

Making Heritage in Vietnamese and Asian Contexts: A Comparative Study

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Received: 9 January 2017.

Accepted: 10 March 2017.

Abstract: The UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage entered into force in 2006 for thirty States that had ratified it on or before 20 January 2006. So far, 174 State Parties have approved or rectified the Convention. In 2005, Vietnam became the 22nd country to ratify it. It is a globally emerging issue that intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is no longer involved solely by local communities. The inscription of heritage on the lists of the 2003 Convention was intended to safeguard ICH elements and their viability, and enhance the visibility of heritage at the local, national, and international levels. This paper is focused on the dynamics and politics of making heritage in Vietnam and the Asian context, emphasising that the UNESCO's inscription goes beyond the objectives of the 2003 Convention, which is aimed safeguarding and promoting the awareness of ICH in general. At the national and local levels, the inscription meets very specific and practical purposes of the State Party and local community.

Keywords: Heritage making, intangible cultural heritage, 2003 Convention, inscription, Vietnam, Asia.

Subject classification: Cultural studies

1. Introduction

In recent years, the field of intangible cultural heritage has received increasing attention of scholars from various disciplines. This was largely in response to the UNESCO's 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter ICH), that raised a lot of consequences and controversies. On the one hand, the Convention has contributed to

enhancing the awareness of agencies, actors, governments, and organisations, i.e. the outsiders to involve in the safeguarding of the heritage. On the other hand, it speeds up the formal process of heritage making of cultural elements that brings in the state as the guarantor and protector of heritage, and meets the local community's needs for their local purposes and for reaping benefits. Today, the concept of heritage is seen through the lens of the politics of recognition

and through various tourism-oriented national and global programmes of public recognition [10], [2], [5], [9].

Cultural heritage has been seen emerging as a global issue particularly since the 2003 UNESCO Convention took effect. The ICH is no longer solely involved by the local communities, but it goes far beyond the national and international levels. It has become both national and international interests and its meanings, functions, and safeguarding measures go now into various directions, including those beyond the objectives of the Convention. This paper will focus on making heritage in Vietnam and its dynamics and politics. From a comparative perspective, the paper will see how the heritage making is associated with other Asian countries and territories such as China, Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea, and Indonesia. It is based on my field research in Vietnam in the recent past and the papers presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) in Asia, Kyoto, Japan, in 2016, on the intangible cultural heritage elements on the UNESCO's lists.

In Vietnam, the cultural heritage has been paid attention to long before the 2003 Convention. Most of the heritage is tangible such as a historical vestige (*di tích lịch sử*), a communal hall, or a temple dedicated to a spirit. The country rectified the 2003 Convention in 2005, becoming the 22nd state party of the Convention (so far, 174 State Parties have either ratified or approved it). Vietnam also amended its Law on Cultural Heritage in 2009 adapting some articles from the Convention on the identification of ICH and its safeguarding measures. The Convention has established three lists: the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need

of Urgent Safeguarding, the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices. Presently, in Vietnam, there are 11 elements, nine of which have been inscribed on the Representative List of ICH of Humanity², two on the List of ICH in need of urgent safeguarding³.

To illustrate how the heritage making in Vietnam goes beyond the objectives of the Convention and causes controversies, the paper will make some points of the Convention in order to have a better picture of the issue. In the conformity with the Convention, the inscription aims at the enhancement of the awareness of ICH in general and of sustainable development. Also, the inscription of the elements contributes to ensuring visibility and awareness of the significance of the intangible cultural heritage and to encouraging dialogue, thus reflecting cultural diversity worldwide and testifying to human creativity. For example, the inscription of the Worship of Hung Kings in Phu Tho (*Tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Hùng Vương ở Phú Thọ*) (inscribed in 2012) provides a basis for consolidation of respectful attitudes towards the past and enhancement of hope for the future among the communities of the Phu Tho region. People recognise clearly the worship of Hung Kings as their cultural heritage to be maintained and transmitted to the following generations, and take part self-consciously as a means of safeguarding cultural spaces and worship sites. This inscription reaffirms the vitality of the symbol of national origin, the pride of the national philosophy of "drinking water, one should remember the source", creating the power for building the national unity in Vietnam. Through the

worship of Hung Kings, Vietnam is able to convey to the world a powerful message on the veneration towards the ancestors as a valuable source of psychological strength in the contemporary society. However, at the national level, the inscription enforces the power and leading role of the Vietnamese government in the management of the Death Anniversary of Hung Kings on the 10th of the third lunar month.

