Article: Challenges for establishing a code of ethics in Korea: Dilemmas of a late runner
Author(s): Sujeong Lee
Source: Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Eighteen, 2011
Pages: 91-98
Compilers: Sanchita Balachandran, Christine Del Re, and Carolyn Riccardelli
www.conservation-us.org

Under a licensing agreement, individual authors retain copyright to their work and extend publications rights to the American Institute for Conservation.

Objects Specialty Group Postprints is published annually by the Objects Specialty Group (OSG) of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC). A membership benefit of the Objects Specialty Group, Objects Specialty Group Postprints is mainly comprised of papers presented at OSG sessions at AIC Annual Meetings and is intended to inform and educate conservation-related disciplines.

Papers presented in Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Eighteen, 2011 have been edited for clarity and content but have not undergone a formal process of peer review. This publication is primarily intended for the members of the Objects Specialty Group of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein rests solely with the authors, whose articles should not be considered official statements of the OSG or the AIC. The OSG is an approved division of the AIC but does not necessarily represent the AIC policy or opinions.
CHALLENGES FOR ESTABLISHING A CODE OF ETHICS IN KOREA: DILEMMAS OF A LATE RUNNER

SUJEONG LEE

ABSTRACT

Formalized conservation ethics have been absent in Korea for the last sixty years since modern concepts of conservation emerged in Korea. Korea’s long history in the 20th century of experiencing the Japanese colonial period (1910 ~ 1945) and the Korean War (1950 ~ 1953) has not allowed conservators to concentrate on the matters of philosophical reasoning - of why and how they preserve heritage - but demanded the reconstruction of destroyed monuments and damaged objects so as to recover national identity. Such approaches have encouraged conservators to focus on the development of conservation techniques and scientific analysis of materials, leaving conservation principles and ethical guidelines hardly explored and developed. Conservation treatment has been understood as a static and mechanical practice to follow a certain set of internationally well-known techniques rather than as a flexible social process to necessitate logical thinking and rational decision-making.

Establishing a code of ethics in Korea, as a guiding post for conservators to take a logical process for rational decision-making, has never been considered until a few pioneers stressed the importance of introducing a code of ethics to the field over the last several years through formal and informal talks (Yonghan Kim, pers. comm. December 3, 2009; Pilseung Yang, pers. comm. April 8, 2010; Yang 2011). In 2010, their input encouraged the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (NRICH) of Korea to provide a small government-given budget to initiate preliminary research into examining various sets of codes of ethics and professional guidelines by various institutes such as American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), Australian Institute for Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM), European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers’ Organisations (ECCO), and etc. Two volumes of the report on the research outcome were published with the translated code of ethics of various institutes and distributed to conservators and libraries in 2011 (NRICH 2011). The three-year project will be completed with the announcement of Korean Conservation Code of Ethics at the end of 2012.

During the first meeting of a research advisory committee composed of professors, and conservators from museum and private companies, two challenging problems were addressed: 1. The lack of recognition among conservators and policy makers about the significance of establishing conservation ethics; and 2. The concern of conservators who understand a code of ethics to be a legal enforcement to restrain their practice. Even NRICH staff had questioned the need for a code of ethics. In order to tackle these deep-rooted problems, NRICH has organized several seminars for museums, and their own NRICH staff. It has also organized an international symposium with well-known speakers from the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), Australian Institute for Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM), European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers’ Organisations (ECCO), Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), and Victoria and Albert (V & A) Museum, to attract public attention as well. The conference aimed to gather advice to set out a possible frame for a code of ethics to fit a Korean context.

This paper examines the problems and challenges in persuading and educating Korean conservators to understand what a code of ethics is, and why they need one in the course of their practice. It also explores the reasons why Korea was somewhat belated in setting out conservation ethics given her historical and social context. In addition, the paper introduces how NRICH has been tackling the challenges it came across during the 2010 preliminary research, such as a lack of legal recognition of the conservation profession, and problems related to the training and assessment criteria for professional competence. In delivering this paper at the AIC annual meeting, it was hoped that the paper would invite useful advice and allow others to share their experiences which could enlighten the NRICH process of conducting subsequent research. The ultimate goal of NRICH’s efforts was to introduce a draft of the code of ethics in 2011 and provide professional guidelines in 2012.

