On Intangible and Tangible Heritage: Human Beings, Objects, Agency, and the Integration of Cultural Perception

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1. Introduction

In this article, I argue that in this age where we celebrate world heritage, recent cultural discourses divide heritage into two types: tangible and intangible. With the rise of intangible heritage—which is defined in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage—cultural heritage conservation projects and policies took the profound step of boosting the significance of cultures and the atmosphere of appreciation toward cultural diversity in many parts of the world. The two divisions of cultural heritage are, however, nominal, because cultures can be considered as subtle masses that consist of entangled material and immaterial or human and nonhuman agencies. Hence, in this article, by delineating the settings and ongoing efforts to develop ways to appreciate cultures and examples of the cultural heritage properties in Southeast Asia, I highlight the points of concern when curating cultures. In doing so, I claim that there is a need to transcend the triumphs of dualism and categorical perception, which is reflected in the sharp divisions in research engagement in our integrated understanding of cultural heritage.

2. Movements of Heritage: From Monolithic to Dualistic

In Southeast Asia, since the 1990s, conservation and preservation of cultural heritage have been conducted with the aid of massive international support. This trend has continued until the present and has triggered an increase in the popularity of heritage tourism in both intra- and extra-Southeast Asian spheres, as well as increased awareness of the urgent need to protect heritage from modernization. In Southeast Asia, conservation and preservation practices are rooted in the period when Western forces expanded into the region, not just in the recent boom in heritage conservation. However, cultural heritage still draws much attention
from the public and from states, who do not want to abandon artifacts of past human beings. Hence, heritage is a phenomenon with an unchanging influence on Southeast Asian societies.

Although the significance of heritage conservation has been recognized, fueled by a humanitarian longing for traces that can certify or identify what people are, it should be noted that cultural heritage is an entity given authorization by systematic and powerful institutions. As Smith (2006: 11) notes, “There is, really, no such thing as heritage.” Heritage is, as it were, not an innate being but becomes heritage via certain mediums that can give cues that a legitimate item needs to be protected (Arizpe and Amescua 2013; Smith 2006; Smith and Akagawa eds. 2009).

Among institutions that select what is to be conserved as heritage, the most noteworthy is the world heritage program. Adopted in 1972 by UN member states and UNESCO, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage provided a key discourse on heritage in the post-WWII world. Article 1 of the 1972 Convention intended to provide a definition of cultural heritage (Table 1). Consequently, this definition became a normative idea upon which most practitioners who engaged in heritage conservation came to rely. The definition was disseminated via practical efforts in conservation work in different areas of the world; but paradoxically, as the significance of heritage protection gained attention, the notion of heritage also faced arguments in turn. One such critique included an argument with respect to the 1972 notion’s orientation toward material culture (i.e., architecture, buildings, sculptures, inscriptions, and others that are stated in Article 1 of the 1972 Convention). Regarding this materialism, critical opinions arose from states situated in the southern hemisphere.

Table 1. The Definition of Cultural Heritage (Article 1 of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage) (UNESCO 1972: 2)

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<td>For the purpose of this Convention, the following shall be considered as “cultural heritage”:</td>
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<td>Monuments</td>
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<td>Groups of buildings</td>
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<td>Sites</td>
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Those states claimed that the places that fit with the 1972 notion of heritage are situated mostly in the northern hemisphere (Aikawa-Faure 2009). The protest included different implications: it led to both political and scholarly discussions about culture. The protest was political in nature because, as discussed earlier, world heritage could not be separated from the institutional procedure of authorization by the member states and UNESCO. In the first place, however, the 1972 Convention was made up of initiatives by the northern countries in the climate that arose following WWII. So, although the goal to protect cultural heritage was said to be a global agenda of the postwar global community, for the protesters the agenda put limits on participation in the effort (Aikawa-Faure 2009). On the other hand, it is possible to state from an academic perspective that the protest posed a question in relation to cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is, as it were, both an academic and political manifestation, and it does include a scientific attitude concerning particularities that may arise in the development of each culture without resorting to the presumed universalism of mankind. Taking the protest into consideration from this perspective, the 1972 notion of cultural heritage was more or less blind to the possibility that, just as there is cultural diversity or each culture has a different cultural process, there is diversity in the elements that compose each culture and cultural process. The protest over the 1972 notion thus brought the dissatisfactory points of the cultural heritage program into the light, making post-colonial claims in terms of the balanced distribution of heritage between north and south, and also in respect to the notion’s leaning toward particular cultural criteria that the south could not incorporate and that were in effect centered on material cultures.

