

Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding System in Vietnam

Nguyen Kim Dung, Expert
Ministry of Culture and Information

1. Context

The Government of Viet Nam views the identification, protection and promotion of intangible cultural heritage as vital in the present period of rapid socio-economic transformation. The Government also aims to ensure that the country's diverse culture with 54 ethnic groups play a role in promoting social and economic development.

Beside the positive impacts by the globalization and modernization in the present time, the rapid socio-economic mechanism changes lead to the changing of cultures and are threatening to eliminate various items of intangible cultural heritage, and thus, leading to the elimination of the cultural diversity of the world in general and of Vietnam as well. In response to these threats, Vietnam has created a government mechanism for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage with various major directions and gained notable experiences as follows:

2. Legal framework:

2.1. Law on ICH

On the 29th June 2001, the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam adopted the *Law on Cultural Heritage*, in which, the whole chapter III is dedicated to intangible cultural heritage. The Law acknowledges that Cultural Heritage has played a significant role in the national development and preservation of the Vietnamese people. It defined: “*The State's policies shall encourage work to collect, compile, translate, inventory, classify and preserve works of literature, art, science, oral tradition and folklore of the multi-ethnic Vietnamese community. These shall be disseminated domestically as well as through foreign cultural exchange.*” (Chapter III, Article 23).

2.2. Decree

Further actions for intangible heritage protection were promoted in the “*Decree on the Detailed Regulations to Implement some Articles of the Law on Cultural Heritage*” (passed on November 11th 2002 by the Government of Vietnam). Chapter II, Article 7 defines “*The State shall protect and promote the values of intangible cultural heritage through the following means:*

- *Organizing the implementation of the projects on nationwide research, collection, inventory, classification of intangible cultural heritage;*
- *Conducting regular and periodical collection, inventory, classification of intangible cultural heritage;*
- *Increasing public awareness of traditional cultural values.*

- *Increasing the tasks of transmission skills to the younger generations, dissemination, publication, performance and revitalization various forms of intangible cultural heritage, putting priority to those expressions that are in need of urgent protection;*
 - *Investing budgets to the activities of safeguarding and promoting ICH, preventing the risks of deterioration and loss of intangible cultural heritage;*
 - *Expanding the socialization in the protection and promotion of intangible cultural heritage;*
 - *Providing free-of-charge evaluation, operational guidelines and support for archiving and preserving intangible cultural heritage at the request of organizations and/or individuals that possess intangible cultural heritage;*
- Among the features that compose the ICH, the human being or the cultural carriers, especially the ICH bearers and custodians are the core and most important. One of the most effective ways to achieve the sustainable safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage would be to guarantee that the bearers of that heritage are recognized for their excellence, and to ensure that they are able to practice and document their knowledge and skills and transmit them to young artists.

Therefore, the State shall accord the honor and adopt treatment policies to artisans and artists through the following measures:

- *Conferring and conferring posthumously, orders, decorations, medals, State Titles of honor and other forms of honor to artisans and artists who hold, preserve and spread traditional arts and professional know-how which are part of the typical intangible cultural heritage in accordance with the provisions of law;*
- *Adopting the policy of facilitating and covering part of the costs for activities of creation, performance, display, presentation and product consumption to the artisans and artists who hold, preserve and spread traditional arts and professional know-how which are part of the typical intangible cultural heritage;*
- *Providing monthly allowances and other preferences to the artisans and artists who are honored with State Title but have low income, difficult circumstances and those living in difficult areas and particularly difficult areas in accordance with the provisions of law.*

3. Institutions and Organizations involving in the safeguard and Promotion of Cultural Heritage in general, Intangible cultural Heritage in particular:

3.1. Governmental Organizations

3.1.1 Ministry of Culture and Information

The Ministry of Culture and Information bears the primary responsibility within the Government for implementing state management of cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) and is responsible for:

- (1) Preservation and protection of cultural heritage;*
- (2) Implementation of measures to prevent damage to cultural heritage;*
- (3) Development and implementation of strategies, plans, frameworks, and policies to further the work of protecting and promoting cultural heritage;*
- (4) Issuance and implementation of legal regulations regarding cultural heritage;*
- (5) Organization and guidance of activities to protect and promote cultural heritage; communication, dissemination and legal education concerning cultural heritage;*
- (6) Organization and management of research activities; training and preparation of specialized staff on cultural heritage;*
- (7) Mobilization, management and use of resources to protect and promote cultural heritage;*
- (8) Organization and provision of incentives and rewards in protection and promotion of cultural heritage;*
- (9) Organization and management of international cooperation in protection and promotion of cultural heritage;*
- (10) Inspection and control of the implementation of the law, settlement of petitions and complaints, and treatment of violations of the law on cultural heritage.*

3.1.2 Under the Ministry of Culture and Information: there are institutions directly involving in safeguarding and managing ICH, such as:

- Department of Cultural Heritage;
- Institute of Culture and Information;
- Research Institute of Musicology;
- Various museums in Vietnam;
- Etc, ...

