

It is thought that people in the Neolithic Age has been interested in using Otchil(lacquer or lacquer coating in Korean)1 as they began to settle down in the area where lacquer trees(Toxicodendrum vernicifluum, or Rhus verniciflua STOKES)2 grew up natively. It was because information on native plants in the ecological environment surrounding them was closely related to survivals of those who managed their livelihood by farming and gathering. It was 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. That is why the traces of using lacquer from the Neolithic Age can be found. In Japan, the evidences of using lacquer remain in the site of Jomong pottery period 10,000 years ago.3 Those traces of using lacquer may remain in other regions as well. The relics and records on lacquerware remain a lot in China. It is confirmed to have used lacquerware since the Neolithic Age in China, too. The lacquer objects such as a lacquer bowl unearthed from the site of Hemudu culture (c. 5,000BCE) in Zhejiang Province and a colored lacquer cup excavated from the site in Tuanjiecu 塔結村, Wujiang 吳江 in Jiangsu Province are thought to be the earliest lacquerwares in Asia. They dated back to 6,000-7,000 years ago. According to records by Han Feizi (韓非子)4, the emperor Sun ordered to 'use vessels for rites lacquered with black outside and red inside'. Through this record, it can be thought that lacquerware has been developed along with Chinese history. The lacquerware produced in Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period was highlighted as an artwork to show the essence of ancient Chinese culture. The lacquer culture has noticeably developed in Han Dynasty and lacquerware was of wide use with various purposes, which is evidenced by lots of gorgeous lacquer objects made in that period. 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 various decorations and patterns on those artifacts show the high level of artistic achievements and drawings on some artifacts also portray life styles of the time. Looking at a detailed list of names of people who took part in the production process, we can find out that the process of its production itself was very complicated and required many techniques and lots of skilled labors. In ancient times, lacquerware was a high-end product to pay more than half of the salary of a high officer to buy a single bowl, even today it is still a luxury product.5 Therefore, it can be inferred that lacquerware was produced with high technique and artistic senses and used mainly by the upper class.

This ancient Chinese lacquer technique was disseminated to the Korean Peninsula and continuously spread to Japan and Southeast Asia. However, in this process of spread, new and unique techniques were developed in different ways by combining traditional techniques in each region. This different development process can be said to result from the difference of cultural traditions and materials in each region. However, lacquerware in Southeast Asia appears to have been originated from China because cinnabar imported from China was used for lacquerware. Therefore, it is highly possible that it was introduced by the Thai people in

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1 ‘Lacquer’ is commonly called in English. This word comes from Sanskrit which means “many” or “infinite”.

2 From this tree, the sap called urushiol is tapped, which is the lacquer. It is a type of poisonous oak tree with broad-leaf native to mid-southern China, the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, and Southeast Asia.


4 Han Feizi, A Classic on the imperial studies and the rule of law, translated by Kim, Won-joong, 2016.

5 Records of the Grand Historian(Shiji), Ranked Biographies.
Guangxi or Guizhou in southwestern China through their migrations, which is assumed to be probably around the 13th century.

It is known that, in South east Asia, while lacquerwork in Vietnam seems to have started through the exchanges with China early, in Thailand, lacquerware was produced in northern mountainous area earlier on by the influence of China, and later it was spread to Myanmar in around the 16th 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 are many cases that lacquer products with traditional colors of each country are sold as a souvenir and it often becomes a local economic resources for living. Looking into the lacquer traditions in China, Korea and Japan in East Asia, each country has obviously formed its own unique lacquer culture, combining their own traditional techniques with techniques from China. In case of China, as generations went by, ‘Qidiao’ called ‘Tihongqi, a kind of Qidiao colored in red’, carving on the thick lacquer coating, was created; in Japan, ‘Maki-e’, decorated with lacquer drawings, formed the mainstream. On the other hand, in Korea, lacquer seems to have begun to be used from Bronze Age on but it is believed to have been used quite earlier than that. Through Lelang Commandery, highly advanced Chinese lacquerware was introduced and since then, lacquerware has come into wide use in ancient society. This fact is confirmed by burial goods 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 in different artistic senses in each period.

Lacquer crafts reflects regional characteristics visibly in each region and period.

The potential function of lacquer crafts and its future through the technique 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 preserving the organic components. 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 lacquer culture. Up to now, mainly the artistic aspect of lacquer has received lots of attentions but it is believed that there is a good chance as well to develop lacquer for various purposes in the future because of its potential scientific functions. Lacquer is known to have many potential functions enough to be commonly called 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 efficay has to be verified through continuous experiments and there is a high possibility to be confirmed in the future.
Another potentiality of lacquer is the complexity of techniques. The process of applying the lacquer is divided into many technical steps and in each step, relevant artisan groups are placed. Such traditions can be found in ancient records, too. Given that there are various materials and techniques applied to each production step and such techniques are differently used in each country, lacquer culture can be highly evaluated to have global values. In this point, each technique itself is worth being preserved and developed as intangible cultural heritage, and is a basic traditional heritage that can create a new culture according to the combination of techniques. On the other hand, as already mentioned above that the lacquer technology has wide range of applications, it can be also applied to various objects by combining with almost all kinds of materials dealt with by human. In addition, it raises the durability of objects, the 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, ranging from organic materials such as paper, straws, thread, wood to iron, bronze, porcelain, earthenware and so forth. It can be also used to coat not simply bowls but also stationery, furniture, carriage, musical instruments and even houses. That is why lacquer is regarded as versatile technology that can be applied to every object for daily life.

