Definition and classification of intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Amid the trend of globalization, there are impacts that result in rapid social and cultural changes, and there is clear diversity. The issue of intangible cultural heritage is a challenge for the cultural management of the countries in Southeast Asia in order to achieve sustainability and allow intangible cultural heritage to be able to continue to exist during this era of abrupt change. This study aims to present the defining and the classification of intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia in order to pave the way for the creation of the registration of an overall list of representatives of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. For this research study using qualitative methods, data was collected from a documentary study together with in-depth interviews from a group of key
informants totaling 30 people, and data analysis with content analysis of the results of the study indicated that defining intangible cultural heritage can be divided into two types, which are definition according to the designation of social institutions in countries and definition according to the perception of people in the social context of each country. Thus, the classification of intangible cultural heritage is based on the social and cultural context of each country.

**Keywords**

intangible cultural heritage, Southeast Asia

**Introduction**

The region of Southeast Asia has prominent characteristics that are important as links forming relationships between people who have had contact and political, social, economic and cultural relations for a long time, which may be referred to as the cultural characteristics that form a common Southeast Asian foundation. Georges Louis Condominas, a French cultural anthropologist, mentioned that the region of Southeast Asia is an area of ethnic diversity by using the word “mosaic” to describe the fusion of regional identity from the ethnic diversity and language of each country (Boonwanno, 2020, p. 142). Moreover, Anthony Reid, a historian from New Zealand and an expert in Southeast Asian studies, proposed dividing the region of Southeast Asia into two main parts, consisting of the Low Centre, namely Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Thailand, which is an area in contact with the trade route through the Strait of Malacca, as it is an area with a shared sense of local identity of Southeast Asia. In the second part, there is the High Periphery that consists of Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines and Indonesia, which are the countries that do not have a common feeling of belonging with Southeast Asia (Laungaramsri, 2015, p. 20).

Regarding the social and cultural contexts, each country has maintained its identity, especially in terms of common beliefs, traditions, and culture, which is a well-demonstrated preservation of cultural identity amid diversity resulting from contact and communication with external societies. For the anthropological and cultural dimensions, Pawakapan (2015) considered them by observing that the area of Southeast Asia is a region where people have had mutual interactions for a long time, and it could be said that it is clear that the relations among the people in this region show flexibility and familiarity with the adjustment of roles to be appropriate according to the administrative officials and participation to create international commercial interactions and activities, in addition to the influence that comes from the dissemination of culture, traditions, and religious beliefs that flowed into this subregion. This is in line with the proposal of King (2008), a professor of Southeast Asia Studies at University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, who asserted that social and cultural pluralism should be considered another common characteristic, as from the past, it can be seen that the process that helped to create pluralism in this area.
resulted from both economic issues and migration, as well as the results of the cultural interactions of the people in this area. These perceptions of countries in Southeast Asia reflect their status as neighboring countries. The work of Thianthai and Thompson (2007) states that there is a division of the countries into two parts, which are the low center and the high periphery; however, the perception that people in other countries have toward countries in Southeast Asia goes along with images presenting other characteristics, especially with regard to visitors and the economic development aimed at becoming an economic tiger. In addition, the countries in Southeast Asia are flowing with multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the perception that the majority of Thai people often have is that the countries of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam have similarities in the historical and artistic and cultural contexts due to the fact that the common religious practice is Buddhism as well as the progressive development and the political and economic systems.

Amid the trends of globalization and abrupt change, the countries in Southeast Asia have made an effort to integrate as member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and to create common standards under “ASEAN Ways” in order to foster peace and a common consensus. At the regional level, the issue of intangible cultural heritage is an important matter that should be brought up for discussion. As Aikawa (2004) explained, to show the importance regarding the creation of common standards regarding intangible cultural heritage, consideration of intangible cultural heritage should emphasize the process, methods and practices more than the cultural products, along with acceptance that intangible cultural heritage is the original source of identity concepts that create cultural diversity and provide social links. In addition, intangible cultural heritage has specific characteristics and continuous evolution. Furthermore, there is also creativity and interactions with nature. Giving respect to intangible cultural heritage and its heirs guarantees that the artists, heirs and communities have the main roles in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. These roles involve giving importance to the handing down of heritage from generation to generation with education and training, acceptance of others among the intangible cultural heritage, and showing respect and acceptance of practices according to the principles of human rights (Suleman & Rahman, 2020; Suleman et al., 2021).