Another example is the element of Practices of Viet Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms (*Thực hành tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu Tam phủ của người Việt*), which was inscribed by UNESCO on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016. At the local level, the inscription of the element would help people in all levels of the society understand the values and significance of the worship of Mother Goddesses. It would enhance the social awareness of spirit possession rituals, and ensure harmony among individuals, groups and local communities. At the national level, the inscription would enhance awareness and visibility of the beliefs and their value for the society in regard to the spiritual life, culture, arts, and social behaviours. It would foster respect for the veneration of mothers and for those who have gained merits by aiding the nation and its people. At the international level, the inscription would enhance understanding of the importance of beliefs in Mother Goddesses, who are symbols of compassion and grace. These beliefs are significant for connecting individuals, groups and communities of the Viet people in Vietnam and overseas, as well as other ethnic groups in the world. However, today, the spirit mediums are making use of the inscription to legitimise their practice of “*lên đồng*” (spirit possession ritual) in dialogue

with the State and the world religions such as Buddhism and Catholicism.

Through the two examples, in Vietnam and elsewhere, it is seen that the understanding of the inscription sometimes goes beyond the objectives of the 2003 Convention. In Vietnam in general, the inscription of the elements makes them become globally recognised, and they are placed in higher positions than those recognised at the national and local levels. Also, the UNESCO-inscribed elements are expected to receive much more attention by the government, authorities or international organisations who financially support them. From these points of view, their inscription on the UNESCO’s list goes beyond the 2003 Convention’s objectives. Taking the Festival at Giong and Soc Temples as an example, the material structures of the element such as the worshipping buildings or temples are expected to be maintained, expanded, or rebuilt, and the festival is to be organised on a larger scale. Also, different actors (authorities, scholars, cultural managers and other stakeholders) work out a project to develop sustainable tourism in order to benefit from the element. On the other hand, the element becomes the pride of the nation and localities, and so on. Thus, the element has been made up with something more meaningful, more solemn, and more imposing than it is used to be.

In fact, the ICH elements have been created, practiced, safeguarded and transmitted for hundreds of years by their bearing communities, and their visibility continues to be ensured by their cultural carriers. The communities decide on the safeguarding measures and how their elements would be promoted. The government and authorities guarantee that

the elements have their support in terms of the legal framework, guidance and direction, not by means of direct involvement and participation in their practices.

However, today, there is a discussion on the effect (*hiệu ứng*) of ICH in Vietnam in the media that provinces are now trying to compete against one another and striving to find the ways to have their local elements inscribed by UNESCO. As indicated by the Operational Directives of the 2003 Convention, at least one file per submitting state should be processed during the two-year circle within the agreed number of nominations per biennium, in conformity with paragraph 34 of the Operational Directives. [12] This leads to the situation that many elements within a country deserve to be inscribed and many communities and provinces want their elements to be submitted to UNESCO. This causes the competition among provinces within a State Party on what elements shall be recommended to the Secretariat of the 2003 Convention for the evaluation in the subsequent year.

