

Keys for the Future of the Cultural Heritages in Vietnam: Comprehensive Research, Cooperation with Local Agencies and Building of Manpower

Masanari Nishimura

Institute of the Cultural Interaction Studies, Kansai University
NPO The foundation for safeguarding the Underground
Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia



1. Archaeology as cultural heritage management and conservation

What is the aim of excavation?

Not only in Japan but also in the world, most of the excavations are not aimed for preserving the sites but for land development works. Once the sites were excavated, they would be lost forever and never recover themselves. We should remind ourselves that excavation is a legal method of destructing archaeological site by scientific method.

On the other hand, to whom does the cultural heritage such as archaeological sites belong? The sites themselves do not belong to the archaeologists, not administrative officers but to the local. Furthermore, the local people and society usually want to know why they excavate and how the site can be placed in their local history and society. Consequently, the archaeologists should remind that the results of the excavation and archaeological research need to be known for the local people and society. This may be termed “public archaeology”.

In the following I would like to introduce my experiences related to the public archaeology and education activity for the young researchers in Vietnam.

2. Duong Xa Kiln site

In November 1999, a group of kilns was found on the left riverbank of the Ngu Huyền Khê River in Duong Xá Hamlet, Van An Village, Yên Phong Dist., Bac Ninh Province. Although the kilns had formerly been buried under thick alluvial silt, the exploitation of clay by modern brick kilns had exposed the kiln structures. Then treasure hunters detected traces of this old ceramic industry and they dug out many artifacts. Soon the antique shops in Hà Nội were displaying unusual stoneware objects.

Once we archaeologists had confirmed that this was an ancient production site, we initiated actions to safeguard it. After we brought letters from the Institute of Archaeology to the local governments of Duong Xá hamlet and Van An village requesting that the sites be secured, the authorities responded immediately and prohibited any further destruction. This happened within two hours! This may be the quickest case in which an archaeological site in Vietnam was safeguarded.

We conducted emergency excavations at three places in 1999 and 2000. After the first excavation, we had to consider the future of the kiln sites. As reported by journalists, much of

Vietnam's cultural heritage (archaeological sites and artifacts) is being destroyed due to treasure-hunting activities and land exploitation. Ancient ceramics and the heritage sites that they are associated with (i.e. kiln and burial sites) are especially targeted by treasure-hunters. Therefore, we decided to conserve the excavated kilns and publicly exhibit them to popularize the significance of safeguarding cultural property found beneath the ground.

Because of the river's high water level during the rainy season, it was considered necessary to transfer the kilns to higher ground. In February 2000, I established the "Foundation for Safeguarding Underground Cultural Property in Vietnam" (the present name is the "Foundation to Safeguard the Underground Cultural Property in Southeast Asia") to raise donations to safeguard this site. Many charitable persons and organizations in Japan donated money to the foundation. In addition, the Van An Village Government generously offered a site on a slope beyond the riverbank and also provided 10000 pieces of bricks for the museum's construction. In March 2000, we carried out a second excavation and also began the conservation work. The kiln structures were cut into



Duong Xa Kiln site damaged by brick-kiln operation and rooting ceramics

Transferring kiln body by handwork of the villagers and researchers



pieces and placed in wooden frames and plaster casts. Then the villagers brought the sections piece by piece on carrying poles to the new site. At the same time, we began constructing the museum on the slope. After completing floor of the museum, the sections of the kiln were joined together by cement. Then the kilns were reinforced by armatures and the refitted parts were painted to resemble their original color. In the middle of April, the provincial and district governments agreed to assist with the construction budget. The building and conservation work were completed in March, 2001. In the summer of 2001, however, the river flooded. The water reached the ground level of the Museum and this inundation partially damaged the kiln structures. After completing the necessary repairs, the site museum was re-opened in May 2002. In total we only spent 22000 US dollars for the construction of museum.

In 2009 the province registered the site and museum as the historical and cultural site of Bac Ninh province and the site museum was managed by the local government.

3. Kim Lan Project

Kim Lan and Bát Tràng are located along the left bank of the Hồng River, in Gia Lâm district of Hà Nội. Bát Tràng is famous traditional ceramic production village but archaeological research was not yet conducted. Xã Kim Lan is also now popular in ceramic production and was used to be

famous for sericulture in the 19th century. In 2000, the old settlement (Bãi Hầm Rồng) site of the village was confirmed at the near riverbed and we excavated in 2001 and 2003. The excavation there revealed the human activity evidence during the 10th to 17th century packed in the thin layer, and also confirmed the ceramic production in the 13th to 14th century.

The site was discovered by the old folks of Kim Lan village. The old folks group researched on the historical origin of the village and they discovered ceramic sherds at the river side and concluded they may be material evidence of the ancient Kim Lan village! Then they informed to the Institute of Archaeology. This old folk group also have collected the old document of the village and surveyed historical monuments and relics of the village. Therefore I also made collaboration with them to search research aural history, historical information, ethnography and traditional ceramic production technology.

Also many villagers of Kim Lan have much interests on the research project. During the excavation, old woman society participated in excavation as volunteer workers. At the both the excavation seasons we organized briefing at the site and many villagers came to see and discussed. In February, 2005 the foundation organized exhibition of the excavated artifacts and briefing the research results on the Kim Lan history at the village office and about 800 villagers attended.

However, the site located at the riverside in destination to be distinguished in near future because of the strong river stream. The old folks hoped that as a center of the conservation and education of the village culture and history combined together with the village industry (ceramic production), small village museum will be set up in the near future for excavated artifacts. From 2003, the Foundation again started inviting the donation for museum construction. With the aid of the financiers in Kansai region and some Celebrity, up to 2007 the foundation collected amount of 30000 US dollars. In November, 2007, we organized the presentation ceremony of the 30000 US dollars as a fund of the museum construction to the village government with the attendance of Hanoi city vice-mayor and Japanese Member of the House of Representatives. In 2008, due to the quick upward of the price, the construction budget become double price compared with the last year and funds needs to be piled up more. But because of the booming down of the Japanese economy, it was not so easy to raise the fund.

