

Cultural information networks in Asia and the Pacific region: APRCCN – history and challenges

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Introduction

In this paper, I will review the history of the Asia-Pacific Regional Centre of the Culturelink Network (APRCCN), identifying its major work and role as an information network in the field of culture, as well as discussing the challenges to be tackled in the region.

The Asia-Pacific region is known for its great diversity of cultures and peoples. It has been the cradle of civilizations and a centre of cultural diffusion since the dawn of humankind. However, in addition to the vast geographical distances involved, the differences in cultural backgrounds, the levels of development and national interests of the countries in the region have posed considerable difficulties for developing cooperative relationships in various fields.

Networks enable us to know each other, share different ideas and create new ideas for development. For countries in the Asian region to establish a solid foundation for full-scale cooperation, deeper understanding of each other's cultural backgrounds is indispensable. In this regard, information sharing in the field of cultural development and related policies can be utilized as an entry point to further improving cultural understanding among member states in the region. To achieve this goal, the Asia-Pacific Regional Centre of

the Culturelink Network (APRCCN) was established in 1997 by the Korean National Commission for UNESCO, under the auspices of UNESCO and in accordance with an agreement with the world focal point of the Culturelink Network (based at the Institute for International Relations, Croatia). The commitment of the APRCCN to encouraging the exchange of information on cultural development and cultural policies strengthens the network's important role among various organizations and institutions in Asia and the Pacific region.

History of the APRCCN

Since its establishment in 1997, the APRCCN has been managed by the Korean National Commission for UNESCO (KNCU), with support from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Focused on collecting information in the field of culture, the main activities of the APRCCN include promoting cultural networking in the Asia-Pacific region and disseminating information through its website and newsletters. Since 1998, the APRCCN has looked for new strategies to broaden Asia-Pacific cultural networks. Firstly, national focal points were sought to provide local information in English. Due to the diversity of languages in the Asia-Pacific region, English was chosen as the main language for communication. However, since in the Asia-Pacific generally few documents were being originally produced in English, the amount of available information differed largely between the nations of the region. To solve this problem, the national focal points were recruited to disseminate quality information on cultural policies, reports and events in the various nations of the Asia-Pacific.

Another important reason for the establishment of national focal points was to facilitate cultural exchange and to promote joint research projects among nations. Most focal points are represented by experts in the cultural field, who work at institutions, academies, government organizations and international NGOs, and who exchange their ideas on specific topics in the field of culture through the APRCCN platform. Thus, from 1998, the APRCCN has been organizing regional meetings on various subjects¹, inviting national focal points, as well as representatives of cultural organizations and experts in the field. During the first meeting in 1998, ideas regarding a Joint Study Project on Culture and Development were discussed, and the project was launched in 1999. The primary purpose of this project was to analyse the current situation of cultural development in Asia and the Pacific, and to provide cultural workers and scholars with valuable information to be used in the formulation,

¹ The 1st Asia-Pacific Regional Meeting of the Culturelink Network was held in Seoul, Korea from the 10 to 11 March 1998, under the theme 'The Role of the Regional Information Network for Cultural Development'.

implementation and evaluation of cultural policies. The study was designed to focus on the practical and administrative aspects of cultural policies, rather than on theoretical considerations. To discuss the results of the 1st Joint Study Project on Culture and Development, the 2nd Regional Symposium for Cultural Development was held in Chuncheon, Korea, in November 2000.

However, mainly because of a lack of financial support, the activities of the APRCCN decreased after 2002, until the establishment of a new partnership with the Office for the Hub City of Asian Culture Project by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2008. To reactivate its regional role, after having examined the activities of its existing focal points, the APRCCN found new focal points, and redesigned its website in order to provide easier access to better organized information. It also created a new space on its website, called ‘Cultural Forum’, aiming to make room for discussion among APRCCN visitors. In addition, the APRCCN Young Researchers programme was launched to raise interest and promote participation of students in the field of culture. With these changes, the APRCCN is now serving as a true link between individuals and organizations in the cultural sector of the Asia-Pacific.

Regional role of the APRCCN

The APRCCN aims to extend the sphere of the Culturelink Network and its activities in the Asia-Pacific region by facilitating information exchange, joint research on cultural development and related policies among cultural institutions and experts within the region. Currently, its main activities can be categorized in two ways: building and providing databases in the field of culture, and facilitating networks of experts and researchers.

Building and providing databases in the field of culture

APRCCN databases cover the following main areas:

1. Policy and law:

This includes international standard-setting instruments, such as conventions, recommendations and declarations by various international organizations including UNESCO, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the World Intellectual Property Association (WIPO), the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT) and the Council of Europe.

