

Heritage Protection in Southeast Asia: Management Plans and Conservation of World Heritage Sites

Selected case studies in Thailand, Cambodia and Lao PDR

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Introduction

Vat Phou and the cultural landscape at Champasak (Laos), Sukhothai and the associated sites as well as Ayutthaya (Thailand), and the problematic case of the temple of Preah Vihear in Cambodia-Thailand are all inscribed in the World Heritage List (WHL), and had been carefully selected due to their emblematical context.

The case studies in this article were chosen because the archaeological sites belong to the same geographical area, and inscribed in the World Heritage List during different historical periods. They feature interesting comparable characteristics, and offer perspectives in cultural heritage management in their current states and evolutionary stages.

Other factors contributing to the selection of these sites as case studies are the availability of documentation on the management of the sites, and the opportunity of contacts with local authorities that bolstered the factuality of the investigation.

In particular, the cases in Thailand (1991) and the Borobudur and Prambanan sites in Indonesia (1991) were among the first in the area to be inscribed in the World Heritage List, and therefore have been a point of reference for the entire Southeast Asia region. The Vat Phou site in Laos was inscribed in 2001, while the controversial case of Preah Vihear, now closed due to conflicts in the area, was inscribed in 2008.

Reference to Angkor and other exemplar sites in the area is essential. The author visited all the sites, except Preah Vihear, and carried out her studies there (for long periods at such sites as Vat Phou). She also participated in the restoration of the temple complex, and the conservation of Nandin Hall, on behalf of the Lerici Foundation and Politecnico di Milano.

Analysis of the mechanisms involved in WHL inscription was also made, that led to the identification of and comments on certain proposals concerning the management of the sites, including the use of territorial indicators and other interesting measures for improvement.

General remarks

The copious documentation collected and the visits to the various sites offered a realistic panorama of the conservation status of the cultural assets in Southeast Asia and the situation of the sites inscribed in the World Heritage List, thus allowing comprehension of the situation in times before inscription, the evolution thereafter and the changes that have been made in terms of laws or from social, economical and environmental points of view.

Over recent years, the number of international documents referring to Asia has increased greatly; for instance: the Burra Charter (1979), which was reviewed several times before the illustrated one in 2004; the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994); Unified Cultural Resource Management Guidelines for Southeast Asia (SPAFA, 1995), China Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (2000); the Indonesia Charter (2003); the India Charter (or INTACH Charter, 2004); Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practise in Asia (2003);

Xian Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas (2005); ICOMOS Thailand Charter, regarding conservation and management of monuments and sites and related cultural heritage (2005-2006); Silpakorn Charter: Proposal on Guidelines for Conserving and Managing the Setting of Thailand's Cultural Heritage (2005-2006); lastly, The Seoul Declaration on Tourism in Asia's Historic Towns and Areas (2005) and the Hanoi Declaration

on Historic Urban Landscapes (2009). There is great cultural ferment in Asia now and many international congresses, workshops and debates have been organised on the topic of conservation, protection and management of cultural heritage, including the stimuli coming from other parts of the world. What is happening under the regional ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) control can be seen directly in practically all the cases studied.



Sukhothai, Buddha statue of Wat Mahathat (2009)

The case studies

Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns and the Historic City of Ayutthaya

The sites at Sukhothai (the Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet Historical Parks) and at Ayutthaya represent some of the most significant remnants of ancient civilisation in the history of Thailand. These sites have changed positively over the years, even before their

inscription in the WHL in 1991. International campaigns have already drawn attention to these sites, and the funding subsequently collected made it possible to start a lengthy process that involved not only the individual sites but also the conservation, protection and management of cultural assets in general throughout the country.

Collaboration between local and international experts has produced very good results, although there are aspects that can still be improved, such as the coexistence of the modern city and the archaeological sites, particularly in the case of Ayutthaya and Kamphaeng Phet, or the villages and schools inside the Sukhothai Park. Particularly, in the case of Ayutthaya and Kamphaeng Phet, what is most surprising is that the part of the city with the monuments cannot be disregarded by the residential part, since the two form a symbiosis.

