Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre, Luang Prabang

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Outline

• Introduction to the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre
• Ethnic Diversity in Laos
• Integrating ICH in TAEC activities
  – Research and Documentation
  – Exhibitions
  – Education
  – Advocacy
• Challenges for ICH and Museums
• Discussion
Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre

- Started in November 2005 by Tara Gujadhur and Thongkhoun Soutthivilay
- Lack of accessible, accurate and engaging information on Laos’ ethnology
- Start-up funding from private donors and foundations
- Opened in July 2007
- Private, non-profit
- Exhibits, TAEC Museum Shop, Le Patio Cafe
Local context

- Luang Prabang*, UNESCO World Heritage Site in north of Laos
- Over 400% growth in tourism in last decade
- Lao PDR is still a developing country, 83% of the population is rural and dependent on agriculture-based livelihoods
- Ethnic minorities make up a disproportionate share of the poor
Ethnic Diversity in Laos

• Laos is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in southeast Asia
• 6.8 million people
• Tai Lao, 55% of population
• 49 officially recognised groups
Austroasiatic (24%) 

Includes the Ta Oy, Lamet, Katang and the many Kmhmu’ groups.
Hmong-Yao (8.5%)

Includes the H’mong, Yao Mien, and Yao Mun peoples.
Tai-Kadai (65%)

Includes the Lao, Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Lue, and Tai Deng (Red Tai) groups.
Sino-Tibetan (2.8%)  
Includes the Lahu, Phounoy, Lolo and numerous Akha sub-groups.
Activities

- Exhibitions
- Research
- Preservation and Documentation
- Education
- Advocacy and livelihoods
Exhibitions

• Permanent exhibition on 7 ethnic groups with text, photographs, objects

• Temporary exhibit, “Splendour and Sacrifice: Taoism in Northern Laos”

• Attempt to show changing lifestyles, the contemporary and the traditional
Research, Preservation and Documentation

- Primary research
- Community cultural mapping
- Collection of over 300 objects, 25 ethnic groups
- Collaborate with anthropologists
Education/Outreach

- Small library
- School outreach
- Ethnic youth internships
- Guides training
- Museum capacity-building
Advocacy and Livelihoods

- Promote livelihoods based on traditional skills through the Museum Shop
- Support ethnic minority pride, identity-building and self-determination
TAEC Vision

- “To become a centre for learning and exchange on the ethnology and artisanal heritage of Laos that promotes appreciation for the cultures and skills of Laos’ peoples, stimulates investment and preservation of their crafts, and supports their sustainable livelihood development.” *

- Not a strict museum-type institution
ICOM

- a museum is an institution that “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the **tangible and intangible heritage** of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”
ICH and TAEC

- Ethnology museum*
  - explores cultures and people, their similarities and differences
- TAEC represents “living cultures” *
- Documenting and safeguarding ICH a goal of TAEC from the beginning
- How does TAEC integrate this in its activities?
Research and Documentation

• Purpose of research*
  – To develop exhibitions, document and better understand collection objects and cultural practices

How TAEC integrates ICH into R&D:
1. Build relationships with communities
2. Informal research methodology
3. Documenting of ICH in field research
4. Use of community researchers
5. ICH-led collection acquisitions and documentation
Building relationships

• First approach formal village leadership; village chief and elders
• Community resource persons
• Young/Old, Women/Men, etc.
• Informal, friendly, steady
• “Give and take”
• Visits to TAEC
Informal research methodology

• Don’t set out with a hypothesis (specific research question)
• More qualitative than quantitative*
• Identify issues of change and development
• Participatory cultural mapping
• Observation
Documentation of ICH

- Documentary photography (not posed, series documenting an activity)
- Life stories (recorded audio-visually)
- Video and film of ceremonies, activities, production of objects
- Currently, UNESCO Traditional Children’s Games
Community Researchers

- Identifying young people in the community who can document their own cultural practices
- Questionnaires/topics to research
- Double objective:
  - Self-documentation
  - Revitalisation
Documentation of Collections

• What types of things are in museum collections?*
• Can ICH be in museum collections?*
• Research methods for documenting collection objects provide ICH context
• TAEC’s collections are not all “antique”
• Document the “traditional” but also examine the “modern”
Exhibitions

• How can we show ICH in exhibitions?*

– Display objects with purpose, information about maker, stories
– Videos, audio recordings, photos
– Bring in community members to develop the exhibit
Exhibitions

