

# IMPACT OF KOREAN CULTURE ON MEXICAN SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the fact that the cultural interaction between Mexico and Korea is an almost unknown topic among many Korean Studies colleagues from different countries, this paper focuses on the creation of cultural programs and activities in Mexico since 1997-98, through governmental and social organizations, in order to promote Korean culture and knowledge of Korea among Mexican people of varying cultural backgrounds rather than academic circles in Mexican society.

It analyzes, in the first part, the Agreements signed between the Cultural Department of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea and two Mexican Institutions: (1) the Ministry of Education (SEP) for the creation of a Korean literary essay contest among high school students and teachers; and (2) the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) for the installation of a Korean Gallery, sponsored by the Korea Foundation, at the National Museum of Cultures in Mexico City.

The second part of this paper is devoted to the social organization, MexiCorea, established by enthusiastic Mexican young people who are fans of Jang Dong Gun, the famous actor known in Mexico through the popular Korean TV drama series transmitted by a local network.

In spite of the short span of just eight years, we observed in our research an increasing interest in both Korean culture and the participation in the cultural activities promoted by the above mentioned institutions and organization.

## I.- INTRODUCTION

### Mexico-Korea Cultural Relations

Formal diplomatic relations between *Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* and the Republic of Korea were established in 1962, when the latter opened its Embassy in Mexico, while the Mexican representation in Korea took a longer time, in 1978 with a Commercial Attache and not until 1987 with a resident Ambassador.

The first bilateral cultural agreement was signed in April 1966, but the cultural exchange programs were minimal. Only three activities took place, among them a Korean Dance Team performance during the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico.

During the 1980's the Korean government began to give greater importance to Latin America economic and foreign policies. Thus, numerous Korean cultural events were held in Mexico; the cultural program based upon performing arts and fine arts exhibitions started in 1987, mainly as a result of the efforts of the Korean Embassy.

In 1996 the first meeting of the Mixed Commission for Educational and Cultural Cooperation was held in Mexico, with the purpose of evaluating the activities undertaken during the past 30 years. After analyzing the ways to improve and increase the cultural exchanges and cooperation, the program for 1996-1998 was approved. It contained 18 educational projects and 29 cultural projects, among which the most relevant were:

- Creation of adequate spaces for divulging Korean culture in Mexico City.
- Establishment of a Korean gallery at the National Museum of Cultures.
- Organization of courses, seminars, exhibitions and cultural festivals.

- Exchange programs between Cultural Foundations, museums, libraries and film archives.
- Translation of relevant texts and information about Korea and Mexico.
- Increased collaboration between radio and television networks of both countries.

These projects became stronger with the official visit of Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León to Korea in November 1996, followed by President Kim Young Sam's visit to Mexico in June 1997. Two of these projects which were developed and implemented are described further on.

The second meeting of the aforesaid Commission took place in Seoul in May 2000, where the Mexican and Korean governments approved the Educational and Cultural Exchange Program valid through December 2002. This program consisted of 37 projects: 18 educational and 19 cultural, with 73% of the total of these initiatives being accomplished (Report, 2005:84). Their main activities were undertaken in the fields of information exchange on education, international festivals, visual arts, translation of works, radio (a KBS producer visited Mexico) and cinematography (a Korean film festival was held at the National University of Mexico -UNAM), and sports and youth exchanges (an agreement between the Korean Ministry of Tourism and the Mexican Youth Institute was signed).

With the commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Mexico and Korea in 2002, various cultural exchange agreements were signed; nevertheless, Mexico's presence in arts exhibitions and film festivals in Korea was far greater than Korea's in Mexico.

The 2003-2006 Cultural and Educational Cooperation Program, signed in June 2003 in Mexico City, is divided into three areas: culture and art, education, youth and sports, with specifications as how to manage the whole program with general and financial provisions.

The Culture and Art area stresses mutual cooperation in specific fields such as: archaeology and anthropology, preservation and restoration of historic and cultural heritages, (where the Korean side has the opportunity to participate in the restoration program of Mexico's historic and cultural patrimony), cultural festivals, visual arts and museums, radio, television, cinema and audiovisual media.

