

Preservation and Promotion of Intangible Culture

Assoc. Prof. Chua Soo Pong

Much of the confusion in today's world can be attributed to the advance of information technology. Images are broadcasted, modem-ed, cabled and faxed directly into people's homes and offices by different agencies. The reality is that we live in a well-connected world and no society can be protected from the influence of the outside world. Through the enterprise of multinational corporations and international trade, people everywhere are experiencing the products of globalisation.

The Era of Globalisation

Globalisation means economic integration, which as it proceeds, undermines the cultural structures that help define nations. The whole complex of distinctive, spiritual and material, emotional and intellectual features that characterise a society, will be affected by the mass consumption of products of the mass culture. Young people around the world watch the same Hollywood movies and videos - the fact the 29-year-

old pop diva Janet Jackson is paid a US\$5 million advance per album, plus a 24 per cent royalty on the retail price of each US\$2.50 record sold, indicates the pervasive influence of Western pop culture.

The intelligentsia watches the same media. Will this universality of common experience overtake cultural particularity? Is the Western colonial expansion of the last century being expressed in new forms and continuing to assert its cultural superiority? Will globalisation shake the foundation of the cultures of the nation states?

Some people think that culture, like ethnicity, is something that is fixed, forever immune to the vagaries of changing time. Closer examination reveals that people adapt, assimilate, borrow or innovate, in response to a wide range of contacts and encounters, forced or voluntary. Old forms are constantly being remolded to the requirements of the day. New practices are being created and if accepted and practiced for a time, become 'tradition' too. However, no matter



how dynamic a culture is, the fact remains that its core values and forms of expressions will retain certain characteristics that make it different from others. It could be the forms of rituals, religious practices, family, social organisations, socialisation processes such as the ways mothers transmit values or expressive culture, i.e., what is called the intangible culture.

The Intangible Culture

Intangible culture embraces all symbolic manifestations of culture transmitted and modified over time by a creative process of largely collective recreation that conveys ideas and emotions. These include language, mythology, ritual, custom, music, dance, arts and craft, oral traditions, traditional

medicine, cooking and festivals. Intangible culture represents the general values and world view of a society, its cultural characteristics symbolise its indigenous character and identity.

As Asia achieves economic growth, there is increased opportunity for new cultural contacts and exchanges. Cultural tradition is adjusting to the times rapidly because of travel and the electronic media. There is therefore intense competition between the cultural forces of the outside world and the indigenous.

Few outside the Western world oppose Westernisation in the sense of modernisation, the introduction of science and technology, and law and justice. What many Asians are concerned about is how popular consumer culture will erode the core values and lifestyle of the societies, their belief in collective well-being and family values. Will their teaching of filial piety, thrift, and team spirit eventually be replaced by an over-emphasis on individual freedom or loose sex? Will the future generations lose

their rich traditional theatre, dance and music to electronic imported pop music and movies?

The Challenge of Cultural Diversity

Millions of people are currently migrating across borders all over the world, either by choice or otherwise. Many of Asia's modern nation states are made up of diverse ethnic groups which speak different languages and practice different religions. The main challenge for these nations now is how to manage and promote cultural diversity as a positive force so that the energies of ethnic, linguistic and spiritual solidarity

Intangible cultural heritage can only survive if it is studied by scholars, documented systematically and, what is more important, if it continues to be transmitted to the next generation

serve as catalysts for creativity and sources of strength. How then can we address this challenge?

Recognising that the situation of cultural diversity helps us to perceive our cultural heritage in a balanced perspective, and to view our own cultural tradition with a feeling of pride and endearment. This pride follows from Asia's economic development and strengthens nations' independence and dignity.

Asians no longer see their traditional heritage with feelings of inferiority and handle Western culture and cultures of immigrants with a balanced attitude.

Preservation of Intangible Culture

Still, in the well-connected world of today, the young people in the technologically less developed countries, seem to be extensively influenced by the electronically transmitted pop culture and the consumer culture of the West. Measures must, therefore, be taken to protect intangible cultural heritage. This is because intangible culture is much more fragile than tangible heritage as the latter is physical, visible and easier to protect and preserve. Historical monuments, ancient palaces and old temples or paintings could be restored and refurbished as long as there is money and labour; but the intangible cultural heritage can only survive if it is studied by scholars, documented systematically and, what is more important, if it continues to be transmitted to the next generation, either by a group of key persons who can teach it and be carried by the community. The Chinese says: "If there is an old man in a house, there is a treasure", while the African says: "When an old man dies, it is as if a library is destroyed in fire".



Penang, Malaysia (Photo by Ean Lee)



Vientiane, Laos (Photo by Florence Pichon)

To propose effective measures to preserve, promote and revitalise intangible culture, it is necessary to, first, examine closely the circumstances that lead to the cultural tradition being marginalised or pushed to deformation or extinction. The reasons are many and they can be economical, political or religious or the combination of all of these. The following examples from Southeast Asia can probably help us in understanding the complex

issues, and how one can devise strategies to preserve and promote intangible culture.