In the context of Vietnam, the National Committee of Cultural Heritage has the functions and duties to provide advisory to and counsel the Prime Minister on heritage, including the ICH. Thus, Vietnam has its national potential list that has been approved by the Office of the Government in 2012. The document included ten approved elements that were supposed to be submitted to UNESCO during the period of 2012-2016. The approved list by the Vietnamese government did not go through, and not all of the listed elements were submitted to UNESCO. By now, only two elements on the list have been inscribed, namely Vi and Giam Folk Songs of Nghe Tinh (*Dân ca Ví, Giặm Nghệ Tĩnh*) (inscribed in 2014) and the

Practices of Viet Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms (*Thực hành tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu Tam phủ của người Việt*), the original title of which was the *Chầu Văn* ritual of the Viet. And some elements on the list have been approved for the compilation of the files and submission, to UNESCO, including the Art of Bai Choi of the Viet in South Central Vietnam (*Nghệ thuật Bài Chòi miền Trung Việt Nam*) (to be inscribed in 2017), The Art of Xoe of the Thai (*Nghệ thuật Xòe Thái*), the Then Ritual of the Tay (*Nghi lễ Then của người Tày*), the Art of Small Stone Caves of the Minorities in Ha Giang province (*Nghệ thuật canh tác hốc đá của các dân tộc thiểu số ở Hà Giang*). The other elements, namely the Art of Dong Ho Woodblock Painting (*Nghệ thuật tranh khắc gỗ Đông Hồ*), the Initiation Ritual of the Dao people (*Nghi lễ cấp sắc của người Dao*), the Art of the Traditional Pottery Making of the Cham (*Nghệ thuật làm gốm truyền thống của người Chăm*), the Art of Du Ke of the Khmer people in the South (*Nghệ thuật Dù Kê của người Khmer Nam bộ*), have not been considered for the compilation of the files for submission to UNESCO. Meanwhile, the inscribed elements of the Art of Don ca Tai tu Music and Song in Southern Vietnam (*Nghệ thuật Đờn ca tài tử Nam bộ*) (2013) and the Tugging Rituals and Games (*Nghi lễ và trò chơi kéo cò*) (2015) were not on the government-approved list.

As per Article 16 of the 2003 Convention, the objective of the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is to ensure better visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and awareness of its significance, and to encourage dialogue which respects cultural diversity. And as per Article 17, the objective of the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need

of Urgent Safeguarding is to take appropriate safeguarding measures. That is to say, the inscription is for the very noble objectives in the sake of cultural diversity, open dialogue and mutual understanding, rather than the hierarchy or ranking.

The noble objectives of the 2003 Convention sometimes go beyond the understanding about the inscription and the need of the local communities. Today, in Vietnam, the local communities such as in Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces with the Vi and Giam Folk Songs, and Phu Dong and Soc Son communities with the Giong Festival expect that their elements are to be supported and paid attention to by international and governmental authorities and with financial support and that of human resources. They want the elements to be known widely nationally and internationally, and more tourists to come, and the elements to bring about benefits. Therefore, here I can see the gap between the UNESCO's objectives of the inscription and the local discourse [11].

From the local perspectives, the practitioners of the heritage elements relied on the inscription for the legitimacy of their practices which satisfied their own needs. For years, the spirit possession rituals have been under the strict management and were condemned as "social evils". The inscription serves as the tool to let the spirit mediums have their more freedom in their practices. For the space of the gong culture, the inscription provides the local communities with opportunities to satisfy their own cultural, economic, and political interests. They make use of UNESCO's inscription of their gong culture to establish gong clubs and to perform a mixture of gong and modern music shows to attract tourists. The inscription goes beyond its

objectives to safeguard the viability and visibility of heritage elements for future generations, as it is being used by the local community members to pursue their own agendas. For the Art of Don ca tai tu Music and Song in Southern Vietnam, the singers use the inscription for their performance at restaurants and hotels to make money for their life and to use it to fill the dossiers to apply for the titles of people's and emeritus folk artists. I would like to stress that the UNESCO inscription goes beyond the objectives of the 2003 Convention, which is aimed at safeguarding and promoting the awareness of intangible cultural heritage in general. At the national and local levels, the inscription meets very specific and practical purposes of the State Party and local community.