Without a doubt, all of those critiques led to the reconsideration of the theory and practice of world heritage protection and conservation. What is particularly noteworthy is the movement that occurred in 2003 with the intention to organize dispersed debates. After witnessing the discouragement caused by the 1972 definition and criteria that triggered an imbalance in the attention paid to regions and societies, UNESCO, the chair organization of the world heritage program, took the initiative to set up a new convention—the Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. After lengthy discussions among those concerned, the 2003 Convention inscribed a clear definition of intangible cultural heritage (hereafter ICH) (Table 2). The 2003 definition of ICH focuses on the immaterial and ephemeral aspects of different cultures, as if bridging breakup points given already by the aforementioned political and scholarly claims or as if empowering cultural aspects and communities that were barely acknowledged by the previously defined framework.
Table 2. The Definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) (Article 2 of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage) (UNESCO 2003: 2)

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<td>For the purposes of this Convention,</td>
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<td>1. The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.</td>
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<td>2. The “intangible cultural heritage”, as defined in paragraph 1 above, is manifested inter alia in the following domains: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship.</td>
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It is evident that ICH goes beyond heritage as a central aspect of material cultures. Until 2003, there were significant discussions about the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage. So, the notion of ICH includes both material and immaterial cultural attributes, which are inseparable, as stated in paragraph 1 of Article 2: “The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therein” (UNESCO 2003: 1, see also Table 2).

Nevertheless, despite the inspiration that the notion of ICH gives us to improve our understanding of cultures, material and immaterial cultures are often treated as polarized cultural dimensions. In Southeast Asia, for instance, this is very much the case. Dualism is about taking the throne of cultural perception. This situation has arisen partly because the campaigns for the 1972 Convention were successful in establishing its concrete position in the region, and ICH is still too foreign and abstract for those engaged in the conservation and restoration of artifacts and buildings. However, are those engineering, architectural, or archaeological conservators really isolated from immaterial culture? For those conservators, to say yes to this question would be easy, for those professionals, who constitute a task force that singles-out the plans and structures of buildings and maps out built-up settings, already internalized the earliest definition of cultural heritage upon engaging with their material objects.

However, if objects and spaces are manmade creations, upon drawing and mapping those
items, do they not speculate about the other dimension of those objects and spaces? Do they not extend their imagination to the unwritten or untouchable aspects of physical objects? Do they simply engage in repairing surfaces that have cracks without asking “who made this?” and “why did someone make it?” If they think that such speculation is external to their profession, how can they identify the functions of objects and objectives of object makers even though they often refer to such dimensions? They and the objects or artifacts that they take care of as cultural heritage are not separated from the intangible side. The objects may have been produced with some meanings and, if so, the ways of using them and performing with them may also have been attached to them. If they make a close scrutiny of material cultures, they cannot dismiss the intangible aspects of the objects that they work on. Also, if they scrutinize the meanings of the objects, it has to be done with deep insight. To dismiss certain aspects of an object is to ignore the facts that are already out there.

Conversely, the same opinion should hold for examiners who focus on cultures that take the form of performance or thought. Their examinations of meanings and thoughts do need to be accompanied by physical objects. They may pose questions such as “Who performs this custom?” and “For what purpose do people practice this custom?” However, the performance of customs, ceremonies, rites, and other immaterial cultural practices and expressions is often accompanied by making and using certain products. People often make artifacts by using not only special knowledge and skills, but also specific raw materials. In some cases, people order items from artisans who specialize in producing ornaments and offerings; they hold special events to show items to guests invited from neighboring communities. In such cases, observers of the knowledge and skills take notes during fieldwork about what kinds of tool are used, who uses the tools, and how people divide up the work. In doing so, objects and artifacts will catch their eyes. Researchers, if they are careful, cannot fail to take note of the names and shapes of artifacts and materials as carefully as they do the meanings of the events at which those objects are used. Even though theories from social and cultural studies or the Weberian or Geertzian traditions have taught them that unfolding webs of significance is the top priority, they still have to include objects in their analyses, because objects are components of the world just as human beings and their meanings are.

