

2007 : the Year of Jeju Folklore Project-
Reviving the Cultural Heritage of
Nature's Paradise

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ABSTRACT

In 2006, the National Folk Museum of Korea (NFMK) initiated the project *The Year of Local Folklore*. The project is to be carried out by both NFMK and local governments. Extending over 10 years, the project is scheduled to cover the whole nation, focusing on specific regions, one by one, each for two years. For the first year, intensive research will be conducted on the folklore of the chosen region. In the second year, exhibitions, performances, and academic conferences, based on the results of the first year's research, will be held. In short, the projects will lay the foundations on which local governments and residents will further promote their culture.

Jeju Island was selected as the project's first target because its folklore has been conserved relatively well due to the island's separation from the mainland, but, because of rapid development in recent years, it is now at risk of extinction.

Environmental context

Jeju Island is located about 150 km south east of the mainland of Korea. In the past the island was used as a penal settlement. Its total area is 1,848 square km, which is three times the size of Singapore or 1.7 times the size of Hong Kong. The land is generally flat and oval-shaped.

Mt. Halla, in the centre of the island, provides contour lines which form concentric circles, letting the cultivated lands spread to the sea coast. The island has a subtropical oceanic climate with four distinct seasons. The temperature ranges from -1°C to 35°C.

The island is endowed with a beautiful natural setting

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and a unique traditional culture. It is the premier tourist destination in Korea because of its unparalleled natural beauty. Scenic beaches, waterfalls, cliffs and caves are situated throughout the island and allow visitors numerous ways to enjoy their leisure there. Mt. Hallasan, a national park consisting of an extinct volcano cone, is especially popular. About five million tourists (domestic and foreign) visit the island each year. In 2002, UNESCO designated the island an ecology preservation zone, a 'Biosphere Reserve'.

The percentages of primary, secondary, and tertiary industries in the island's economy are 16.1%, 3.0%, and 80.9% respectively. The population is 557,000, which is 13% of that of Singapore or 8% of that of Hong Kong. The island boasts excellent resources such as an airport, ports, and road facilities. All the tourism sites in Jeju are within one hour's distance by car.

Though Jeju's history goes back to the Stone Age it has developed rapidly since the 1960s. In particular, the Korean government has recently recognized Jeju's enormous potential as a centre for tourism and business. It designated the island a 'Free International City' in 2002, and a 'Special Self-Governing Province' in 2006. With greater autonomy, Jeju is pushing ahead with ambitious projects to build tourist attractions and business complexes.

Institutional context

There are over 40 museums in Jeju, including the Jeju National Museum, the Jeju Folklore & Natural History Museum, the Peace Museum, and the Museum of African Art. Each of them has its own unique theme, such as folklore, natural history, foreign arts, food, cinema - and even sex! About half of the museums are connected with

the National Folk Museum of Korea through the 'Network of Museums' Cooperation.'

The Network was initiated in 2005 to help local museums and has been led by NFMK. At its own expense, NFMK provides local museums with educational programmes, professional assistance to repair and arrange collections and various workshops.

The collaboration and cooperation between central and regional government to develop Jeju also plays an important role in designing and implementing any project on Jeju Island.

Sequence of events

In January 2006, NFMK drafted the project *The Year of Local Folklore* and got the approval of the Minister of Culture and Tourism. Soon after, NFMK entered into the *Agreement of the Year of Jeju Folklore* with Jeju Province. By the end of March 2006, NFMK had discussed and decided the details and schedules of the project with Jeju Province and local folklorists. In April, NFMK concluded an MOU with the National Institute of the Korean Language to study Jeju dialect, which is so unique that a person from the mainland cannot communicate with a person who uses it. NFMK is considering cooperating with UNESCO to preserve it as oral intangible heritage.

Also in April, NFMK organised two research teams with four of its staff members and eight local experts, and dispatched them to two Jeju villages which were judged to be representative of Jeju folklore. Residing in the villages until this coming November, these staff will do a thorough job of researching local folklore and traditions.

Basically, the project is to be carried out jointly by NFMK and local government. Extending over 10 years,

the project is scheduled to cover the whole nation, focusing on specific regions, one by one, each for two years. For the first year, intensive research will be conducted on the folklore of a region. In the second year, exhibitions, performances, and academic conferences will be held, based on the results of the first year's research. Hopefully, cultural commodities, tangible or intangible, will also be developed. Up to this point, NFMK will play an important role, but from the third year on local government should take the lead.

The reason why Jeju was selected as the first target of the project is because, until recently, the folklore of the island has been conserved relatively well due to the island's separation from the mainland, but it is now at the risk of extinction because of recent rapid development.

