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ICOM SEOUL 2004
- Adrian Norris



Entrance to the Gyeryongsan Natural History Museum

I was lucky enough to have been able to attend the 20th Conference and 21st General Assembly of ICOM in Seoul, South Korea, 2-8 October 2004. The general theme of the conference was “Museums and Intangible Heritage”.

The COEX Conference Centre, the main site for the conference, can only be described as “huge”, and can easily cope with several very large conferences and exhibitions at the same time. The centre also has a very large shopping Mall with many different food courts.

The City of Seoul has a population in excess of 11 million and covers an area of over 600 square kilometres. Although the city does have a number of historic sites, most of the city is very modern and looks more like Manhattan than the eastern city landscape we expected. The roads running through the city, not including the freeways, can be in excess of 14 lanes wide, making it difficult to get about on foot, thus taxis are common and cheap, but the traffic can be very heavy and congested and the air quality can be poor at times.

The food in Korea is cheap, interesting and varied but is mainly based around a vegetarian diet with very strong and spiced preserved products and dips. Bread, milk and potatoes are available in some shops but are not normally served whilst meat is generally more expensive and used mainly for flavouring in dishes. Specific meat restaurants are common but the meat is of rather poor quality, and very fatty by our standards. Coffee, as we know it, is very hard to find and even the poor quality liquid they sell as coffee, can be more expensive than most main dishes.

The social side of the conference with its many and varied events was almost overwhelming, with most sites we visited feeding us as well as giving substantial gifts and reminders of our visit. These included large fully illustrated exhibition or main collection catalogues in full colour, pottery tea services and craft products amongst many others. The cultural programme revolved around the Intangible Heritage and included such varied subject areas as dance, fashion shows, traditional ceremonies, theatre, music and even martial arts displays.

The Government of Korea is using museums to help establish a national identity and thus large sums of money have been poured into fabulous new buildings even though many of the museums have little or no core collections.

The difference in the political environment between Britain and Korea is very marked when it comes to museums. In Korea, museums are seen as a matter of local pride and the content appears to be of little consequence. It’s the building and the statement that it makes which matters. In Britain, museums are so often considered to be politically irrelevant. However, there is one aspect of museums on which politicians in both countries converge, neither understand why collections matter and why they cost so much to keep in

good order. Thus Korea is reluctant to establish a National Natural History Museum.

I visited two brand new Natural History Museums, both opened in 2004, and two other museums with natural history displays, either as part of the activities of the ICOM NATHIST Committee or as part of the general conference tours. The two new museums were the Seodaemooon Natural History Museum and the Gyeryongsan Natural History Museum. Both of these new museums have had no expense spared on the buildings or their displays, but these and the two older ones we visited, the Ewha Women's University Museum and the National Science Museum, (which has a natural science display), have very similar displays, based around the "Big Bang"



Main Store Seodaemooon Museum of Natural History

and Dinosaurs, followed by a general mixture of specimens with a world-wide context. In general the displays were simple with little or no imagination and no thought about what it was they wished to say. The Ewha Women's University Museum was the only one of the four that had any specific scientific collections of note. None of the displays made any real attempt to involve the visitor in any way, and I felt that the museums had not thought about the displays at all but had just bought them off the shelf. The only exception to this was the display at the Ewha Women's University Museum entitled "The Promise of Life, Seed", which did show some imagination, both in the subject and the display technique.

The stores in the Seodaemooon Natural History Museum have to be seen to be believed! The main store had a highly polished wood-block maple floor, and we were asked to change our shoes for slippers before entering the store, which proved to be almost empty, at least by British standards. The space was mainly occupied by a small number of very large geological specimens obviously recently purchased from an international dealer, and a series of local geological specimens being assessed prior to purchase, all of which were just spread out on the floor.

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Most of the papers presented to the meetings of the ICOM NATHIST Committee proved to be very interesting, with speakers from Korea, Japan, Brazil, Nigeria, Russia, Germany, Hungary and France. It was a great shame for the British museum fraternity that only 3, (now 4, I registered as a member in Seoul), members of this international committee come from Britain. None of the registered members from Britain came to the Seoul meeting. I found myself as the only native English speaker at most of the meetings even though all of the proceedings of this committee are held in English. Why are there so few members of ICOM in Britain? and so few interested in the Natural Sciences? This committee is now very active and will be holding a series of international meetings between now and the next general conference, which is to be held in Vienna in 2007. The provisional programme includes meetings at the University of Helsinki in 2005 and Mysore, India in 2006.

The cost of joining ICOM is not that expensive, and most, if not all of the cost of the membership fee can be recouped from non-payment of entrance fees when visiting museums outside Britain. I find it a great embarrassment that the ICOM membership card is recognised by most museum staff throughout the world and usually gives you automatic free entry to most museums and exhibitions, whilst most museums and galleries in Britain do not recognise this international organisation.

It is therefore all the more surprising, and praiseworthy, that, with so few British members, two of the three new Honorary Members announced at the ICOM AGM were British - Patrick Boylan and Geoffrey Lewis.