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**Ethnic and Cultural Heritage Protection  
and Tourism Development in Korea**

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**I.**

It is an honor for me to have been invited to the 2nd PECC ecotourism forum to present the topic “*Ethnic and Cultural Heritage Protection and Tourism Development in Korea*”. In the Korean language, tourism is called “*kwankwang*,” a word with Chinese origin. If we translate “*kwankwang*” into English, the word implies “to see light.” The original meaning of the word for “light” in Korean, however, does not simply mean a light itself. It holds a deeper meaning of “enlightenment,” and “wonder” which can be obtained from the way of life and culture. While tourism is regarded as a type of product from traveling or movement, it has a particular meaning of a new way of life and enlightenment acquired from different regional lifestyles and culture. Thus the traditional cultural heritage of an ethnic group serves as a vital resource for tourism development.

Despite the fact that a cultural heritage can be an important resource for tourism, many conflicts are possible between cultural heritage protection and tourism development. Cultural heritage can be easily damaged and distorted by the excessive pursuit of short term profits in tourism development. The dilemma of maintaining a balance between protection and development may exist in any country and Korea is in an ongoing struggle with this

dilemma.

Korea has undertaken many difficulties in the process of modernization, as many other Asian countries have. South and North Korea have been separated since 1950 by the Korean War, which was only 5 years from its 1945 independence from Japanese. During the four years of the war a death toll of 300 million. and damage of property equivalent to US\$ 2.3 billion. Nevertheless, the Korean economy rapidly grew from US\$ 80 in the 1950s to US\$ 12,600 in 2003 per capita of GNP, growing 150 times in only 50 years. In the process of rapid economic growth in Korea, it is notable that tourism has played an important role as a growth engine of the economy and that the tourism industry has actually contributed to the economic development of the country.

Several questions arise when thinking about this: What changes has this rapid and compacted economic growth with modernization brought to the people and culture of Korea? I should also ask the question, “What problems are confronting Korean traditional culture and ethnic heritage under these changing circumstances?” *(NB: During the Lee dynasty of 500 years, there was a strong central ruling system that seemed to have fewer cultural differences between regional populations before pre-modernization. The term “traditional cultural heritage” may be more appropriate in Korea rather than term “ethnic cultural heritage”. That is, the Korean people are a homogeneous ethnic group, sharing one language).* Furthermore, I have tried to focus attention on what relationships can be identified between cultural heritage protection and tourism development during a rapid economic growth.

## II.

What I am concerned about is the fact that most Asian countries are either undertaking or

expected to follow a path of compacted economic growth in conjunction with globalization trends. Besides Japan and the four dragons, China has already shown a remarkable speed of change in recent years. Many reports indicate that India is taking off in compacted economic growth. At the same time, many countries in East Asia, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Philippines have either taken off or are anticipating a rapid and compacted economic growth. Mongolia and Uzbekistan in Central Asia will likely follow a similar path. With regard to protecting cultural and ethnic heritage during tourism growth, Korea has already experienced the problems that can be utilized as lessons for other countries. There are rather more negative effects than positive in Korea's case relating to cultural heritage protection and tourism development.

What is the premise that made possible for the Korean economy such a rapid growth and compacted modernization? Many reasons can be found but one of them seems to be denial of the past culture and tradition. We cannot of course deny the positive effects of modernization. Cultural reform is inevitably followed in the process of modernization. Cultural reform reshuffles 'new' and 'old', and "externality" and "natives" through a hybridization and re-composition process. However, the functions of past culture and tradition within changing society must much be considered. Although the emergence of new culture is necessarily hybrid in nature, the foundation of hybrid culture would also be based on a regional culture base. In fact, by nature culture originates and starts in various regions. Culture cannot exist without considering a particular region and residents living in the region. The culture of a region is a process of acquiring uniqueness from tangible and intangible products, which regional community members have produced by the conformity and interaction with peculiar natural environments under spatial, periodic and social constraints. Therefore, it is cultural heritage that makes uniqueness and abundant sources of regional culture possible within this process. Although cultural unification is accelerated by

the trends of globalization and IT development, an individual culture can create difference unless the existence of culture is completely destroyed by certain circumstances. Culture as a way of life produces a hybrid culture continuously based on traditional culture of a region, even though there is cultural shock and conflict in the process of choosing and consuming a new culture.