1. WHY IS A CODE OF ETHICS NEEDED IN KOREA?

1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For the last 60 years since its independence from Japanese rule, the Korean government has played a leading role in heritage management and conservation. The priority of the government was to recover national identity by re-discovering and listing various heritage
objects, and to repair any damaged objects to visually re-establish the dignity of the nation with material remains, which had been severely diminished during colonial rule. The government has implemented and applied acts and regulations such as Cultural Heritage Protection Act (1962), Traditional Temple Protection Act (1993), Historic City Preservation Act (2005), and Cultural Property Repair Act (2010), and managed conservation projects for nationally and locally valued heritage sites and objects. The budget for heritage activities has been steadily increased over time along with the economic growth and political stabilization of the country since the 1980s.

The Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA), which was under the Ministry of Culture, became an independent organization in 1999 enabling heritage related decision-making to be centralized, and its management to become more efficient. In order for the government to support heritage activities with academic foundations, NRICH was established in 1969 to conduct useful research projects for both the CHA and the public to manage and enjoy the benefit of the nation’s historical cultural material. NRICH opened the Cultural Heritage Conservation Science Center (CHCSC) in 2009 as a sub-institute of NRICH to focus on the conservation treatment of various materials. The centre is well-equipped with advanced equipment such as a multi-purpose high resolution X-ray diffractometer, a high temperature laser scanning microscope, an electron probe X-ray micro analyzer, a gas chromatography mass spectrometer system, etc., to analyze traditional materials and techniques in one place. While National Museums have looked after their collection since they took over the collection from the Japanese colonial government, NRICH and CHCSC have been involved all nationally designated movable and immovable heritage conservation which are not in the National Museum collection.

However, the aforementioned priority of the government to recover national identity previously led conservators to concentrate on the development of technical and scientific knowledge of an object. Theoretical aspects, such as why and what to conserve, and ethical principles of conserving heritage, have never been formally explored or examined for half a century. Due to the lack of attention to philosophical research, international ethical principles for conservators such as reversibility, minimum intervention, and assessing the use of traditional techniques and materials for conservation have not been adequately examined or questioned within a Korean context. Such international principles sometimes conflict with local practices, and therefore Korean ethical principles have been needed for conservators to reduce a gap between international principles and local practice and find a compatible approach to respect both.

1.2 LEGAL CONTEXT

Article 5 of the 2010 Cultural Property Repair Act (CPRA) states that all nationally and locally designated properties should be repaired and conserved by certificated conservators or a registered company. It also states that conservation of any designated object should be executed by a certificated skilled technician or a team of certificated skilled technicians. Certificated conservators have organized into two different categories: Skilled Technician and Technician. Specialties of the Skilled Technician are divided into 6 areas: 1. Building repair technician; 2. Painter of traditional patterns on the surface of timber building; 3. Surveyor and draftsman; 4. Landscape technician; 5. Conservation scientist; 6. Plant technician. The specialities ones of Technician are divided into 20 different areas including master carpenter, roof maker, carver, conservator, and etc. The “conservator” in the Technician category has two sub-specialties: fumigation technician and conservation treatment technician. The qualification criteria for
certifying a Skilled Technician and Technician are examined in two different ways: first, with a written exam followed by an interview for applicants who pass the exam. In the written test, applicants’ knowledge in the area of their specialty, and their understanding of Korean history and cultural heritage is evaluated. This interview examines an applicant’s ethical attitude and standards by asking questions on applicant’s decision-making in his previous practice. The interview panel is composed of professors, a senior officers of CHA or NRICH, and a member of Cultural Heritage Committee (an external advisory committee for CHA to advise on important matters of designation and conservation of cultural heritage). However there is no formalised way of assessing ethical level of an applicant or criteria for judging ethical qualifications, or any explanation of what ethical attitudes are when dealing with historical objects. This displays that even though an ethical attitude is believed as an important factor to become nationally certificated conservator, no one, even in the government-regulated assessment process of certifying an ethical conservator is aware of exactly how to assess this. Furthermore, it seems that no one knows what ethical attitudes exist in conservation because these were rarely discussed or formalized.