If one considers the dimensions that are able to raise the level of the model for the promotion and cooperation for common development in future, the issue of intangible cultural heritage is another one that has great importance, from which many countries have started to recognize and increasingly give importance to intangible cultural heritage and make an effort to push for the issuing of laws and the setting of policy in its management. This is something that is a greatly significant factor in the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage that ancestors created and practiced that have been passed down from the past to the present through descendants from generation to generation until becoming their
cultural identity, which fulfills the needs and preferences of communities in the present. Thus, intangible cultural heritage is not only culture or customs and traditions that have been passed down since antiquity but also includes the contemporary culture that is created to be consistent within the context of communities in the present as well. Furthermore, in the present, the group of countries in Southeast Asia have started to recognize the common management of intangible cultural heritage in order to create the guidelines and measures for the mutual preservation of the intangible cultural heritage of the neighboring countries of Southeast Asia sustainably.

2. Research objectives

2.1 To study the definition of intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia.

2.2 To study the classification of intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia.

3. Research methods

This study was conducted as qualitative research having the details as follows.

3.1 Key Informants

The group of the key informants totaling 30 people was divided into three groups, namely 1) a group of representatives from the government sector totaling 10 people, 2) a group of representatives from the academic sector totaling 10 people, and 3) a group of stakeholders totaling 10 people, in which the selection of these groups of key informants was done using non-probability sampling with the method of purposive sampling. For the research tools, in-depth interviews and group discussions were used in the data collection. These research tools provided the details concerning the registration of intangible cultural heritage and its feasibility. Moreover, the key informants were people that have an academic interest, work or social movements involved with the management of intangible cultural heritage for a period of time not less than 3 years.

3.2 Data collection

Primary data is data that is obtained from field studies through data collection with qualitative methods employing in-depth interviews and group discussions about intangible cultural heritage that has been registered on the lists of intangible cultural heritage.

Secondary data is the study of secondary documents related with intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia, concepts and theories
about management of intangible cultural heritage, lessons on general registration of intangible cultural heritage, case studies of foreign countries, and a study of the body of knowledge about intangible cultural heritage that has been registered on the list of intangible cultural heritage (at the national level) of the group of countries in Southeast Asia.

3.3 Data analysis

This study is qualitative research that is focused on data analysis from both the secondary data and the transcriptions from interviews and group discussions of the group of key informants by the use of content analysis. The content analysis of this study also covered the analysis of the issues according to the objectives of study.

4. Research results

Operations included in the topic of the management of the intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia have different formats and approaches according to the guidelines of the 2003 Convention on the Preservation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which are undertaken by state parties for the classification and definition of intangible cultural heritage that is located in their own territories. These actions are conducted in order to establish and improve the registration of intangible cultural heritage within their own jurisdiction, setting policies that aim to promote the role of intangible cultural heritage in society and the establishment of organizations that have the ability to preserve intangible cultural heritage, provide support for education and research in order to preserve intangible cultural heritage effectively and setting the appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures that are aimed at the preservation and equal access to the intangible cultural heritage. Based on the information above, it can be seen that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has directed state parties to carry out the defining and classification of the categories of intangible cultural heritage of each of the state parties. This research therefore, conducted the data analysis and obtained the results of the research as follows.

4.1 Defining intangible cultural heritage

For the countries in Southeast Asia, defining intangible cultural heritage has two types, which are 1) definition according to the designation of social institutions in countries and 2) definition according to the perception of people in the social context of each country, which have the details as follows.

