

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH:

# Use of interpretation to enhance visitor experiences at UNESCO World Heritage Sites: the case of *Changdeokgung* Palace Complex in South Korea

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### Abstract

This study explores the use of interpretation as a tool for enhancing visitors' experiences at a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Korea. The Changdeokgung Palace Complex was constructed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the Joseon Dynasty and has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997. Questionnaires were given to visitors to the Changdeokgung Palace Complex in August 14-15 and October 1-2, 2011. This study found that the visitors preferred to experience the outstanding universal values of world cultural heritage through interpretation. The visitors were using information panels, interpreters, and brochures as interpretation media. Among these interpretation media, visitors were most satisfied with interpreters. In the case of the information panels and brochures, the visitors preferred the written words to pictures in order to experience the values of the Changdeokgung Palace Complex. The study also suggests the need to use customized interpretation systems in order to meet the needs of various visitors to the palace including young people and children.

**Keywords:** Interpretation, Interpretation media, Outstanding Universal Value, (South) Korea, World Heritage Sites.

### Introduction

Tilden (1957) defined interpretation as an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply through the communication of factual information. Since Tilden first published his definition, there have been many other definitions of interpretation focusing more on environmental and cultural aspects.

According to Civitarese, Legg and Zudfle (1997:10), interpretation is a communication activity designed to enhance the quality of the recreational experience of the visitor and to inspire greater appreciation of the resource in an enjoyable manner. Similarly, Weiler and Davis (1993: 93) define environmental interpretation as an educational, illustrative and entertaining activity which aims at providing the visitor, through first-hand experiences, with an insight into the interrelationships of the various resources and systems comprising the natural environment.

The National Association for interpretation (NAI), a society for interpreting heritage in the UK has explained interpretation as the process of explaining to people the significance of the places or objects they have come to see, so that they enjoy their visit more, understand their heritage and environment better, and develop a more caring attitude towards conservation (Littlefair 2003: 21). The National Association for Interpretation (NAI) uses the following definition: "*Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings in the resource*".

The Interpretation Australia Association (IAA) uses a similarly broad, inclusive definition on their website (1993): "*heritage interpretation is a means of communicating ideas and feelings which help people*

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*understand more about themselves and their environment*". The American Alliances of Museums (AAM) has defined interpretation as "*a planned effort to create for the visitor an understanding of the history and significance of events, people, and objects with which the site is associated*" (Alderson and Low 1985).

A more recent, museum-specific definition by the American Alliance of Museums ([www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org)) characterizes interpretation as "*the media/activities through which a museum carries out its mission and educational role.*" In their view, firstly, interpretation is a dynamic process of communication between the museum and the audience; secondly, interpretation is the means by which the museum delivers its content; and thirdly, interpretation media/activities include but are not limited to exhibits, tours, websites, classes, school programs, publications, and outreach.

Therefore, one specific definition may not suit the whole breadth of the interpretation profession. "*The true interpreter will not rest at any dictionary definition*" wrote Tilden (1967), who then offered an alternative himself: "*Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact. [The interpreter] goes beyond the apparent to the real, beyond a part to a whole, beyond a truth to a more important truth*".

These definitions suggest that interpretation offers more than instruction in facts. It uses facts and phenomena to pass on the meaning of something and to develop a deeper understanding. It stimulates interest and observation. It helps people to develop their skills, to read their landscape, to relive their history, and to feel their art (World Heritage Center 2012). Using these definitions, interpretation of World Heritage Sites can be summarized as an activity designed to communicate to visitors, in a recreational context, cultural, historical and natural/environmental messages, in order to assist them to develop empathy towards such sites and broaden their (cultural, historical, and environmental) knowledge, thereby enhancing visitor experiences.

Since the Seokguram Grotto and Bulguksa Temple in South Korea (hereafter Korea) were listed by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites in 1995, nine additional Korean sites have also been added to the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. They include Haeinsa Temple Janggyeong Panjeon and the Depositories for the Tripitaka Koreana Woodblocks (1995), Jongmyo Shrine (1995), Changdeokgung Palace Complex (1997), Hwaseong Fortress (1997), Gyeongju Historic Areas (2000), Gochang, Hwasun and Gangwha Dolmen Sites (2000), Royal Tombs of the Joseon Dynasty (2009), and the Historic Villages of Korea: Hahoe and Yangdong (2010).