Both governments have been making substantial efforts to promote cultural exchanges, and among the wide variety of projects aiming toward the promotion of mutual friendship and understanding, we considered worth analyzing three illustrative activities promoted by the Korean Embassy in Mexico:

- The Korean literary essay contest among Mexican high school students and teachers;
- The Korean gallery at the National Museum of Cultures;
- The diffusion of Korean TV dramas, and the resulting creation of a spontaneous Mexican organization and Fan Club.

I have chosen these three based on my personal involvement as (1) a member of the jury of the literary essay contest; (2) the curator of East Asian Art at the aforesaid Museum; and (3) a student in Korean language classes at the UNAM, where one of my classmates (Rocio Salinas) is the founding president of the Mexican Fan Club for Jang Dong Gun.

## II.- KOREAN LITERARY ESSAY CONTEST

In 1997 the Cultural Department of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea and the Ministry of Education (SEP) signed an agreement for the creation of this contest among high school students and teachers from public (government) schools in Mexico City, which occurred annually for seven years.

The main objectives were to promote the knowledge of Korea and the appreciation of its culture, to encourage the practice of reading and writing, and to further mutual understanding and friendship between Korea and Mexico.

The general subjects selected for the students to write about were (1) the similarities and differences between Korean and Mexican cultures; (2) their impressions concerning Korean society and culture, before and after the 2002 FIFA World Cup held in Korea and Japan; (3) commentaries of the Korean gallery at the National Museum; and (4) which symbol or image might be chosen to identify Korean culture.

The themes selected to be developed by the teachers dealt with more specific aspects: (1) The Korean War; (2) the relevance of the former President Kim Dae-Jung (awarded with the Peace Nobel Prize in 2000), and the expectations of the current President Roh Moo-Hyun, both prominent human rights defenders; (3) the comparison of the Mexican and Korean educational systems; (4) the evaluation of Mexico-Korea relations over 40 years, since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1962, including the main achievements and how they are reflected in the daily life of both peoples; and (5) the impact of two Korean enterprises in Mexican society, LG Electronics and Samsung(a).

In 2002 the Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP) set up the National Reading Program in order to connect the students with other cultures through literature, emphasizing the importance of this knowledge which enriches them and prepares them to be better citizens (SEP, June 2002:142).

In agreement with this program, the fifth and sixth contests had as their main themes for students the reading of two Korean short stories: (1) When the Buckwheat Blooms, written by Lee (Yi) Hyo-Sok, whose vivid description of the lives of rural peddlers and the colorful sights and sounds of market day –still a feature of Korean villages and towns- highly motivated the students to read and know more about Korea; (2) The Hedgehog Story, written by Kweon Dae-Jung, focused on the fight between the powerful and threatening tiger and the seemingly insignificant and defenceless hedgehog, whose self-confidence and wisdom made him victorious over the arrogant and conceited adversary.

The core of its message lay, according to these young Mexican readers, in the will to not give up nor let oneself be impressed by the fame of the adversary, and to struggle to achieve respect and dignity.

On the other hand, the participant teachers had to read Lee Ho-Chul's novel The Middling Citizen (or The Petite Bourgeoisie) and grasp the most relevant characteristics of Korean culture mentioned in the plot, which depicts the everyday life of ordinary people during the Korean War period(b).

According to the general data provided by the Head Office of Educative Innovation of the SEP, more than 1300 essays were received during the first three years of the contest; in the next three years the number grew to 2000 student essays and 600 by teachers. Unfortunately, the number of participants decreased drastically for the 7th and last contest in 2004, partially due to the lack of Korean works translated into Spanish. Thus, the only theme chosen was to once again discuss the similarities which exist between Mexico and Korea.

The students and teachers who obtained the Grand Prize in each of the contests were rewarded with a week-long, all-expense paid trip to Korea, and additionally received a monthly grant of five hundred pesos during the corresponding school year.

Each year the winning essays (12 to 15) were published as an internal publication by the Undersecretary of Educational Services of the SEP and the Korean Embassy. In almost all of the essays received, the participants manifested their admiration for Korean culture and its values and traditions, and considered that Korea was a worthy example to follow, because it is a country from which one can learn to live in harmony both with human beings and with nature, to strengthen and reappraise cultural patrimony, to achieve the development of sports associated with the culture, to reduce illiteracy and to increase education destined to scientific and technological advances.