2. The politics of making heritage in Asian contexts

Today in Vietnam and in Asian contexts, the politics of making heritage becomes a controversial issue. With focuses upon Asian contexts, in this part, my paper demonstrates the process of heritage making, its consequences and controversies. The paper examines the different elements, forces, and impacts of heritage making in ethnographic contexts including China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Indonesia. Through the examination of the five presentations given at the annual meeting of the AAS in Asia in Kyoto, in 2016, including the presentations entitled *Beyond the Politics of Heritage: Intangible Cultural Heritage in China* by Chang Jung-a [3]; *The Making of an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hong Kong: Tai O Dragon Boat Water Parade* by Tik-Sang Liu [6]; *New*

Issues of Cultural Heritage in the Old Village of Sambe: Between and Betwixt Cultural Practices and Cultural Politics by Hahm Hanhee [4]; *Cultural Heritage as Commodity: Production and Consumption of Traditional Textiles in Indonesia* by Ayami Nakatani [8]; *Cultural Heritage and Creative City Safeguarding through Development* by Han Kyung-Koo [7].

The five presentations study the hemp weaving, dragon boat water parade, the *batik*, the folk culture and heritage resources in general, and thus share some similarities and, however, also dissimilarities. The different presentations are focused on the following issues that reveal the politics of making heritage

2.1. National, ethnic and regional cultural identities

The paper by Chang Jung - a makes an interesting case on the heritage making in China from folk culture to intangible cultural heritage, demonstrating the diversity and richness of the Chinese culture. The paper argues how ICH is engaged with constructing the identity of what he refers to as *Chineseness*. The author makes a strong case about the ICH that reconstructs this *Chineseness*. The ICH protection movement shows the process in which the values of the ICH change. The paper makes contributions with new observations on how to analyse the process of what makes folk culture elements be of *Chineseness*. The author furthermore provides insights on the shift in the meaning of folk culture, in which its perception has been dramatically changed: from the destruction by elites who perceived the practices as superstition to what it is today, in

which the folk cultural heritage is perceived as an important resource for spreading the Great Chinese Culture throughout the world.

The issue on the transformation of ICH from an old and backward element into the national cultural heritage is examined in more detail in the paper by Tik-Sang Liu. Drawing on a case in Tai O, the Dragon Boat Water Parade, his paper provides evidence of how these kinds of cultural practices are no longer regarded as backward, and, instead, how they are today perceived as exciting “national events” that contributes to the cultural identity of the citizens of Hong Kong. The author emphasises in this paper how, since Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, local cultural elements have become increasingly important in the construction of the identity for the Hong Kong citizens. Furthermore, the Tai O Dragon Boat Water Parade was inscribed in the national list of ICH in 2011, with which it has become part of the ICH for Hong Kong. The event proves to contribute to sense of cultural identity, providing the citizens of Hong Kong with a sense of pride for the Dragon Boat guilds.

Ayami Nakatani, in the presentation on the traditional textile of the Balinese *songket*, similarly interprets how these practices in Indonesia can be perceived as a manifestation of their regional-cum-ethnic identity. She, however, also emphasises how this creates a larger market for the urban consumers beyond their original locality.

Drawing on a case on the revival of the hemp weaving in the old village of Sambe in the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Professor Hahm Hanhee shows how the Korean government has similarly started to re-appreciate these folk cultures of remote old

villages. Over the last fifty years, the Korean government has paid more attention to the elite's cultural heritage and individuals' best practices. Through the case of the hemp weaving, the author examines the intersection of the macro-and micro-politics and policies inside and outside the village. The author provides these insights via introducing the story of the women of the village, which explains how they decided to revive the hemp weaving collectively by raising funds and organising it through a collective weaving organisation. The story shows how they could sell these products, which enabled them to receive more assistance and funding. Drawing on the case, the author demonstrates how the micro-politics in the village has played an important role in the re-consideration by the government of their cultural policies. This shows the importance of the 2003 Convention that emphasises the active role of the community in identifying and safeguarding their own heritage.