1.3 RECENT CHANGES TO THE HERITAGE FIELD

The increased public awareness of cultural heritage in recent years has brought a change in the government-led structure of conservation; the public has emerged to become an important body in making decisions and judging the quality of conservation. Such change demands that conservators provide logical rationales for applying certain conservation treatments. Particularly since conservators are using specific materials and techniques to preserve nationally valued heritage that is significant to the entire Korean public, establishing ethical guidelines for conservators is essential.

A recent case of public criticism of cracks which formed on the newly restored wooden tablet of the main gate of Gyeongbok Palace in 2010 is an example of this change. The completion of the newly made tablet engraved with the name of the restored gate was set to coincide with Korea’s anniversary of independence from the Japanese Colonial regime on August 15th. Several months after the completion ceremony took place, cracks were found on the surface of the tablet and subsequently reported in newspapers. The public questioned the government’s responsibility and work ethic of the engraver who had disregarded the necessary period of drying for raw timber, which was seen as the reason for the appearance of the new cracks.

The increased numbers of conservators in Korea in recent years is another change in the field, and also suggests a reason for establishing the ethical code or guidelines that can guide them to practice the best quality of conservation treatment. There are almost a thousand members of the Korean Society of Conservation Science for Cultural Heritage at present who are working both in public and private conservation institutes. Their attitudes vary from one conservator to another, and therefore it is necessary to have a set of ethical guidelines in place in order for them to pursue a high standard of practice and encourage them to gradually improve the standard and quality of their work. Establishing ethical guidelines will also encourage universities to create training modules in conservation ethics and rational decision-making; these have not previously been included in the academic curriculum.
2. ESTABLISHING THE CODE OF ETHICS: THE PROCESS

2.1 INTRODUCTION OF THE PROJECT

Recognising the problems of the absence of ethical guidelines, in 2010, NRICH launched a three-year project called ‘A preliminary research for establishing a code of ethics’. Although most codes of ethics such as AIC, AICCM and ECCO have been drafted and adopted by a non-governmental institute or an association of conservators, government-based NRICH decided to initiate the research on conservation ethics and to take a leading role in introducing ethical guidelines for conservators. There is no conservators association in Korea and most conservation-related institutes or organizations work on the projects related specifically to conservation science or treatment. Furthermore, any research projects which do not directly bring monetary income have been mostly dependent on the Korean government’s involvement and support.

The Code of Ethics project aims at producing a draft ‘code of ethics’ that can be practically helpful and usable in the daily practices of conservators. The structure of the three-year project has been split into three stages: Stage 1. For the year 2010: understanding of the code of ethics and guidelines of various countries and organisations worldwide; Stage 2. For the year 2011: gathering various opinions and professional advice from a wide range of conservators who work for both, public and private institutes within Korea, and considering what aspects should be carefully considered in drafting the Korean Code of ethics; Stage 3. For the year 2012: drafting the code of ethics and consulting with Korean conservators before its final announcement.

2.2 OUTCOME IN 2010

During the first year of the project, NRICH had focused on the understanding and examination of available codes of ethics including AIC, ECCO, AICCM, and others. At the beginning of the year, the research team had the unexpected opportunity to use existing funds to organise an international conference. Because it was hosting a conference about an unknown subject—conservation ethics and principles—the NRICH research team carefully selected speakers and organized arrangements. It was essential to contribute to the best quality of the project by effectively organizing the conference so that it would be a useful opportunity to present the breadth of international codes and ‘propagate’ the importance of establishing the code among Korean conservators. Fortunately, nine presenters with experience in establishing and revising code of ethics or conservation principles in AIC, ECCO, AICCM, V&A Museum, INTACH, ICOMOS China, and Nara Research Institute of Cultural Heritage of Japan were able to attend.

Under the title ‘Conservation ethics for rational decision making: the dialogue between east and west’, invited speakers from AIC, ECCO, AICCM, England, India, China, and so on discussed similar and contrasting experiences of establishing a code of ethics. One of the common understandings derived from various attitudes towards establishing codes displayed in the presentations was that ethical codes should reflect local contexts; therefore, Korean conservators began to understand that the code of ethics should be compatible with the local practice and that is the reason why local codes should be laid out. Such recognition was important progress in Korea, where there was no consensus on the need of a code of ethics among conservators until this stage.
The conference attracted significant attention from professional conservators, related professions, students, and general public and was a tremendous success. About 350 attendees were present at the conference, and a thousand copies of the conference proceedings were distributed during and after the conference, thus publicizing the importance of and the need for a code of ethics within a local context to Korean conservators.