Lacquer crafts has been developed by the techniques mixed with various other technological cultures together and these combinations are presented differently depending on regions, countries, groups and individuals. Therefore it has great expandibility of new combinations.

Additional great potential value of lacquer is to be grafted onto contemporary art. Not only the craftsmanship of each production process but also the reflective colors and lights of lacquer are very distinctive and artistic. It is thought that lacquer can be developed into modern art as a new genre. The colorful and delicate glows of lacquer arouse profound emotions, creating very unique colors and texture in expressions of modern art in that they have depth of lights and high chroma. Therefore, it can grow to another genre of modern art different from various motifs or expressions applied to ancient lacquerware. It can be also a practical artworks for residential spaces in the modern urban life because, as mentioned above, it has many merits in aspect of practical science. This attempt has already started, and in the future, the development of lacquer as a 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(엇칠) in Korean, is broadened to the domain of modern art in earnest, its marketability would be greatly increased.

Lacquer crafts is processed by diverse groups of artisans stage by stage and requires many labors as a considerable time-consuming work. So, it can create employment. It is also expected that its techniques can become 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 strategies for the preservation and transmission**

It is the most important to establish the strategies for improvement of our lives through creatively applying technology of intangible heritage to our everyday life, not to preserve it as it is. Actually, it is the lacquer crafts among many fields of 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 thought that relevant individual community is greatly interested in this crafts. Looking into how to use lacquer crafts in Asian countries, it can be seen that each country uses it as a sustainable strategy for local economy, nationally protecting the groups of lacquer craftsmen and allowing individual community to use it as tourism resources. However, by and large, it is more common to preserve what has been originally handed down rather than to make creative use of ancient techniques. In this aspect, it is desirable to develop and establish strategical measures for its 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 measures corresponding to the respective techniques, materials and purposes and make it publicly available. This approach will hopefully contribute to building the sustainable society as the international task because lacquer crafts can create lots of relevant jobs in the digital era in the future. Also, it is hoped that the development as an art genre as well as technological expansion, can enlarge the scope of its application to various fields as practical art widely.

However, there are two problems in developing such practicality. They are the technical and economic gap between countries, so it is not easy to research and develop it unless these techniques 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 laborers's skills and lack of long-term strategy. On the other hand, in case of countries where still have many traditional cultures, it dose not seem to be easy to develop new, creative and future-oriented designs or expand its practicality through scientific analysis.

Thus, if Asian countries can establish the strategical plans for lacquer crafts through mutual cooperation and joint development, lacquer crafts as a common intangible heritage could greatly contribute to future society in Asia. Lacquer handicrafts were the most precious objects in ancient and medieval times and each country has developed high quality techniques and holds many beautiful masterpieces of art. Even today, each country has made great efforts for safeguarding lacquer crafts and has been continuously establishing strategies. Korea has also labored over developing strategies for global expansion of lacquer technology as an intangible cultural heritage for a long time.14

In such a situation, it will be necessary to strengthen the cooperation unconditionally between Asian countries as the task of preservation and creative development of lacquer crafts in the future. In that the indigenous cultural characteristics of mysterious and colorful lacquer crafts enables to cultivate new markets in both Asia and the West, it is thought that the establishment of strategies for the preservation and development of lacquer culture in national level and at the same time 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 countries 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 outstanding artistry. A Chinese expressed Najeonchilgi as “Semilgagwi(細密可貴, sophisticated enough to say to be very precious)” after seeing the Najeonchigi made in Medieval times in Korea. It
was probably because Najeonchigi contained the high spirit and technology enough to say so. Lacquer has universality as Asian indigenous culture and, in another aspect, it represents cultural diversity very well because its style and techniques are different from country to country. Lacquer crafts has been regarded as the best crafts art since ancient times and even in modern times because it has high value with its complexity of techniques 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 to revitalize disappearing or disappeared intangible culture. Fortunately, lacquer techniques and art have still its practicality and artistic values as well as infinite development possibility, so it is thought that it could become promising technology and a genre of art to thrive vigorously if there are attentions of every sector in a society on it and development strategies for it.

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 could play a greater role definitely in forming the foothold for sustainable social development. Also its range of application is unlimitedly wide. Further, considering its potential practicality, it is expected to be economically highly useful in modern society as well.

Thus, if Asian countries cooperate to enlarge cultural diversity and to increase practicality creatively in modern times, lacquer craft can be transmitted as Asian intangible heritage permanently. 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 through the converged technical development, modern and new designs and application of ancient lacquer techniques to various modern objects. In order to achieve such things, it is also critical to build international organizations for establishing cooperative strategies and implementing them. If various plans, for instances organizing international exhibitions of modern lacquer art and an international expo of lacquer culture or establishing an international center for lacquer information exchange, are designed, it would be contributory 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 in 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 economy. Making better-off country is all countries’ highest concern. Accordingly, in the globalized, modern digital society, every country has checked and competed fiercely with each other, while information and migration have been enlarged. In this globalizing 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. That shared culture helps to form the bond of sympathy beyond borders. In Asia, the continuity of lacquer culture and its regional diversity as the results 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, lacquer culture would contribute to strengthening the spiritual bond as well as social prosperity as an icon of Asian culture.

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