

ILC2021 Europe and the Middle East: International Association of Arts and Culture for Peace

Yvo Bruffaerts
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Europe and the Middle East -- The International Association of Arts and Culture for Peace (IAACP) held a webinar as part of the 2021 International Leadership Conference.

"The Role of Culture in the Peaceful Reunification of the Korean Peninsula" was the title of the online conference held on April 30, 2021.

The speakers spoke from their own experience of the potential of culture to bridge the gap between North and South Korea – countries that, after all, share the same history and culture.



Moderator **Armando Lozano**, president of the Espacio Ronda Cultural Centre in Madrid, said that approaching the division on the Korean Peninsula with art is different from doing so with politics or economics. Culture and art, despite their great diversity, are freer, less competitive, and more universal, he said. People throughout history remember certain accomplishments made in art, architecture, music, with gratitude for their diversity without any sense of competition. Culture is a universal language that goes beyond the tensions and problems created by history and politics, he said.

Before each panelist spoke, their background and artistic work were shown in a short introductory video.

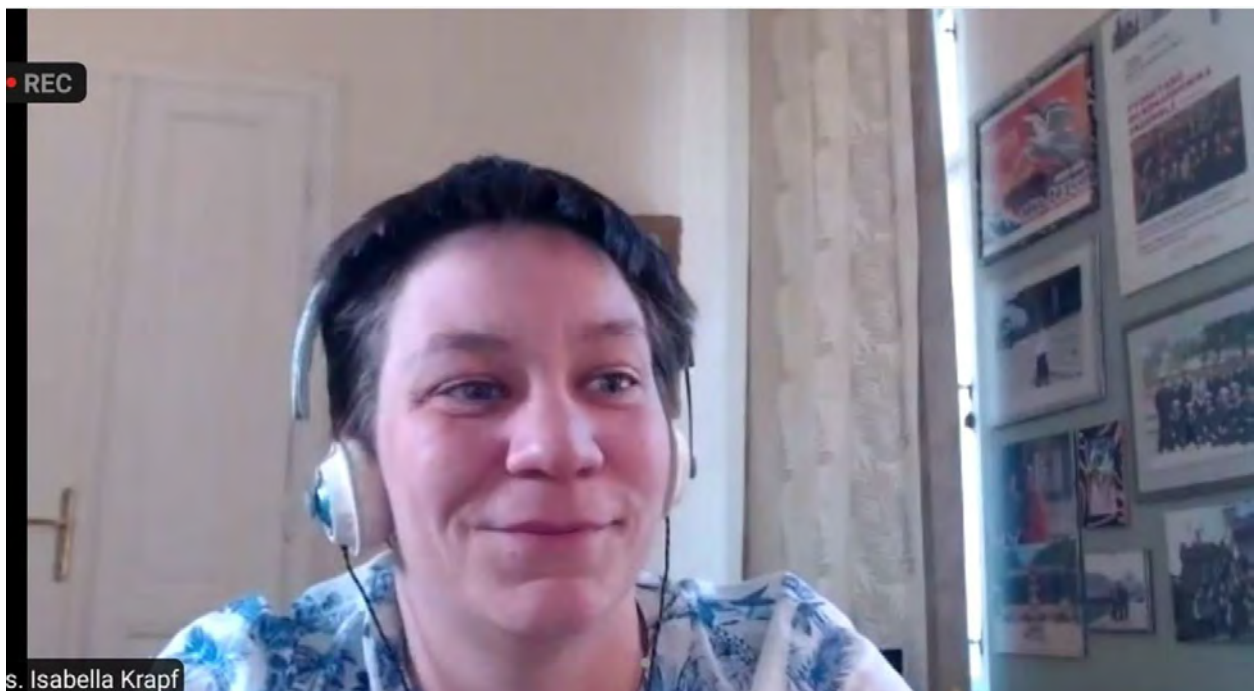
Dr. Antonio J. Doménech, an associate professor in East Asian and Korean studies at the University Of Malaga, Spain, spoke first. He lived for 10 years in South Korea, where he was studying the role of women in shamanism. His wife is Korean and is the director of a Korean theatrical company. Most important, he said, is to speak about *han* -- the feeling of suffering and pain experienced by older Koreans whose families were separated by their nation's division into North and South. *Han* has united many in an

attempt to overcome the division of a nation with one culture, one history, one language.

In 2000, **Dr. Doménech** witnessed the reunions of Korean families, giving them much hope for the reunification of North and South Korea. Moreover, both countries have the same myths and stories, he said. This common heritage is another tool, a starting point, on the way to unification.



Once back in Spain in 2002, Dr. **Doménech** set up various programs to allow Spaniards, as well as people in Latin America and Korea, especially young people, to know about the social situation in their countries. This knowledge, friendship and bridge-building among young people may contribute to the creation of bridges between South and North Korea.



Isabella Krapf, a musician and the vice president of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Association in Austria, spoke next. From 2011 to 2013 she worked as a teacher of music in a Pyongyang theater.

North Koreans are very proud of their old culture, the arts and music, Ms. Krapf said. Outside Pyongyang many well-preserved old temples can be found, and each has a monk responsible for its upkeep. Traditional dance, such as *sangmo*, has a prominent place in North Korean culture, on stage, in festivals, and indeed in the lives of people all over the country. For instance, the ladies cleaning her flat in Pyongyang were also opera singers. Painting, calligraphy, embroidery, and singing all help to keep the old culture alive. On the other hand, contemporary interest in styles and cultural influences from abroad is also very lively. Ms. Krapf said she played a lot of jazz with her students. She also mentioned a local school of painting, where one can have one's home painted in the style of Monet or another artist.