2.3 ON-GOING PROCESS IN 2011 AND FUTURE PLAN

Entering into the second year of the project, the research team has been working closely with Korean conservators to develop ideas on applicable ethical guidelines that are compatible with local practices. In 2011, an advisory committee of five members from a university, a museum and a conservation company was created to provide guidance on the overall process of collecting and analyzing Korean conservators’ ideas and opinions.

Two meetings for internal staff of NRICH in the first half of the year have provided ideas on what aspects should be considered in setting out ethical codes in Korea. Conservators of NRICH have contributed their opinions and suggestions and discussed dilemmas they face in their daily practices.

In the second half of the year, the research team will organize two or three more meetings with internal staff, as well as one seminar for external conservators of museums, conservation companies, and private practices. During such a process, the advisory committee will continue to play an important role in directing the project. The research outcome in 2010-2011 will be published as a preliminary report of the two-year research on the international code of ethics and domestic framework.

The third year of the project, in 2012, will involve drafting the code of ethics that will then be circulated to conservators for review and comments. This stage should be carefully designed in terms of working on the dissemination of the code and implementing it into actual practice. First, several seminars and discussion meetings will be organized for NRICH conservators to educate conservators and related professionals on ‘why’ and ‘how’ to apply the code to their actual practice. At this stage, members from several non-governmental organizations, such as the National Association of Repair Technicians and the Korean Society of Conservation Science for Cultural Heritage, will be invited to review a draft and to provide feedback before its announcement. Second, a booklet with detailed explanations of the guidelines on how to use the ethical code in actual practice will be published.

3. ESTABLISHING CODE OF ETHICS: PROBLEMS AND DILEMMAS

The problems encountered during seminars and advisory committee meetings can be summarized with two points. First, conservators are afraid of having ethical guidelines, and second, conservators are very reluctant to talk about ethical guidelines. The reasons for these suppositions are explained below.

First, many conservators are skeptical about having the codes on the basis of misunderstanding existing codes. They believe that the code will ‘handcuff’ their freedom and authority to make a decision as an expert. Such misunderstandings have been formed by the idea that ethical codes or guidelines would provide absolute direction, rather than procedural principles of making a decision. Therefore, one important point to make conservators understand during future meetings is that the code is a self-regulated indicator, allowing conservators to ask...
necessary questions of themselves when they need to make decisions, and is expected to help
them to think logically in the process of decision-making.

Second, Koreans tend to avoid discussing ethical issues, because discussing ethical
guidelines can be a sensitive matter. Therefore, the first seminar intended to remove prejudices
about conservation ethics from conservator’s perception by providing examples of the useful
cases of having ethical code. Texts from international ethical code have been displayed with
practical cases in parallel so that the seminar participants could re-consider the practical benefit
of having ethical guidelines in difficult decision-making process. Such prejudices have been
deeply rooted in their thoughts so the research team had to persuade conservators that the code is
not a tool to judge their practice as right or wrong, nor is it meant to criticize the quality of their
work.

In addition, given the expectations of Korean culture, young or junior conservators were
reluctant to offer their opinions in front of senior and experienced conservators. The research
team found that only seniors gave their opinions and juniors were very quiet during the first
seminar. Such behavior might have descended from Confucian traditions which respect aged and
experienced people and their opinions. Such attitude becomes more consolidated in discussions
about ethics. Although Confucianism is no longer a dominant philosophy in modern Korean
society, the tradition still exists in Koreans’ behavior in certain situations, and impacts the
conservation field. Therefore the research team had to tackle this problem creatively. Since
junior conservators respect their seniors’ ideas, it was essential for the research team to make
senior conservators recognize the importance of establishing the code of ethics and to have an
open mind on allowing junior conservators to freely talk about the subject. A series of seminars
and discussion has been arranged by different age groups so that peer groups can feel
comfortable to talk about their dilemmas and opinions without attendance with senior
conservators. The discussion was thereafter shared with all conservators so that they can be
informed what had been discussed.