2.2. *Community members, tourists, and mediators*

As aforementioned, Hahm Hanhee shows the importance of the micro-politics through looking at the roles of the old women weavers in the Sambe village in the revival of its traditional weaving. The case introduced by professor Tik-Sang Liu showed how, in contrast in the development of the Tai O Dragon Boat Water Parade for tourists, the protecting of ICH can also lead to the losing of the local members and local participants. The story about the Dragon Boat Water Parade is made as the standard version of the traditional events, so they become easy for tourists to understand. In

this (macro-political) process of heritage revival/protection, the practices actually have lost their religious meaning. The parade has become a tourist attraction, and participants pay more attention to the spectacle of the colourful folk performances, rather than its religious meaning. Tik-Sang Liu raises an important question on how to safeguard ICH in a way that it remains a meaningful cultural practice for the community members.

The presentation by Ayami Nakatani also provides the evidence of how authenticity can be lost in the process of heritage making. After the Indonesian *batik* was inscribed on the Representative List of the ICH of Humanities in 2009, it helped revitalising a stagnant market for *batik*. The market revived due to mass-produced fabrics printed with *batik*-like motifs that have replaced the time-consuming and expensive hand-waxed and hand-stamped *batik* textiles. Many customers turned the *batik* fabrics into Western-type clothing, and they no longer care about the authenticity. However, the Balinese *songket* with its dyeing techniques and ancestral motifs are still used by designers and tailors to produce jackets and dresses for the wider market and urban consumers. The author has emphasised on how, in the process of producing the *batik* as part of a larger market, mediators play an important role by attempting to intervene with the design and marketing of the traditional textiles. She points out that the transformability and the potential for wide-ranging usage are vital elements for facilitating the "*commodification*" beyond the original context. The paper anticipates that the precariousness and transient nature of the market may bring the sustainability of *authentic batik* at risk. She demonstrates the

lack of the active roles of the local community members and weavers in the process of marketing and producing the *batik*.

The paper by Han Kyung-Koo addresses another interesting case, introducing the process of application of Jeonju City, South Korea, for the UNESCO Creative City Network (UCCN). The network encourages the emergence of “Creative Cities” by using their cultural resources to identify, rediscover, and redefine them and develop their potential for economic growth. Professor Han Kyung-Koo suggests that more attention be paid to the UNESCO Creative Cities Network for a number of reasons, among which is that the network will help raise general awareness of cultural heritage and sustainable development. The author furthermore raises also the question on the modification of cultural heritage as to make tourists more comfortable or pleased. The use of the ICH for commercialisation and the tourism industry for the benefit of the local communities is a problematic aspect mentioned by UNESCO. In the Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage that was updated in 2012 UNESCO suggests applying the additional safeguarding measures to prevent the negative impacts of commercialisation and tourism on ICH. All the issues of tourism and national pride, or the benefits of the elements, lead the safeguarding of ICH and the involvement by actors/outsideers to go beyond the Convention.

3. Beyond the 2003 Convention

As analysed, Ayami Nakatani in the case of Indonesia shows that the Balinese *batik* goes

beyond its authenticity by adapting the Western style of fabrics for the tourism market and making cheap products for better sales. Meanwhile, as said earlier, Tik-Sang Liu and Han Kyung-Koo furthermore raise the question on the modification of cultural heritage as to make tourists more comfortable or pleased. The article by Chang Jung-a goes beyond the manipulation of the ICH by the Chinese government by emphasising *Chineseness*. She points out the gap between the cultural heritage of the local bearers and the “refined and outstanding culture” as propagandised by the Chinese government. Her statement is associated with the other cases in South Korea and Vietnam when these two State Parties hail the ICH with the greatest and outstanding values. At the community level, Hahm Hanhee shows the importance of the micro-politics via looking at the roles of the old women weavers in Sambe village in reviving its traditional weaving.