For both these examples, it is difficult to define the boundary between the ancient area and the modern part. According to the local authorities, the biggest problem for all of the Parks is the lack of sufficient funds to cover the expenses of general maintenance (small but urgent conservation work, including keeping back the vegetation in the park beyond the core area), and the need for more staff to carry out the maintenance and improve the safety systems, so that even the less known parts of the sites can be opened to visitors.

There have been a few conservation ‘experiments’, and compared to the first restoration campaign in Sukhothai, great progress has been made in recent years, with the benefit of new technologies, such as the advanced devices employed in risk preparedness at Ayutthaya. Nevertheless, Sukhothai and its other sites (but principally Sukhothai, because of its fame) have received a great deal of investments which were more than the other archaeological sites managed to have throughout the years. A certain amount has been used for restoration that in some respects might be considered too radical, especially at the beginning; but with the more recent experiences, the Sukhothai experience has become a point of reference, and has provided working guidelines for the country to adopt.

In Ayutthaya, a barrier made of cement slabs in a cement canal (temporarily closed with bricks), as in the Portuguese settlement, was



Ayutthaya, Wat Chaiwatanaram (2009)



Sukhothai, Wat Mahathat (2009)

rapidly constructed after the 1995 flood to protect the monuments at high risk of flooding. The tendency nowadays, following advanced studies, is toward the use of metal barriers placed at the margins of the site. They could be activated in a very short time, as in Wat Chaiwattaram, but entailed complex work, and is certainly a more expensive method. Installing the metal barriers improperly may also result in adverse consequences within the environment; and thus the recommendation is for terracotta paving.

The present investments and projects for Ayutthaya have been and are considerable. Apart from the budget for the anti-flood barriers, certain restoration work is required in the central part of the city, according to the master plan indications, costing a further 221 million baht (US\$7.3m). Such restoration should greatly improve the present situation, and the investments will serve to “... preserve integrity and outstanding universal value in a sustainable dimension and let the site be free from modernization”, to quote Methadol Wichakana, the Park Director.

In general, for all the Parks, the participation of the local community arose as a direct result of the projects inside the Park, such as special



Sukhothai, Wat Si Chum, restoration project area (2009)

Sukhothai, Wat Si Sawai (2009)

Sukhothai, Wat Si Chum, main Buddha statue (2009)

training programmes, or recreation activities involving the community members. The economic situation of the area has improved due to an increase in profits coming from expansion in tourism and because the infrastructures and services have improved in the whole area. Tourism is a vital feature in the management of the Parks, even though there have been none of the problems that are causing difficulties at Angkor in Cambodia; in effect, even local tourism should be stimulated since it would make the population more appreciative of the historical-archaeological heritage of their own country. Statistics show that few local tourists visit the Parks; there is therefore a need for nation-wide campaigns promoting them better in order to attract and involve the population more, perhaps by creating a series of itineraries from one site to another since they are easily reached from most parts of the country.

It is crucial to manage the tourism in Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, and Kamphaeng Phet. According to related studies, the current system of services offered should be improved and informed tourism is the ideal approach, perhaps involving the tourist in a combined tour of the three Parks for a richer experience. It should be carried out by suitably trained personnel and, if necessary, with the aid of advanced technology. Enhancing a site successfully is not simple; continuing to make the locals and tourists appreciate the importance of the site is

fundamental to preventing vandalism (which has decreased greatly in recent years) and indifference towards the value of the place they are visiting. Though a vital feature in the sites, even the entertainment provided must be studied carefully not only to assess its appropriateness to the environment but also to avoid any damage to the area.

Constant monitoring and maintenance of all the Parks are equally as important as the large projects. Much needs to be done still to safeguard the local intangible heritage, but the religious culture as a factor should not be disregarded. The religiosity of the monuments is still a very important matter for the population, as can be seen in their celebrations, shows, etc. in the sites.

