Preservation and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam
(Some results and practical experiences)

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Introduction
The cultural heritage of the world has been accumulated in the progress of the development of the mankind and early respected. But people could only know about the tangible cultural heritage through thousands of sites/relics, which were recognized by UNESCO and listed as the world heritages. The diversity forms in construction and architecture of the sites of different ages have brought the rich value to history, art and science. Comparing with the value of tangible cultural heritage, the intangible cultural heritage is in no way inferior. Unfortunately, it is “intangible”. So its value and glittering and mysterious beauty could be only found when it is manifested/expressed or practiced/performe. The intangible heritage actually has glorified the aspect of the spiritual life of nations before. But it is now hidden in the modern society by the tendency of globalization in culture. This liability to globalization in culture might lose the richness and the diversity of the world culture as well as the cultural identity of each country and ethnic group.

More than 30 years, after the convention for the safeguarding of cultural and historic relics and natural beautiful sites -1972. The Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage issued by UNESCO in 10/2003 could help all country members to prevent the above liability and make comprehensive assessments of the world cultural heritages including both the intangible and tangible ones. Recently, a Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions issued by UNESCO in 11/2005 has indicated the great role and value of intangible cultural heritage in the cultural life of the world today.

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1 “Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage”, Article 2:

The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skill-as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural space associated therewith- that communities, groups, and in some cases, individual recognize as part of cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirement of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.

The “intangible cultural heritage” as defined in paragraph 1 above, is manifested inter alia in the following domains:

a) Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;

b) Performing arts
With those conventions, a clear definition has been made and what are concrete expressions of intangible cultural heritage could be easily understood. From this unified content, we will easily together exchange experiences on activities in every aspect of intangible cultural heritage preserving and promoting work.

1. The first bringing into full play of the value of traditional cultural heritage in Vietnam

Vietnam is a country of multi-nations and considered as a small South-East Asia in Asia with 54 ethnic groups belonging to the language groups: Viet - Muong, Tay - Thai, H’mong - Dzao, Mol- Khmer, Tang - Myanmar, Malayo - Polineziean and Hoa. The diversity of nations has been the diversity of Vietnam traditional culture including many different styles and each one of every groups’ style has its own special characteristic.

Right after gaining the independence in 1945, the State of Democratic Republic Vietnam has paid attention to the national cultural heritage. First, the decrees No. 65 (1945) and No. 517 (1957) were promulgated for protection and restoration of tangible cultural heritage (historic and cultural relics and revolut ional monuments). Since early 60s decade of the last century, Vietnam Commission of Social Sciences (Vietnam Institute of Social Sciences at present) has been established. This organization combined with the Ministry of Culture (Ministry of Culture and information at present) to collect and study in order to promote the value of old-traditional culture in building the modern cultural life. The valuable researches and discoveries/findings from old-traditional culture (intangible cultural heritage) of the ethnic groups have been proclaimed in many research works on ethnology, folk culture and folk art performance.

Due to the economic difficulty of many years of war, the results in exploiting from these treasures are still limited. At that time, the collectors and researchers of Vietnam could not be armed with mordent equipments to record images of the performing arts and expressions of the intangible cultural phenomena. Many festivals, rites, folk religious practices, styles of folk art performance as well as the manipulations of traditional handicraft were only described by words or by some poor photographs. However, these monographs would be very precious practical documents for the restoration of many intangible cultural heritages, which have been nearly fallen into oblivion at current time, and also useful reference materials for finding and study of changes of intangible cultural heritage.