3. Intangible and Tangible Heritage as an Integral Entity

In the previous section, I stated that tangible and intangible cultural heritage represent
recent human challenges in understanding cultures, and that the world heritage program is a
crystalized form of those challenges. I intended to note that, although tangible and intangible
heritage are regarded as a separate category in the world heritage program, in practice they
are closely tied to interaction, exchange, and intermingling in the long process of cultural pro-
duction that continues in different social contexts.

Two world heritage sites in Lao PDR, the townscape of Luang Phabang and the cultural
landscape of Champasak, may support the aforementioned understanding of cultural heritage,
where tangible and intangible heritage are part of an integrated cultural entity respectively.
The two sites demonstrate that buildings, artifacts, religious practices, and thought melt
together and combine.

3-1. The Town of Luang Phabang

The town of Luang Phabang (Figure 1) was inscribed on the world heritage list in 1995. In
most historiographies and narratives of the Lao people (the majority population of the present
Lao PDR), the town is acknowledged as the earliest capital of the Lane Xang Kingdom. Present
official historiographies state that, according to the Lane Xang chronicle, the town became the
capital in the 14th century when one of the earliest Lao kings, Panyă Fă Ngum or Lord Fa
Ngum, came to politically dominate the northern and southern Mekong region. Fa Ngum
grasped the area of Luang Phabang, which was called Xiengdong-Xiengthong in the past, and
gained superiority over chiefs that governed mŭ’angs, or towns-states, around the later capital
Vientiane and its satellite town Vieng-
khām in the midstream Mekong River
region, as well as mŭ’angs in the down-
stream areas on both banks of the
Mekong while building a good relation-
ship with the Khmer king (Ministry of
Information and Culture 2002). Given its
official designation as the birthplace of
the Lao kingdom that retains traditions
and memories of the country’s long his-
tory, Luang Phabang is regarded as
special to the nation, so the state party
prescribes the importance of the con-

Figure 1. The View of the Town of Luang Phabang
and Mekong River at the Peak of Mount Sî
(Phot by Odajima, August 16, 2016)
servation of the town in national decrees and laws. Following this official perception, the town became a world heritage site, and is often said to be one of the places that most preserves “Southeast Asian” traditions.

The documents that the state party and the UNESCO selection committee officially issued for the purpose of inscribing the town onto the world heritage list and managing it properly as a world heritage property may serve as guidance for tourists on the charms of the town. The Decisions Report (UNESCO 1995) gives authorization for Luang Phabang to become a world heritage property. In it, the UNESCO committee refers to the values of the town, stating that it meets the three general criteria that the UNESCO committee uses for assessing values\(^2\):

Criterion (ii): Luang Prabang reflects the exceptional fusion of Lao traditional architecture and 19th and 20th century European colonial style buildings.

Criterion (iv): Luang Prabang is an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble built over the centuries combining sophisticated architecture of religious buildings, vernacular constructions and colonial buildings.

Criterion (v): The unique townscape of Luang Prabang is remarkably well preserved, illustrating a key stage in the blending of two distinct cultural traditions\(^3\).

The given justification reflects that the outstanding value of the town lies mostly in the material, visual, and aesthetic features of its buildings. In particular, the Decision Report underlines the intermixture of different architectural elements as a unique feature of the town, saying that Luang Phabang “represents, to an exceptional extent, the successful fusion of the traditional architectural and urban structures and those of the European colonial rulers of the 19th and 20th centuries” (UNESCO 1995: 47).

The main reason why the values are measured by focusing on the appearances is related to the fact that in the selection process the general criteria that became effective with the 1972 Convention and that tended to emphasize the distinctiveness of materiality took a central role in the assessment. But in the post-ICH period, it is not overstating it to say that if our focus tends to be on material cultures, our scrutiny will remain underdeveloped despite our will. If the objects of significant value are manmade, thoughts, beliefs, and other immaterial and ephemeral concepts, behaviors, and human movements may have affected these objects.
Furthermore, in the case of Luang Phabang, our examination ought not to be done with a focus on only a single layer of culture and history, as the town is home to different cultural and historical traces—tangible or intangible—within themselves. The French period is one of these layers, and so, unless the traces of this period rehabilitate orientalism, the investigation of the formation of hybrid cultures may contribute to improving our understanding.

If our examination is conducted from the aforementioned perspectives, vernacular peoples and their thoughts and acts, and all other immaterial creations, will no longer be dismissed. It seems that this spirit is anchored to the recent campaigns of the UNESCO experts and local authorities who used Luang Phabang to publicize the 2003 Convention and their ongoing surveys of vernacular intangible cultures.