1) Defining according to the designation of social institutions in countries is the situation in which each country determines the meaning of intangible cultural heritage legally and this becomes the duty of the social institutions that have roles involved with preservation and management of culture that will take action
regarding the designation of the meaning of intangible cultural heritage. For example, Thailand’s definition of intangible cultural heritage has been determined together with cultural wisdom heritage by having the official terminology for the phrase “cultural wisdom heritage” on 31 August 2009 changed to the use of the phrase “intangible cultural heritage” instead. Furthermore, the Promotion and Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act 2016 provided the definition and the meaning of the phrase “intangible cultural heritage” as referring to the knowledge, expression, practice or cultural skill expressed through a person, tool or object that a person, group of people, or community accepts and feels to be the joint owner of and is passed down from one generation to the next and may be modified in response to their environment.

Meanwhile, Laos provides the meaning of intangible cultural heritage in the context of Laos in accordance with the Lao National Heritage Law. Cultural heritage that is tangible or cultural heritage that is intangible, which refers to cultural treasures such as wisdom, knowledge, public philosophies, beliefs, and traditions that are praiseworthy and expressed in the way of life, social etiquette, language, numbers, legends, stories, proverbs, poetry, indigenous music, folk dances, songs, melodies, indigenous medical texts and others that have been handed down. Also, in Vietnam intangible cultural heritage is defined in the context of Vietnam in accordance with the Vietnamese Cultural Heritage Law, which gives the meaning of the word “intangible cultural heritage” as consisting of the intellectual products that have historical, cultural or scientific value that are preserved by memory, writing, transmission through oral traditions, teaching, performance and other methods and forms. These include language, writing, works of literature, art, science, oral instruction, folklore, ways of life, festivals, traditional craftsmanship, knowledge of traditional medicine, food, national costumes and other forms of traditional knowledge.

With regard to Singapore, although no law related with clearly defining intangible cultural heritage in the context of Singapore has been issued, the National Heritage Board (NHB), which is the bureau under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth of Singapore, have prepared documents for the master plan on the heritage of Singapore named “Our SG Heritage Plan”, which provides the meaning of intangible cultural heritage that includes traditions, rituals, crafts, expression, knowledge, and trade that a community recognizes as their own cultural heritage. This is because intangible cultural heritage is something that is dynamic, which is to say, it can change according to the period of time and the context of communities.

2) Defining according to the perception of people in social context of each country is found in some countries in Southeast Asia, where there is no designation of the meaning of intangible cultural heritage through the duties of social institutions, but instead relies on the creation of the common perception and understanding both in the viewpoint of putting forward meaning that has universal
characteristics applied and the designation of meaning according to the social context and culture of each country.

For example, Malaysia defines intangible cultural heritage in the context of Malaysia in accordance with official terminology in which the phrase “intangible cultural heritage” refers to expression in any form including the language of speech, spoken language, songs produced musically, notes of songs, song lyrics, folk songs, oral traditions, poetry, music, dance, the performing arts, theater, and the composition of songs and melodies of songs that may be involved with the heritage of Malaysia or any one part of the country of Malaysia or is related with the heritage of communities in Malaysia.

As for Brunei Darussalam, the definition of intangible cultural heritage is not specified clearly in either the viewpoint of law or the institutions. The meaning of intangible cultural heritage of this country was thus determined comprehensively in with regard to cultural heritage in accordance with the Convention on the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

Nevertheless, it was only after the ratification of the Convention on the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage that the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport of Brunei established the National Committee for the Safeguarding of ICH in order to conduct a study on intangible cultural heritage.

In the Philippines, defining intangible cultural heritage in the context of the Philippines does not have a law that clearly specifies the meaning of intangible cultural heritage. At present, there is a law related with cultural heritage, the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009: Republic Act No. 10066, which led to the establishment of various agencies such as the Philippine Registry of Cultural Property (PRECUP) and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). However, it mainly relies on the designation of the meaning of intangible cultural heritage through the perception in the national context of the country.