It also includes information on different policy measurements developed and implemented at the national level, including general policy background and specific laws in the field of culture.

2. Articles and research papers:

Various articles and research papers on important policy issues, including cultural diversity, cultural development, creative industries and cultural regeneration have been published. Materials of direct relevance to the Asia-Pacific region are included under the subtitle 'Within the Asia-Pacific Region', while others are categorized under the subtitle of 'Beyond the Asia-Pacific Region'. In addition, this section also offers a brief review of critically important articles and papers prepared by the APRCCN together with the original document files or links to other relevant resources.

3. On-going events and projects:

These refer to continual updates of information on cultural policy-related meetings, research projects and other events around the world with particular focus on the Asia-Pacific region. Covering areas ranging from the cultural diversity measures in different countries to the evolution of the cultural economy and changing patterns of creativity and artistic expression, the information is organized into the following five categories: cultural diversity, cultural regeneration, cultural industries, the UNESCO creative city network, and other issues.

These databases have been accumulated through the work of the APRCCN national focal points, volunteer researchers and the staff of APRCCN. In particular, the role of national focal points is very crucial, since they act as information collectors and sometimes as translators who research relevant papers and reports of events in their nation and send them to the APRCCN in English. New APRCCN young researchers from the Asia-Pacific region are also important actors in establishing databases for the APRCCN. As of 2009, nineteen focal points exist in the Asia-Pacific region, the number of which the APRCCN plans to continue to expand.² From the information collected, the APRCCN selects quality papers and articles to include in the quarterly APRCCN Newsletter. There are special sections called 'In Focus', which introduce cultural events or projects related to each issue's specific topic. The 'Voice in Culture' section features an interview with a scholar or expert in a specific area, such as cultural diversity and creative city networks. In addition, for the 'Contribution' section, experts and researchers can submit their papers related to cultural issues. The APRCCN national focal points have been actively participating in this section.

² These 19 focal points are located in Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Palau, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Maldives, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Croatia (headquarters). Details can be found at <http://www.culturelink.or.kr/about/fpoint.asp>

Facilitating networks of experts and researchers

Another major role of the APRCCN is networking among experts, officials and researchers in the Asia-Pacific.

The APRCCN has held regional cultural policy conferences since 1998. In the past, these regional cultural policy meetings were held mainly with a view to discussing the results of the Joint Study Projects. After an eight-year gap in the APRCCN regional conferences, the 4th Culturelink regional conference was organized in 2009 to develop new approaches for cultural policies to enhance regional cooperation, with new objectives of utilizing the APRCCN as an information provider and networking facilitator in the Asia-Pacific in the twenty-first century.³ Under the theme of ‘Cultural Development and Information Networks in the 21st Century’, scholars and experts in the field of cultural policy and development, and representatives of cultural institutions from beyond Asia-Pacific regions, such as the European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research and the Asia-Europe Foundation, were also invited to share knowledge and experiences of cultural networking.⁴

There have been two recent attempts by the APRCCN to extend its network and promote participation of various members and visitors. Making use of the benefits of the Internet in the twenty-first century, the APRCCN recently created a new online platform for members, where visitors can exchange ideas on various cultural topics. People can write a short article on the web board, ‘Cultural Forum’, to share their opinions to which other people can attach their feedback as a reply. Moreover, to increase the participation of young researchers in information sharing and idea exchange, the APRCCN has initiated the ‘APRCCN Young Researcher Programme’. By inviting young students from Asia-Pacific countries as short-term and long-term researchers, the APRCCN promotes active participation in the network while giving them a role in the gathering and providing of various viewpoints, ideas and information closely related to culture.

Challenges for networking of cultural organizations

Over the last decade, the Asia-Pacific region has rushed into the better stage of economic development, qualitatively and quantitatively, which inevitably demands a change of direction for cultural policies. In some nations, such as Korea, China and India, which have been achieving sustainable growth, cultural demands are remarkably increased, particularly among groups which have been

³ The 1st Conference was held in 1998, the 2nd in 2000 and the 3rd in 2001.

⁴ Details can be found at <http://www.culturelink.or.kr/announcement/index.asp>

long neglected as major cultural consumers, and their patterns are diversified in terms of creation and participation. Based on these changing circumstances, parts of Asia and the Pacific region are beginning to change their cultural policies in a productive way.