While collecting data on intangible cultures and renewing national memories of culture are ongoing initiatives of the relevant authorities, to unfold the webs of tangible and intangible cultural significance we should consult ethnological information that will give us insight into the entanglement of human behaviors and thoughts. The information resources that we can access were written in around the 1950s and 1960s; namely, the post-French period that already made a mark on both regional and foreign cultures. Information of this kind makes it possible to know that religious and moral thoughts and practices are closely connected to the formation of the physical environment. In other words, what we can know and should note first is that Luang Phabang is a cultural space. It is also possible to call it a townscape or cultural landscape, borrowing the terms used in the Decisions Report or the general selection criteria of the world heritage program. By using such terms, we show that the town is not just made in the course of natural processes, but is an alliance between human beings and the environment, or between their imagination and skills and material potentiality.

As the ethnological data show, this old capital was opened up and nurtured along with the rise and growth of the Lane Xang Kingdom. Amongst the sources that were anchored to the political and social settings of the kingdom, the most important tool was Buddhist institutions. Although in some periods Lane Xang Buddhism intended to dislocate indigenous beliefs, the locally nurtured customs including beliefs, myths, and legends served as signifiers of the legitimacy of the king as a governor, and were not completely cut off by Lane Xang Buddhism or other cultural traditions.

The French ethnographer Charles Archaimbault refers to the way that the kingdom opened up the town by using the fusion of local beliefs and Buddhist practices, in narrating how That Luang, or the Great Stupa, was built in the capital as an emblem of the Buddhist
kingdom:

“According to the Lao hagiography, when Buddha was deceased Mahâkassapathera or Asoka transported some relics to Laos in person and disposed them to this place ... In Luang Phabang, That (dhât) was constructed on the forestry place that was haunted by a devil, Yaksini Nang Kang Hi. Since the erection of the sanctuary, the sacrifice was offered and a priest purified this unhealthy place. He accomplished a triple circumambulation around the That and affirmed the foundation. It is the perfect center of the Kingdom at that the ritual makes the sovereign virtue in the 12th month” (Archaimbault 1973: 20)

Upon taking a glance at the locations of emblematic constructions on the map of Luang Phabang—that is, the palace and temples—it is evident that the kingdom continued to create the town while following religious teachings and cosmology. Situated in the central area, the palace or the present national museum apparently represents Mount Meru, the central peak of the Lane Xang world. The palace, built at the foot of Mount Si or the naturally made Mount Meru, likely borrowed the power of this emblematic mountain to legitimize the centrality of the court. Behind the palace and the mountain is the Mekong, which could be an economic, social, and political gateway, for the Mekong could serve as a route for the transportation of goods and services and as a fishing resource. The court relied on the political and juridical grounds of the organization of Buddhist monks. Via the medium of the Buddhist organization, the court could grant people knowledge, morals, wisdom, and a device for recording—that is, letters. Another important duty of the court was to conduct rites and festivities following 12-month calendrical cycles—that is, hit sipsông or the Twelve Traditions.

The Twelve Traditions had multiple significances: conducting rites and festivities meant holding religious, political, social, and cultural events. The Traditions are religious firstly because the events take place based on religious teachings. Each month has its own rites and festivals where people confirm the Buddhist teachings and anecdotes about gods and ancestral entities that appear in the local legends. At the same time, by conducting the rites, the court and citizens could remove the sins that they had accumulated in the course of their everyday lives. Above all, as “people say that the Twelve Traditions are the tradition of ‘het bun’ in the 12 months” (Mahâ Sila Viravongsi 1996: 86), the most important objective of the Traditions was “het bun”: to do (het) virtuous deeds or virtues (bun). Hence, for all practitioners, het bun is an act as well as a purpose. To have bun, or virtues, was “an image of the luck... the eternal
dream of happiness” (Nginn 1967: 1).