Si Satchanalai, Wat Chom Chuen Archeological Site Museum (2009)

Si Satchanalai, Wat Phra Si Rattana Maha That Chaliang (2009)

Si Satchanalai, Wat Chang Lom (2009)



Si Satchanalai, Wat Nang Paya (2009)

Kamphaeng Phet, Wat Phra Non, ancient building supported by a wooden structure (2009)

Kamphaeng Phet, Wat Pra Keo next to the modern town (2009)

The peculiarity of the site is not only its historical significance but also the fact that the sites together eloquently relate centuries of the country's history with their archaeological importance. In this case, it is important to safeguard against the possible destructive effects of progress, to maintain the uniqueness and identity of the site, and at the same time preserve the vitality of the intangible heritage of the site, and attend to the social and economic needs of the community.

Temple of Preah Vihear

Another of the sites studied is the Preah Vihear temple, which was founded in the 9th century and is situated on the border between Cambodia and Thailand. The site is authentic because it was isolated for many years for historical reasons and because of its geographical position. The temple cannot be considered on its own but together with the surrounding landscape comprising the other two mountains that represent the Hindu triad of Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma.

Its history is extremely complex, and it was inscribed in the WHL three years ago (July 2008). Even before the site was formally inscribed, it was a source of contention between Thailand and Cambodia. In 1904, France and Siam signed a treaty delineating the borders of Cambodia, which at the time was a French protectorate, and acknowledging the Preah Vihear temple as lying inside Cambodian territory. Later, Thailand claimed the site, and in the 1940s included it in the nation's list of heritage. After Cambodia declared independence, the Hague International Court attributed the Preah Vihear temple to it in 1962 but, in effect, the two countries never came to an agreement. When it was inscribed in the WHL, Thailand requested it to be considered a transboundary property but, in spite of the fact that part of the archaeological ruins lie inside Thai territory, its pleas have been ignored. Attempts to solve these long-standing problems with the WHL inscription has failed so far; on the contrary, the conflict at the borders between the two nations has intensified alarmingly.

The supplementary report of the site documentation, Conservation et Gestion (2008), contains an in-depth study of the area performed by local and international specialists (Autorité National pour Preah Vihear ANPV, National Commission of Cambodia for UNESCO, APSARA, national and international experts) in their different areas of expertise. According to this document, the



Preah Vihear monument (2008)
Photo: Alongkorn Juthagate



9th-century ruins on the Cambodian-Thai border (2008)
Photo: Patcharee Kunasarn



Technical reports stressed the religious importance of the site (2008)
Photo: Alongkorn Juthagate

management of the site should ensure protection for the tangible heritage and produce positive improvements, deriving from tourism, for the whole area at both local and provincial levels. Every single part of the site has been analysed in such a way as to ascertain the timeframe required for the architectural, hydrological and territorial preservation and conservation work. The areas studied are divided into different sectors according to whichever treatment the different characteristics will require. Managing floods is one of the major concerns, and advanced studies in this respect are being undertaken to provide better canalisation, for example.

Strategies for development of the area with education and eco-tourism in mind are among the prime objectives, and the idea of referring, i.e., to the ecological aspects of the USA National Park Service, has been postulated. Some of these points and recommendations would be incorporated in the management plan being studied. Moreover, buildings should be subject to strict regulations, and in this respect there are attempts to define some of the parameters to be followed.

Even interpretation of the territory now reconsiders the Hindu culture, so as to comprehend all the most significant reasons that led to the choice of this location in the past, acknowledging the cultural landscape as an essential element of the environment.

The local population and the social and cultural traditions of the area are taken into account, although they are a secondary consideration for the optimisation of the site. Shifting one of the border villages and the market has been debated but this plan has been revised. The population could also participate in the management of the site by becoming part of a committee of consultants where all the stakeholders would be represented. However, technical reports point out the importance of the religious aspect of the site, and stress the intangible heritage linked to it.

The Cambodians access the site mainly from the south (where they encounter the Visitor Services Zone near Saem) by means of a road built by the Chinese government, but Richard Sussman's report suggests that the ancient Northeast route from Thailand and from Laos might need to be resumed.

