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## Archaeology in the International Cultural Strategies of South Korea

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### Abstract

The essay approaches the particular topic of the reemerging importance of archaeology in the global relations. It examines this contemporary trend in the particular national context of the Republic of Korea, which is more than illustrative because of the specific developments in both archaeology and the international cultural strategy of the country. While it focuses on important analyses of the compatibility of the two phenomena in the Korean national context, the essay provides some profound conclusions and recommendations that are universal and implementable in different national realities.

**Keywords:** archaeology; international cultural strategies; impressions; nation branding.

### 1. Introduction

The archaeology has made a new dramatic entrance into the global politics. Every next day we are amazed by a new foreign policy effort of some country to maintain, improve, transform or moderate its image through the archaeological exhibitions, cosponsored archaeological departments focused on particular geographical regions or ancient cultures, educational programs, documentaries or touristic offers that promote amassing archaeological sites [1].

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In the new global reality in which the “age of information with the superiority of capital, technology and knowledge has changed to the age of sensitivity” with the importance of culture [2: 10], the cultural and identity symbols, narratives and material provided by archaeology and the archaeologists have again become key for successful relations with the neighbours and the world. These highly sensitive, emotional and irrational aspects of our minds are becoming increasingly important elements of the social cohesion of the societies and the global dialogue of individuals, nations, economies, organizations and corporations.

In this context, the analyses of the particular development of the archaeology and international cultural strategies of one of the most particular national contexts in Asia makes an effort to clarify some of the main dimensions, specifics and complexities of this novel global dynamic.

This essay represents an analysis of the relations of archaeology and archaeological material with the sphere of political and societal in the particular national context of South Korea. It introduces a particularly interdisciplinary oriented approach, taking into account some of the novel tendencies and scientific analyses in the fields of archaeology, history, IR, diplomacy, political science and studies of nationalism. Yet, it takes a concrete and narrow focus, challenging these new scientific ideas on the relation of archeology in South Korea, with a particularly important aspect of the cultural living in a globalizing world, the international cultural strategies of the country.

## **2. Methods and Interdisciplinary Approaches**

This study is focused on a concrete case-study, Republic of Korea (RoK), chosen as very particular and illustrative example for the development of international cultural strategies and archaeology. It chooses the path of separate focused analyses of the development of the two specific phenomena of interest in this particular national context, in order to be able to competently investigate their compatibility and the positive and negative impact of their complex contemporary interaction. The scientific approach is multidisciplinary and while the study is focused on the particular national context it provides some universal conclusions and recommendations. The main method of the research is a review of the appropriate policies and literature, while some statistics and secondary data were used and analyzed only in the context of particular clarifications and conclusion. While the particular focus was maintained on one national context some comparative analyses were also conducted in order to give a more objective picture of the Korean model in the contemporary global context.

### ***2.1 Limitations of the study***

While this essay takes into consideration wide range of policies and literature, its main sources are limited to documents written and analyses presented in English. Thus while it makes an effort to analyze both local and non-local views on the subject, the main perspective might still be associated with Western view on an “Eastern” development.

In this context, the main limitation of this study might be connected with the fact that the author is able to approach only documents and analyses written, transmitted or presented in English language. In this context, while the analyses of this essay involve extensively the perspective of local policy makers and academics, their

context, structuring and some of the main assumptions might still be connected to the western perspectives on Republic of Korea, North East Asia, cultural diplomacy or archaeology.

Therefore, this multidisciplinary and novel study of the complex interaction of international cultural strategies of South Korea and the archaeology in this North-east Asian country might still have the constraint of limited knowledge of the wider national dynamics. Yet, its international perspective unburdened by any local bias represents an added value to the novel approach of seeing archaeology as active factor in creating perceptions and influencing relations among countries and nations in the contemporary globalizing world.

While this essay opens widely an unique research niche for both Korean and international researchers, the future of this potential scientific focus lays in the common efforts of these two interested group.

### **3. Results**

In the last few decades, many countries with minor experience or less significant traditions in the field of cultural diplomacy and international cultural strategies have decided to initiate projects and programs in this specific field. Many of them have invested heavily in such and common foreign policy strategies and some have already felt the benefits from such approach.

While the traditional powers have superior infrastructure, the newcomers are more creative, innovative and effective at concrete diplomatic undertakings, bringing fresh ideas and approaches that invigorate the whole spectrum of global creative exchange.