Another reason expressed is that in spite of having been a country that was humiliated for centuries, it is a vigorous people that have succeeded in winning a place in the world and continue struggling to improve on a daily basis in every way. Some students mentioned the similarity among their histories, since both countries were the object of conquests, invasions, colonialism, pillage, destruction and death, as well as territorial losses that redefined their borders and left a permanent scar on their social, economic, political and cultural life(c).

This is obviously an encouraging experience for pursuing the restarting of the contests, broadening the activities to other artistic manifestations where the participants can develop other abilities besides reading and writing, for instance painting, dance or music, as ways to enrich their knowledge of Korea and its culture(d).

### III.-THE KOREAN GALLERY

The Korean Gallery was established with the generous support of the Korea Foundation, and is located between the Chinese and Japanese galleries as a way to stress the outstanding bridging role played by Korea in the cultural exchange among them and, at the same time, their uniqueness.

The opening of the *Sala de Corea* at the *Museo Nacional de las Culturas* in Mexico City was held on November 23, 2000. It is the first gallery of Korean Art in Latin America, and at that time, the ninth gallery in the world supported by the Korea Foundation, whose program to help establish Korean galleries in overseas museums began in 1992 (Moon, 2000:4).

The establishing of the Korean gallery was decided in June 1997, following a summit meeting between the presidents of Korea and Mexico. Then, the above mentioned Museum requested, through the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), support from the Korea Foundation, which in 1998 agreed to proceed with the project given the Museum's links with other cultural and historical facilities, its educational efforts, and other cultural benefits.

The exhibition layout was discussed through continued contacts between the two sides, and its planning was assigned to the National Folk Museum of Korea, which submitted in 1999 a detailed list of exhibition plans and exhibits. The theme was "A Retrospective of Korean History and Culture toward the 21st Century"; the 66 exhibits were arranged to depict Korean history and culture in chronological order(e). This plan mirrored the layout of the Mexican Museum's existing Chinese and Japanese galleries. The Arts and Engineering Research Institute at Kaywon University of Arts was commissioned to design the gallery and

in August 2002 a work crew of this Institute began the construction of the interior of the gallery including its lighting system, and in late October an exhibition installation team was sent to complete the 120 square meter gallery.

Most of the items in the exhibits are excellent reproductions of existing National Treasures produced by 20 master craftsmen, some of whom have been designated "intangible cultural assets". In selecting the artists and overseeing the work, the Folk Museum provided invaluable advice and assistance, while the task of editing the Spanish signage and explanations for the exhibit items prepared by the Folk Museum was undertaken by the curator of East Asian art at the National Museum of Cultures.

This Museum is the sole institution in Mexico exclusively devoted to the cultures of foreign countries. It has 20 exhibition halls or galleries in which one can appreciate the evolution and cultural richness (from Origins to the early 20th century) of the millenarian peoples of many regions(f). The Museum presents man in his cultural diversity and, therefore, is a space for reflection on the others with a respectful gaze.

Since its creation in 1965 it has looked to relate the school curricula with the Museum's exhibitions. Its major function is to serve as an educational resource for primary and secondary school students(g), who constitute 42% of the total annual visitors (an average of 263,000 in the last four years), as well as senior high school and university students (37%), and the general public (15% Mexican and 6 % foreign).

#### Activities relating to Korea

Since the opening of the Korean gallery, the Museum has offered lectures, workshops and exhibitions to stimulate an interest and appreciation of Korean art and culture among its visitors.

The Museum worked together with the Korean literary essay contests providing the participants with guided tours in the Korean gallery and help in consulting the 62 books and magazines about Korea (only a very few are in Spanish) in the Museum's library collection, which was largely donated by the Korea Foundation and the Korean Embassy.

From 2001 onward Korea has been included in the summer courses which are organized every year for high school teachers around the theme "Cultures of the World and the Teaching of History", and which include lectures and guided visits to the various Museum's galleries.

There have also been three temporary exhibitions; the first, in 2001, with a representative sample of esteemed or admired Korean celadon (a garden table inlaid with symbolic figures of animals and flowers); the second, in 2003, concerning the Traditional Life of Korean Women during the *Joseon* dynasty, exclusively with items from our permanent Korean gallery exhibition; and the third one, in 2006, exhibited Korean costumes (recently donated by the Korean Embassy) for weddings and official ceremonies held during the aforesaid dynasty.