The citizens, by participating in the Traditions, could accumulate virtues higher than the ones that they could obtain through everyday behaviors. Thus, the Traditions were a collective representation of sanctity. On the other hand, the Traditions were political deeds. It was the court that sponsored the rites and festivals that not only regenerated the power of the living spaces and people but also showed the court’s political capacity. For the Lane Xang court, the most meaningful rite was the rite of declaration, the climax of the 5th and 12th months when the New Year Festival and the Great Stupa Festival took place. Within the palace, the court, facing the guardian spiritual powers, declared good governance, and could thereby continue its reign. In the vicinity of the palace, meanwhile, by the order of the court, masters of elephants and the royal boat- “racing” troop went around, patrolled, and conducted rites both on the land and in the rivers. The court members then showed up to public spaces in processions, dropping in at emblematic sites and temples. The state’s most important emblem and guardian, the statue of Phabang, was lifted and taken around the communities. At the same time, the rite conjured up the guardian spirits Pù Nyoë Nyaw Nyoë (the great grandparents Nyoës) that also showed up to the citizens. Witnessing the incarnation of the mythical couple, the citizens reconfirmed the continuity of their kingdom (Archaimbault 1973; Evans 2009; Nginn 1967).

The monthly festivals and rites were occasions specially designed by cultural orders that took the shape of theatrical grandeur. Each manmade architectural feature constituted a culturally organized urban space that possessed immaterial elements. Through the aforementioned investigation, it is possible to grasp that the culture of vernacular peoples, whether tangible or intangible, allows integration with the natural environment. In the investigation, however, the process by which hybrid cultures are produced remains unstudied. This cultural phenomenon makes up the distinctiveness of the region, so the accumulation and the examination of data in terms of both material and immaterial cultures that are related to the phenomenon are meaningful. Studies from the perspective of the integration of culture, humans, buildings, and the environment are required.

3-2. The Cultural Landscape of Champasak

The other world heritage site, Champasak, also represents the integration of tangible and intangible cultures. It is said that in the southern region that is home to Champasak heritage, before the Lao court members who branched off from the Luang Phabang court stabilized their reign in this region in the 18th century, the non-Lao populations left social, political, and reli-
gious traces. A popular hypothesis states that the tangible remnants that lie both underneath and upon the ground are such traces, and that the Lao people reused these non-Lao remnants.

The two distinctive layers are the complex of Wat Phu and its associated monumental sites and the so-called Ancient City. The Wat Phu complex, featuring ancient stone buildings called Wat Phu, Nang Sida, and Thaotao, has physical marks from different historical periods. The most identifiable mark is of the Angkorian style that dates back to the period between the 9th and 12th centuries. However, nearly invisible tinges of other historical styles remain unstudied. The complex of the Ancient City has physical indications of the early urban formation in Southeast Asia. The ancient urban complex was initially named after the legendary Khmer city of Sresthapura, but was recently renamed Kruksatra—the name of a place that appears in the discovered inscription K365. Some chronological interpretations say that the urban complex can be traced back to around the fifth century, from before Wat Phu and its associated monumental buildings came to have the style that we can see presently. It is, however, not possible for a more precise examination to be conducted until more data are available. Meanwhile, we are charged with data collection, examination, and discussions on the junction of tangible and intangible cultures. As in the case of Luang Phabang, it is important in the case of Champasak to consider the history and culture from an integrated perspective of humanity, culture, and the environment. We have to keep in mind that, upon becoming a world heritage property, Champasak was called a cultural landscape. This means that there is an integration between human culture and the natural environment. Likewise, we must take into consideration the possibility that tangible and intangible cultures may have penetrated into each cultural dimension.

In this heritage area, the key that connects tangible and intangible cultures lies in the natural environment. Being sandwiched between the Mekong and a mountain chain, Champasak is a wide stretch of alluvial plain, on which the major archaeological features were built. Among the mountains, one that has a unique shape is called Phu Kao; it has a huge rock on top. From a distance, the rock looks like a female chignon, so the Lao people call it such. But from the religious viewpoint, this mountain resembles Linga, the avatar of the Hindu god Shiva. For this reason, the leading interpretation states that this mountain was called Lingaparvata, the mountain of Linga, in accordance with some ancient inscriptions, and Linga was the object of worship from the time the archaeological remnants were initially created. In other words, the mountain triggered the creation of the monumental buildings and all other artifacts in this place.
What is more noteworthy is that, as I have already noted, the harmonious combination of nature and culture, material and immaterial, continues until present. To understand this requires sharp insight into contextualized historical and cultural processes and tricks of the domestication or vernacularization of cultures.