In Korea, a new large complex of the National Museum was constructed and a series of actions has been taken to promote the cultural and educational functions of 230 local cultural centres throughout the country. Also, the very difficult decision was taken to transfer arts education from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Culture. In an effort to integrate cultural components into economic policy, a series of long-term strategies for the promotion of cultural industries has been strongly implemented for the past ten years. With the initiative of the central government, several local autonomous governments have begun to promote digital industry as one of their major objectives by setting up digital content promotion institutions.

Furthermore, it seems to be a landmark in the history of Korean cultural policy that 'the minimum 1% culture budget principle' of the total government expenditure became true. In addition, views on cultural policy have slowly changed. It is no longer a weak power within the entire government system. It is now recognized as a central value for national development, social cohesion, creativity and democracy. For a long time, officials had been very reluctant to work in the domain of cultural policy. However, the situation has been reversed in recent times. The Ministry of Culture is regarded by new and young officials as the top favourite government agency to start their professional and bureaucratic career. These changes were never expected. Also, as in the other countries in the region, Korean society has enjoyed an explosion of culture and arts. NGOs in the process of political democracy and the increasing participation of civil society in cultural policy are nowadays becoming popular. In the midst of changes in cultural policy, the government worked together with a couple of NGOs to promulgate 'the Culture Charter', highlighting the respect of cultural rights, cultural diversity and multiculturalism.

The change in Korea's cultural policy is just one of the examples occurring in Asia and the Pacific region. There are many examples in the region of foundations being laid for new directions in cultural policy in the changing society at national and regional levels. In Asia and the Pacific region, many remarkable achievements have been made in cultural cooperation. Regardless of the types of cooperation, the number of cultural exchanges and cooperative effort is continually increasing more than ever. In the 1970s to 1990s, UNESCO played a major role in promoting the exchange of different ideas and experiences

among policy makers and cultural workers. However, since the 1990s, other intergovernmental organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), took their place to ensure cultural exchanges among nations by implementing research, meetings, cultural events, training and funding. ASEAN+3 (Korea, China, Australia) has been gradually expanding its cooperative programmes in the field of culture, and ASEM has integrated many cultural activities in its main agenda.

In particular, the arts markets in Asia and the Pacific region steadily expanded hosting many international arts festivals, ranging from cinema, art and drama, to folklore. There is a strong tendency in the region to reinforce the relations and cooperation among arts institutions, arts education, digital industry and others. These trends have been increasingly activated by the surge of information culture in the region.

In short, cultural cooperation in the region is now in full and rapid expansion and is being recognized as an important pillar of cultural policies. And it is time not only to strengthen the networking infrastructure among cultural and artistic institutions, but also to seek to establish some new forms of networking.

However, negative aspects of the cultural policies in the region in terms of targeting cultural policies and their implementation also need to be mentioned. Many countries are still facing numerous challenges along the way, especially regarding the accommodation of globalization in their cultural policies and the integration of culture in the socio-economic development at local and national levels. In Japan, the competitive system was introduced to national cultural institutions, such as museums and cultural heritage institutions, which until then had been under the full responsibility of the central government in terms of legal and financial support. This decision demands that they find ways to survive in a more competitive situation and at the same time fulfil their missions in more productive and efficient ways. If Japan's case yields some results, it may be followed by other countries, thus offering a new challenge to cultural workers and artists.

From the analysis of current trends in Asia and the Pacific region, we realized that an increased amount of information and research materials need to be provided on major issues in the future. This should be done in more cooperative ways, applying ICT more than before. It must be pointed out that the digital divide is widening. This is obvious from figures showing that at the end of 2008 the developed countries accounted, for example, for about 70% of Internet access, while the developing countries accounted for a mere 22%. This quantitative difference deepens inequalities worldwide and exacerbates information asymmetries, placing the vast majority of humanity at an

enormous disadvantage. The APRCCN needs to develop its networking system in order to narrow the digital gap by supplying ample information both on- and offline regarding the role of culture in development at local and national levels; multiculturalism; cultural rights; the scientific approach towards cultural policies; culture and arts education; training on arts and cultural management; cultural industry, including handicrafts; the preservation and utilization of heritage resources, including intangible heritage and cultural surroundings; and cultural financing.

A new form of identity could be created through joint endeavour. So many achievements would not have been possible if people had not successfully moved beyond the conflicts that generally arise in hierarchical organizations through their involvement in common projects. This is the essential foundation on which all networks in the region, including the APRCCN, should operate. Networks are useful instruments for cultural workers to create new ideas for development. It is with this firm belief that the APRCCN will continuously contribute to connecting the people of the world through the Culturelink Network.

Link

APRCCN web: www.culturelink.or.kr