These activities are examples of the Museum's desire to find ways to effectively operate and maintain the permanent exhibition and promote or increase the temporary ones, for instance, inviting private collectors to collaborate.

It is expected that the students, teachers and general public who visit the Museum will learn that Korea has a distinctive culture and that like Mexico it has managed to keep up its cultural traditions despite a history of invasions by neighboring powers.

#### IV.- KOREAN TV DRAMAS

The initiative to transmit Korean TV dramas in Mexico as a means to disseminate Korean culture came from the Councillor for Public Relations of the Korean Embassy, Mr. Yi Chongyul, in 2002, who carried out the necessary arrangements before the government of his country with the purpose of paying royalties to the Korean Broadcasting Systems (KBS) as producer of the dramas and to the distributor *Arirang*, in order to be able to broadcast them in Mexico. While, he also invited the Mexican TV companies to participate in said project, the only response was from the Mexiquense Broadcasting System.

This TV network, whose motto is “culture and identity without frontiers”, was founded in 1984 in the State of Mexico, but nowadays has coverage over the whole country. It produces or elaborates 48% of its programs and the rest is the result of agreements and collaborations with national and international institutions.

Until the present day, TV Mexiquense’s Channel 34, as well as other local channels in the main Mexican Cities, such as Guadalajara, Monterrey, Campeche, Merida y Puebla, have transmitted three Korean dramas dubbed into Spanish: *All About Eve* (2002), *A Wish on a Star* (2004), and *Winter Sonata* (2005). The Korea Foundation supported the distribution of the latter, a very popular drama in Korea and other Asian countries, and finalized arrangements with TV networks in Central American countries for the local broadcasts from early 2006 of other Korean dramas: *Stairway to Heaven*, and *Autumn in My Heart*. Mr. Yi Chongyul has recently been in talks with directors of TV Azteca, one of the leading broadcasting systems in Mexico, who are interested in transmitting them in the very near future since these have gained popularity among Mexican audience.

The airing of these programs has contributed to heighten awareness of Korea, its culture and way of life, and the emergence of positive perceptions of the Korean people among Mexican residents, as well as the creation of fan clubs both for the protagonist actors and the singers of the soundtracks. At present there are six fan clubs in Mexico:

*I Will Give You All Jang Dong Gun* (May 2003)

*Love Forever Ahn Jae Wook* (June 2003)

*Always AJW Mexico* (June 2003)

*A person named Kang Ta* (July 2005)

*Bae Jeon Young Mexico* (2006)

*Kwon Sang Woo* (2006)

The founding officers consider that the Korean TV drama series have been successful due to their structure and format, having 16 to 20 chapters, being stories narrated in a different way from those of Mexico, with a continuity in the story line, and a greater quality of production, directing and acting. The stories are simple but interesting, lacking in sex and violence, and the characters have real-life experiences, and they disseminate their values and traditions. Besides, the series have varied locations and novel camera takes, excellent photography and music (*Super TV magazine*, 2006:37).

#### Jang Dong Gun Fan Club “I Will Give you All Mexico”

The Club was created on May 20th, 2003 with the main objective being to get to know more about the popular South Korean actor Jang Dong Gun, the hero-character in the TV drama *All About Eve*, that was transmitted in Mexico by the Mexiquense Broadcasting System in 2002(h).

The idea for the fan club came from a small group of 15 enthusiastic young university students headed by Rocio Salinas, president of the Club. They hold gatherings every two or three months, to which an average of 70 people come. At the moment there are 400 members in Mexico and more than 1000 in various Latin American countries, whose ages range from 5 years to 69; most are women since there are only 10 young men in their 20s.

All the Club members maintain contact via their Spanish language website, ([jang\\_dong\\_gun\\_mexico.tk](http://jang_dong_gun_mexico.tk)) and share information about JDG, his films, and TV dramas. They also exchange pictures, Korean recipes, music, videos and news about Korea. It has a link with KBS World Radio and multiple message boards where all the information is in Spanish. As for last August 25, there were 6,870 messages, 17% dealing exclusively with updated news in South Korea.