In Vietnam’s context on ICH and the five other cases examined in this paper, I can see that the understanding of the ICH elements, especially the inscribed elements, goes beyond the 2003 Convention. The elements are made by outsiders [1], different actors (government, local authorities, researchers, managers of the cultural sectors) who share their common politics to make up the elements with something “imposing” (*hoành tráng*), the appropriation (*chiếm đoạt*, [9, pp.311-346]), producing benefits, getting elevated to the world level, and so on. That reveals that the inscription is seen to be more of material value than intangible value as stated in the objectives of the Convention regarding cultural diversity, open dialogue and the local bearers’ creativity.

In this paper, I would like to raise two points. *First*, while the 2003 Convention emphasises the cultural identity and the functions of the ICH for its *community* and the skills and knowledge of the *community members*, it is observed that some governments, managers of the cultural sectors, scholars, and other actors still misinterpret the Convention. They still tend to attach some of the criteria from the 1972 Convention to it, in particular, the one on the universal excellence. One example of this is the paper by Chang Jung-a, that indicates the excellent and authentic features of the cultural heritage that makes the “Great Chinese culture.” The “excellence” is interpreted as “distinctiveness in China of diverse ethnic groups and regions.” The author raises the question on “the universal excellence of Chinese culture”.

Second, the updated Operational Directives includes an inappropriate glossary that was previously used, such as references to authenticity, masterpieces, original, unique, exceptional, correct, ancient, the world heritage of humanity, labellisation, branding, and so on. One example of this is the paper by Han Kyung-Koo, in which he mixed up the 2003 and 1972 Conventions and uses still the vocabulary of “unique”, “the outstanding cultural resources” without the distinction either in the 2003 Convention on the ICH or the 1972 Convention on the world heritage. I would like to stress that the focus of the 2003 Convention has been shifted, and we should use the appropriate vocabulary that follows the spirit of the most recent interpretation of the Convention such as those in the UNESCO’s Aide-mémoire and the Operational Directives.

4. Conclusion

The UNESCO 2003 Convention and its lists, namely the representative list and the list of ICH in need of safeguarding, entail contradictions and controversies. They contribute to safeguarding of ICH in general and ensuring its vitality for the future. At the same time, they involve much of the politics of recognition and safeguarding. Sometimes, they impede the living culture and transform the meanings of the cultural elements after their inscription. The case of Vietnam’s context and the five elements of other Asian countries and territories presented in the annual meeting of the AAS in Kyoto in 2016, which were of the heritage in mainland China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and South Korea, reflect the dynamics and politics of the heritage making process. I believe that the topic on how to adequately engage in heritage making is still open for further debate. It needs much more critical discussions of the UNESCO’s 2003 Convention and lists as part of future meetings and many other conferences and publications to come.

Notes

² This list includes *Nhã nhạc*, Vietnamese Court Music (*Nhã nhạc cung đình Huế*) (2003), Space of Gong Culture in the Central Highlands (*Không gian văn hóa Công, Chiêng Tây Nguyên*) (2005), *Quan họ* Folk Songs of Bac Ninh (*Dân ca Quan họ Bắc Ninh*) (2008), Giong Festival of Phu Dong and Soc Temples (*Hội Gióng ở đền Phù Đổng và đền Sóc*) (2010), Worship of Hung Kings in Phu Tho (*Tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Hùng Vương ở Phú Thọ*) (2012), Art of Don ca tai tu Music and Song in Southern Vietnam (*Nghệ thuật đờn ca Tài tử Nam Bộ*) (2013),

Vi and Giam Folk Songs of Nghe Tinh (*Dân ca Ví, Giặm Nghệ Tĩnh*) (2014), Tugging Rituals and Games (multinational nomination) (*Nghi lễ và trò chơi kéo co*) (2015) and Practices Related to Viet Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms (*Thực hành tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu Tam phủ của người Việt*) (2016).

³ This list includes *Ca trù* Singing (*Hát Ca trù*) (2009) and Xoan Singing of Phu Tho Province (*Hát Xoan Phú Thọ*) (2011).

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