

Korean museums:

Modernization and participation in international activities

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Abstract

The quantity, quality, and standards of museums not only represent a nation but also reflect its national strength and cultural maturity. In recent years, the Korean government, with its growing economic power, begins to regard culture as an important industry and devote great effort to promoting the cultural industry and to participate actively in international activities.

Keywords: Korea, museum, culture, marketing museum, international participation, museum, museum conference

I. The origin and development of Korean museums

1. Cho Sun Royal Museum ¹

As archives showed, the Koryo ² imperial family established collection storehouses, such as “Royal storehouse” or “highest-ranking imperial concubine's storehouse,” ³ to store precious historical relics. They were the precursors of today's museums. The emergence of modern museums in South Korea, on the other hand, began in 1907, when the government vigorously set about establishing zoos, botanical gardens, and museums. In 1908, with the establishment of the Royal Garden Office, botanical garden and museums began to function, and these institutions purchased a variety of animals for people to visit.

2. Museums in the Japanese colonial period

In this period, Japanese immigrants aggressively collected and purchased all kinds of handicrafts and art work all over Korea, paving a solid base for national museums. It was also during this period that grave-robbers-cum-merchants actively explored the ancient capitals, Ke Sung ⁴ and Kang Wha ⁵. Their findings were gathered up and taken to the Cho Sun Governor's office. Ironically, the Korean imperial family had to pay heavily to purchase these stolen artifacts. In this initial period, the museum's collection comprised over 12,230 pieces in total.

The stone-built Hall Art Museum, completed in 1909, was located inside the Duk Su Palace ⁶, which used to be the abode of the abdicated emperor Go-Zong ⁷. The collection then comprised more than 110,000 pieces.

3. Museums after independence

The building of the National Korea Museum was moved several times and since October 2005 it has been at Yong San ⁸,

supposedly the best and largest museum in Asia.⁹ The new building, approximately 20 minutes' drive from the Seoul Train Station, provides 930,000 square meters of space, 14,000 square meters of which houses the museum. Its length is 404 meters, width 186 meters, and height 43 meters. It has a robust iron steel frame design consisting of one basement and six floors, equipped with the latest facilities. Nearly 160,000 items are displayed here.

II. Categories of museums and the prospects for museums

1. Current categories and condition

In South Korea, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the highest cultural agency with the government, directly reflects the cultural policy of the country. All museums at the national level or at the local level are under the command of the Ministry. According to an investigation by the Association of Museums in Korea, the total number of museums in Korea is 377. Of these, 179 are public or managed by local government, 60 are managed by enterprises, 12 are managed by religious groups, and 184 are managed by universities or the private sector.

The average number of curators in private museums is 1.27, meaning fewer than 2 persons. About 30 museums have no curators. Quite a number of museums have been closed for lack of funds. According to the above-mentioned investigation, for every 117 museum workers, only 37 people (or

¹ 朝鮮王朝博物館

² 高麗

³ 《三國史記》百濟本記第三 辰斯王七年條；《三國遺史》紀異 卷一 延鳥郎細鳥條。

⁴ 開城

⁵ 江華

⁶ 德壽宮

⁷ 高宗皇帝

⁸ 龍山

⁹ Ji Gon-Gil (池健吉), 'The History of the National Museums in Korea', *Museum Professionalism- Forum of Museum Directors*, 2001, pp.124-131. Taipei: National Museum of History, Dec. 2001.

30%) possess a national license. In art museums, only 14 out of 165 members of staff hold the same license ¹⁰.

Public museums, funded by government and supervised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, include national museums, art museums, science museums, etc. Examples of this category include the National Korea Museum, the National Folk-art Museum, the National Modern Art Museum, and the National Korea Science Museum, etc.

The National Korea Museum has been established for more than 60 years. On 9 August 2006, Ms. KIM, Hong-Nam ¹¹ was appointed to the post of the director of the National Korea Museum for the first time in its history that a woman was appointed. This museum also manages more than 20 local museums, controlling their personnel, administrative, and financial affairs.

There are also museums at both national and local levels which focus on certain professions or local industries; these museums are generally managed by local societies or governments. Museums in this category include the National Palace History Museum, the National Aquarium, and the National Li Military Common Memorial Museum ¹², etc. Other focuses of such museums include national music, the police, forestry, foreign relations, the postal system, railways, textbooks, beacons, Kim-chi ¹³, embroidery, dress, tea culture, education, water systems, agriculture, wine, porcelain, design, Buddhist art, furniture, cinema, calligraphy, masks, paper, coal, printing, currency, the Olympics, independence, medicine, war, celebrities, religion, sport, and children museums. Some professional museums are managed either by a company or legal person or partly by government and partly by the private sector. It is a matter for celebration that more and more museums are currently being established in Korea.