3.1.3 Other professional institutes and organizations from different branches also do the documentation, collection and research on intangible cultural heritage. They are: the Vietnam Institute of Folklore Studies (belonging to the National Centre for Social Science and Humanity); the Han - Nom Research Institute, the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists; Departments of Culture and Information of 64 state - level cities and provinces through out the country, etc...

3.1.4 Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Ministry of Culture and Information established the “Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage” in 2001 (hereafter called the Committee for ICH. The Committee is chaired by the Director of the Department of National

Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture and Information and provides advice to the Minister on the documentation, recognition, transmission and revitalization of intangibles cultural heritage. The members have technical expertise as well as heritage managerial capacity at a senior level.

3.2. Public organizations

3.2.1 Vietnam Cultural Heritage Association

On April 23, 2004, the Vietnam Cultural Heritage Association was established under the control of the State and protection of the Ministry of Culture and Information. This shows the expansion of the involvement of public sectors to the safeguarding and promoting of intangible cultural heritage.

3.2.2 Vietnamese Folklorists Association has branch offices in every provinces and actively involve in the safeguarding of ICH in Vietnam.

3.2.3 Other clubs or societies: War Veterans Society, Vietnam Fatherland' s Front, Age-old person' s association;

4. Some concrete examples of activities and experiences in Vietnam:

Pursuant to the Law on Cultural Heritage of Vietnam and the guidance in the Decree, since 2001, a National Targets Program for cultural heritage management has been conducted. Hundreds of projects have been actively implemented by various governmental as well as private organizations or institutions and gained remarkable results. However, most of these projects are for researches, collections and documentations (An ICH data bank has been set up at the Institute of Culture and Information and at the Research Institute of Musicology).

To Implement the National Targets Program, 23 projects for the comprehensive ICH survey in different small – population ethnic groups have been carried out. Besides, on June 17, 2003, the Prime Minister of Vietnam had signed a Decision to approve a project proposed by the Museum of the Cultures of Ethnic Groups of Vietnam for the preservation and development of the cultures of the Vietnamese ethnic minorities. The project mostly concentrated in research and collection work.

Due to the limitation of the awareness and other economic conditions, most of the ethnic minorities are not able to set up their own mechanism for the safeguard of their ICH and have to depend on the supports from the government. Only a few villages are striving to revive some of their traditions which fall into oblivion or are at risk of disappearing.

In the passing years, about over 60 projects for comprehensive ICH survey (the initiatives of inventory – making) in various provinces were approved, but approaches and results are very limited and different from province to province

- Identify the representative ICH items;
- Understanding of the number and status of ICH items, which have fallen into oblivion, which need to revive, and which are at risk of disappearing and need urgent protections;
- Having basis to build a list on endangered heritage, a list on those with academic research results, and list of all the ICH known in a given province ...
- Being a basis for the assessments and an overview on the real situation of intangible cultural heritage of the whole country or of a given region; depending on that, building relevant policies, strategies or action plans for the safeguard and promotion of intangible cultural heritage of our nation.
- Systemizing and archiving all the items of intangible cultural heritage from various areas in all over the country; select the most outstanding ICH items to publicize nationwide and internationally (in the forms of publications, CD, VCD and scientific films...)
- Helping in the Establishment of a database of Vietnamese intangible cultural heritage for the reference of researchers and future generations.

As, being designated by the Ministry of Culture and Information with a new function of ICH state management in the whole country, during 2003 and 2004, the Department of Cultural Heritage has carried out several pilot projects. Among these was the *pilot project*: “*comprehensive survey and inventory on the intangible cultural heritage of Yen Hung District, Quang Ninh province*”.

Yen Hung district in Quang Ninh province was chosen for the following reasons:

- Consisting of a large range of terrain, from mountainous to plane and sea zones, Quang Ninh province is diverse in natural conditions and ecological environment.
- Having an age – old history and Being the homeland of 20 (out of 54) Vietnamese ethnic groups, this province is really rich and diverse in cultural traditions.
- Quang Ninh has around 500 relics including many famous cultural and historical monuments of state – level and Ha Long Bay, which has been twice recognized as World Heritage.
- Beside the negative impacts of globalization, the rapid industrialization, urbanization and tourist development in this province bring along threats of elimination of many ICH items.

