

# The Task of Inventory, Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

## Experience from Vietnam

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### Law on Cultural Heritage of Vietnam and the Issue of Inventorying Intangible Cultural Heritage

In Vietnam, activities aimed at the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage date from a much more recent period than the protection of tangible cultural heritage.

This delay of over half a century in the development of preservation policies for intangible cultural heritage has been a big loss, which in some cases cannot be redressed. Because of the limited awareness of the full value of intangible cultural heritage, many ordinary people and culture owners have ceased practicing and transmitting their traditions. This has meant that there have been no inheritors to many traditions. Many oral heritage elements have disappeared forever, even from popular memory. The rapid change of socio-economic conditions has led to many changes in the spiritual and cultural life of communities. In the past, some intangible cultural heritage elements were considered backward or superstitious or belonging to the culture of the feudal class. As a result, culture bearers disavowed their heritage or

were compelled to renounce their traditions. There are some social customs, forms of folk knowledge and technical skill that have become altogether extinct without any possibility of restoration or revival.

However, after having access to UNESCO's various recommendations and the 2003 Convention, Vietnam has made ICH awareness processes and safeguarding activities an active and effective feature of public policy, with a high degree of positive outcomes. This has been the result of a widespread shift in thinking, dating back as far as 1986. The commitment to ICH awareness and safeguarding strategies has given rise to extensive practical work in many aspects of Vietnamese life, including culture. Much has been done to seek out new and developing knowledge about ICH perspectives so as to benefit from the broad knowledge and experience of experts in all countries where ICH safeguarding is being advanced and promoted, and this has resulted in Vietnamese ICH safeguarding activities advancing with great rapidity and success in recent years.

A legal framework for safeguarding ICH has been developed step by step and gradually completed and integrated into the common viewpoints of humanity. Our Law on Cultural Heritage, which was promulgated in 2001 and came into force in 2002, has recently been revised to be in line with real-life conditions and the 2003 UNESCO Convention. UNESCO has affirmed that the articles of this law are basically in conformity with the Convention. We have incorporated in the law new concepts, mostly in the areas of ICH and safeguarding measures, identifying appropriately the responsibilities of each sector in safeguarding cultural heritage, in which ICH is recognized as living heritage, bearing power and existing in an unceasing development of social relations. The importance of ICH, seen as living, contemporary, traditional, and recognizable by communities, has key significance for these communities not only because it is their heritage but also because of its critical importance to their identity.

The inventory process is one of the most important measures required for the ICH safeguarding. This problem is defined in the Cultural Heritage Law (2009) and in the protocol guiding its implementation (2010). Article 17 of the law stipulates that the state has the responsibility for creating conditions for everybody—from cultural owners to relevant communities, from individuals to collectives, from state research agencies to non-governmental organizations—to join in with safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. “To organize research, collection, inventory, and classification of intangible cultural heritage” is the primary task identified by the state among measures

to preserve ICH stipulated by this article. Article 18 details the inventory of ICH:

1. Chairmen of the People’s Committees of Provinces and Cities under the Central Government (hereafter referred to as provincial level) organize the inventory of intangible cultural heritage in their respective locality and select and prepare scientific dossiers to be submitted to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to include in the list of national intangible cultural heritages.
2. The Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism decides and promulgates the list of national intangible cultural heritages and issues certificates of intangible cultural heritages to be included in the list of national intangible cultural heritages.  
In cases where the items of intangible cultural heritage already included in the list of national intangible cultural heritage are subsequently found not to meet the criteria, the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism shall decide on their exclusion from the list of national intangible cultural heritages.
3. The Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism guides the implementation of Item 1 in this Article”.

So, with the above detailed objectives, Vietnam’s Cultural Heritage Law is closely aligned with international measures for safeguarding ICH in general and with regard to the importance of inventory listings in particular. When comparing the terminology, concepts, and contents of Vietnam’s Cultural Heritage Law and the 2003 UNESCO Convention, you can see that they are similar in viewpoint, orientation, and solutions. Especially with regard to making an inventory, they coincide in purpose, general and global regulations, the updating of information, the role of communities, and the responsibility of society for these issues.

Cultural heritage elements in Vietnam will be classified as part of the inventory according to their current viability and their relative need of safeguarding or urgent safeguarding. This is very appropriate to the purpose of the inventory laid down by the Convention: “to ensure identification with a view to safeguarding” (Article 12.1).