However, although defining intangible cultural heritage can be divided into two types, which are defining according to the designation of the social institutions of countries and defining according to the perception of people in the social context of each country, the same point of intangible cultural heritage, which is that the forms of wisdom that include knowledge, culture that is inherited, and identity relative to the social and cultural context of each country, are something that has characteristics that are abstract or sometimes able to change from an abstraction to become a concrete form through various media such as expression through the bodies of people, books, folk tales and communicative interactions. To define intangible cultural heritage therefore is a delicate matter and must have the common perception of people in society until it is present in their cultural heritage. Nonetheless, the fact that countries in Southeast Asia will determine the common definition of intangible cultural heritage to have a single meaning that is commonly recognized at the regional level is an issue that that needs to be discussed further due to the cultures that exist in the various countries are also divided into the main culture and the subcultures. In the subcultures, there are also differences from the
main culture. Hence, consideration of intangible cultural heritage remains necessary and must take into consideration the cultural relativity of the main culture and the subcultures of each of the countries as well.

4.2 Classification of intangible cultural heritage

The classification of intangible cultural heritage of the majority of countries in Southeast Asia have characteristics that are very similar; however, in each country, there is the designation of categories of intangible cultural heritage. Interestingly, the classification of intangible cultural heritage of Thailand is divided into six categories according to the Promotion and Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act 2016, which are Folk Literature and Language; the Performing Arts; Social Practices, Rituals, Traditions and Festivals; Knowledge and Practices about Nature and the Universe; Traditional Craftsmanship; and Folk Plays, Local Sports and Martial Arts.

In Indonesia, the classification of categories of intangible cultural heritage are divided into five categories, which are Oral Culture and Expression (Tradisi Lisan dan Ekspresi), the Performing Arts (Seni pertunjukan), Traditions, Rituals and Festivals (Adat Istiadat masyarakat, ritual, dan perayaan-perayaan), Knowledge about Nature and the Universe (Pengetahuan dan kebiasaan perilaku mengenai alam dan semesta), and Traditonal Craftmanship (Kemahiran kerajinan tradisional).

Meanwhile, Brunei does not yet have clarity about the definition and legal matters related with intangible cultural heritage, resulting in there not yet being a classification of intangible cultural heritage of the country of Brunei. Nevertheless, there are numerous government agencies that are involved with the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, which are often associated with the culture and protection of the way of life of seven groups of indigenous peoples, namely the 1) Belait, 2) Bisaya, 3) Malayu Brunei, 4) Dusun, 5) Kedayan, 6) Murut, and 7) Tutong.

In Cambodia, the classification categories of intangible cultural heritage are divided into three categories, which are the Performing Arts, Oral Cultural Heritage and Craftsmanship Skills.

In Laos, the classification of intangible cultural heritage is divided into five categories, which are Traditions and Oral Traditions, Expression and Language, the Performing Arts, Social Practices, Rituals and Festivals, Knowledge and Practices about Nature and the Universe, and Traditonal Craftmanship.

In the dimensions of Malaysia, there is classification of intangible cultural heritage into eight categories, which are Clothing, Textiles, Ornamental Arts and Crafts, Customs and Culture, Food Heritage, Language and Literature, Performing Arts, Traditional Medicine, Traditional Games and Martial Arts, and Others.

For the Philippines, classification of intangible cultural heritage includes five categories according to convention with the preservation of intangible cultural heritage of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which are 1) Oral Traditions, Expression and Language, 2) Performing...

Singapore has classification of the categories of intangible cultural heritage into six categories, which are Oral Traditions, Expression and Language, Performing Arts, Social Practices, Rituals and Festive Events, Knowledge and Practices Concerning Nature and the Universe, Traditional Craftsmanship, and Food Heritage. Numbers 1 – 5 are classified according to UNESCO with the addition of the category related with food due to the process of group discussions and listening to the opinions of the people of Singapore during of the preparation of the strategic plan for heritage in Singapore during which many of the people of Singapore provided their opinion that food can be a representative of the cultural diversity and traditions of Singapore that can connect people who have many differences in terms of ethnic groups. By the listing of the intangible cultural heritage of Singapore, it was possible to register many categories.

