

Presentation 2-4

Joint Inscription of Ssirum (Korean Wrestling), Intercultural Understanding and Peace

남북 씨름의 공동 등재: 문화 간 이해와 평화



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Introduction

While peace can be achieved through various means such as military power, economic wealth, or cultural influence, my presentation will highlight how the joint inscription of Ssireum as a shared cultural heritage on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity contributes to peace through dialogue and mutual understanding among cultures.

The Concept of Peace

What is the peace we truly seek? Is it merely the absence of war? UNESCO, established after World War II in 1945, is an international organization dedicated to achieving global peace. The UNESCO Constitution states, "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed," highlighting the importance of education, science, and culture in preventing war and building peace.

Moreover, Norwegian peace scholar Johan Galtung provides a more profound definition of peace by categorizing violence into direct, structural, and cultural violence. According to Galtung, when structural and cultural violence are eliminated, and societies experience creative transformations that foster mutual understanding, friendliness, and harmony, we can achieve what he calls "positive peace." It is in the realization of this state that we can say we are truly on the path to peace.

On the other hand, Baekbeom Kim Gu, in Baekbeom Ilji ("My Wish"), emphasized that "culture is the power to bring happiness to oneself and others." He underscored the importance of culture as a means to achieve peace, expressing his hope that Korea would cultivate the power of culture rather than relying solely on economic or military strength. Culture, therefore, serves as a vital tool for fostering mutual understanding.

However, mutual understanding is not automatically achieved through culture alone. It is when cultures engage in open exchanges and collaborate in various ways that dialogue and understanding are truly promoted. I firmly believe that this kind of intercultural dialogue and understanding plays a crucial role in resolving conflicts through non-violent means.

Shared Cultural Heritage in Central Asia and Joint Inscription

In this context, I believe that the joint inscription of shared heritage on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity provides a framework for mutual understanding and cooperation. The joint inscription process enhances the cultural identity shared by the participating countries and reinforces the necessity of cooperation. Furthermore, through the joint inscription process, a high level of collaboration is established between the involved nations, fostering ongoing cultural exchanges and dialogue. This kind of cooperation plays a significant role in building peaceful relationships based on mutual trust.

Central Asia is a leading region in fostering cooperation through the joint inscription of shared cultural heritage on the international stage. In fact, 57% of the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity from Central Asia is inscribed jointly, which is significantly higher compared to other regions—13% globally, 8% in Northeast Asia, and 14% in Southeast Asia.

Moreover, Central Asian countries do not stop at merely listing their cultural heritage jointly with UNESCO. They actively strengthen practical exchanges and cooperation through traditional cultural festivals such as the World Nomad Games. These efforts serve to expand mutual cultural understanding. For instance, at the 5th World Nomad Games held in Astana, Kazakhstan, in early September this year, over 3,000 participants from 90 countries gathered to enjoy various nomadic traditions, including traditional wrestling, archery, strategy games, and folk activities. Such events play a vital role in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation through shared cultural heritage.

The Characteristic on the Joint Listing of Ssireum

Meanwhile, ssireum (traditional Korean wrestling) was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as a joint listing by North and South Korea during the 13th Intergovernmental Committee meeting in November 2018. The inscription was unanimously approved by the 24 Intergovernmental Committee member states. Ssireum is a traditional Korean martial art, game, and sport where two participants engage in a wrestling match, grabbing each other's waistbands or trousers, and using strength and skill to topple the opponent. This practice has long symbolized the community culture of the Korean people, expressing communication, social solidarity, and cultural identity.

However, the joint inscription of ssireum by North and South Korea did not follow the typical multinational nomination procedure. Initially, both Korea submitted separate applications, but it became the first case of joint inscription due to the political context of peace and reconciliation. The decision at the 13th Intergovernmental Committee recognized the exceptional nature of this joint listing. UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay stated that this joint inscription marks "a highly symbolic first step towards reconciliation between the two Koreas, reminding us of the power of cultural heritage as a bridge for peace building between both Korea."

The Process of Joint Inscription of Ssireum

The joint inscription process for Ssireum began with the voluntary will of both countries, but due to political motives, it became an example of a joint inscription achieved through exceptional procedures. The process unfolded as follows:

Discussions on the joint inscription of Ssireum began at the Northeast Asia Sub-regional Cooperation Meeting held in Mongolia organized by the UNESCO ICHCAP in 2014.

During this meeting, Ro Chol-su, Deputy Director of North Korea's National Heritage Protection Administration, explained North Korea's planned UNESCO listings and first raised the possibility of a joint inscription of Ssireum between North and South Korea.