In some scientific fields that count the abstraction of an orderly sequence of causal events and people as important, the present Lao communities would not be regarded as complete heirs to the ethnicity and religion of the ancient forebears who lived in the lower Mekong area. Although we are still lacking sufficient data on who really lived there in the different ancient periods, if we follow some historical and typological interpretations, the ancient populations are unlikely to be exactly the same as the present Lao populations whose ancestors founded the Buddhist kingdom and its traditions. However, if we carefully scrutinize the paths of the past and present inhabitants who domesticated every cultural capacity and potentiality and made vernacular traditions that are all incarnated in this cultural landscape, the dense fog caused by this “historical break” will surely be dispersed.

Ethnological information can, again, reveal hidden codes that are embedded in the cultural landscape. Ethnological studies state that the Lao communities who are likely the offspring of the southern Lao kingdom that branched off from the northern centers of the Lane Xang at the beginning of the eighteenth century, took over the Twelve Traditions and made some changes to the myths that support the rites and festivals. The Lao kingdom and citizens added to the Lane Xang traditions the ritual thoughts, cosmology, and ways that had already been cultivated by their “ancestral” inhabitants before the Lao resettlement. In other words, the Lao kingdom and communities saw success in resettlement by connecting themselves with non-Lao ritual and worship systems and ritually declaring their presence to the “ancestors.”

The ethnological account gives a portrayal of the way that the Lao populations took the non-Lao ritual elements into their Traditions. This cultural aspect is, for example, well depicted in the account that records the procedures of the Boat “Racing” Festival held in the 11th month in the Lane Xang traditions:

“... This day, the aborigines, ten in number, arrive at and install themselves ... in the yard of the prince’s residence. In the past, the ceremony used to reunite certain Kha belonging to seven or eight different tribes who came from Boloven or from Se Khong in the north of Stung Treng. In actuality, those were only Kha Phakeo, the descendants of the ancient guardian or the Buddha of Precious Stone, of the village of Ku Cik ... Who is
this Kha? According to some versions of the annals of the south, in 1724 AD, Soi Sisamut, King of Champasak, learned that two aborigines of the Saravan region had found a Buddha of Precious Stone in a cave. The lord gave an order to transport the statue to the capital. At the mouth of the Sebang Lieng river, the Buddha of Precious Stone, which was exposed in the boat, then fell into the water. The search was done in vain, and the king received a preach of the god in his dream, saying for the king to let the aborigines who escorted the statue jump into the water. The two aborigines had found the Buddha of Precious Stone [and] made a success in carrying it back to the bank. The statue was placed in the room of the throne, and every year the aborigines, who had been resettled in the Kham Nung village—which was then renamed the “village of the Kha of Buddha of Precious Stone”—must offer clothes, rice, scarfs, hairs, and cotton to the precious statue ... Now, back to the prince’s residence ... Mother Can distributes the aborigines the dresses in deep-red ... caps in white and red [and] three gongs of different dimension that their ancestors offered to the king of Champasak. Immediately dressing, the Kha ... deploys the rites of their ancestral festivals: the ceremony Apūp.” (Archaimbault 1972: 55-56)

As in the aforementioned festival as well as in the northern customs of the Twelve Traditions, the main conductors of the festival were the Lao court and the Buddhist and non-Buddhist priests whom the court appointed. The non-Lao minorities whom the Lao called Kha were also assigned a role: the minorities were the proper practitioners of the rites that aimed to invoke and communicate with ancestral spirits that were believed to bestow the power to control the land of the kingdom. The Lao people took over governance, as it were, not from the minorities but from those spiritual entities. In this respect, it is possible to state that immaterial culture gives continuity to the region’s historical paths.

In the lower Mekong region, where not only the Lao but also other groups appeared in turn, it was the immaterial cultural traditions that continue to take place, irrespective of which group is the successor, to connect the different historical layers. The important rites and festivals are held at or around major archaeological sites that were created in connection with the cosmology that views the mountain as a sacred entity or the center of the world (Mount Meru) (Figure 2). Incorporating all of those cultural features into our analysis, we can state that the material and immaterial cultures have together constructed the local culture by making dialectic and relational ties. Some parts of the given determinations by the world heritage committee for this world heritage property took account of Champasak meeting three general criteria,
and accordingly described the uniqueness of this heritage site as below:

Criterion (iii): The Temple Complex of Vat Phou bears exceptional testimony to the cultures of South-east Asia, and in particular to the Khmer Empire which dominated the region in the 10th-14th centuries.

Criterion (iv): The Vat Phou complex is an outstanding example of the integration of a symbolic landscape of great spiritual significance to its natural surroundings.