After being designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the number of visitors to the sites has increased exponentially. For example, the number of visitors to Yangdong village increased by 300~600% after it was listed in 2010 (*Chosun TV news*, in Korean, <http://news.tv.chosun.com>). Enhancing visitor experiences at World Heritage Sites has thus become important; interpretation is now acknowledged as an essential tool for enhancing these experiences (Anderson & Low 1985; Civitarese, Legg & Zuefle 1997).

To seek ways to enhance visitor experiences, it is necessary to understand visitor needs. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of visiting World Heritage Sites in Korea by identifying visitors' needs through conducting a questionnaire at Changdeokgung Palace Complex in Korea. The results are expected to provide information to help plan a better experience of World Heritage Sites in Korea.

## Methodology

The author has done an extensive review on the criteria for designation as a World Heritage Site that will be presented in the next section. Moreover, an extensive study was done on one of the most famous World Heritage Sites in Korea, along with a questionnaire study of the visitors to the site. The study area was Changdeokgung Palace Complex which has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site since 1997. Constructed in the 15th century during the Joseon Dynasty, the Changdeokgung Palace Complex occupies 57.9 ha in Jongno-gu, northern Seoul at the foot of Ungbong Peak, Mount Baegaksan, which is the main geomantic guardian mountain. The specifics of this palace will also be described in the next section.

To identify the visitor needs for interpretation at the Changdeokgung Palace Complex, questionnaires were distributed and 316 collected in total. Questionnaires were given to visitors to the palace on August 14-15 and October 1-2, 2011. The questions were developed from issues raised in academic literature, comments derived from media statements on interpretation of World Heritage Sites, and research on attitudes to interpretation of World Heritage Sites. The questions were classified into four sections: major motivations for visiting Changdeokgung Palace Complex, interpretation media used to obtain information on Changdeokgung Palace, interpretation services needed at Changdeokgung Palace Complex, and demographic information.

## Findings and Discussion

*The selection criteria for UNESCO World Heritage Sites:* To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria. These criteria are explained in the “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention” which, besides the text of the Convention, is the main working tool on World Heritage. The criteria are regularly revised by the Committee to reflect the evolution of the World Heritage concept itself. Until the end of 2004, World Heritage sites were selected on the basis of six cultural and four natural criteria. With the adoption of the revised Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, only one set of ten criteria exists. The criteria for inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site have been described in Table 1.

Changdeokgung is an exceptional example of official and residential buildings that were integrated into and harmonized with their natural setting. The complex was originally built as a secondary palace to the main palace of Gyeongbokgung, differentiated from it by purpose and spatial layout within the capital. Situated at the foot of a mountain range, it was designed to embrace the topography in accordance with *pungsu* principles, by placing the palace structures to the south and incorporating an extensive rear garden to the north, called *Biwon*, the Secret Garden.

Adaptation to the natural terrain distinguishes Changdeokgung from conventional palace architecture while the official and residential buildings that make up the complex were designed in accordance with traditional palace layout principles. The buildings and structures include three gates and three courts (administrative court, royal residential court and official audience court), with the residential area to the rear of the administrative area based on the principles of ‘*sammun samjo*’ and ‘*jeonjo huchim*’. The buildings are constructed of wood and set on stone platforms, with many featuring tiled hipped roofs with a corbelled multi-bracket system and ornamental carvings.

**Table 1.** Criteria for inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

<i>Operational Guidelines(year)</i>	<i>Cultural criteria</i>						<i>Natural criteria</i>			
2002	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)
2005	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)	(viii)	(ix)	(vii)	(x)
<b><i>Selection criteria</i></b>										
<b>(i)</b>	to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;									
<b>(ii)</b>	to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;									
<b>(iii)</b>	to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;									
<b>(iv)</b>	to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;									
<b>(v)</b>	to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;									
<b>(vi)</b>	to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);									
<b>(vii)</b>	to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;									
<b>(viii)</b>	to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;									
<b>(ix)</b>	to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;									
<b>(x)</b>	to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.									