In short, Vietnam has implemented the 2003 Convention promptly and effectively. Some articles in the Law on Cultural Heritage have been amended and supplemented, particularly those relating to inventorying ICH. For example: the 2001 Law on Cultural Heritage did not contain the terminology “inventory of intangible cultural heritage”, and inventory was often understood as “investigation,” “collection,” and sometimes

“statistics.” The amendments to some articles of the 2009 Cultural Heritage Law added the term “inventory” and some new contents on ICH, which stipulate that “inventorying intangible cultural heritage and listing cultural heritages” with the aim to safeguard and develop the values of ICH. (Item 14, Article 1)

In June 2010, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism issued Circular 04/2010/TT-BVHTTDL, guiding ICH inventorying and the preparation of scientific dossiers of ICH elements to be included in the list of national ICH. At present, the work is being implemented throughout the country.

### Experience in Inventorying Intangible Cultural Heritage in Vietnam

In the last fifteen years, many organizations and agencies (governmental and non-governmental) have carried out surveys and developed inventory lists and documentation of cultural traditions and created databases to different extents. Some lists have been made by cultural forms (such as music, performing arts, traditional handicraft, festivals, oral heritage, etc.); some by geographic regions; and others by ethnic groups, localities, and administrative units—provincial or district levels. Some projects have had good objectives, but they lacked community participation. Other projects were strong in both objectives and community participation, but they were not consistent and broadly based. Most of the survey and inventory projects are separate, lacking in continuity and coordination for the common objective of safeguarding cultural heritage.

According to the results of a survey on the current situation of inventorying ICH in Vietnam (a project jointly implemented in 2008 by the Department of Heritage, the Hanoi UNESCO Office, and other relevant agencies), research, collection, and documentation of ICH have been undertaken by those agencies and professional associations and individuals to meet the needs of learning about the values of ICH in their own functions and tasks. But the assessment of the vitality of cultural heritage and solutions and specific plans for ICH safeguarding have not been sufficiently attended to.

The inventory of intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam has been carried out by state agencies, social organizations and individuals for different purposes and by different ways, but mostly for research and collection purposes in their own functions and tasks

and has often been understood as a general survey—statistical and collection activities.

These agencies and institutions as well as their purposes are as follows:

- The Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism:
  - formed through general surveys and implementation of projects on ICH
  - classified by forms such as festivals, crafts, performing arts, folk knowledge, etc.
- The Musical Conservatory (The National Conservatory, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism):
  - formed according to ethnic groups and geographical regions
  - classified by song, dance, music, etc.
- The Institute of Culture Studies:
  - formed through classification by folk culture groups, performing arts, traditional crafts, customs and traditions, festivals, religious belief, folk knowledge, etc.
- The Vietnam Association of Folk Arts: In 2000, the Association developed the Plan-Vision 2010.
  - formed from surveys and studies and implementation of some projects on rehabilitating ICH
  - supplemented through the mobilization of all its members to take part in a general survey on ICH, conducted in all provinces throughout the country
  - resulted in inventorying and classifying ICH of forty-six out of fifty-four ethnic groups into five categories: social culture, production culture, daily culture, religious culture, and art culture
  - published in two volumes entitled General Inventory of Folk Arts of 54 Ethnic Groups in Vietnam. Implementing the Plan Vision 2010

Other departments of culture, sports, and tourism of provinces and cities have undertaken inventorying projects in possible localities by geographical regions or by

cultural forms. Some localities have developed inventory lists by ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>. In general, ICH inventorying in Vietnam has been taking place under different forms and to different extents with different approaches. Most of the projects and programs on general surveys and inventories of ICH have been conducted on a large scale, but they lack depth and safeguarding solutions, particularly for those elements at high risk, and they have also been conducted without guidance and direction from competent authorities.

### CCH and the Project on Inventorying, Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hanoi City

In Vietnam, most provincial and municipal inventory lists have been built based on the old conception of listing and enumerating the quantity of common heritage in large local geographical areas without prioritizing and identifying at-risk heritage elements in urgent need of preservation and proposing measures for their protection. In Hanoi, most ICH forms subject to inventorying, as stipulated in Circular 04/2010/TT-BVHTTDL of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, have not yet been inventoried in a scientific and in-depth manner with full information as required, and their vitality has not yet been identified fully. On the occasion of the Millennium of Thang Long—Hanoi in 2011, the city invested in many research projects on cultural heritage. But much of this work paid more attention to “typically outstanding” heritage elements not at-risk forms of heritage. Moreover, they did not recognize the vitality of cultural heritage forms and their practitioners and owners. It is impossible to consider them as contributions towards an effective inventory of ICH in Hanoi.

As a result, the city has decided to implement a project entitled *Inventory: The Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hanoi* not only to clearly identify the quality and undertake classifying ICH but also to assess the values, challenges, and risks the elements face and to take immediate measures to ensure their existence and help them to last and flourish in today’s social conditions in a more active and sustainable manner.