The North Korean students who come to Austria on an 18-month exchange program learn about Austrian culture, she said. Most important is to know how to approach North Koreans, how they feel about culture. Speaking Korean is essential. Ms. Krapf's project with North Koreans in Vienna does not always get good press coverage. Instead of bringing one-sided news, the press should see in culture the potential to contribute to a peaceful reunification on the Korean Peninsula.

Donations for the music project supported by Ms. Krapf can be [done here](#).



Dr. Oleksiy Rohotchenko, an art critic and member of the National Academy of Arts of Ukraine, said that Korea's decorative and applied art -- a whole world of objects and images -- is the history of Koreans' way of life, their ideals and ideas about beauty. The arts of embroidery and shell painting are steeped in history. Historians and culturologists worldwide consider pottery to be the main ancient art of Korea, one of the first countries where the potter's wheel became widespread.

Dr. Rohotchenko gave some examples of the unifying role that subcultures play. In the world of motorcyclists, greeting oncoming motorcyclists is done by waving one's hand, even though one cannot identify each other or know each other's religion or nationality. The annual Festival of Blacksmiths in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine, gathers blacksmiths from around the world to demonstrate their skills in re-created real-life conditions. The former two Germanys, the divided Koreas and Ukraine all share folk art of their own. Folk art has suffered the least from the influence of modern brands spreading worldwide. Ethnoculture can be a country's guide to a worldwide cultural sphere, he said.



The fourth speaker was the painter **Ji Suk (Jessy) Baek**, a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Seoul. She married a Croatian and obtained a master's degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb.

Korea was divided without the will of the Koreans, which explains why reunification cannot depend on the two Koreas only, Mrs. Baek said. This is why she said she is deeply moved by the efforts made by UPF to raise awareness of the necessity for cooperation.

Ending 70 years of conflict between two ideologies is not only a regional matter, she said. Moreover, Korea's long history and God-given values can contribute much to the world, Mrs. Baek said. Most importantly, reunification should be motivated by the interest of the whole, rather than merely national interests, thus creating a path for the rest of the world to do the same, she said. Reunification of North and South may happen sooner than expected.



Since the 1980s, the Korean Wave -- the increased global popularity of South Korean K-pop, "Gangnam Style" and K-drama -- has spread around the world. It even spilled over into North Korea, where G Dragon, a young K-pop star and artist, as well as BTS, a K-pop boy band, have fans around the world. Although it is forbidden, North Korean young people watch K-dramas and K-pop, and thus learn about freedom, human rights, and love. Mrs. Baek likes to believe that the unification of the two Koreas and a united Korean culture will contribute to the development of a world culture that will nurture and elevate the spirit.

After the four panelists had spoken, Mr. Lozano said that any form of art very much reflects the situation in a country. It has the responsibility to reflect the social situation and the needs of the people in a country, he said. Artists cannot just live their dreams. On the other hand, artists are also visionaries who cannot just produce what the people like in order to sell well. They should guide people to greater ideals, even at the price of sacrifice.

Next, a question-and-answer session was held. Carlos Badosa, the assistant director of the Espacio Ronda Cultural Center in Madrid, presented the questions that the audience had submitted:

Imagine there is political agreement for unification of the two Koreas. What culture, what kind of measures, programs, and practical steps can be taken by culture to bring together North and South Koreans after 70 years of separation? What would you do if you were minister of unification?

Dr. **Doménech** said that, from an anthropological point of view, it would be important to bring together young people from the South, who have little interest in reunification, and youngsters from the North, through cultural or educational programs or sports. Also women in South Korea can play a very important social role, as, unlike men, they have not had a military formation, and are well placed to get people to love each other.

Ms. Krapf said that the North Koreans are longing for reunification. They have *tongil* (Korean word for unification) statues in many places and countless *tongil* songs. Also their culture is similar. When North and South Koreans met at a world championship for harmonica, Ms. Krapf noticed that they were very happy to meet, which shows that reunification is 100 percent possible.

Dr. Rohotchenko, when asked how the desire to maintain traditional arts can be united with the desire to go forward with modern art, said there is no protocol for unification. Artists can only make suggestions, he said. He would gather North and South Koreans to do something with folk art, such as ceramics,

pottery, embroidery, as it does not require much explanation, unlike contemporary art. Afterward, they could pick up painting. One should tread carefully with new trends, not to harm each other's feelings.

Mrs. Baek answered a question about how to bring Koreans together spontaneously, not by force. She said that young people in South Korea are not much interested in reunification, while in the North they are very much. To change the older generation and their concepts is very difficult. Therefore, local school-to-school interchange programs should be organized or supported by the government, so that very young children from the North and the South, who do not have concepts about politics and social issues, are given a platform to intermingle and can have a good experience together.

Asked whether she considers K-pop has a good influence on young people, Mrs. Baek answered that K-pop is a big money-making business. Expressing higher values -- or the divine nature, as Mrs. Baek put it -- is not a priority, and the content of K-drama is somewhat naïve. It is important to strengthen the character of young people at a vulnerable age. When they can distinguish good from evil, what is produced in art will not need to be censored. Good culture will elevate people, and elevated people will produce a better culture.