With the solid base of academic research and archeological excavations, as well as the

accumulated experiences of teachers and students alike, university museums are recording a glorious achievement never seen by common national, public, or legal-person-managed museums. They are the pioneers to which other museums look with respect. As a result of the recent repeal of laws related to university museums, however, such museums have lost the legal foundation for their existence. From now on, the establishment and development of university museums will be seriously handicapped.

In the distant past, university museums and libraries were commonly regarded as its two most important institutions. University museums, moreover, combining academic research and archeological excavation, played an important role in cultivation of professional museum staff. They also enhanced social education, research, and excavation of local artifacts, aside from contributing greatly to the national collection and national preservation of cultural artifacts. This situation has tragically changed in recent years, however, as many university museums virtually stop functioning, lacking clearly-defined operational aims, and making do with non-professional, part-time managers appointed by the university administrations. ¹⁴ This mode of operation makes it difficult to have faith in any expectations for the better.

Lack of budget is the common difficulty among national, public, and private museums. With the decline in the world economy and increase in the numbers of unemployed, the transformation of museums into legal persons seems inevitable. The common hope of Korean museums is that the government will ease regulations on the establishment of private museums, such as

¹⁰ Please see <www.kora.or.kr> .

¹¹ 金紅男

¹² 李忠武公紀念館

¹³ 泡菜博物館

¹⁴ JUNG Jing-Wen, 'The Condition and Challenge of the University Museum', *Museology*, pp.136-147. Seoul, KR, 1999.

that requiring that, “in order to maintain a fine level of arts, gallery space must be larger than 100 square meters, etc.,” and provide a multiplicity of options for people seeking to establish museums.

2. Prospects for museums

(1) Increasing the number of museums from the current 350 to 800

The number and quality of a nation's museums directly reflects the strength and cultural maturity of that nation. Japan has 4,500 museums; Germany has 5,000.¹⁵ In South Korea, the current number of public and private museums is about 377. The ideal is 800. This ideal is calculated in accordance with population and national income¹⁶. According to this ideal, Korea should have 880 museums but the number of functioning museums is only 110, a figure far too short of the ideal.

(2) Increasing the cultural budget from the current 0.3% of the annual national budget to 1~2%

With its special national situation, South Korea allocates a great portion of its budget to national defense. The value of the national defense budget is a secret.

The ideal of cultural activists is first to decrease the astronomical national defense budget and increase the cultural budget to 1~2% of the annual national budget. In the future, they hope, with unification of South and North Korea, the government will increase the cultural budget to 10% of the annual budget, giving everyone the benefit of a higher quality of life¹⁷.

(3) Marketing museums

A museum cannot function without visitors. In order to reduce the cost to society, provide management and facilitate their function of social education, museums must be located in easily-accessible areas. Otherwise, with

the establishment of museum facilities, the concerned authorities should simultaneously arrange transportation plans. Here are some examples of failure¹⁸ :

(a) The National Ethnology Museum of Japan: The museum building is located on the old site of the world exposition of Osaka. The building is spacious, with world-class hardware, software and equipment, but its audience has nevertheless declined gradually. The reason is that there is no subway station in the vicinity. Inconvenience of transportation is the key obstacle.

(b) The National Contemporary Arts Museum of Korea: The National Contemporary Arts Museum is equipped with the latest hardware and software facilities, and located in Seoul children's park, Kua-chuan City, Gyeonggi-do.¹⁹ It is a spacious complex with beautiful scenery, but its visitor numbers remain static because of its location in relation to transportation.

(4) Encouraging enterprises to establish museums, with carte-blanche donations and tax reduction

Modern life has brought technology, information, and improvements in taste. With the advent of electronic communications, thinking, values, and approaches to management also differ from those of the past.

The social responsibility of enterprises lies in increasing the well-being of humanity. With the diversified display of enterprise museums, the company can promote its reputation, interact with international customers, and increase its competitiveness.

¹⁵ Please see <www.kora.or.kr>.

¹⁶ Please see <www.dgbas.gov.tw/pubic/Attachment/5991041471.xls>.

¹⁷ KIM Byung-Mo, & etc., ‘The Condition of Korean Museums and Relative Issues’ , *Museology*, p67. Seoul, KR, 1999.

¹⁸ KIM Byung-Mo, & etc., ‘The Condition of Korean Museums and Relative Issues’ , *Museology*, pp.65-68. Seoul, KR, 1999.

¹⁹ 京畿道果川市

The following are responses to a poll from the museums of 30 domestic enterprises²⁰:

(a) What is the reason for lack of diversified activities? Primary answers are “lack of budget” (11%); “low audience participation” (10%), and “lack of professional museum workers.”

(b) Entrance admission: Charging an admission fee (31%) Providing free admittance (57%).

(c) Sixty percent of the museums believe that admittance fees help maintain operations.

(d) Opening days: in line with government (75%) and all-year-round (10%).