2. Program on preservation and development on the intangible cultural heritages in Vietnam

It is considered that the activities of the Decade of world cultural development (1988-1997) mobilized by UNESCO in country members was the great landmark of fully awareness of the value of intangible cultural heritage. This activity aimed at the preservation and promotion of the intangible cultural values so as to keep the national cultural identity. After that, in 1997, the State of Vietnam assigned the Ministry of Culture and Information to run the national cultural program on protection and promotion of intangible cultural values.
The Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (now is The Vietnam Institute of Culture and Information) has co-ordinated with the local organs (The Culture and Information Department in provinces) in carrying out this program. The Vietnam Institute of Culture and Information was also the centre to keep the results of the program. In July of 2001, The Law on Cultural Heritage was issued in Vietnam. This includes 7 chapters and 74 articles. The article 4 in chapter I of this law pointed out “Intangible cultural heritage consists of intellectual products with historical, cultural or scientific value that have been preserved by memory, writing, passed down through oral tradition, teaching, performance and all other means and forms. It includes language, writing, works of literature, art, science, oral tradition, folklore, ways of life, lifestyles, festivals, secrets of traditional handicrafts, knowledge of traditional medicine, cuisine, ethnic costumes and other forms of traditional knowledge.” This article has indicated more clearly the necessity to protect, maintain and develop the Vietnam intangible cultural heritage in the process of building the National culture at present.

The fund for this program is considered much more than that in the past. But it is still insignificant in comparing with the restoration fund for tangible heritages (it is only equal with restoration fund for some heritages). However, after 8 years carrying out this program in the whole country, there have been 647 projects of being done and to be done with the following tasks: collection, study, protection and restoration of the intangible cultural heritages. Among these tasks, priority should be given to studying and preserving the intangible cultural heritages which are likely to disappear. The whole 54 ethnic groups inhabiting in Vietnam have been objects of collection, study and protection of intangible cultural heritage. With the equipments invested by the State, a Centre of data of the intangible cultural heritage of Vietnam’s ethnic groups has been established in Vietnam Institute of Culture and Information. The intangible cultural heritage documents are kept here. Those intangible cultural heritages are manifested through the contents of VCD, DVD, CD-Rom and describing texts, which have been produced from the results of the program on collection, study, preservation and restoration of the intangible cultural heritages of ethnic groups.

After a period of implementing the program, those people who preserve and transfer the outstandings and skills in practicing the intangible cultural heritage expressions has been mentioned in Vietnam.

3. The making full use of and protection folk- Artists and “Living Human Treasures” in Vietnam

In the agenda of the 142nd session in 1993, UNESCO has supported the idea of setting up a Living Human Treasures System that was put forward by Korea (Hancook) and encouraged members to carry out. Those living human treasures are really brilliant folk artists who save and transfer the intangible cultural treasure to the later generations. The aim of setting up the Living Human Treasures System would help nations, which there are still no policies for folk artist (a part of protection and promotion intangible cultural heritage) might refer to experiences of others in making artist titles. These experiences could be found from Thailand (1993), Japan (1994), Philippine (having decree on” National artist” in 1973), France, and Romania... The activity of Living Human Treasures System is also aimed at the youth in order to encourage them to pursue and continue the works of the old artists.

In 1998 and 1999, workshops on Living Human Treasures System were held in Korea for the members of UNESCO. The delegates not only mentioned about the impacts of world culture on the traditional culture of nations, but they also put forward a question that how to ensure the existence of the manifesting forms of intangible culture in every country. This is the matter relating to the interest of folk artists. Activities in order to exploit and protect the folk artist as well as the transferring of the intangible cultural treasure from generation to generation were also mentioned. Those are favourable policies on the artists support, giving performances, exploitation, copyright, know-how transferring and subsidy to maintaining performances of the folk artists...

In Vietnam, folk artists naturally have been, preserving their national intangible cultural heritages in a silent and voluntarily manner. Among them there are many who Living Human treasures are really. They haven’t been awarded a title and received their interest protection yet. The awarding title for those people is absolutely difficult for the reason that this is sensitive and may hurt them in the application of criteria for selection. Yet, this appears even more difficult in seeking financial resources that support the artist after they are awarded the title.

Nevertheless, The Vietnam Association Folklore has awarded artist title on those who are brilliant in traditional culture practices and deserved a credit for transferring these ones to the next generation. Unfortunately, the awarding has not yet financial policy in conformity with such awarding. Therefore, the situation remains neither salary/allowance nor financial assistance in a packet (this is one UNESCO mentioned of) to the folk artists. Similarly, the subsidy to maintaining performances of the folk artists has not implemented yet.