Then we changed the direction for fund raising from the Vietnamese side. The foundation made blueprint of the museum and the village government tried to raise the fund from Hanoi city government. In 2009 Hanoi city government decided supplement the shortage of the budget and the construction will start in 2010. The dream of the Kim Lan villagers will come to true soon!

4. Problems of the Vietnam and Japan Government joint project

From 2004 to 2007 I also participated in the Joint project of Thang Long citadel site. Thang Long citadel site, which was located at the center of present Hanoi city, have long occupation history from 7th to 19th century and was scheduled to register as a candidate for the World Cultural Heritage site till the 1000th memorial year of transferring the capital to Thang Long, 2010.

I have worked with several Japanese specialists for archaeology, material conservation,

architecture and land survey and supported them for making them work smoothly with the Vietnamese side aiming to give lectures on the research and conservation methodology and make them practice.

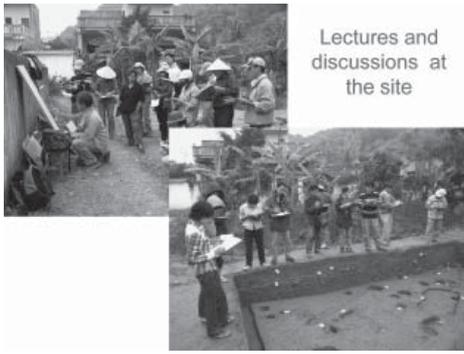
However, in result I have recognized some dissatisfied points for this project. Here I point out like the following.

1. Large scale project includes research, equipment granting, negotiation and conservation. But many of them were not conducted in a uniformed system. So some of the project seem like low output in the cost v.s. performance.
2. Many of the participants have high-level skill and speciality but are working for the governments, not for the site! Nearly all of them are government officers so that they are always thinking of the government will. Therefore all of their working way were not always be the best for site and its safeguarding.
3. The project was conducted by the big budget but not always mean big investment for site. Probably labor cost and traffic fee for the Japanese specialists are quite high.
4. The project was managed by government officials. The shortage in the knowledge and experience of the local science (Vietnamese archaeology, Vietnamese history etc.) and society (Vietnamese society). The opinions from the spot (site) are often neglected and it affected the morale for unproductive direction. Example, from my experience in the Vietnamese archaeology, I provided some opinion and method for archaeological recognition and scientific research method, most of them were not adopted by unknown reasons.

5. Dong Son field school project

From the above mentioned experiences, I have concluded that the best way for solving the above mentioned problem like the chapter 4, is building the manpower. Without the good manpower no effective or productive project works for this field.

Therefore, I have set up the field school projects for the young generation of Vietnamese archaeologists, museum curators and officers of the cultural heritage management. Based on the funding by Toyota Foundation, From the end of 2007 we have organized three seasons of the field school at Dong Son site in Thanh Hoa province. The field school was aimed to excavate carefully one large scale archaeological site and to practice the methodology of the research and study the related fields. It includes various study programs such as land survey, collecting paleo-environment relics, excavation methodology, drawing methodology at site and of the artifacts, discussions on the research method at the site, reconstructing the excavated artifacts, way of the writing report, etc. Also we invited several foreign scholars like the Vietnamese, Japanese (Prof. Nakamura Shinichi, Kanazawa University) and Chinese archaeologists to give lectures on the research methodology and cultural resource management. Additionally, for exchange among the new generations we invited several graduate students from Silpakorn University, Thailand for field school. Based on this occasion, they later organized one session by themselves for the 19th Congress of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Nov., 2009.



The field school is aimed to practice the real scientific method and master it for the archaeology and related fields at the site so that in the third season we conducted the test excavations controlled by the participants themselves.

Furthermore, in 2008 and 2009 we organized study tour, each 10 days to Thailand and South China for studying the recent developments of the archaeology, museum and site conservation works and hold the workshops for the exchange the academic research results at the visited country. This tour is effective not only for heightening the self-consciousness for their study but also played a role for the introductory of the public archaeology in Vietnam. In 2009 we invited Thai and British archaeologists and held the first seminar for public archaeology in Hanoi and many of the mass-medias informed this issue to the public.

As a result, we were quite successful to educate new generation implementing with the new refined methodology in archaeology and they may become leading scholars in this field. Another three fruitful result are that the province government decided to conduct preservation projects for Dong Son site, we could establish new strong relations between the neighbored regions and it is successful in the encouraging the local manpower.

6. Final words

Base on the above mentioned experiences, I concluded some remarks for the success in the public archaeology and cultural resource conservation works.

1. Comprehensive research method is needed for understanding the real value of the site. Otherwise it is rather difficult to provide the total picture of the archaeological site for the public. Sometime it is also necessary to make collaboration research with the historical and ethnographical studies.
2. Appealing its characteristic site and artifact are necessary for the public understanding. We should pay attention what is the appeal point of the site for easier recognition. Also emphasizing for acquiring affinity in culture and emotion is necessary.
3. Cooperation with the local people and society is definitely important. Without the understanding the local context of the cultural property, no successful in the all of the discovery, conservation activity and research are guaranteed by this collaboration.
4. Collaboration in long-term will lead to the manpower building. This kind of work needs rather long-term investment. But if we worked based on the viewpoint of the long term working, it will have good effects to the manpower building.
5. Budget is always necessary but we need much more enthusiasm and wisdom!! And probably the enthusiasm is most important.