The protection, management, authenticity and integrity of properties are also important considerations. Since 1992 significant interactions between people and the natural environment have been recognized as cultural landscapes. The garden was landscaped with a series of terraces planted with lawns, flowering trees, flowers, a lotus pool and pavilions set against a wooded background. There are over 56,000 specimens of various species of trees and plants in the garden, including walnut, white oak, Zelkova, plum, maple, chestnut, hornbeam, yew, ginkgo, and pine.

Changdeokgung was used as the secondary palace to Gyeongbokgung for 200 years, but after the palaces were burnt down during the Japanese invasion in the late 16th century, it was the first to be reconstructed and since then served as the main seat of the dynasty for 250 years. The property has had a great influence on the development of Korean architecture, garden and landscape planning, and related arts, for many centuries. It reflects sophisticated architectural values, harmonized with beautiful surroundings (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, <http://whc.unesco.org>).

The Changdeokgung Palace Complex meets three criteria of Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) as defined by the World Heritage Committee regarding integrity and authenticity, and protection and management as follows:

*Criterion (ii):* Changdeokgung had a great influence on the development of Korean architecture, garden design and landscape planning, and related arts for many centuries.

*Criterion (iii):* Changdeokgung exemplifies the traditional *pungsu* principles and Confucianism through its architecture and landscape. The site selection and setting of the palace were based upon *pungsu*

principles whilst the buildings were laid out both functionally and symbolically in accordance to Confucian ideology, that together portray the Joseon Dynasty's unique outlook on the world.

*Criterion (iv):* Changdeokgung is an outstanding example of East Asian palace architecture and garden design, exceptional for the way in which the buildings are integrated into and harmonized with the natural setting, adapting to the topography and retaining indigenous tree cover.

*Integrity:* Changdeokgung incorporates all key components required in Korean palace architecture and conforms to Confucian principles and protocols in its spatial layout, arrangement of buildings, gardens and forested mountain landscape at the rear of the palace. All the palace components are still intact, including the *Oejo*, the royal court of the dynasty; *Chijo*, the administrative quarters of the palace; *Chimjo*, the residence of the royal family; and the garden intended for the king's leisure. The entire architectural complex and natural setting of Changdeokgung are included within the boundaries of the property. The principal threat to the physical integrity of the buildings is fire. The wooden structures have been destroyed by fire on successive occasions throughout history.

*Authenticity:* The buildings of Changdeokgung Palace Complex were destroyed by fire and have undergone successive reconstructions, and some additions were made to the complex in the centuries following its original construction. However, when judged against the philosophy and practices that are standard in Asia, the complex has a high level of authenticity. The buildings and natural elements of the rear garden have sustained their original forms, which generally date from the latter part of the Joseon Dynasty, and their relationship with the natural terrain and landscape. Most recently, work has been undertaken to reverse the changes made during the Japanese occupation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This work is being carried out using traditional methods and materials, and is based on historical evidence and research.

***Protection and management requirements:*** The entire area of the Changdeokgung Palace Complex, including the individual buildings and plantings within the complex, has been recognized as a State-designated Cultural Heritage under the Cultural Heritage Protection Act. In addition, a number of the buildings of the complex have been designated as National Treasures or Treasures (Injeongjon Hall, Injeongmun Gate, Seonjeongjeon Hall, Huijeongdang Hall, Daejojeon Hall, Old Seonwonjeon Shrine and Donhwamun Gate) or as Natural Monuments (the Chinese juniper tree and the *Actinidia arguta* plum tree). These designations impose strict control over any alterations to the property.

The area extending 100 m from the boundary of the Changdeokgung Palace Complex has been designated as a Historic Cultural Environment Protection Area under the Cultural Heritage Protection Act, and all construction work and alterations within the area require the authorization of the Cultural Heritage Administration through the *Jongno-gu* district office. The Rear Garden of Changdeokgung has been designated as an Ecological Scenery Conservation Area under the Natural Environment Conservation Act. At the national level, the Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA) is responsible for establishing and enforcing policies for the protection and management of Changdeokgung, and for allocating financial resources for its conservation. The Changdeokgung Management Office, with approximately 40 employees, is in charge of day-to-day management. Regular day-to-day monitoring is carried out and in-depth professional monitoring is conducted on a 3-to-4 year basis.