Criterion (vi): Contrived to express the Hindu version of the relationship between nature and humanity, Vat Phou exhibits a remarkable complex of monuments and other structures over an extensive area between river and mountain, some of outstanding architecture, many containing great works of art, and all expressing intense religious conviction and commitment. (UNESCO 2001: 44)

The authorization given to the site, however, does not specify the contributions that immaterial cultures make to the cultural integration. The given determination by the world heritage committee does not precisely explain how the cosmology, rites, and religious customs are connected to the natural environment and the creation of the buildings. Nor does it elucidate the vernacularized beliefs that act as a medium to connect different historical layers. We have to wrestle with this theme while collecting data.

4. Tangibility and Intangibility: Objects, Human Beings, and Agency

By outlining the two case studies, I reiterated that tangible and intangible cultures are parts of the cultural entities that supplement each other, and suggested the importance of our exploration of cultures from an integrated perspective. Nonetheless, we have a problem left
unaddressed: the epistemological dichotomy between the tangible and intangible. Why do we rely on two categories while intending to convey the significance of the integrated approach to culture?

When considering the question “Why do we naturalize the categorical and binary perception upon understanding culture?,” some may recall the dichotomized perception in philosophical explorations. One may trace such explorations back to Descartes. In his Meditations, he extracted the thesis of the Mind and Body as substances distinguishable and separated. The Cartesian theory takes the stance that material things or objects including the Body exist substantially vis-à-vis what comes up in or to the Mind, which is, after all, an immaterial substance contrastive to material substances (Descartes 1881).

Cartesian thought that rationalizes the material and immaterial as separable has as its basis the notion that “I” exists as the most real—that is, “only a thinking thing, that is, a mind (mens sive animus), understanding, or reason” (Descartes 1881: 107) or “who apprehends certain objects as by the organs of sense, since, in truth, I see light, hear a noise, and feel heat” (109). In this way of thinking, it is the mind, or one’s understanding or reason, that can give proof of the existence of an object. The tought that the perception of humans’ gives assurance to the existence of the object is embedded in hylomorphism, too. The bottom line of hylomorphism regards the human capacity of thinking and designing, which only brings about the material becoming the object.

This concept—that the human mind is the key to the life of the physical world—was adopted by the fields of modern sciences including social and cultural anthropology, which made the conceptual assumption that humanity consists of strong-willed men. This legacy of modern thought, however, has already faced a number of critiques saying that humans or the human mind would not be universally coherent, nor as simple as the modern psychoanalytic view of the true mind that does not appear on stage but always hides itself backstage. We have to reconsider our customary perception of the relationships between mind and body, material and immaterial, and tangible and intangible, depending on the subject/object perspective. This leads us to a reconsideration of the discussion that we have already touched upon: the modern world heritage concept, which used to focus on material cultures. We should rethink the engagement of the human and the mind, which embraces complexity, in material cultures.

Discussants like Gell (1998), Latour (2009), and Ingold (2013) have grappled with the aforementioned topic. They warned about a human-first policy or the superiority of the mind; they
also posed a question about the concept of humans having a strong will. In other words, they thought that agency—that is, initiators, mediators, and outcomes of causal events that happen through being involved in social networks (Gell 1998)—is a privilege for human beings, but there is the possibility that materials and objects can also have such agency in societies. Their arguments consider the possibility that an object acts by noting that a door may engage in our society just as a human who opens a door does (Latour 2009) and that materials and sites for basket-making that have specific attributes may impose some unavoidable conditions for the skills and objects of basket-makers and finished baskets (Ingold 2013). Latour (2009), in reconfiguring human and nonhuman as a set of actant or a unit that acts, goes on to state that the human and nonhuman categories dwarf nonhuman agency in an anthropomorphic capacity. This certainly prevents us from developing a closer comprehension of the living world (162).

These discussants have given us persuasive commentaries on the possibility that the tangible and intangible categories tightly fasten our perceptions of culture and heritage to them. Despite their utility, the categories can only anchor our understanding of the world to a certain point. So, our alternative is to respond to our world’s growing process (Ingold 2013) as a complex whole that consists of human and nonhuman and object and nonobject, as an agent that may take intersubjective actions between the two.