The CCH (established in 2007) is a non-governmental organization affiliated with

1 According to the Country Report sent to UNESCO by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2012 on the implementation of the 2003 Convention

the Vietnam Association of Cultural Heritage. One key aim of the CCH is to apply the latest achievements in the studies of tangible and intangible cultural heritage to promote a sustainable and culturally rich development of local and indigenous communities in the rural and urban localities. Through strong partnership with local community leaders, policymakers, and practitioners, and with the private sector, mass media and scholarly researchers, the CCH seeks to enhance awareness of the importance of local knowledge, participation, and voices in an ecologically sound and culturally meaningful process of development. The CCH's activities help empower local and indigenous peoples, especially children and young people, in voicing their concerns about current issues and to support them in working toward solutions for improving their quality of life. The CCH gives priority to marginalized communities whose tangible and intangible heritage is at risk: those of ethnic minority communities facing development, of immigrants as a result of industrialization, and of urban spaces endangered by rapid urbanization. Among the variety of intervention measures, the CCH pays special attention to formal and informal education at schools and in the community and helps ensure effective inter-generational engagement in building mutual understanding, self-respect, and self-determination for future generations.

The Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Hanoi invited the CCH to join the inventory project as a professional stakeholder. In the coming three-year period, 2013 to 2015, the CCH will take part formulating and implementing the Inventory: The Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hanoi project. With its experience in raising awareness and implementing the 2003 Convention, the CCH proposes the following project objectives:

- identify the quantity, assess the vitality, identify challenges and risks, and recommend suitable measures for the preservation of different forms of ICH in Hanoi
- find means of timely rapid-solution protection for representative/high-risk ICH elements in urgent need of preservation in Hanoi.
- consolidate and raise awareness and capacity building for staff and communities on the need for safeguarding ICH in Hanoi.

To implement this project, the CCH has identified the following basic requirements:

- mechanisms on the urgent preservation of ICH established and implemented

including concepts, criteria on urgent condition, policy on the provision of benefits, public honors, and financial support for culture owners

- representative/risk ICH identified and safeguarded through measures of preservation including preparation of dossiers of ICH to be listed in national ICH databases, and based on the result of large-scale inventorying, measures undertaken to preserve different forms of ICH in Hanoi.
- training and capacity building provided for core and sustainable human resources (including both staff and resource communities) to take part in safeguarding and developing ICH as well as cooperation and awareness raising for media organizations to cover continuously and timely with a correct understanding of inventory and safeguarding activities of ICH to raise public awareness on the preservation of ICH in Hanoi.

Project activities to be implemented with the following contents:

- inventory, listing ICH to be safeguarded in Hanoi
- inventory in close combination with the preservation of some representative and high-risk ICH elements
- inventory in close combination with the development of a mechanism on urgent preservation of ICH in Hanoi
- inventory ICH of Hanoi, preparing scientific dossiers for listing national ICH.

***Expected outcomes:***

- representative/high-risk ICH in Hanoi preserved in time and their values developed
- the quantity, vitality, challenges, risks, and suitable measures identified for safeguarding different forms of ICH in Hanoi
- mechanism for urgent safeguarding of ICH established and effectively functioned
- capacity of staff and communities in safeguarding ICH in Hanoi built and upgraded, and a database on Hanoi ICH established to store and synchronously manage and updated regularly to serve the public

***Project significance:***

Expected project outcomes will be significant, practically and theoretically, for the state to administer preservation and develop the values of ICH in Hanoi.

Project activities and approaches stress community participation. With support and recommendations by UNESCO, as proposed in this project, the activities will contribute to creating best practices and the basis for policymaking for ICH safeguarding in Hanoi and at the national level.

## Protection of Ustod-Shogird as an Essential Heritage Safeguarding Task

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First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to ICHCAP, which has brought us together to implement our duties to our ancestors and future generations. ICHCAP calls us on to protect our intangible cultural heritage, but what does intangible cultural heritage mean, and what are the tasks involved with safeguarding it?

Intangible cultural heritage safeguarding includes preserving our cultural memory for our future generations; preserving our essence and dignity to live a proper life; protecting our unique cultural heritage by which we live every day; developing traditions for our young generations; and enriching our lives by studying about the rich experiences of the past.

The social condition of contemporary Tajik society can be defined as transitional. There is the formation of a civil society with a specific pluralism in spiritual life. Political and legal systems are being established according to international democratic standards. This transitioning society demands higher education levels, better economic and political cultures for the people, and greater independence in their pursuits of various ideological and spiritual traditions and trends. To meet these demands, it is necessary to facilitate