4. CONCLUSION

In 2011, the project team focused on the exchange of ideas and opinions between conservators so
that they could gather practical information to set out structure of Korean Code of Ethics. The
research outcome of 2010 on the international code has been used as a reference to discuss a
possible structure to be fitted into Korean context. In addition, necessary sub-title and contents
have been discussed in the discussion so that the project team can have an overall idea of
drafting structure and contents of the Code in 2012. The research conducted in 2010-2011 has
been shared with conservators by publishing and disseminating two volumes of report with a full
Korean translation of code of ethics by AIC, AICCM, ECCO, Canadian Association for
Conservation of Cultural Property (CAC) and the Canadian Association of Professional
Conservators (CAPC), Canadian Association of Heritage Professional (CAHP), Dutch
Association of Professional Restorers (VeRes), and Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural
Heritage’s Charter for the conservation of unprotected architectural heritage and sites in India.
The project team plans to prepare a draft of Korean Code of Ethics and take a consultation
process with conservators, art historians, heritage administrators, and etc. Once the draft is
finalized, it will be announced, with a User’s Guide, at the end of 2012. The three-year project
for establishing a Korean code of ethics has been a very challenging project, and has been
perhaps a brave and bold project that has generated many barriers for the research team to
overcome. However the process of establishing the ethics code will surely contribute to opening a new chapter for Korean conservators as they enter into a new stage of improving the quality of their practice, and better preserving the nation’s heritage.

NOTES

1. They are: 1. Mr Yonghan Kim, a director of Cultural Heritage Conservation Science Center of Korea, an archaeologist; 2. Gyeongsoon Han, a professor of Kunkook University and a wallpainting conservator; 3. Pilseung Yang, a senior conservator of Seoul Municipal Museum.

2. Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA) is a ministry-level government organization to look after cultural heritage which has been separated from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. CHA has a research institute, called National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (NRICH), which mainly conducts various kinds of useful research projects which CHA uses for the management and conservation of cultural heritage. One of responsibilities of NRICH is to conduct conservation treatment for CHA so it has a sub-institute called Cultural Heritage Conservation Science Center (CHCSC), which mainly conduct conservation treatment for NRICH.

3. At present there is one central museum and eleven provincial museums, each of which has individual conservation labs for the collections with highly educated and trained conservators.


6. The Committee members were selected based on the reputation of their knowledge and interest on conservation ethics, such as a professor who teaches or mentions conservation ethics during his lecture, or who were trained in Italy and exposed to international code of ethics. Five members of the committee are: 1. Heasun Yu (National Museum of Korea, Senior Conservator); 2. Kijeong Jeong (Wuri Cultural Heritage Conservation, President); 3. Kyuho Kim (Kongju National University, Professor in material analysis); 4. Sunduk Kim (Seojin Cultural Heritage Conservation, President); 5. Gyeongsoon Han (Kunkuk University, Professor in mural painting)
REFERENCES


National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (NRICH), ed. 2010, _Conservation ethics for rational decision making: the dialogue between east and west_, Daejeon: NRICH.

National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (NRICH), ed. 2011, _Preliminary report for establishing ethical guidelines of conservation in Korea (Volume 1&2)_ Daejeon: NRICH. (note: this reference is in Korean)


SUJEONG LEE has been working as a researcher in the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (NRICH) of Korea since 2009. Her main research interests are history and theory of conservation. While she had studied Korean art history and wall painting conservation for her MA in Korea she participated in the conservation of several wall paintings in Bongjung and Shinheung temples. She attained her doctorate in the Department of Archaeology, Conservation Studies, at the University of York in England. The PhD thesis concerned the conservation of religious buildings in use, comparing the ways of assessing values and defining authenticity in conservation, taking the cases of English churches and Korean Buddhist temples. After her PhD, she worked part-time for York Civic Trust providing her professional advice regarding planning applications for listed buildings in York. Her present research projects include conservation ethics and conservation principles for establishing local principles which have been less studied in Korea. Address: National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage of Korea, 132 Munji-ro, Yuseong-gu, Daejeon, Korea, Postcode 305-380. Telephone: +82(0)428609349. E-mail: slee70@korea.kr or preservation30@yahoo.co.kr