It is not impossible to find similar explorations in classic social theories. Lévi-Strauss, for instance, when referring to pottery, shows that his theoretical basis is hylomorphism: “Every art imposes form on matter ... Clay extracted from the earth is also the ‘crudest’ of all raw materials known and used by man ... The raw material, pulled out of the limitless range of potentialities, is lessened by the fact that, of all these potentialities, only a few will be realized: all demiurges, from Prometheus to Mukat, have jealous natures” (Lévi-Strauss 1988<1985>: 178). In this statement, he seems to make the assumption that the material or the nature becomes an object only as skills, projects, beliefs, or human cultures give it the order to take a certain shape. On the other hand, when he refers to bricolage he goes beyond that assumption. In contrast to modern engineering and manufacturing that prepare a priori plans and designs, bricolage does not exclude ephemeral and unexpected happenings. This attribute is expressed in bricoler, the verb form of bricolage; its elementary meaning is “applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting and riding. It was however always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle” (Lévi-Strauss 1966<1962>: 16). Bricolage is, as it were, creation that takes into account all potentials that materials, objects, human beings, and cultures have,
as well as all unpredictability present in and around them. In this view, insight into all whole creations and creative agencies involved is required.

The aforementioned arguments will help us to further explore the cultural features that may exhibit an integral characteristic of the two world heritage landscapes I discussed in the previous section. Those theoretical considerations suggest we should focus on not only the decoration of tools, utensils, and all other artifacts that were used for the purpose of *het bun*, but also on the social organization of communities that consist of performative *actants*; such communities’ methods for dividing up jobs related to production and preservation; artisans’ knowledge of materials and objects and their learning — both formal and informal — methods; the process of taking in and off foreign and domestic traditions; how they selected places for settlement; the temperature and temperament of ancient times, materials, and grounds; how they acquired materials in the given environmental conditions; the relationships of beliefs, thoughts, and rituals of the different groups with the manufacture of objects and settlements; the relationships between the groups and between the gods and the groups; and the local perception of tangibility and intangibility. In response to these themes, the surveyors will be required to become a close community and go beyond the divisions of teams.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I stated that the concept of cultural heritage has already moved on from a monolithic way of thinking, and that, even if the concept of heritage is presently divided into two referential categories, the future growth of the perception of heritage and culture will be of importance. Without doubt, the endeavor to gain knowledge of heritage and culture is critical for researchers, irrespective of their disciplines. In particular, for those who explore ancient sites and objects, this is an important theme, as ancient buildings and sites are still mainstream targets of protection policies in many places in the world. For those that treat antiquities as their main subject, however, it is very difficult to make direct observations about the moments when such pieces were manufactured. Even so, researchers should not stop deeply considering ancient materials, humans, and agencies without fitting the puzzle pieces into the present frame of our assumptions about the world. For this purpose, researchers who engage in different fields of foci are expected to transcend their differences and make and maintain cooperative relationships with each other.
Notes

(1) The article is a re-edit of the original version that was entitled “Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of the Champasak World Heritage Site.” The author presented the original article at the Fifth International Coordination Meeting for the Champasak World Heritage Site, Lao PDR, March 30th 2018, and was honored to have the opportunity by the chair organizations (UNESCO Bangkok and the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism Lao PDR). Both articles were written in the normative language that was used at the meeting. I did so with the hope of continuing close communication with all participants of the meeting, and of extending communication with all concerned with the world heritage programs in and around the region. At the same time, I would like express gratitude for Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C), JSPS (25501021 and 16K02086) for supporting the study of heritage in Lao PDR.

(2) To become a world heritage property, candidates must be assessed by UNESCO’s selection committee, who measure their value using general selection criteria. Each candidate property has to meet at least 1 of the 10 general criteria that are inscribed in the Operation Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, the tool used by the committee to make decisions on selection. The selection committee is supposed to revise the criteria on a regular basis to fit with the changes to the regulations and concept of world heritage. Reflecting the arguments about the concept of world heritage, in 1992, a special criterion, which is called Cultural Landscape and which celebrates outstanding interactions between humans and the natural environment, was added to the criteria. UNESCO allows public access to the selection criteria (see the UNESCO website, https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/, accessed August 12, 2018).

(3) The Decision Report of the UNESCO committee gives “Luang Prabang” as the name of the town, for this usage became common prior to the start of the socialist era in 1975. After 1975, the town came to be called “Luang Phabang,” following the writing regulation of the government that omitted the “r” sound. The description of how the town meets the general criteria can be found on the UNESCO website, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/479 (Accessed August 30, 2018).

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