Relocation and construction of tourist accommodation facilities are considered priorities. Profits derived from the sale of entrance tickets form a significant part of financial resources; proposals seeking support from certain international agencies, as was the case in Angkor, have been made. In spite of the best intentions, some of the choices in the project appear to be dictated strictly by political reasons rather than by concerns linked to the site; an example is the choice of the perimeter to be considered for inscription in the WHL and the improvements to be carried out in the infrastructure network for improved access, which are only contemplated at national level for the time being. The controversies with Thailand have unfortunately clouded this issue, and consequently the perimeter has been defined only in Cambodian territory, leaving out an important section that lies in Thailand. Since this is a very recent inscription, one would have thought it advantageous to organise a better network of roads not only with Thailand, for the obvious reasons (that is, if the political reasons had not prevailed), but also with other countries such as Laos.

Links with the other very famous Angkor site are mainly technical, with the APSARA authorities offering training. Due to the fact that the Angkor site has been well known for many years, a regional itinerary of visits that embrace the two sites was mentioned, but, in effect, the project has yet to be implemented.

In spite of the fact that collaboration between Cambodia and Thailand is greatly encouraged in official documents, the disaccord between the two countries continues. A focus point is that ICOMOS has requested for more detailed cartography, in particular for the northern and eastern areas that will be co-administered by Thailand and Cambodia. This is why, in more than two years after its inscription, the site has been closed and opened repeatedly, and all the projects and studies concerning its management have yet to be implemented. As a result, it has been impossible to apply the customised system of management (Autorité National pour Preah Vihear) for the site, based on the APSARA model employed for Angkor.

Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape

The Vat Phou site lies south of Laos, and is a significant vestige of the Khmer period (tracing back to the 9th-12th centuries); moreover, studies have discovered even traces of pre-Angkor period settlements nearby.

The site and the cultural landscape at Champasak should really be considered as one, since they are the vestiges of antique traditions belonging to the country's history and Hindu cosmology, explaining thus the WHL inscription in 2001 under the name of Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape. The inscription includes not only the Vat Phou temple but also the sacred mountain of Phou Kao, the Hong Nang Sida temple and the city of Lingapura, the ancient roadway that once led to Angkor, Thao Tao, Tham Lek, Vat Oubmung, the Tomo temple, the ancient city of Shrestrapura, Champasak and the Island of Don Deng.

The procedure for inscribing the site actually commenced with studies for a master plan supported by UNESCO and funded by foreign countries. These initial basic studies triggered off a series of mechanisms, such as better laws for protecting the cultural heritage and the creation of an NIMCC (National Inter-Ministerial Coordinating Committee) consisting of national and international experts, which followed the inscription procedures step-by-step. Once the site was inscribed, great changes took place: an office for the management of the site was created on the premises, the ancient outlet ditches for the

Vat Phou, bird's-eye view of the complex (2008)



Vat Phou, stone stairs damaged by the tree roots (2009)



Vat Phou, main façade of the sanctuary (2008)



Vat Phou, quadrangular building with the destroyed gate (2009)



Vat Phou, Buddha statues inside the sanctuary covered by a recent roof (2008)



Vat Phou, ruined south side of the sanctuary (2008)

disposal of water particularly during the monsoon season were recovered, a museum and offices were organised inside the temple, ceremonial access was restored, including the restoration of Nandin Hall by Italian Institutions, the work by the French government in safeguarding the quadrangular buildings inside the Vat Phou site, as well as tourism management. The local staff has constantly increased their experience and improved their skills and qualifications through trainings and on-site experience. There is now more personnel, and special training has been programmed both for them and for local tourist guides.