- Among the others, Yen Hung is an important district which has almost typical characteristics of Quang Ninh province: being one of the oldest areas, having different terrains, having 200 out of 500 valuable cultural and historical relics (33 were recognized as state – level relics) and accompanied are various famous festivals and cultural traditions.

Methodology:

- Community – based implementation;
- Interdisciplinary
- Experts consultancy ...

Concrete Activities were carried out, step by step as follows:

Preparation stage:

1. The Department of Cultural Heritage (MoCI) organized several meetings with the Quang Ninh Department of Culture and Information to discuss to have an agreement in principle on the purpose and contents of the project. to carry out the project;
2. Established a proposal with concrete plans and budgets to be submitted to the MoCI; identified the venues to implement ICH surveys; created survey sheets (see appendix 1, 2, 3);

Implementation stage:

3. Organized an experts meeting to consult members of the Committee for the ICH on the methodologies of the project and ICH survey forms.
4. Provided professional training workshops on the significance of the safeguard of ICH for local authorities and implementing persons; provided guidance/ gave instruction on how to fill out the survey sheets;
 - Conducted quantity survey (using survey sheets);
 - Synthesized and wrote reports on the situation of ICH of Yen Hung District.

Ending stage:

Organized a final meeting for the assessment on the results of the project.

Achievements and lesson learnt:

The pilot project gained some certain achievements: Intangible cultural heritage of 20 communes of Yen Hung District have been comprehensively surveyed. Around 5900 ICH items have been filled out in 1569 files (following 5 categories recommended by UNESCO: language and scripts as a mean of communication; knowledge and practice of nature and universe; social practice, rituals and festive events; Craftsmanship. Through this work, the knowledge and awareness of the significance of ICH safeguarding of the community and local

authorities has been improved. Working ability in the ICH aspect of the local cultural workers is strengthened.

The disadvantage of the project lies in that there had never been before, a state organization or institution to be officially responsible for a comprehensive ICH inventory. Therefore, there has not been an unified and effective method system or criteria for this work; limitation of the knowledge and experiences in recognizing and identifying or categorizing intangible cultural heritage of the project implementers; **lack of scientific tools** (equipments, guide book, inventory sheets...); shortage of budget as well as labor source; the accuracy of the data is therefore not high enough.

However, the results achieved provide an over view on the status of intangible cultural heritage of Quang Ninh province in general and of Yen Hung district in particular. This is a data basis and a lesson for inventory – making for a region or for the whole country, in both terms of theory and practice.

Besides, responding to the UNESCO' s Decision on the *Establishment of a System of Living cultural properties* (more commonly referred to as Living Human Treasures), we have built up a proposal for the establishment of Living Human Treasures in Vietnam and searching for counterparts and sponsors.

As mentioned above, in Vietnam, various institutions have been carrying out hundreds of projects aiming at safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage. The appearance of the Law on Cultural Heritage, the Decree of Vietnam, the UNESCO' s Guidelines and 2003 Convention... are significant legal framework, creating favorable conditions for the ICH safeguard. However, most of these research institutions or organizations works independently without sharing experiences to one another. Good or bad lessons of the previous activities are not known by the latter doers. Therefore, we have also been conducting a project for the Establishment of Project Database and recently organized a national workshop to identify best practices on the safeguarding and promoting of intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam in order to serve better the ICH state management in the nationwide. The workshop was under the assistance and guidance of UNESCO Office in Hanoi and a specialist from Smithsonian Institution, Dr. Frank Proschan. The Department of Cultural Heritage and is preparing a national workshop aiming at drawing assessment (with both, good and bad lessons) of the status of ICH project implementation.

In cooperation with the Hanoi City' s Committee and the Ministry of Education and Training, another pilot project for the integration of the ICH education into schools curriculum has also been implemented step by step. The first step, pilot stage has been completed successfully.

Understanding the importance and urgent of safeguarding ICH in Vietnam and responding to the appeal of UNESCO, in October, 2005, Vietnam ratified UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003.

Vietnam is more and more actively involving in the mission of safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage. As the results, for the third proclamation of UNESCO in 2005, "The Space of Gong Culture in the Central Highland of Vietnam" is recently inscribed in the List of 43 "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible cultural Heritage of Humanity". This is the proud of the Vietnamese people. But, how to keep our intangible cultural heritage alive in the communities, how to safeguard and promote our intangible cultural heritage values is a crucial question and we need more cooperation and assistance from international organizations (governmental as well as NGOs), such as UNESCO, ACCU, Korea and other countries who have been pioneer and experienced in this field.

Thank you very much for your attention!