• What role can community members play in exhibition development?*
  – Providing information
  – Collaborative research
  – Loaning objects
  – Installing an exhibition
Education/Outreach

- Important part of ICH preservation and revitalisation
- Library
- Visiting schools to do activities and raise awareness on cultural diversity
- Bringing children’s groups in for tours
- Guides training
- Sponsoring ethnic youth interns
- Museum capacity-building
Advocacy and Livelihoods Development

• Museum Shop
  – Distinctive village handicrafts based on traditional arts
  – Handwoven textiles, bamboo weaving, embroidery, hand-worked silver, applique, batik, pottery
  – Primarily from source communities
  – Average of 50% of shop income returns to communities
  – Benefits to women and families (80 women in 10 communities)
Importance of handicrafts and Museum Shop for ICH preservation

- Important supplementary source of income for vulnerable communities
- Promote use and transmission of traditional skills and knowledge
- Income to alleviate need to sell cultural artefacts
Advocacy

• Promoting appreciation for ethnic minority cultures (exhibits, education activities, festival)
• Fostering pride and identity within ethnic minority communities (handicrafts, visits to TAEC, ethnic youth interns)
• Would like to move into more revitalisation activities, but requires more time in villages, expertise and funding
• Community Museums (particularly for tourists)
Splendour and Sacrifice “Taoism in Northern Laos”

- Research and exhibition project funded by US Embassy
- 2008 – 2010
- Objective:
  “To document the religious rituals of the Iu Mien and Kim Di Mun ethnic minorities of northern Laos, to recognize the importance that Taoist and shamanistic rituals play in their identity, and to promote appreciation and preservation of these cultural resources for future generations.”

- Research and documentation, exhibition, education and handicraft development
Splendour and Sacrifice “Taoism in Northern Laos” (cont’d)

• Research and documentation:
  – Worked with community resource persons
  – Recorded ceremonies by video, photos and observation
  – Recorded object names, key words and phrases in minority language
  – Documented making of (ephemeral/impermanent) ritual materials and equipment on video, e.g. paper making
  – Contracted Dr. Jacques Lemoine, anthropologist
Splendour and Sacrifice “Taoism in Northern Laos” (cont’d)

• Exhibition:
  – Emphasised ICH and TCH – video, recreation of a ritual, documentary (‘action’) photos
  – Community resource persons came to install the exhibition, assist with labelling and display
  – Community recreated ephemeral materials for the ordination ‘scene’, such as paper decorations and offerings to gods
  – Participated in the opening, including giving demonstrations of arts and crafts and talking to visitors
Splendour and Sacrifice “Taoism in Northern Laos” (cont’d)

• Education/Outreach:
  – Four “ethnic youth interns” based at TAEC for one month
  – Continued as “community researchers”
  – Strengthening community pride and self-reflection
Splendour and Sacrifice “Taoism in Northern Laos” (cont’d)

• Advocacy and Livelihoods:
  – Community members given an opportunity to interpret their own culture for visitors
  – Yao Mien and Yao Mun section of TAEC Museum Shop
  – All handicrafts from research communities
  – Handicraft demonstrations at exhibition opening
  – Communities have earned over $15,000 from handicrafts since project began
What challenges do you see for your museum working with ICH?
Challenges integrating ICH in TAEC activities

• Research and documentation:
  – Researching ICH is more time consuming, abstract and complex
  – Staff need to learn skills in how to document ICH
  – Cultural and linguistic gaps between communities and TAEC staff
Challenges integrating ICH in TAEC activities

• Exhibitions:
  – Displaying ICH in an exhibition is more complex than simply material culture
  – Can require more budget and technology and space

• Education:
  – ICH is more abstract and difficult to communicate
Challenges integrating ICH in TAEC activities

- Livelihoods development:
  - Takes a lot of time
  - Communication and banking
  - Quality and design development
  - Timing
  - Internal community politics

- Importance of ICH, or need to revitalise is often not recognised in communities
ICH safeguarding and representation

• Responsibilities of a museum representing living cultures

• In a developing country, the issue is even more acute
  – Changes in cultural practices, community cohesion, religion, social norms, education
  – Cash dependency, sale of cultural artefacts
  – Integration into the majority culture

• Even more of a reason why safeguarding ICH has to be central to the museum’s goals
THANK YOU

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