Rapid modernization in Korea seemed not to fully utilize resources from traditional cultural heritage. This would have generated uniqueness and fluency from culture if they were efficiently used. As mentioned earlier, a fast modernization brought negative awareness of past lifestyle and culture. Two extreme attitudes appeared toward traditional cultural heritage. One is that there is a tendency to look down and devalue traditional culture and to have excessive pursuit of external culture. The other is stick to traditional culture obsessively. The problem with both of these attitudes is that they separate traditional culture and contemporary culture, that is, separate the past and the present. Presumably, the co-existence of cultures, which makes cultural fluency by interacting with the past and the present, will disappear by a separate recognition or understanding of them.

The regulation of cultural property protection in Korea can be regarded as a seriously flawed law. According to the regulation, once a specific area is designated as a conservation area, residents within the area are severely constrained on renovation or remodeling of homes or buildings, causing great inconvenience in their daily lives. Thus a village will deteriorate over time and residents will want to move to another place. However it is not easy to move due to housing prices within conservation areas being usually much lower than other areas. If so, why is such a strict law enforced in Korea? There might be several reasons. One of them is the fact that the regulation contains, under the current trend of destroying cultural heritage through rapid modernization, such strong conservational

contents that reflect a traditionalist view of conservation. At the same time, enforcement of the law enables people to reject conservation of traditional cultural properties. Regions not falling under this regulation have witnessed destruction and damage of cultural heritage more easily and lost respect for cultural heritage more quickly. A circular cycle of problems is created by this dilemma.

In the context of resolution of these issues, it is well recognized that tourism development is a useful tool for disconnecting this circle of vice. Furthermore, there are also residents who are caught between cultural heritage preservation and tourism development. There exists a healthy relationship between tourism development and cultural protection as long as preservation is assisted or implemented by the residents themselves. Thus the residents will have pride and respect for cultural heritage while tourism development brings them economic revenue. The revenue can be utilized for further preservation that can further increase tourism development. This kind of circle of virtue produces varied new culture based on traditional regional culture, and makes it possible for coexistence and harmonization between cultures

### **III.**

This positive relationship however seems not to be realized easily. Take Gyeongju, a capital city of the ancient Shilla Kingdom, for example. It was founded some 2000 years ago and had a 1000-year history until AD 935. This city is still one of Korea's major cities with a population of 280,000 and it is a major tourist destination. Looking back to Korean economic development again, the Korean economy in the 1960s needed a great deal of capital investment for economic growth, thus the Korean government developed Gyeongju as an international tourist site as a means of raising foreign earnings from tourism development. Several world cultural heritage sites in Gyeongju in Korea (*i.e.*, *Seokguram*

*(stone grotto) and Bulguksa (temple), which are registered in UNESCO)* were restored, and hotels and other accommodation facilities were built at designated tourist sites, that is, Bomun lake resort. The tourism development attracted tourists under a simple development policy without a long term vision and insight.

Today's situation, after 30 years, has shown that tourism in Gyeongju is decreasing or stagnating in terms of number of tourists, and that invaluable cultural resources of the city have been damaged. The residents of the city have fallen into economic difficulties and complained about the inconvenience of daily life due to rigid regulations. The cultural heritage there displays only monumental shapes, and has failed to persuade residents and to attract tourists by neglecting historical and cultural awareness. Exceptional potential cultural resources are being exhausted, are losing vitality, and are facing many difficulties. These circumstances have eroded the foundation for co-existence between residents, tourism, and cultural heritage. The situation now requires large capital investment and efforts to revitalize Gyeongju to reestablish its place in Korean tourism.

#### **IV.**

In conclusion, the trend of international tourism is changing toward cultural tourism in recent years. Tourism is not only understood as an industry, but is also regarded, from a cultural point of view, as an important vehicle of mutual understanding between nations of the world, and between Asian nations. Tourism can be successful as industries, only in accordance with certain cultural requirements. In this context, an ideology of 'a sustainable tourism development' is emerging. However it is not likely to be easy to follow the ideology within some countries on a path of rapid economic growth. I think that a policy beyond speed is more important than any other. Finally, I believe that all of you sitting in here can make this kind of policy and achieve it successfully in conjunction with tourism

development and cultural heritage protection. Thank you very much.