The case-study of the international cultural strategies of the Republic of Korea represents an excellent example of such development. The results of the research of its policies in this field underline the possibilities, but also the liabilities and challenges that many medium-sized democracies are facing with during the last decades.

#### **3.1 *Transforming the Economic into Cultural Content***

Republic of Korea, by many of its performances, represents one of the most competitive players in the contemporary global relations. This country, that managed to mount to thirteenth place on the world list of economic powers through its rapid economic and social development, has undoubtedly chosen the “cultural approach” as a central strategy for projecting its new position in the global relations [10].

But this was not always the case. Today the wider global public is dominantly unaware of the fact that this modern and prosperous society was developed in the decades after the Second World War from the part of the Korean peninsula that was less developed than the territory of the nowadays isolated and backward North Korea [3: 3-4]. In only few decades, the global geopolitical reality and the successes of the South Korean economy transformed drastically this society.

Among of the leading elements of this transformation process were the internationally successful and well known (South) Korean companies. At the same time with their significant contribution to the national economy

and the welfare of the South Koreans, these companies' indigenous corporate brand development have played leading role in the process of improving the overall image of the country in the world. This was more than desirable development for South Korea, as county whose image was previously mostly associated, and continuously burdened, by the negative reflections of its troubled relations with the neighbor and brother-nation on the north [11].

Through time, the successful corporate brands of companies like Hyundai, Samsung and LG Electronics, and other prominent Korean businesses, especially in the field of Information Technology, have won over the negative political perceptions [11]. In addition, these appealing and positive brands have become the dominant image of the country, shaping the perceptions and understandings that other nations and people have about South Korea [11].

Thus, for example, the research, published by KOTRA, which analyzes the "impressions of Korea" in the international audience in 70 countries, confirms that already in 2004 the "north-south division" is the first thought connected to Korea for a minority of this audience, consisted of less than 30 percent. On the other hand, the vast majority of this relevant international audience has shown much more positive and less burdened first impressions for Korea, connecting the country to issues like: "economic development", "IT", sports or international events [2].

Encouraged by these positive image developments, the Seoul authorities were riding the wave of the economic boost for a longer period. Their understanding was that the modern presentation as society of innovative electronic products and cutting edge technologies is a much more powerful image weapon than any of the indigenous and unique traditions of the "fifty centuries old Korean culture" [4]. In other words, the contemporary trends with focus on Information technology were in the focus of the presentation campaigns of the country, rather than the overall cultural tradition, potential and uniqueness of the country.

Yet, on this new stage of development, when the Tiger wants to stabilize and maintain its positions in global relations, its government has comprehended the needs to unlock the whole capacity and the diverse spectrum of soft power [10]. The key component of this endeavor of the Seoul authorities is the international cultural strategy. In this field, as well, South Korea has developed an inventive approach that builds on the potentials, strength and existing infrastructure of the Korean brand strategies. According to the South Korean experts, the pathway to the next steps is in the potential of the 'cultural technology' [10].

Thus, the country so famous for its Information Technology capacities is prepared to leap in the next stage. South Koreans believe that this new concept, called 'cultural technology', is the "final stop in value-added technology that will continue to influence global markets in the years to come" [10].

This means that the technologically advanced South Korean society will make an attempt to engrave its cultural traditions and messages into the main streams of the global communication, thus striving for soft power and long-lasting influence in the global relations.

Furthermore, the Koreans have unlocked the capacities of the creative industries, and they expect to benefit

substantially from this undertake. Thus Kim Joon-han [10], one of the most influential shapers of South Korean policies in the field, would say: “When we were a developing country, we made our living through manufacture. Now we have to move on and live by the culture industry” [10].

At last, the time has come for the Asian Tiger, South Korea, to step into the serious game of the global cultural competition. This new dynamics of the South Korean international cultural presence may be easily perceived by the change of the main national promotional slogan by the Korean Cultural and Information Service. Thus, the yesterdays “Korea - Country of the Morning Calm” has transformed overnight into the “Dynamic Korea” [12], switching dramatically its course towards proactive foreign cultural strategies. This shows undoubtedly that the economic giant number 13 has entered into a dynamic cultural diplomacy phase.