The area around Changdeokgung is managed co-operatively by the Urban Planning Division, Traffic Policy Division and Cultural Heritage Division of the Seoul Metropolitan Government. Seoul City's Basic Scenery Plan and District Unit Plan for the areas surrounding Changdeokgung, which are periodically

revised and updated, provide the framework for management and planning in the buffer zone. Conservation works in Changdeokgung are conducted by Cultural Heritage Conservation Specialists who have passed the national certification exams in their individual fields of expertise. The CHA is implementing the “Integrated Security System Establishment Plan for the 5 Palaces and Jongmyo”, in place since 2009, in preparation for accidents and/or disasters that could impair the integrity of the property. Now we shall examine the results of the survey on the visitors to the site.

**Demographic characteristics of respondents:** The socio-demographic characteristics of respondents are presented in Table 2. A descriptive analysis of the sample shows that there were more female respondents than male and the respondents included those aged 30-39 years (27.4%) and 40-49 years (31.9%), with the majority (70.5%) having at least a college degree. Nearly half (48.3%) of the 316 respondents earned an annual income between US \$ 20,000 to 40,000. It can be said that the respondents have characteristics that may be expected from a representative sample of the general population.

**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of respondents (N=316)

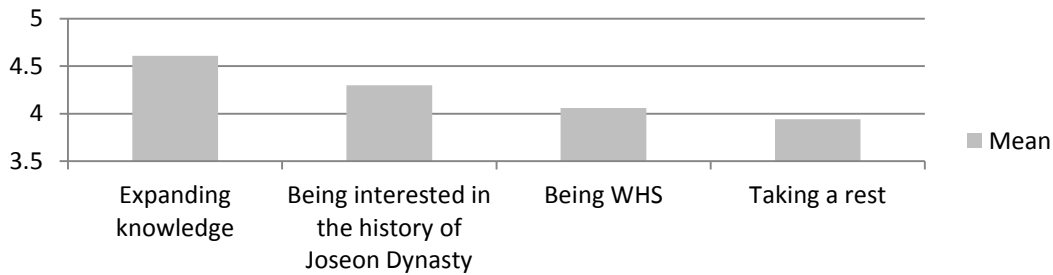
		Number of visitors	Percentage
Gender	Male	133	42.2
	Female	183	57.8
Age	19 or younger	57	18.1
	20-29	22	7.1
	30-39	86	27.4
	40-49	101	31.9
	50-59	38	12
	More than 60	11	3.6
Level of education	High school	93	29.6
	College	47	14.8
	University	135	42.9
	Graduate school	40	12.8
Annual income (US \$ )	Up to 20,000	66	21.0
	20,000~30,000	55	17.3
	30,000~40,000	98	31.0
	40,000~50,000	44	13.8
	More than 50,000	54	17.1

**Major motivation for visiting the complex:** Changdeokgung Palace Complex is regarded as the most significant historical place in Korea and visitors come for many reasons. Given that a high proportion of visitors have at least a college degree, it is not surprising that ‘expanding knowledge’ and ‘being interested in the history of the Joseon Dynasty’ were important motivational factors. Also, visitors indicated that the fact that the Changdeokgung Palace Complex is a World Heritage Site was an important motivational factor. This implies that designation as a World Heritage Site may have increased its status in the mind of visitors and may help to explain why Changdeokgung Palace Complex attracts a significant number of visitors. Interestingly, the study shows that “taking a rest” was an important motivational factor. The results are shown in Table 3 and Figure 1.

**Table 3.** Major motivational factors for visiting the site.

<i>Motivator</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Expanding knowledge	4.61	0.812
Being interested in the history of Joseon Dynasty	4.30	0.914
Being a World Heritage Site (WHS)	4.06	1.210
Taking a rest	3.94	1.261