Leadership and decision making

The Committee for *the Year of Jeju Folklore*, a formal framework for the project, was set up in February 2006. The governor of Jeju Province took the chair of the committee, and the director of NFMK was its vice chair. Legislators of the National Assembly representing Jeju, and directors of major cultural institutions in Jeju, joined as committee members. The executive committee was also organised, chaired by the director of NFMK. The secretariat is composed of five divisions in charge of planning, research, exhibition, acquisition, performance and education, respectively.

Although the committee and the secretariat are made up of the people from NFMK and Jeju Province, NFMK has played a leading part from the inception of the project.

Cultural resources

Jeju has a very strong and unique oral folk tradition, especially in the *bonpuri* (the main themes of shaman songs told in story form) and *nodongyo*, the traditional work songs of farmers and fishermen.

Oral traditions can be categorised into legends, folk songs, proverbs, riddles and so on. Jeju is often called 'a treasure house of folk songs' because the songs of this province are rarely found in other areas. Folk songs relate to the way of life of local residents and reflect the realities of their lives. The powerful and dynamic tunes and words reflect their attitudes and preoccupations

Jeju is also an island of tales. Every town has its own myths and legends. There is hardly a nook or cranny, stone or cliff on Mt. Halla that does not have a legend or story about it. The locals believe that more than 18,000 gods and goddesses preside over the island. The most powerful, and typically orally transmitted, myth relates to the island's origin, recounting that the three gods Samsinin - *GO eula*, *YANG eula*, and *BU eula* - founded the nation of Tamla on Jeju after their marriage to three virgins who crossed the ocean. The gods are said to have emerged from *Samseonghyeol*, literally a hole for the founding gods, and Jeju still has three caverns regarded as sacred places.

It is well known in other provinces that Jeju has many folk customs and songs of shamanic origin. Other kinds of music are hard to find. Jeju's musical instruments are mainly percussion instruments used in shamanic music.

Folk crafts are the skills handed down generation after generation among the common people, to create objects for use in their daily lives. Jeju has a large number of folk crafts, including *kat* (Korean hat making), bamboo and native grass crafts, pottery, and dyeing.



Figure 1: Jeju Island, Korea: general scenic view



Figure 2: Heobeok, a traditional water jar



Figure 3: A native woman diver, Jeju



Figure 4: A native women diver, Jeju



Figure 5: Folk performance, Jeju

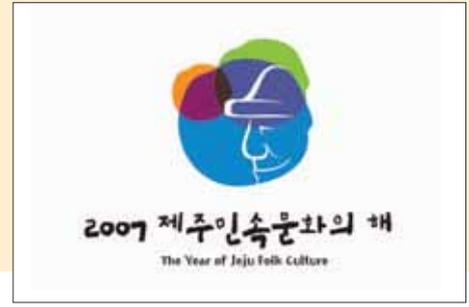


Figure 3: Year of the Jeju Folklore Project emblem. This symbolises Jeju's three main characters in three colours: green for Mount. Halla, orange for tangerine, and blue for water.

Social and economic inputs and outputs

The budget for this project is about \$2.5 million, of which \$2 million will come from NFMK and the rest will be borne by Jeju Province. The project aims to lay a foundation on which the local government and people of Jeju will be able to build to promote their culture further. The end result of the project will be a comprehensive report on the island's folklore. The report will provide a detailed explanation of Jeju's cultural resources and will show the island's potential as a centre for cultural tourism. In the second year of the project, some pilot programmes (exhibitions, performances, conferences, etc.) will be implemented utilising the findings of the report.

For the first two years, the main investor is central government, namely, NFMK. However, it is the responsibility of the local government and people to exploit the outcome of the project because the residents of Jeju are expected to be the beneficiaries. The local newspapers and broadcasters have welcomed and applauded the project, partly because it does not include any regulation or disadvantage for the residents' properties.

Considering that the impact of the project will extend over a long period of time, a rigid cost benefit analysis cannot be given. The project, and the situation, is subject to change.

Sustainability

The benefits of the project are sustainable. It is critically important to make full use of them. One of the ultimate ideals of the project is to build an eco-museum where Jeju's natural and cultural heritage can be preserved. The leading role of local government and the active

support and participation of the residents are essential factors, because after two years the human and financial resources of NFMK will be moved to another region.

Lessons learned

The project is at an initial stage so it is too early to enumerate any lessons learned. However, a few general observations can be made. First, as in all the other projects, the main protagonists must have a clear long-term vision, expertise and resources. In the case of this project, NFMK and its director have performed this role effectively and efficiently. From the beginning, NFMK secured the support of central government (the Ministry of Culture and Tourism).

Secondly, close collaboration and cooperation between central and local government is crucial. NFMK concluded the necessary agreement with Jeju Province and formed a joint organisation to carry out the project.

Thirdly, support and participation from the local community is essential. Keeping that fact in mind, NFMK made strategic efforts to involve the local press with the project and this has been very successful.

Lastly, it is highly recommended that a local organisation be established, drawn from both the public and private sectors on Jeju, to keep the project going. 