These developments are supported additionally with some traditional and stable institutional infrastructure, but also with creative and novel approaches that make the Korean strategies particularly interesting. Traditional players in the public diplomacy of the country like the foreign ministry, the ministry of defense and Korea foundation have already gained stronger cultural focus [5][6]. Additionally, the modern and proactive governmental agent, the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOIS), has launched its new communication strategy, focused on the Government's official English-language homepage, [www.korea.net](http://www.korea.net) [12], and other diverse initiatives, based on the creativeness and cultural inputs of the South Korean society [12].

Finally, the South Koreans have already created their own independent agent of cultural diplomacy, the Korea Culture & Contents Agency (Kocca) [12], set up to promote ‘Korean cultural content’ abroad, following the examples of Alliance Française and the British Council [12].

The real issue triggered by such global and national development is: What really is that “Korean cultural content” and how complex is it to utilize culture and identity linked phenomena into the pragmatic foreign policy of this dynamic international player?

### ***3.2 The typical culture content***

While the efficient and highly professional (South) Korean institutions are pushing for new campaign and branding efforts, like: “Dynamic Korea”, “Premium Korea”, “Sparkling Korea”, or culturally focused campaign the “Hun Style” [2: 24-25], and the “Korean Wave” is becoming viral globally [6], the global awareness for the Republic of Korea remains comparatively very low and unstable [2: 23-24]. One aspect of this problem was located by the researchers in the fact that, while Koreans have clear and atypically coherent view of their culture, roots, language and ethnicity [9], the international audience is unaware of the “typical country image” of Republic of Korea [2: 24]. Even more, important segments of the international public, and especially the western audiences, still consider Korea and the Koreans as less authentic “culture of secondary importance” in Northeast Asia, frequently representing them as an off-shoot of China or Japan [3: 4-5].

Thus, in the new global reality in which the “age of information with the superiority of capital, technology and knowledge has changed to the age of sensitivity” with the importance of culture [2: 10], the century old issues of ethnic and cultural identities, mythologized roots and proves of heritage and ownership have gained new

existential importance for the Korean society as for many others.

This is the new context in which the archaeology is gaining importance in the international cultural strategies of the Republic of Korea and numerous other states. Thus, many less informed researchers with dominantly western focus of interest are surprised by the active role that archaeology plays today in the identity and political relations of Northeast Asia. Traditionally perceived as European phenomena, the close link between archaeology and nationalism was exported to this part of the world to become even more eminent factor in the relations among the Northeast Asian nations [4: 4].

Therefore, the main question in the context of the relations between archaeology and diplomacy of Korea is not if archaeology is connected or influencing Korean foreign policies. The real question of interest is what are the performances of the (South) Korean archaeology and if they have capacities to substantially support some of the international cultural strategies and goals of the country. In this context, before trying to analyze the specific possibilities and liabilities for Republic of Korea in case it decides to follow the wider trend of utilization of archaeology in the international cultural strategies, we have to evaluate some of the main characteristics and potentials of this national archaeology.

### ***3.3 The archaeology of South Korea***

One of the main characteristics of the Korean archaeology is that, in contrast to some contemporary developments on global level, it remains primarily focused on its clearly stated goal to provide evidence for the national identity of Korea and the Koreans. In the words of Korean archaeology experts the main goals of this scientific discipline in Republic of Korea are: “(1) to uncover buried material culture, (2) to identify the origins of Korean culture, and (3) to define the past territorial limits of the Korean cultural sphere”. In this context, many foreign researchers have found the focus of the Korean archaeology on the “ultimate and explicit motive” to search for the “origins of Korean ethnic identity” narrow, unbalanced, biased or inadequate for the contemporary global scientific development [4: 2]. Yet, the most striking characteristic of the Korean archaeology is the attempt through its work and findings to transfer the Korean present “cultural homogeneity” through time, portraying different archaeological cultures and findings as presence of the “supposedly unified Korean people which existed from time immemorial [7: 46].

This main characteristic of this national archaeology was predetermined by its roots, by it also determined its’ development and represents main strength and liability for its societal status and capacities today. While the international scientific community has been generally uninvolved and dominantly ignorant to the Korean archaeology [4: 24], in the last decades we can see a growing number of international analyses and overviews on its achievements and professional development [3]. In this context, we will underline just some of the main characteristics of this national archaeology in order to analyze their compatibility and usefulness for the foreign policy strategies of the Republic of Korea.