They are also in close contact and collaboration with the other fan clubs in Mexico and with the Official Adonis Chinese, one of the three authorized JDG International fan clubs, which was created in October 2004 and provides first-hand information about the actor, and a Forum for fans to write letters directly to him.

The Club's successful activities gained attention from the Korean Embassy in Mexico, and in September 2004, its three officers were invited by the Korean Tourism National Organization to the opening of the Hall of Fame in Seoul. This place, where the most outstanding and internationally renowned Korean actors and pop artists are portrayed, was established for the Korean Wave (Hallyu) diffusion mainly among the foreign residents and tourists. The three young Mexicans were designated Honorary Ambassadors for Korean Culture and Tourism Exchanges by the above mentioned organization(i).

Upon arrival back in Mexico, as a result of their wonderful experience in Korea, they decided to establish an association named MexiCorea, which besides providing information about the Mexican fan clubs and the Korean TV dramas, has the purpose of uniting the cultures of both countries, which means, according to its president Rocio Salinas, "to broaden our knowledge of Korea with a Mexican vision, to feel ourselves identified in a mix of these two countries which has changed our life, taking us toward a new horizon". Therefore, they are now even more motivated to continue studying Korean language, and learning how to play traditional percussion instruments (*Samulnori*), and new songs to be able to participate in the *Karaoke* contest promoted by the Korean Embassy in Mexico. The semifinal of the *Karaoke* contest took place in June 2005, with 30 participants; the 14 selected on that occasion competed in December for the big award, a two-week trip to Korea.

The Korean Embassy also hosted, in November 2004, visiting reporters from two Korean TV networks (MBC y KBS), who held interviews with the presidents of the Mexican fan clubs of the actor Jang Dong Gun and the pop singer Ahn Jae Wook, which were later broadcasted in Korea.

Then, in December, the Ambassador Cho Kyo-Hyung sponsored a well-attended "End of the Year" party for these clubs members. The program included the participation of the Korean rock group *Yangin*, composed by 3 Koreans and 2 Mexicans; the tasting of Korean food; the showing of the video *Dynamic Korea* and the film *Brush Strokes of Fire* (*Chihuwaseon*, biography of the famous painter of the *Joseon* dynasty); a *Karaoke* contest; and a raffle of a wide variety of Korean items. All the participants had a great time and hoped to be able to organize such festive gatherings more frequently.

During the official visit of President Roh Moo-hyun in 2005, Rocio Salinas organized and led a Mexican style "demonstration", with 60 members of the aforesaid fan clubs, outside the hotel where the Korean president was staying, cordially asking him to please promote the visit of the Korean TV drama protagonists to Mexico in the very near future. This was big news in Korea and appeared immediately on TV.

## V.- CONCLUDING REMARKS

Besides promoting knowledge about Korea and an appreciation of its culture, the programs and activities carried out by the researched institutions and organization are relevant because they encourage respect for cultural diversity and creativity. In spite that their success is still reduced in scope and depth, these experiences should permit the construction of other types of programs that could pave the way for the intensification of cultural exchanges. It is important to define more clearly the objectives and the appropriate criteria for approaching them, as well as the spirit and the methods for pursuing them.

According to the Report of the Mexico-Korea 21st Century Commission(j), bilateral exchanges in culture remain limited in depth. This seems to be both a cause as well as an effect in the fact that knowledge of each other's history, culture and society, at the level of common citizens is poor and often distorted by prejudices.

Among the main conclusions, recommendations and proposals ventured by this Commission, are worth mentioning the following:

The exchange program between national libraries has had very limited success due to the language barrier which limits the access to reading material written in Spanish or Korean due to the lack of translated materials.

As long as translation and editorial work remain circumscribed, there will be a lack of reference texts and books suitable for providing accurate and valid information about both Korea and Mexico. This requires the co-operation of editors, translators and publishing houses for evaluating the existing works and to figure out which ones are the most convenient to be published and to ensure their distribution. In this aspect there is the need to establish contacts with Mexican editors in order to publish books about Korean culture, art and history, as well as to initiate a partnership between national libraries.

Radio, television, cinema and audiovisual media provide the most effective means to promote the mutual understanding of both peoples. Because of their wide audience penetration, media program exchange should be enlarged and promoted through greater contacts among TV producers.

