THE GYEONGJU NATIONAL MUSEUM, KOREA

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Gyeongju, the Capital of Silla

According to traditional Korean history, Gyeongju was the capital of Silla (57 BC–AD 935) for 992 years. The name of the city, Gyeongju, still reminds many Korean people of Silla itself. This ancient kingdom existed until it was conquered by Goryeo in 935. A territory that existed for a millennium is extremely rare, not only in Asia but also elsewhere.

Silla’s history had been one of reform and innovation. The driving force behind the changes lay within the kingdom itself, but cultural influences from the outside world also played a crucial role. Culture needs to remain in contact with the outside world to stay alive. A culture isolated from the world is little different from a dead civilisation. Silla was located in the southeastern part of the Korean peninsula but far from being isolated, the kingdom had continuous cultural interaction with the outside world, not only its neighbours such as China and Japan, but also distant countries in West Asia. Silla’s continuous contact with the world outside the kingdom helped enrich its culture.

In 503, the political entity established on the southeastern part of the Korean peninsula adopted a new name, Silla, whose meaning is “renewing virtuous tasks and encompassing the four directions”. The kingdom officially recognised Buddhism as the state religion, opening the road to the glorious Buddhist culture it would achieve. It
then defeated its two rivals, Goguryeo and Baekje, and achieved the first unification of all Korean kingdoms.

During Silla’s heyday, its capital Gyeongju grew to be a large metropolis containing 178,936 households within its boundary. According to historic records, the city housed as many Buddhist temples as stars in the night sky and stupas lined like geese flying in formation. Gyeongju in the 8th century was large enough to be compared with the world’s most prosperous metropolises of the period, such as Constantinople (today’s Istanbul), the capital of the Byzantine Empire (circa 330–1453), Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Empire (circa 750–1258), and Changan (today’s Xian), the capital of the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907).

**Gyeongju, a City of World Cultural Heritage**

Above and below Gyeongju there is a wealth of historical and cultural heritage, from the prehistoric period to the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), including that of Silla. The historical significance of the city led UNESCO to designate it as a World Heritage Site in 2000. The Gyeongju Historic Areas, consist of five areas according to the characteristic features of the heritage contained in them: the Nam-san Area which is a treasury of Buddhist art; Wolseong Area, which contained Silla’s royal palace for about ten centuries; Daereungwon Area, a sanctuary of Silla’s royal tombs; Hwangnyongsa Area, which once housed the kingdom’s largest Buddhist monastery; and Sanseong Area, which preserved military facilities built for the defence of the dynastic capital. It is in the Gyeongju Historic Areas that the Gyeongju National Museum is situated. The museum is close to the Wolseong, Daereungwon and Hwangnyongsa Areas, and faces Namsan Mountain in the south. The abundance of rich cultural heritage in the areas surrounding the museum helps the museum share their historical and cultural significance. The long history of Silla and the outstanding cultural achievements of its people, who flourished in this great city, directly influenced the birth of the museum.

**Brief History of the Gyeongju National Museum**

Gyeongju National Museum was established in 1945, the final year of Japanese colonial rule over Korea, as the Gyeongju Branch of the National Museum of Korea. Prior to that, the city had a tiny private museum opened in 1913 by the Conservation Society for Historic Sites in Gyeongju. The museum was housed in an old government building of Gyeongju-bu located in today’s Dongbu-dong, and an annex was built in 1923 in its courtyard for the storage and exhibition of Silla’s gold crown discovered two years earlier. In 1926, the museum was turned into a public institution,
Gyeongju Branch of the Museum of Government-General of Joseon, and continued to operate until 1945.

In 1975, the Gyeongju National Museum moved to its new buildings completed that year, which are still used today (1). Moving the museum and its collections to a new home became a remarkable cultural event. The process of moving the Divine Bell of King Seongdeok was particularly impressive, with enthusiastic participation by Gyeongju citizens. The new museum that opened in 1975 consisted of the Hall of Silla History and Culture, a Special Exhibition Hall, and a bell tower for housing King Seongdeok’s bell, all designed by Yi Hui-tae (1925–1981). The design of the main hall, characterised by a row of columns outside the building, is said to have been inspired by Gyeonghoeru Pavilion in Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul.