The country of Vietnam has classified the categories of intangible cultural heritage into eight categories, which were previously Language and Alphabet, Folk Literature, Works of Art, the Performing Arts, Social Practices and Beliefs, Festivals, Traditional Craftsmanship and Folk Wisdom until the year 2010. This was when classification of the categories of intangible cultural heritage in the national context of Vietnam were reclassified into seven categories, which are Language and Alphabet (Tiếng nói, chữ viết), Folk Literature (Ngữ văn dân gian), Folk Performing Arts (Nghệ thuật trình diễn dân gian), Social Practices and Beliefs (Tập quán xã hội và tín ngưỡng), Traditional Festivals (Lễ hội truyền thống), Traditional Craftsmanship (Nghề thủ công truyền thống) and Folk Wisdom (Tri thức dân gian).

5. Conclusions and discussion

From the study and data analysis of the defining and classification of intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia, it can be seen that defining intangible cultural heritage can be divided into two types, which are defining according to the designation of social institutions in countries and defining according to the perception of people in social context of each country, which shows the designation of meaning in order to create the perception in the context that is appropriate and in accordance with international laws related with intangible cultural heritage, which conveys that intangible cultural heritage is wisdom that is knowledge that is accumulated, culture that is inherited, and identity, to which it is related according to the context of society and culture. Meanwhile, classification of intangible cultural heritage will reveal that classification according to the culture appears in each country, regardless of whether it will introduce social beliefs as part of the intangible cultural heritage together with the local languages that are diversely expresssed both in the forms of oral communication and the writing system.

However, classification of intangible cultural heritage of each country is an attempt to bring about things that are Collective Representations, which includes
social standards, social values, social beliefs, and social regulations appended for intangible cultural heritage. In addition, there is also the importance given to the subcultures that are local cultures as well. As Bouchenaki (2003) explained, intangible cultural heritage is the beginning of cultural identity through concepts for creation and diversity. Intangible cultural heritage also includes customs and traditions, oral traditions, music, language, poetry, performance, traditional festivals, and religious rituals as well as traditional knowledge and skills related with cultural materials such as tools and housing, etc.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is fundamentally an organization that has important roles in the management of cultural heritage that recognizes and gives importance to intangible cultural heritage, which is the heritage of Living Culture. Therefore, measures have been put into place in order to to create cooperation with the various countries by creating the Convention on the Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage for use as a legal measure. This convention emphasizes the roles and importance of communities, groups of people and individuals who are involved with intangible cultural heritage (Blake, 2009). Meanwhile, the research work of Bortolotto (2015) helped to show the fact that the intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia will be able to provide a common definition and classification and must rely on cooperation from all sectors with the important role being that of anthropologists who will connect with experts in the registration of intangible cultural heritage. Moreover, providing registration of common heritage also transcends the use of criteria from any one country as a determinant such as those of the debate about the use of Europe as a hub (Eurocentrism), which is an attempt in the creation of universalization toward intangible cultural heritage that can be excessive, the impacts of which result in the neglect of providing relationships with cultural relativity.

This study reflects that the related agencies should have important roles in the registration of common intangible cultural heritage. At the level of Thailand, the Department of Cultural Promotion of the Ministry of Culture should create a platform to negotiate cooperation in raising the level of cultural tourism routes based on the intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia and push the Department of ASEAN Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, which is a hub of development of sources of data on the intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia. This can be achieved by inviting the educational institutions of each country to come together as partners for cooperation in conducting the work as mentioned. Meanwhile, the body of academic knowledge remains an important factor in the issue of development to provide networks and academic conferences of scholars in the field of intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia in order to determine the guidelines for research and develop policy for the creation of cooperation in future, including development research that strives to study the field of the intangible cultural heritage of the group of countries in Southeast Asia. This is one
part of raising the level of income and the quality of life of those related with the activities as mentioned, both the management of tourism and the development of goods and products, including development of the body of knowledge that is able to to create income for communities.

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