Cooperation on major international issues has just begun to widen, but the institutional framework for exchange and cooperation remains weak and unfocused. Therefore, considerations should be given to the establishment of an academic Consortium formed by governments, scholars and businessmen that can work together in building the framework of the projects and in providing the funding of their activities, which would lead to the foundation of institutions for research and teaching, the formation of networks of creative writers, artists and information specialists and to stimulate reflection on the importance of culture in this globalized era (Report, 2005:93-94).

The ancient and rich cultural heritage of Korea and Mexico provides the most effective tool for launching a more comprehensive and future-oriented approach. If we try to see each other in our historical reality and through the mutual appreciation of our cultures, we certainly will contribute to pave the way for framing and conducting new and innovative exchange programs (*Op. cit.* page 92).

## NOTES.

(a) LG Electronics and Samsung Electronics, which started operations in Mexico in 1988, have been sponsoring sports teams and athletes, as well as social assistance institutions such as the Mexican Red Cross, DIF, and in the specific case of LG, the boarding school *Villa de las Ninas de Chalco*, where 4000 poor Mexican girls live and receive free education and training in various fields. The most outstanding students are awarded with scholarships to further their studies in Korean and Mexican universities. LG has also promoted the presentations and tours of the musical group constituted by 120 girls of this *Villa*, who have a wide repertoire of traditional songs and dances both from Mexico and Korea.

The *Villa* was founded by Father Aloysius Schwartz in 1991 and is run by 3 Korean Marist sisters.

(b) Lee Ho-chul is one of South Korea's most prominent writers and a leading dissident in the struggle for freedom, democracy and reunification. He offers a narrative that coincides with his own life; therefore, he criticizes the complacency, apathy and selfishness of his intriguing characters. In 2001 he participated in readings of this novel organized by the Mexican University of Guadalajara, where a collection of his short stories were translated into Spanish in 2004.

(c) Reference to tragic dates and border names: year 1945 and parallel 38 for Koreans, years 1848-1855 and the Rio Bravo river for Mexicans.

(d) Ideas and plans commented on during the interview with Gabriela Friederich, Director of Educative Innovation Programs of the Ministry of Public Education (SEP), on July 2006.

(e) The exhibits include 15 relics from the Bronze Age and Three Kingdoms Period, 5 ceramic works (3 *Goryeo* celadon, one *buncheong* and one white porcelain), 9 items of traditional clothing, 11 pieces of furniture, 7 traditional musical instruments, 2 astronomical devices, 6 paintings and 11 *Hahoe* masks. Some of them are displayed in a typical women's living quarters (*Anbang*) during the *Joseon* dynasty.

(f) Mesoamerica and the Andes, North American aborigines from the Arctic to the forests of the southeastern United States, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, Greece and Rome, Eastern Europe, Africa, Oceania or South Seas (which has part of Bronislaw Malinowski's collection donated by his widow), Middle East, Southeast Asia, China, Korea and Japan.

(g) The 5th grade of primary school and the 3rd year of secondary school curricula include World History and therefore obligatory visits to the Museum.

(h) Jang Dong Gun, born in 1972, has taken part in eleven TV dramas, the first *Our Heaven* in 1993, and eleven films of which only one has arrived in Mexico, the internationally renowned *Brotherhood of Blood or War* (*Tae Guk Gi*) in 2004.

(i) The Korean Wave began at the end of the 20th century with the export of Korean TV dramas, movies, popular music and games to China and Southeast Asian countries, and is now spreading to Japan, India, the Middle East, Mexico and other Latin American countries, showing signs of expanding further to the United States and Europe. Cf. You Hong-june, 2006:122-132.

(j) The Mexico-Korea 21st Century Commission was established as a multi-disciplinary body in charge of studying the medium and long-term outlook and strategies for bilateral relations, following the summit meeting of President Vicente Fox Quesada and President Kim Dae-jung in June 2001.

The Commission, with the participation of distinguished officials, business people and academics or scholars from both countries, held three formal meetings between September 2002 and May 2004, and produced a Final Report in 2005. Its Chapter IV. Cultural Exchange as a Foundation for Partnership provided useful information for our research.

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