Our team had prepared for this meeting over two years, and there were many complications surrounding the participation of the North Korean delegation. In fact, this was one of the most rewarding meetings I attended in my decade of work with UNESCO. However, despite subsequent working-level talks between North and South Korea, no substantial progress was made. Then in March 2015, North Korea submitted an independent application for Ssireum to be inscribed by UNESCO, prompting South Korea to submit its own application for Ssireum to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in March 2016. However, at the 11th Intergovernmental Committee meeting in 2016, North Korea's application was deemed to require supplementary information, and North Korea submitted a revised application in 2017. Under UNESCO's review regulations, both South Korea's application submitted in 2016 and North Korea's revised application submitted in 2017 were evaluated simultaneously in 2018.

In April 2018, the inter-Korean summit was held at Panmunjom, fostering a mood of reconciliation between North and South Korea. Later, during President Moon Jae-in's state visit to France in October, Audrey Azoulay, the Director-General of UNESCO, proposed a joint inscription between the two Koreas. Following this, discussions regarding the joint inscription progressed rapidly, with a UNESCO envoy being dispatched to Pyongyang.

Finally, at the 13th Intergovernmental Committee meeting in December 2018, representatives from 24 intergovernmental committee member states assessed that traditional Korean wrestling (ssireum) shared similar cultural and social significance in both Koreas in terms of its transmission and practices. Additionally, the decision was viewed as contributing to peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula, leading to a unanimous decision for the joint inscription.

Ultimately, an exceptional process between North and South Korea was carried out due to political motivations, resulting in the successful joint inscription of ssireum as a shared cultural heritage. This serves as a fitting example of UNESCO's goal to protect intangible cultural heritage through international cooperation.

After Joint Inscription?

What has happened since ssireum was exceptionally inscribed as a symbol of peace and reconciliation between North and South Korea? Unfortunately, since the joint inscription in 2018, there has been no actual exchange or cooperation between the two Koreas regarding ssireum. While the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019 posed physical challenges to interaction and collaboration, the situation has largely been influenced by the political circumstances between the two Koreas. The breakdown of the North Korea-U.S. summit in Hanoi in February 2019 caused a cooling of the reconciliation atmosphere, and since then, no progress has been made in terms of cooperation on ssireum. This illustrates the limitations of the joint inscription as a symbol of peace and reconciliation, showing how political tensions have hindered any further exchanges.

Revitalizing International Cooperation on Ssireum

Should ssireum exchanges and cooperation be left solely to the political situation between North and South Korea, or should we find other ways to advance exchanges, given that ssireum was inscribed as a symbol of reconciliation and peace beyond political boundaries? Of course, alternative approaches that align with the original intention of the joint inscription must be explored. Though not exhaustive, I would like to propose three small but feasible solutions.

First way is to expand the number of countries involved in the joint inscription of ssireum by North and South Korea. This means adding

other countries with forms of wrestling that, although different in style, share similar functions and roles to that of ssireum. If ssireum was initially a matter of inter-Korean exchange, this would broaden the framework to include multilateral cooperation. By transforming the issue from a bilateral to a multilateral and international one, it could help reduce the extent to which ssireum exchanges are influenced by the political situation between the two Koreas.

Second one is to actively participate in international traditional cultural festivals that include ssireum. Although ssireum differs in name and style, many countries in regions like Mongolia, Central Asia, and Eurasia enjoy similar wrestling traditions. This creates the possibility of broader ssireum exchanges with other nations. Showcasing each country's unique wrestling styles and gathering them in one place would offer a fascinating opportunity to experience humanity's long-standing physical culture. For example, North and South Korea could actively participate in events like the World Nomad Games recently held in Kazakhstan. By collaborating with the organizing committee of such festivals, they could invite both Koreas simultaneously, creating opportunities for practical exchanges.

Third way is to promote exchange and cooperation activities with international cultural organizations such as UNESCO. In particular, through active collaboration with the UNESCO Beijing Office, which oversees five Northeast Asian countries, indirect initiatives such as research on ssireum and exhibitions in third countries could be explored. While there may be limitations due to UN sanctions on North Korea, as UNESCO is a specialized UN agency, various methods can still be considered.

Conclusion

Ssireum is a festival of the body, where individuals collide with their bare bodies, understand their opponents, and release their strength. Through multilateral international exchanges and cooperation activities related to ssireum, I believe that we should create opportunities and spaces where North and South Korea can interact and work together, thereby expanding mutual understanding. Furthermore, not only should there be exchanges and cooperation between the two Koreas, but through international cooperation involving similar forms of wrestling, we can move closer to the active peace we seek, which is the non-violent resolution of problems based on mutual understanding. Thank you