(e) Forty-three percent answered that they offer various kinds of facilities, such as libraries, brochures, and refreshment areas etc.

(f) Annual visitors: less than 2000 (56%); more than 600,000 (10%); more than 300,000 (6%).

For those with less than 2000 visitors a year, that averages to less than 7 visitors per day. This is a serious state of affairs. A popular movie, no matter how expensive the ticket might be, will grab the interest of moviegoers. Likewise, if the museum can design above-the-standard exhibitions and plan innovative and interesting activities, visitors will naturally be attracted. In order to develop museums, the government should encourage donations from enterprises, with tax deduction incentives.

III. International participation

1. ICOM 2004, Seoul

Generally, ICOM has chosen the cities for its meeting from among those of European nations. In 2004, however, there was a “double first” : it was the first such meeting this century and also the first time the meeting had taken place in Asia.

For Korea, ICOM was like a “cultural Olympics” after the Olympic Games, Asian

Games, and the FIFA World Cup. The government invested considerable resources and concerns and fully promoted the meeting. The result fully satisfied the expectations of academic and cultural observers.

2. Establishment of “Korean gallery” in foreign museums

Generally, cultural affairs are managed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and many galleries and museums are under its supervision. The Korea Foundation, however, an affiliated legal branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs, also contributes in the promotion of cultural affairs. In order to enhance international exchanges, promote refined culture and all-round knowledge of Korea, and improve the national reputation, the Korea Foundation has arranged for the establishment of a “Korean gallery” within famous art galleries and museums around the world, creating opportunities for close contact with Korea for foreign visitors.

3. Invitation of world-class scholars

The Korea Foundation organizes a “Curators' Workshop” every year, inviting foreign experts, curators, and professors of Korean history and culture to have first-hand experiences with Korea. In this two-week workshop, carefully-designed activities and face-to-face contact with Korea give participating experts a chance to hear fresh viewpoints and ideas. Every year the workshop designs different topics, and most of the participants have good a command of Korean, Chinese, or Japanese. The author, who participated in the activities for two consecutive years, learned quite a lot from this experience. The Korean government is like a farmer, and the participating foreign curators seeds, grains of wheat, which, when well tended will produce a rich harvest.

²⁰ CHO Han-Hee, ‘Effective Movement Scheme of 21st Century Korean Enterprise Museums’ , *Museology*, pp.253, 260-262. Seoul, KR, 1999.

4. Frequent international conference of museums

Following 2004 ICOM meeting, “The international scientific seminar on cultural heritage protection and prevention of museum calamity” meeting was held in June 23, 2006, organized by Korea ICOM, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage (ICCROM) and the Getty Conservation Institute in the U.S. With this large-scale international scientific seminar, the South Korean government was able to improve the national image by exchanging opinions and absorbing others' invaluable experiences.

Conclusion

Museums in Korea are still young, the oldest not yet one hundred years old. The enactment of museum related laws and the establishment of the Museum Association occurred within the timeframe of just a few short decades.

Recently, international society has witnessed a “Korea Trend” all over the world. On the one hand, the government organized international meetings and exchanges, established several Korean Showrooms and Korean Showcases in foreign countries, and assisted experts of Korea to conduct research. On the other

hand, it also encouraged the private sector to export Korean films, dress, food culture, even cosmetics industries, to other countries.

According to a report from Contemporary Artistic News of Taiwan, the Korean government, and the country's private sectors, are showing strong vitality and making strategic maneuvers in relation to cultural and artistic issues. In the same report, we witness how the best art gallery in Korea, Leeum Samsung Museum of Art²¹, is the best example of an enterprise communicating with the society through art and culture. On the one hand, it molds an independent cultural character; on the other hand, it serves to promote the enterprise's high technology products. This kind of social engineering of Korean enterprises, like that of their counterpart in Japan, is most representative of Asia. Koreans, cool, subtle, yet with a warm character, are no longer satisfied with the effort of the cultural and artistic establishment alone. Rather, they are extending their cultural territory with smart tactics. This is something that observers should ponder seriously.

In Korea, as well as in the Republic of China (Taiwan), museums are all very young. It is to be hoped that they can grow strong and fulfill their role of cultural and social education.

About the author²¹

Dr. Sung Kee-In was born in Seoul in 1946.

She got her B.A. from the Department of Arts at the National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei in 1970, M.A. from the Department of Art Education at the Graduate School of the Tokyo National Education University in 1976, another M.A. from the Department of History at the Graduate School of the National Taiwan University in 1986, and Ph.D. from the Department of History at the Graduate School of the Chinese Culture University in Taipei in 1997.

She works on the Research Department in the National Museum of History in Taipei since 1984, she also is teaching in the Taipei Municipal University of Education as an associate professor, with dozens of published books and papers.

²¹ 三星美術館