**Figure 1.** Major motivational factors

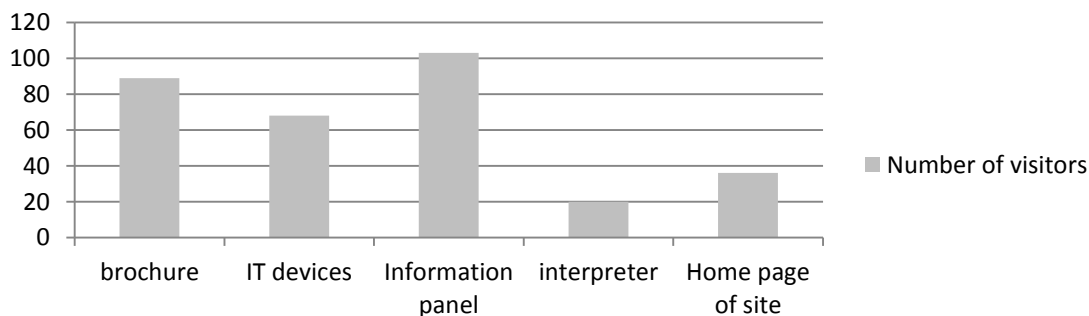


**Interpretation media used to obtain information on Changdeokgung Palace Complex:** A lot of controversy surrounding the visitor experience at Changdeokgung Palace Complex is focused on the available interpretation. Although guided tours are provided, the great majority of visitors (54.1%) used signs as interpretation media. These include numbered way-markers and signs at the site as well as immediately off site and in the car park, providing information on the Palace Complex and the surrounding area. The results suggest that the visitors responded positively to the use of signs and found these easy to understand. The various media used by the visitors to convey the needed interpretation about the site was examined (Table 4 and Figure 2).

**Table 4.** Interpretation media used to obtain information

<i>Interpretation media</i>	<i>Number of visitors</i>	<i>%</i>
brochure	89	28
IT devices	68	22
Information panel	103	33
interpreter	20	6
Home page of site	36	11
Total	316	100

**Figure 2.** Intrepretation media used by visitors





The visitors to the Changdeokgung Palace Complex preferred brochures (39.4%) and IT devices which can be carried during the visits (5.5%), to the guided tours. This suggests that the interpretative activity involving a guided tour suffered from constraints of timing and a lack of flexibility. When participating in a guided tour, a visitor needs to follow the pre-planned timing, routes and the pace of the tour. Brochures and IT devices allow visitors to skip unwanted information, revisit as they wish, and proceed at their own pace; it seems likely that these factors are perceived as convenient.

***Interpretation services needed:*** This study shows that there is a need for new interpretation media. A staffed visitor center usually plays a major role in visitor management at tourism destinations. Its function includes providing information and assistance at the site. Some form of interpretation is frequently delivered at a visitor center. Currently, Changdeokgung Palace Complex lacks a true visitor center, due in part to spatial constraints. However, this survey suggests that the visitors' experience is likely to be 'complete' if they are encouraged to go to a visitor center, rather than only the site itself.

Also, this study indicates that it is necessary for visitors to understand the values of Changdeokgung Palace Complex as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The respondents visited Changdeokgung Palace Complex because it is a world cultural heritage. However, the majority of visitors do not recognize the universal value of Changdeokgung Palace Complex as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Therefore, these values should be explained through interpretation, and whatever interpretation media that may be needed.

In addition, visitors wanted to have access to an interpretation system for children and the youth. Changdeokgung Palace Complex is a place to also teach children and youths about the value of Korean culture and history.

## Conclusion

As the number of visitors to UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Korea increases, the role of interpretation becomes more significant in enhancing the visitors' experiences. To enhance these experiences, it is necessary to understand the visitors' expectations for interpretation. To explore visitor needs for interpretation, a survey was conducted at Changdeokgung Palace Complex in August 14-15 and October 1-2, 2011 and 316 questionnaires were collected.

The research shows that "expanding knowledge" and "being interested in history of the Joseon Dynasty" are important motivational factors in the visit. Second, the great majority of visitors (54.1%) used signs (information panels) rather than guided tours as the interpretation media of choice. They most often used information panels and brochures as interpretation media. Third, there is a need for interpretation to explain the Outstanding Universal Values of Changdeokgung Palace Complex. Lastly, the study indicates that there is a need for an interpretation system for children and youths.

These results show that interpretation media at Changdeokgung Palace Complex often did not provide sufficient information on why Changdeokgung Palace Complex was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Therefore, every interpretation media should include such information. However, the available media should be appropriate for the different age groups of adults, children, and youths.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that this study has a limitation in that it surveyed only one World Heritage Site, Changdeokgung Palace Complex. Therefore, the results may not be generalized to all World Heritage Sites in Korea.



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