4. Some results and practical experiences

The intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam is diversity of styles and rich in expressions. Most of intangible cultural heritage expression in the ethnic communities has been collected and studied. The domains which are interested are as under:

- Festival relating to the life of the community and production activities: Saint/God protects the community, agriculture, fishing, handicraft...
- Rites relating to life cycle: name the baby, grow up (being adult, being member of community), house building, marriage, funeral;
- Religious practices relating to the environment, exploiting natural resources; welcome the New Year, worship the ancestor, worship the Heaven and Earth/Saint/God for recovering from the illness
- Forms of folk art performance: ritual dance and song, alternative-singing, Gong playing, traditional instrument playing, water puppet, dry puppet, popular opera,
- Games, acting games (of children, of youth)
- Cuisine art in every regions and technology in processing medicinal herbs

Local and ethnic minority languages are encouraged in Vietnam to express forms of intangible cultural practicing, except music art, cuisine and medicinal herbs trade.
Each product from the above resources, which are being saved by the Institute of Culture and Information, has been introduced twice a week on main channels such as: VTV2, VTV3, VTV4, HTV... of Vietnam Television. They have been also introduced in the conferences on protection of national culture at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

The program on collection, research and protection of intangible culture has gained definite advantages. With the coming of collectors and researchers at the localities to implement their tasks has made good impacts on the local people’s consciousness of national cultural heritage protection. The contacts between the host and the guest and record images sessions have waken up the pride and cultural self-respect of the local people. All these things could bring out more effects on preservation and promotion of the nation culture. However, the appearance of the collectors and researchers has also made bad impacts on cultural practices of the local people that might be affected by the equipments and the observation of “strange guests”. Being lack of time, most of collectors and researchers would not be able to penetrate deep into the community life which was object of their study in order to be “insider”. They could not completely have caught the aesthetic value of the intangible cultural practices at the localities where they studied, so they might easily assess those expressions through aesthetic standard of the “outsider”. This limitation has been mentioned at the conferences on the diversity of intangible cultural expressions held by UNESCO in countries and being an obstacle for the intangible cultural preservation.

One more thing that folk artists wish to transfer their understanding as well as art skills in practicing traditional culture and maintaining this treasure to the younger generations, but it pretends to be more and more lack of followers. Fast changing in socioeconomic environment has made a long distant between old traditional culture and the contemporary one and caused an interruption between the former and follower in maintaining the intangible culture. Time passes, the folk artists are getting old. Additionally, material support from the State and community to them is not adequate and their health as well as their memory is being declined very fast. So their ability to transfer skills in traditional cultural practice might be disappeared at any time, especially in the aspect of folk art performance. This phenomenon has become a great obstacle for maintaining and restoration of intangible cultural heritages.

**Conclusion**

In the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in the South East Asia, there people live in the same ecological environment that has the same similarities in their own history of development of the different ethnics concerning their cultural characters. I carry in my hope the experiences and practical learning in the land I live- Vietnam in preservation and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage would be thereby exchanged and shared together with colleagues who have the same ideology. May I also have a hope after this workshop, we obtain further manner or have co-operated projects in which we will reach ever more effectiveness in protection and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage.

I wish every year (or two year a time) UNESCO and ACCU will be able to organize training courses in the areas on the skills seeking for, restoring, preserving and promotion of the intangible cultural heritages. Thereby the trainers who are well-known specialists coming from different UNESCO members will deliver their understanding. Beside the training
sessions and the exchanges of experience between the learners, there would be indicative performances coming together with them. Festival of the folk artists of countries would be organized to create an opportunity of “meeting” for the diversities of traditional art and cultural performances bringing from various countries. The festival would bring a great intellectual and spiritual assistant to the artists; this contributes to forwarding the effectiveness of the process of protection and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage.

Finally, I hope that in the future there will be a Law on copyright that protect folk cultural works and the people who preserve them, and folk understandings (know-how of traditional handicraft and traditional medicine,...) and folk performances will be under the protection in the Copyright Law of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)./

References