First, the Korean archaeology is built upon the infrastructure of the Japanese colonial archaeology, and it has built its main focuses and hypotheses in relation and as direct answer to those of the Japanese archaeologists [7:

37]. In the decades after the Japanese rule, Republic of Korea built its archaeology upon the institutions, legislative and other traditions inherited from the Japanese, while its archaeologists were fiercely fighting for the authentic place, achievements and contributions of Korea in the wider historical and cultural developments in Northeast Asia. Thus, this nationalistic orientation of the newly developing archaeology of Korea was a direct reaction to the decades-long effort of the Japanese to utilize the archaeology in presenting Korea as integral part of Japanese nation, culture and history, and Koreans as “inferior” and “backward” members of the Japanese “race” [7: 40-41] [8].

Second, the development of the archaeology of South Korea was additionally burdened by the postwar developments that have ideologically, militarily and administrative torn the Korean cultural sphere. The hostilities between the two Koreas, the isolationist policies and the totalitarian system of the North, as well as the constant ideological war for the primacy in the future unification of the nation, had their impact in the scientific focuses and debates in archaeology. The traces of such political background may be traced in numerous layers of the Korean archaeology. They range from search for archaeological traces and explanations for social and economic differences of the two territories in antiquity, through different focuses on ancient and medieval cultures represented as prime holders of the Korean tradition, to the effort of the South Korean archaeologists to present themselves in front of the international academia as critical and less nationalistically biased scientists in contrast to their less advanced northern colleagues [4: 10-20].

Third, the archaeologists of South Korea can be proud of their achievements, from the development of institutions, rapidly increasing number of active archaeological sites in the country, their influence on the creation of national policies, to the development and implementation of new technologies and methodologies. Most importantly, in the South Korean national context, the work of the Korean archaeologists in the last decades gave many arguments for the authentic and rich archaeological and cultural material of Korea, which deserves a separate focus and remains inevitable aspect of any future analyses on the historical and cultural developments in Northeast Asia.

Yet, Korean archaeologists, proud of the authentic and independent development of their national archaeology are at least partly responsible for the limited interest and involvement of the global archaeological community in Korea. While their fierce patriotism and nationalistic enthusiasm supported parts of their pioneer work and lead to important discoveries on Korean soil, these same characteristics represent a visible liability for the Korean archaeology and cultural strategies in the new millennium. Many critics would agree that the “Xenophobia, patriotic sentiments, and competing political agendas pose the greatest barrier to an objective and analytical study of Korean archaeology and ancient history today” [4: 24]. At the same time, this context limits the capacities of Korean archaeology as important avenue of wider cultural exchange and promising image making factor of the country.

Finally, the newest developments in the Republic of Korea archaeology and politics have shed different lights on the capacities and possibilities of this relation in the future. The new globalizing reality, that is constantly changing the picture of Korea as culturally and ethnically homogeneous society, has opened widely the public discourse towards the subjects of immigration and multiculturalism. The South Korean authorities have

supported both morally and financially this new process in the Korean society so extensively, that they were even accused from critical observers for “state-sponsored” and “government led multiculturalism”. In this new context, the archaeology, with its important influence over Korean identity, has its say as well. The extensive archaeological research that speaks of the continuous migratory and immigration processes in the Korean peninsula, as well as constant cultural, political and identity transformations, tell an important story of the short lived nature of the sense of ethnic homogeneity. Thus, it provides crucial and important arguments for the new transformation waves in this dynamic society [9].

At the same time, the politically heated archaeological debates with the ever stronger China recently brought a new reality, where the archaeologists from the South and the North work together in the archaeological debate with large diplomatic, political and ethnic consequences. Thus, the archaeologists of the two political entities on the peninsula that were defending for many years the Korean identity and culture isolated in their ideological and political frames, might transform into forerunners of the wider cultural and scientific exchange and cooperation that might eventually realize the national dream of unification [4].

#### **4. Conclusions**

Known as the “Hermit Nation” at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, occupied, torn apart by war, poverty and geopolitical games in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Republic of Korea enters the new millennium as one of the most vibrant societies and one of the most competitive players in the global relations.

This country has built an excellent infrastructure for the development of its international cultural strategies, branding endeavors and wider accumulation of soft power. Developing the specific concept of “cultural technology”, the country has effectively utilized its resources and knowhow in Information technology to present its cultural traditions and messages into the main streams of the global communication.

Yet, the strong competition in its region and on global level has pushed South Korea in the direction of unleashing the wider potential of cultural diplomacy, including the new emerging trends of utilization of the sensitive field of culture and identities.