Less attention has been given to the other sites. Apart from some work for tourist accommodation in Champasak, the protection plan of Champasak town to manage traffic passing through the centre, has not been implemented. The Island of Don Daeng remained unspoiled for many years, almost without influence of any tourism until the lodge, a type of hotel made of detached wooden structures under concepts relevant to eco-tourism, was built. Electricity reached the island only in the last few years. Since this place has been inhabited since ancient times, there are many archaeological remains that must be safeguarded, and others that still have to be studied; certainly, the vernacular architecture must be protected before the onslaught of modern developments that destroy traditional dwellings to make way for poor quality brick buildings, as is happening in other nearby districts.

Champasak also has valuable buildings, such as the typical timber ones, those of French colonial architecture, buildings for the nobles and religious structures, which may disappear or be replaced by poor quality modern constructions and even more hotels and restaurants. "While it is true that the area needs modernisation, especially better services for the population and tourists, the historical heritage and all its traditions may be forgotten in the process, unfortunately. Positively, some new timber constructions are still being made; these include homes for families who respect the ancient rites of having Buddhist priests bless their houses. These rituals and traditional feasts for particular moments of family life are part of the rich cultural heritage of the area and, while they have almost disappeared in the larger cities or in the capital, they continue in villages and small towns such as Champasak. This intangible heritage must be safeguarded at the same time as the tangible heritage.



Champasak, example of precious architecture in the town (2008)

Many experts from regional administrations and different countries have contributed technical and advisory support, especially Italy, Japan, France and recently India (which has strong cultural links with Laos) have become involved in some projects.

Crucially, efforts should be made in the both routine and exigent maintenance (e.g. the sanctuary at the top of the Vat Phou complex) of the site, with a more detailed and complete inventory of all the heritage in the area. The efforts should also include a general surveillance of all the sites, even those not easily accessible, as well as an improvement of the local infrastructure and general services, and a constant reform of the laws. In fact, over the past few years, there has been progress in adapting national and local rules and regulations; the site is attracting an increasing number of tourists, so much attention must be given to this, and to improving residential structures. Moreover, it should be considered an important site from a religious point of view, and there needs to be proper management during the peak period for tourism when the Vat Phou Festival, a sacred Buddhist festival that attracts worshipers from all over the country, takes place in February every year.

It remains that the original purpose of these sites were religious, and therefore, besides representing an important vestige of the cultural heritage, they are still sacred sites, and managing such sites must be done with respect for the spirit of the place (*genius loci*).

In addition to proposals for certain improvements, the management plan (which has been compulsory since 2002 for WHL sites) is a valuable tool. In implementing it, territorial indicators have been introduced. The use of territorial indicators as guides should facilitate the task of both specialists and non-specialists when making decisions concerning management and, above all, help them steer clear of purely political choices. Furthermore, this system of indicators would permit monitoring the management plan throughout time, and allow it to be adjusted according to different situations and necessities that might arise. Only a dynamic, evolving and interactive management plan will be able to bring success to a sustainable development of the site while maintaining its identity.

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Contributor's Note

In general, work on my thesis required me to be in Southeast Asia for an extensive period to establish contacts with the local authorities, collect copious material, and visit and study the case-study sites. In particular, the documentation concerning the sites was gathered at the sites themselves, with the aid of local authorities in interviewing the managers of the Parks and other members of their staff, experts, and also representatives of institutes, universities and libraries in Asia, Europe and in the United States. During that period, I also participated in an important workshop, *Risk Preparedness for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage*, that was held in Bangkok, Ayutthaya, Chiang Mai and Vat Phou.

The doctorate thesis analyses the sites in Vat Phou and the cultural landscape at Champasak in Laos, Sukhothai and the associated sites in Thailand, as well as Ayutthaya in Thailand, and the problematic case of the temple of Preah Vihear in Cambodia-Thailand. It includes a report on the conservation, restoration and management of cultural assets in Southeast Asia, taking into account the historical, political, social and economical situations in those countries. There is also a study on the implementation of the management plan (which has been compulsory since 2002 for the sites inscribed in the WHL), and the last part deals with a more analytical study of the procedures a WHL inscription entails, including the author's personal comments on the subject.

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Photos: Beatrice Messeri except those on page 12-13

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