Exhibiting Arirang

Lee Kunwook [Vanya]
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**Kunwook (Vanya) Lee**  
Curator, the National Folk Museum of Korea

**ABSTRACT**  
*Arirang* is best known as a type of Korean folk song. But it is more than just a simple folk song. It is a kind of cultural phenomenon that embodies people’s lives and everyday activities. The National Folk Museum of Korea recently curated a special exhibition about *Arirang* to reconsider the meaning of this song which so many Koreans take for granted. In the exhibition we presented both historical materials and everyday products related to *Arirang*, and we also introduced sound resources. These were not only recordings of the songs performed by professional singers, but also recordings of *Arirang* songs sung by ordinary people, documented region by region. We collected personal stories and accounts of what *Arirang* means, and these too were edited into audio-visual forms to be exhibited. Certain regional groups that co-operated in collecting materials for the exhibition were invited to give performances themselves. The performances by people who put their own experiences into the *Arirang* lyrics were especially popular with audiences. The exhibition was important for the future in that we gained new experience in utilising tangible and intangible materials possessed by communities which are transmitting a certain kind of intangible heritage.

**Keywords**  
*Arirang*, folk song, popular culture, communities, Korea, personal stories, museum exhibition, audio visual resources, ethnicity

**What does Arirang mean in Korea?**  
*Zinga* in Brazil means a footstep that is thought to enshrine the spirit of Brazilians. However, it is not something that can easily be explained. It is just a symbol of Brazilian traditional culture that is equally applicable to soccer as a national talent or to the emotions of
Brazilians. Korea has something similar. It is called *Arirang*. Its origin is unknown, and when asked what exactly *Arirang* is, it is extremely difficult to give a clear answer. At its simplest, it is a Korean folk song, sometimes considered to be the unofficial national anthem of Korea. Whether they are sad or happy, in the past or the present, at home or abroad, most Koreans have sung *Arirang*, and *Arirang* is found everywhere. Each region has its own *Arirang* melodies and the lyrics recite life’s joys, agonies, sorrows and delights. *Arirang* is potent. Even people who have lived away from their homeland for decades never forget it.

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Some people say *Arirang* is intangible heritage because it is a musical form of expression. In fact, distinguishing ‘tangible’ heritage and ‘intangible’ heritage is somewhat pointless because classifying long-standing cultural experiences that occur in different contexts into ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ is overly simplistic. Culture is a whole, it is fluid and changes according to context. It is never possible to classify culture completely into tangible and intangible, or material and psychological. However, in the context of the *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, many do conceive of intangible heritage and tangible heritage as separate entities. So was it ever going to be possible for us to create a tangible exhibition out of ‘intangible *Arirang*’, something that is best known as a form of song? The answer was ‘Why not?’ The National Folk Museum of Korea opened a special exhibition, *Arirang*, which ran from the 4th of April to the 21st of May 2012, and demonstrated that culture cannot simply be divided into two separate categories - ‘the tangible’ and ‘the intangible’. Any cultural phenomenon can be presented through material artefacts.

**Reconsidering a well-known form**

*Arirang* can be heard and sung anytime, anywhere. The exhibition director wanted to consider and focus on *Arirang* as something that has always been taken for granted. A culture is a composite entity of fundamental assumptions. It is not something tangible or intangible but a way of life, something that people feel almost without realising it, something as natural as breathing. With the coming of modern concepts of ‘nationhood’ and ‘national identity’, however, culture has taken on a
political dimension, and through this came the divisions between 'yours' and 'mine'. Therefore, in some respects, concepts like Arirang or Zinga should not be taken as forms of nationality but as something possessed by ethnic people living in a particular region. This was the starting point of the exhibition.

**Human warmth**

The purpose of the exhibition was to show Arirang as something that many ordinary Koreans relate to, not as a national symbol. Human beings create and possess cultures. To express Arirang, not just as a musical form but as part of popular culture, materials for the exhibitions were collected from various community groups which, in the past, would themselves have been seen as subjects to be researched and investigated, and from which materials would have been collected. This time however, members of the general public, including rural inhabitants and North Korean defectors, were brought into the exhibition hall and asked what Arirang meant to them, and they were also asked to sing their personal versions of Arirang. All these contributions were edited as audiovisual and sound resources and were displayed in the hall, and also made into an illustrated book.

One of the groups that participated in this project was invited to sing Jindo Arirang on a stage set inside the exhibition hall. There was no master of ceremonies introducing the performance, rather the programme was planned, performed and executed by the group itself. A woman who had had a very difficult relationship with her mother-in-law described her emotions through the song, and it actually became an improvised musical performance. It was unplanned, she was not trained as a singer, but sang about her own personal experience.

The exhibition was an experiment. Not only did we exhibit collections from different social groups, but their descriptions of their experiences became exhibits in themselves. How did audiences respond? We found we had hit the jackpot! People responded enthusiastically to the authenticity of untrained, 'real' sounds and the human emotions they released through the very personal stories reflected in the improvised words of the songs.

**Plate 2**
A visual showing someone from one of the participating communities, 2012. Photo: National Folk Museum of Korea.
Other aspects of Arirang

If all we had had to present had been the songs, it would have been a performance, not an exhibition. We therefore also introduced historical materials associated with Arirang. Visitors saw materials that made Arirang act as a form of ethnic identification for Koreans when they were otherwise deprived of their sense of identity such as during the Japanese occupation, and those that showed how Arirang became known world-wide at the time of the Korean War.

In particular, we displayed everyday products - such as cigarettes and a ball - with brand names that included the word Arirang. An internet search using Arirang as a
search term had found more than a thousand such products. In exhibiting these items, we tried to collect as many different stories as possible related to them and presented those stories audio-visually.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this exhibition was important in that it gave us the opportunity to experiment with ways of visualising the intangible. It was special because it recorded particular people’s individual stories, contained in Anrang, in the context of those people’s community background.

Exhibitions at the National Folk Museum of Korea have largely been about history and about collections, concentrating mainly on tangible cultural elements. However, this experiment of telling human stories which stem from intangible cultural heritage through an exhibition surely sheds light on a new direction that the museum might take for future exhibitions.