Raising the Status of Artists

The intangible cultural asset requires the presence of artists who pass on the art forms and the core values of the culture from generation to generation. In the past, many activities practiced by these artists were regarded as communal activities. Individual

income was secondary to the community spirit. Everything was done on a mutual assistance basis. The Indonesians and Malaysians call this *gotong royong*. There were no tickets sold for these performances as the cost of the show was borne by the sponsor.

Today, artists in many countries in Asia and the Pacific region are struggling for a decent standard of living. Many traditional theatre practitioners (*Jikay* and *Makyong*

actors in Malaysia, *Likay* and *Nang Yai* performers in Thailand, *Wayang Wong* Artists in Indonesia, Chinese opera practitioners in Singapore and Hong Kong) are no longer under the patronage of kings, sultans, wealthy people, religious, local dignitaries or communal leaders.

In the current market economy, they find great difficulty in finding financial resources to support their family, and to continue practising and teaching their arts as the previous system of patronage has disappeared. They are at a loss in the new social environment that is flooded by advertisements and commercial sponsorship. The market system of their rapidly urbanised and westernised societies dictates that performing arts events be organised within the commercial framework that the artists are alien to. Because of their difficulty in adjusting themselves to the new world of commercial competition and because of the attractive financial rewards offered by new employment opportunities, the artists have chosen to give up their arts altogether.

To address the problem, the artists should be exposed to arts administrative programme where they will learn to market their artistic products. What is more important, the government has to

take on a more active and visible role in raising the status of artists through the implementation of award systems and the establishment of a fair system of enumeration. In Japan, Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and many other Asia Pacific countries, the governments are giving outstanding artists various awards that may include monetary rewards.

Because of the attractive financial rewards offered by new employment opportunities, artists have chosen to give up their arts altogether

Since 1986, a number of views in support of the arts and artists have been brought before the Philippine Congress. Senate bill 1492 and House bill 17476 call for the preservation and enhancement of culture, arts and the development and protection of cultural workers. Two important institutions responsible for the arts that are supported by the government are the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, and the Philippines High School for the Arts. The former has grown from being a mere performing venue to being a national centre for the promotion of the arts. The latter, on the other hand, is the key institution for the

training of young artists. The government of the Philippines has also set up the Presidential Commission for Culture and the Arts that formulates cultural policies and distributes grants for significant cultural projects.

In Bangkok, The Thailand Cultural Centre was conceived as a grant aid co-operation project between the government of Japan and Thailand. It is officially known as "The Social Education and Centre Project". The Japanese government, through the Japan International Co-operation Agency, allocated 6385 million yen as grant aid for construction of the building and for furnishing the centre with equipment. The Thai government made available the plot of land and made preparations for actual construction and supplied all the infra-structure and essential services. Officially opened in 1988, the Thailand Cultural Centre has become the prime venue for performing arts and visual art in Bangkok. It features local performances at subsidised prices and has a permanent exhibition on Thai culture. Exhibitions on arts and crafts are put on regularly with changing themes. It also has an information service centre that print newsletters as well as collect and disseminate information on culture. Being a popular venue for



Chinese Opera



Indonesian Gamelan



Contemporary Drama



ASEAN Festival Dance

conferences and seminars on the art, the Thailand Cultural Centre is also actively involved in organising music, dances, arts and crafts classes for children.

The Office of the National Culture Commission (NCC) located nearby is in charge of directing and coordinating cultural activities according to national cultural policies. Set up in 1979, the

cultural data, preserve, promote, develop and disseminate Thai culture, support and train cultural personnel, organise exhibitions and support cultural activities of other governmental agencies. The NCC has an active research and planning division that publishes books as well as conducts training programmes for arts administrators. It is also the coordinating centre for Thai-ASEAN affairs in

known as TIM. The complex in central Jakarta occupies a spacious 6 hectare site previously occupied by the zoological gardens. The idea of a national culture venue had been mooted for a long time and it was eventually approved in 1968. At the end of the same year, the 90 million rupiah centre was opened and named after leading Indonesian composer, Ismail Marzuki. The complex includes a planetarium, a 2,000-seat open air theatre and a 500-seat proscenium theatre, an art gallery and a 450-seat theatre-in-the-around, an 800-seat auditorium and several rehearsal spaces. TIM also holds the Jakarta Institute of Art Education, Lembaga Pendidikan Kesenian Jakarta (LPKJ). In the 1968 decree, there is also a provision for the establishment of an honorary council of artists called Jakarta Academy, Akademi Jakarta (AJ) whose members are highly respected individuals in the arts circle throughout Indonesia. This Academy was to become the leading national artistic establishment. It also has a 25-member Jakarta Arts Council, Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (DKJ) responsible for the artistic policies in the metropolis, mainly the development of the cultural centres. Since its inauguration, TIM has hosted many significant national and regional festivals. In 1981 and 1991, it hosted the first ASEAN Festival of Performing



*Chulalongkorn Day
Commemorating King Rama V, Thailand*

NCC's governing board includes key government officials and distinguished individuals in the art scene. The board is chaired by the Minister of Education. The NCC is in charge of 135 cultural centres now established in Bangkok, 72 provinces and 44 districts. These cultural centres have the authority to conduct research and collect

culture and information. Besides NCC, there is also the National Identity Board, the Prime Minister's Office that plays an active role in promoting Thai culture.