This development has given new weight to archaeology and archaeologically linked cultural material in the international cultural strategy of the country. Yet, while the Korean archaeology has become one of the core scientific areas in the building of the national myths and identity, one of its important characteristics is its relative isolation from the global archaeological community.

In this context, reaching towards archaeology in the new endeavors for nation branding and promotional strategies is an expected move for South Korea. It reflects the global trends, answers to the common tendencies and excellent policies of some of its main competitors in the region and wider, like China and Japan, and makes an effort to transform the sensitivity, energy and national mythology into a meaningful and profound cultural exchange.

However, in order to grow as scientific and societal field of work as well as a medium for cultural exchange, the



“Korean archaeology” has to make a leap from the dominant traditions of its professional history and contemporary identity. If it remains wedged to its stereotyped image of “hermit” national archaeology with “invasion neurosis”, the Korean archaeology will miss the great opportunities for growth through the powerful global scientific dialogue and become useless “Achilles heel” of the Korean presentation and cultural diplomacy efforts.

On the other hand, the archaeology of South Korea has made some important scientific breakthroughs, which enrich the cultural heritage of the country, but also provide meaningful knowledge of the wider historical and cultural developments and dynamics in this part of the world. Once the Korean archaeology opens to the world it will provide great opportunity for the developed infrastructure of this dynamic country to integrate it thoughtfully in the wider cultural dialogue that places all nations and society on to global map today.

Finally, Republic of Korea is a nation that exceeds many others with its fast pace of transformations and agility. Therefore, if its archaeology is to help the country image and foreign policy it has to follow that national pattern as well. Once it has done that, the Korean archaeology will have the unique capacities to provide the desired equal footing for Korea as one of the three “great cultures” of Northeast Asia.

#### ***4.1 Recommendations***

Bearing in mind the above analyses, as well as the presented general conclusions and opened questions, this study would not be complete without few concrete policy recommendations for the future international cultural strategies of South Korea. The following recommendations might be useful steps if the South Korean government decides that archaeology might be one of the meaningful focuses of the longer-term international and branding strategies.

- Inviting more international scholars of archaeology and related disciplines to acquire important positions and meaningful responsibilities in the archaeological departments of South Korean universities will certainly strengthen the Korean science and archaeology. At the same time, it will increase the credibility and visibility of the approaches, results and focuses of this “national archaeology”. Finally, it will open new avenues for scientific, but also wider cultural exchange and create a strong pool of lobbyists for the Korean viewpoints of both past and present.

- The government should also support meaningfully and consistently the international involvement in the most representative Korean archaeological projects and archaeological sites. In other national contexts this approach has already shown results in attracting wider interest of the international publics, varying from archaeology students eager for international and intercultural experience to different groups of business visitors or tourists.

- The Korean government, or any government that decides to focus its efforts in this direction, has to integrate a separate and visible archaeological focus in the overall branding and cultural diplomacy efforts of the country. Following the main principle of branding and nation branding, the archaeologically related activities of the wider strategies have to be well defined, organized, and have an overall aim separated, but closely connected to the aims of the overall nation branding. Thus, for example the “British heritage” represents one of the five main

pillars of the self-image of the United Kingdom defined in 1999 [13: 52].

- In the process of implementing such strategies the government has to empower the archaeologists, themselves. This empowerment should go vertically, from strengthening and focus on the support of international exchanges and presentations of the archaeologists and archaeological departments to involvement of archaeologists in the bodies that profile and implement the wider strategy, like Korea Foundation or the Prime Minister's Korea Image Committee.

- Setting up and supporting Korean or Korean heritage departments or divisions of foreign universities and well-known museums is a strategy that promises high visibility and "comprehensive and synergistic effects" [2: 61, 62]. Yet, it requires serious and consistent investment in upgrading and fulfilling the collections of artefacts in such institutions, publishing and promotion of appropriate professional books, and wide coordination of the public promotion of such complex cooperative effort [2: 61, 62].

- Finally, the nation-branding strategists of South Korea, in cooperation with Korean and possibly also international archaeologists, might find it useful to locate and articulate few main, or potentially only one, archaeological focuses, like site, group of sites of a limited geography or period, group of representative archaeological artefacts or findings that through appropriate PR and branding strategies might be transformed into important and evocative image markers of the country.

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