The museum opened another exhibition hall in 1982, named Wolji, designed by Kim Swoo-geun (1931–1986) and built to display the artefacts discovered at the Wolji (Anapji) Pond (2). The outer appearance of this structure comprising wood and brick walls and traditional ceramic roof tiles was influenced by traditional Korean storehouses. In 2002, the museum opened an art gallery designed by Yi Sang-eun (born 1954) which is now used for educational and research activities as well as exhibitions.

The museum is currently undergoing an expansion plan to build a new main entrance on the newly obtained site (73,000 square metres) in the south, and more buildings for storage and exhibition of its collections. The museum’s long-term goal is to become a tourist centre for travellers visiting the city to enjoy its priceless historical and cultural heritage.

Gyeongju National Museum has now developed into the second largest national museum in Korea following the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, and is visited by over 1.4 million people every year. In May 2010, the museum achieved a total of 50 million visitors since its opening in 1975. Most of its collections, over 250,000 items in total, consist of artefacts unearthed through various surface sur-
veys and excavations. The collections include fifteen National Treasures and forty-two Treasures.

**Exhibition and Education at the Museum**

There are currently about 4500 items displayed for the public in the Silla History and Culture Hall, Art Hall, Wolji Hall, Belfry, and Outdoor Exhibition Area in the Gyeongju National Museum. The Silla History and Culture Hall (1290 square metres, 3) is designed to offer visitors a brief, but comprehensive introduction to the one thousand year history of Silla. The exhibition includes many gold objects such as the famous gold crowns that resulted in one of Silla's nicknames, “Golden Kingdom” (4).

The Art Hall (1428 square metres, 5, 6) is largely used for the exhibition of Silla's Buddhist works, old inscriptions and handicrafts. The hall is currently divided into three rooms focusing on Buddhist art, inscriptions, and Hwangnyongsa Temple, and exhibits over four hundred items including the famous roof-end tile carved with a human face wearing the famous “Smile of Silla”.

Wolji Hall (1302 square metres, 7) is used for the exhibition of artefacts excavated at the sites of Donggung (“Eastern Palace”) and Wolji (“Moon Lake”), a large body of water contained in the palace. This space is considered unique, as it was built solely to house the discoveries from a single archaeological site.

Gyeongju National Museum also encompasses a spacious outdoor exhibition area (approximately 74,000 square metres) displaying over one thousand items of archaeological discoveries, including the Divine Bell of King Seongdeok (made in 771, and 18.9 tonnes), the three-storey stone stupa at Gosonsa Temple (built in 686, and 10.2 metres tall), and many other stone stupas, Buddhist statues, stone lanterns, and basins discovered at the sites of temples and palaces across Gyeongju.

The museum's Special Exhibition Hall (708 square metres, 8) holds two to four events every year. One of its most successful events in recent years was the 2012 exhibition of a collection of Tang masterpieces from the Shaanxi History Museum in China.

Gyeongju National Museum opened the Children’s Museum (490 square metres, 9) in 2003, and has since attracted 100,000 to 150,000 children every year with a range of exciting educational programmes. Currently, the museum operates about twenty programmes designed to guide young museum goers to a better understanding of Silla history and culture.

One of the most successful educational programmes currently operated by the museum is the Children's Museum School. Offered free to all elementary school children every Saturday from March to December, the school consists of lectures, participation and tour programmes. The school was launched in October 1954 and has since produced over 15,000 graduates, some of whom grew up to pursue a career in related areas, including museum curatorships. The
school is the oldest of its kind in Korea and is often cited as a fine example evidencing the productive educational function of a museum.

**A Space for Inspiration Based on Tradition**

Clearly, the objects displayed at a museum are largely artefacts made by human beings and, hence, contain their ideas and life experiences. Each exhibited item seems to yearn to communicate with the viewer. We can start a dialogue as soon as we are ready to listen. Gyeongju National Museum aims to create a space in which museum goers can engage with and learn from our ancestors through the artefacts they left behind; feel the joy, sorrow, anger and pleasure of the creators of the artefacts; meditate as we gaze at the famous image of a bodhisattva in meditation; appreciate the wisdom and skills of the ancient masters who turned cold granite into warm human figures; praise the beauty of man-made objects and discover the truth about the human lives behind them; communicate with people from the past; and most of all, create what is newly inspired through achievements of the past.