In Indonesia, the key institution and prime venue for the arts is the Taman Ismail Marzuki, popularly

Arts and the first ASEAN Dance Festival respectively. In the recent years, various agencies also use it to stage international arts festivals. After a face-lift in the 90's, TIM has a multi-cinema complex, an air-conditioned 900-seat theatre as well as arts and crafts shops and restaurants.

Role of Governments

To preserve and promote intangible culture, the governments can take on an invaluable role in the following ways:

- a) Assist the efforts of provincial governments and institutions.
- b) Provide opportunities for introducing the cultures of other countries or places through income-generating activities. For example, in Tonga, the government encourages Tongan traditional dance and musical activities linked to the tourist industry. In the past, traditional artists were permanent residents in the courts of Tui Tonga. They performed for the kings and the gods they represented. Unfortunately, many of these songs and dances were lost while Tongan society modernised and adopted Western institutions. In recent years, the government has helped to revive these traditional dances and music, and arts and crafts as there has

been a demand in the tourist industry to see authentic presentations of traditional art forms. The establishment of the Tonga National Cultural Centre has helped to generate public interest as well as improve the artists living standards.

- c) Exchange researchers and artists who are involved in traditional culture of different provinces and areas.
- d) Promote exchange of information, sending books and magazines.
- e) translate books, magazines and articles.
- f) Promote joint-research projects; invite experts of different countries to work together.
- g) Set up research centres specialising in the research of Asian cultures or cooperate with regional organisations like ACCU or SPAFA.

Contributions of Institutions

Institutions, on the other hand, could assist in the following ways:



Training Artists

- a) Initiate documentation of intangible culture. To achieve the best result, institutions responsible for the documentation of intangible heritage must set up its objectives with a long term perspective. That is to say we must understand very clearly the purposes of recording the dance, music and theatre? Who are the users? Are we producing the videos for children? For higher education institutions, for the public? For local and national consumption or for the foreign audience? Will they be used by the artists so that they can use the elements of intangible culture in their creative work?

In documentation, a performance must be recorded in its entirety. Each recording must be set in its cultural context with its audience. It can be accompanied by a documentary that serves to enhance the images of the performances or provide a

commentary on them. Documentaries made during different periods must be retrieved from the archives where possible for comparative purposes while the same dance or music performed by different people at the same period in different venues should be viewed before further documentation. A team of producers, ethnographers, artists, historians, musicologists or dance experts should work in co-operation as artistic sensitivity must be combined with technical knowledge and scientific equipment in the production.

b) Conduct surveys of the present circumstances of traditional culture.

c) Improve the legal framework, for example revise the copyright law so as to extend the rights of performers to prevent unauthorized use of film by video recording; to establish the tape recorder levy system against home audio and video taping; or to extend the application of industrial accident insurance i.e. encourage employers to contract such insurance for every performer. In Japan, performers who are employed in the professional companies are covered by Labour Standards Law, the Industrial and Health Law, the Industrial Accident Insurance Law,

the Employment Security Law, and the Trade Union Law. The artists have the right, under these laws, to organise a trade union, collective bargaining and demand conditions as workers can in other professions.

d) Devise appropriate programme to recognise traditional artists and artisans, and raise the status of artists

e) Maximise the use of education, providing opportunities for students of all levels in every institution to learn about the intangible culture in the formal curriculum time as well as out of it as in the extra curricula activities.

f) Provide opportunities for the artists and artisans to display their crafts at theatres, exhibition halls and concerts.

g) Establish schemes for training young artists, including the establishment of training institutions and training instructors.

h) Arouse wide public interest in traditional culture through the media and formal and information education.

i) Catalogue materials and records and establish archives, libraries and museums.

j) Assist in the organisation of festivals and traditional celebrations.

Conclusion

Documentation of intangible cultural heritage is a form of memory recorded by scientific equipment. It helps us to remember the important and the impressive collective creation of forms of expression of ideas and emotions. Remembering the past and values of significance help us to define a sense of nation, community and history. Documentation is a means and not an end. More important for us is how to continue to build on our cultural knowledge to teach our young people to use the knowledge of our tradition to cope with the future. ■

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Chua Soo Pong, who obtained his Ph.D. from the Department of Social Anthropology, Queen's University of Belfast in 1980, is a theatre scholar, ethnomusicologist, playwright and choreographer. He is also the author of many books on Southeast Asian dance, music and theatre. Between 1989-1995, Dr. Chua was the Senior Specialist in Performing Arts of SEAMEO-SPAFA, and is currently the Director of the Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore.