

Representing “Vat Phou”

— An Ethnographic Account of the Nomination Process of
Vat Phou and Adjunct Archaeological Sites to the World Heritage List —

Masao Nishimura

I. Introduction

The Vat Phou⁽¹⁾ archaeological site which is located along the Mekong River in Lao PDR, 500 km southeast of Vientiane and 6 km southwest of Champassak, is one of the most important sites of the greater Khmer Empire (9th-13th centuries AD) and a site which exhibits some of the earliest known evidence of urbanism in Southeast Asia (e.g., Barth 1902; Nishimura 1998b; Nishimura and Sikhaxay 1998; UNESCO 1998).

Khmer legends say that the area around Vat Phou was the birthplace of the Hindu god, Shiva, and the heartland of the pre-Khmer kingdom of Land Chenla (Ishii and Sakurai 1985:76-85). The Vat Phou temple complex is set midway up an imposing mountain overlooking the floodplain of the Mekong River, on a natural terrace where a fresh-water spring emerges from the rock. Behind the temple, a sheer sandstone formation rises vertically giving the impression of a giant Shiva lingam. The stream has been channeled so that it flows through the main sanctuary of the temple itself and over the central representation of Shiva which originally would have been in the sculpted form of a Shiva lingam. From there the sacred stream flows down the artificially terraced mountain slope into the sacred reservoirs or barays, and finally into the Mekong River where life-giving waters sustained the whole of the ancient Khmer Empire. The core monumental area of this site is a Hindu/Buddhist sanctuary covering four square kilometers on a terraced hill slope and includes the following major buildings: the main temple on the terrace, six shrines on the middle terrace, two the so-called “palaces” and a Nandin⁽²⁾ hall on the lower terrace, and

(1) “Vat Phou” has been commonly spelled in several different ways. We often see “Wat Phu,” “Vat Phu,” or “Wat Phou” in documents. Here I adopted “Vat Phou” for three reasons: 1) it was first used by French; 2) it was most recently used by UNESCO for the Champassak Heritage Management Plan and 3) since the World Heritage Nomination in 2001, many authors have used this romanization.

(2) Nandin is a bull, and a symbol of Shiva’s mount in Hinduism (e.g., Rooney 1994: 232).



Fig. 1: Map of the Champassak Plain
Source: Department of National Geography, Lao Government: Map No.D-48-44, 1987

two large reservoirs (barays) situated at the foot of the hill. Begun perhaps as early as the 3rd century AD, the Vat Phou temple complex was extensively renovated and enlarged to its present form by the Khmer King Suryavarman I (ca. 1000 AD) (Cœdès 1963: 34-67; Dumarçay 1998: 35-43; Freeman 1996: 200-207).

In addition to distinctive mountains, archaeological remains of an associated extensive ancient city,⁽³⁾ dating from as early as the 3rd - 7th centuries AD and continuing into the 13th century, have been identified in the area adjacent to the temple remains. This is the earliest known Khmer period urban settlement and the first Khmer city site from any period to be scientifically excavated. As such the site provides unique and valuable evidence for the origins of Southeast Asian urbanism.

Although of outstanding cultural and historical value, this site has suffered from serious deterioration through environmental damage, vandalism, and other causes due to the lack of a systematic management. The establishment of a sustainable site management system was therefore necessary. Lao government asked UNESCO to conduct multi-disciplinary research on Vat Phou and the adjunct area, and to establish the most suitable master plan, since they wanted the Vat Phou and associated archaeological sites to be included in the World Heritage list. The author of the present paper was involved in the entire process of nomination of the Champassak World Heritage.

The present paper pursues two aims: first it intends to describe the nomination process with emphasis on the restructuring of central as well as local government organizations. In doing so, it intends to provide a brief ethnographic account of the Champassak World Heritage nomination. The account is written from development anthropological viewpoints on which the present author's argument is based (e.g., Pottier 2003; Novellino 2003; Ramos, et. al. 2003). Second, it also intends to show the socio-political circumstances which had to be taken into account in the process of promotion of Vat Phou temple complex and associated archaeological sites to World Heritage nomination. In doing so, it intends to emphasize how external factors come into the decision-making process from the beginning to the end. The paper especially pays attention to the decision to establish a protection zone for the Vat Phou temple complex and associated archaeological sites. Finally, the paper implicitly and explicitly suggests how the concept of World Heritage is constructed in a particular setting, and therefore argued that World Heritage is no universally shared concept, but rather that many concepts of World Heritage exist in association to

(3) This ancient city was a large walled city, and it is now assumed to be the legendary "Shestapura."

one heritage which are often inconflcted with each other.

II. Preparation for the nominaion of the Champassak World Heritage: Capacity-building⁽⁴⁾

Taking into account both the scale of the project envisaged for the future restoration of Vat Phou and the systematic management approach which needs to be applied, it has been necessary to radically reassess needs at the site and to draw up a development plan to meet these needs (e.g., UNESCO/PROP 1996; UNESCO/UNDP 1991).

Such a development plan was also a prerequisite for the nomination of Vat Phou to the World Heritage List, which had been given high priority by the Laotian Government. World Heritage listing implies that the management regime established at the site must be of the highest international standard and take into account not only site preservation, but also the future development needs of the local population, researchers, worshipers, tourists and other visitors to the site (e.g., UNESCO 1996c).

The implementation strategy for this project was therefore that of a capacity-building exercise, whereby international experts worked in teams with their Laotian counterparts and with national trainees from the Department of Museums and Archaeology of the Lao Ministry of Information. On-the-job training was the backbone of this project (Kuribayashi 1996; Nishimura 1997, 1998a, 1998b). Field investigations, as well as the drafting of the final reports, were undertaken by Laotian specialists and trainees under the guidance of the international experts (UNESCO 1999). This approach was used in order to develop and enhance the Laotian national capacity for the preservation and management of this World Heritage site.

Considering that the primary responsibility, not only for the restoration of the monuments of Vat Phou, but also for the safeguarding and management of the larger archaeological area, as well as for promotional and fund-raising activities to ensure sustained maintenance of the site, lies with both the Lao national authorities, and the sources of external assistance, including assistance delivered under this project of Lao PDR. This necessitated conceptualization and implementation of this project as a joint undertaking of the Lao authorities and the international community, if it was to succeed and have a long-term impact. In this context it was extremely important that: 1) a suitable number of trained staff were assigned by the Department of Muse-

(4) The term "capacity-building" is not so familiar in academic circles, although it is frequently used among development project agencies. It conveys a rather wide range of meaning from formal to informal education and technical training. Many instances of capacity-building are made through verbal as well as visual methods.

ums and Archaeology to the project in order to complete the work in a timely manner; 2) detailed plans and appropriate promotional materials were prepared before initiating any actual restoration activities; and 3) an effective inter-ministerial co-ordination mechanism was established (Nishimura 1997, 1998a, b).

Based on this general framework, we strategically designed the following list of specific aims and activities:

1. The better inter-ministerial co-ordination of activities for the safeguarding, preservation and development of the Vat Phou archaeological area.
2. The scientific investigation of the history of Vat Phou and associated ancient city site with results formulated into up-dated *restoration and management plans* to guide the preservation, presentation and development of the Vat Phou archaeological site.
3. The assessment of the Vat Phou area’s potential for the development of cultural/educational activities - in particular *sustainable cultural tourism* - and the formulation of an action plan for promotional and fund-raising activities as well as for educational and public information, within the overall context of authentic site preservation.
4. The acquisition of optimal technical expertise, together with sufficient *equipment and training*, for conservation and site management staff (Nishimura 1997, 1998a; Nishimura and Sikhanxay 1998).

III. Field Implementation of Capacity-building: Vat Phou Case

In general, all the planned activities were undertaken and successfully accomplished as detailed below.

1. Establishment of the National Inter-ministerial Coordinating Committee (NIMCC)

The establishment of the NIMCC was designed to provide for sustainable inter-departmental management of the Vat Phou monuments and archaeological site within the framework of national and provincial development plans. The lack of such a national management mechanism was the underlying cause of the unsustainability of international assistance since 1974 (Dagens 1988; Dumarçay 1988; UNESCO 1987, 1995, 1996a, b; UNESCO/UNDP 1991). Therefore the establishment and support of the NIMCC as a permanent on-going effective site management mechanism was a critical objective of this project (UNESCO 1995, 1996a, b, c).

The NIMCC became a core organization of the Government of Lao PDR, established by Ministerial Decree No. 330/IC dated 17 June 1996. The decree delegates absolute site management

authority to an inter-ministerial committee constituted under the authority of the Ministry of Information and Culture and comprised of national and local representatives of the Ministry of Information and Culture's Department of Museums and Archaeology; the Secretary-General of the Lao National Committee for UNESCO; representatives of the local Champassak provincial government; and representatives of National Development, Tourism, Environment, Finance and Planning ministries. The Chairman of the NIMCC is Chief of Cabinet of the Ministry of Information and Culture. The secretary of the NIMCC is the officially designated National Project Coordinator of this project, and is a staff member of the Ministry of Information and Culture's Department of Museums and Archaeology. The author was assigned by the UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in consultation with the NIMCC to advise the NIMCC in his capacity as Chief Technical Advisor of this project. The UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific acts in an *ex officio* advisory capacity to the NIMCC.

All five meetings of the NIMCC held between September 1996 and March 1998 were extremely productive and successful in establishing the NIMCC as the site management authority. A wide range of topics concerning the administration of the site as well as technical problems related to the preservation and conservation of Vat Phou monument complex and associated ancient city were discussed at the meetings. All international experts and all Lao national counterparts were invited to each meeting of the NIMCC (Nishimura 1998 b; Nishimura and Sikhanyay 1998; UNESCO 1999).

2. Research Activities

The sustainable result of this project is a comprehensive master plan for the conservation, restoration and preservation of the Vat Phou monument complex and adjacent archaeological sites. In order to understand clearly the conservation needs of the monuments as well as the distribution of archaeological sites, it was important to conduct on-site scientific research in a systematic way. At the same time, project research activities provided Lao counterparts with the opportunity to reinforce their research capacity in a variety of fields.

In other words, there were two purposes in project research activities: one was to accumulate the information needed for drawing up the site master plan; the other was to strengthen the research capacity of Lao counterparts. Therefore, although the research was advised by international experts in each field of research, these experts were required to team up with at least one Lao counterpart as co-researcher, and to transfer their expertise with a one-on-one teaching method. This training program provided fruitful results for both Lao and international members.

Namely, both parties could exchange their knowledge.

Research activities conducted during the project were based on fieldwork. Due to the pre-project lack of information on the archaeology of Vat Phou and adjacent sites, this information had to be scientifically and systematically collected before a conservation master plan could be developed. Therefore intensive as well as extensive field research was a necessary part of this project. The research activities undertaken can be classified into two categories: 1) research to obtain basic data on the site; and 2) research concerning conservation problems and their solutions.

A. Research to Obtain Basic Data

1) Extensive Survey of the Distribution of Archaeological Sites

This survey intended to identify and map all unknown archaeological sites around Vat Phou (Jacques 1986), so that the important core area to be protected could be clearly defined. This fieldwork was conducted by the author of the present paper together with Lao counterparts. Research aimed to clarify the differential distribution of archaeological sites, and to determine the co-relations among factors such as the size, location, kind of site, the surrounding environment, and distance from the Vat Phou monument and ancient city. The so-called "site-catchment approach" (see e.g., Vita-Finzi and Higgs 1970; Flannery 1976; Zarky 1976) was adopted to analyze the data, which allowed the interpretation of the result of analysis from an anthropological perspective.

We could infer that the distribution pattern of archaeological sites in Vat Phou area were quite skewed, implying that there were several distinct and well-defined prehistoric and historical activities in this region. Types of activities appear to be grouped in specific patterned locations across the site. The functional division of the regional urban system appears to be clear. This implies that human activities of a particular kind such as agricultural, or craft works, were organized in a centrally-planned manner during the period from the 11th to 12th century and perhaps even earlier (Cucarzi, et al. 1992; Cucarzi and Zolese 1997). This pattern was taken into account in the final version of our master plan to protect and manage the Vat Phou temple complex and associated archaeological sites.

2) Small-scale Archaeological Excavations and Introduction of Non-destructive Methods for Archaeological Sites

A small-scale archaeological excavation was made within the precinct of the Vat Phou monuments. The excavation was carried out on the northern side of the so-called "North Palace" (Dumarçay 1988, 1990). The purpose of this excavation was to investigate the drainage system of Vat Phou monument through the restoration of the original engineering system. Through this

excavation, we learned that there was indeed a well planned drainage system in the Vat Phou precinct during the Angkorian period (Dagens 1988; Dumarçay 1988; Freeman 1996, Nishimura 1997, 1998a, c). Through our field research, we further inferred that it was of great importance to *rehabilitate the original Khmer drainage system*⁽⁵⁾ since the problem of water erosion was the most serious one to be addressed for the long-term conservation of the monument and site. The excavation also provided an opportunity for field training.

Geo-magnetic survey techniques were introduced into this project by Italian team members to identify and test non-destructive methods of archaeological site investigation (Cucarzi, et al. 1992, Cucarzi and Zolese 1997). The area to be protected contains a number of archaeological structures lying beneath the surface of the ground. It is impossible to excavate all of them at once to understand the development of urban system, or to expose them in order to protect them. It is also not advisable to investigate the underground sites in a large scale way, such as a full scale excavation of a whole site which is often seen in Asia, since such excavations also destroy archaeological sites. Once the site is destroyed by whatever means, looting or excavation, the site will never be able to recover its original form. The ideal is that the site should be left *in situ*. The project team strove to maintain this idea of cultural heritage protection at the site. The result of this experimented research was fruitful. The size, form, and some contents of underlying monuments could be determined precisely in three dimensions along with the materials used for building those monuments. The adoption of non-destructive research methods will have a significant and permanent effect on archaeological site management and bring the management of archaeology in the Lao PDR in line with the best world standards.

B. Research Concerning Conservation Problems and their Solutions

Given the purpose of the project and our principle that the site has to be appropriately preserved, we think that any research must incorporate the total master plan of restoration and preservation of archaeological features. This implies that the restoration of archaeological features should be included in the research design from the beginning. Unfortunately, this is not always done. For instance, a number of archaeological investigations previously conducted in Southeast Asia failed to consider the after-effects of the project. Therefore, in many cases, we see quite messy traces caused by the investigation at the site. In the Vat Phou project, we intend-

(5) Detailed studies of drainage systems in Angkor period have been performed in Siem Reap area, Cambodia by French scholars (e.g., Groslier 1979; Jacques 1962).

ed to lay out a strict rule: every archaeological research project should have a strong responsibility for the restoration of the original state of the site after the end of research (e.g., Feilden and Jokilehto 1993).

From this perspective, the research concerning the restoration was an important part of our project and so we conducted architectural and geological research. This research was concrete and specific, both parts included an intensive training for counterparts.⁽⁶⁾ Based on the research results, a strategy for restoration was developed. The restoration was designed for techniques which local people can use and control (e.g., Feilden and Jokilehto 1993; Pichard 1997, 1998; Young 1997). The Vat Phou temple complex is now in the process of restoration by local people.

IV. Basic Concept of the Preservation of Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the establishment of the organization, the so-called "National Inter-ministerial Coordination Committee (NIMCC)" within the Laotian government, was key for the success of this project. Since all problems related to the Vat Phou monument complex and associated archaeological sites have been discussed, and solutions arrived at, by the NIMCC, the decision-making procedures guiding the conservation, preservation, and restoration of the Vat Phou monument complex and archaeological sites were coordinated and clear. Since administrators of national-level and local-level governments are included in the NIMCC, and all problems were continuously expressed and dealt with, the miscommunication between national and local governments and between project team members - which is so commonly seen elsewhere in Southeast Asia - was avoided in the implementation of this project (e.g., Nishimura 1998c).

Another fundamental element of the project was capacity-building. Capacity-building was persistently pursued as the primary strategic objective of the project. In fact, all activities performed in the project involved capacity-building. In order to avoid imposing unnecessary knowledge on local people, project members began implementation by defining what capacity-building should constitute. Therefore, targets for capacity-building could be clearly set, and energy focused on the achievement of these targets. Capacity-building undertaken within the framework of this project was not limited to technical training, but included the total capacity for cultural management, as a way of recognition and validation of the cultures of the past for the present. Capacity-building as an integral concept included all kinds of activities associated with the

(6) Almost all of the counterparts were government officers in this case.

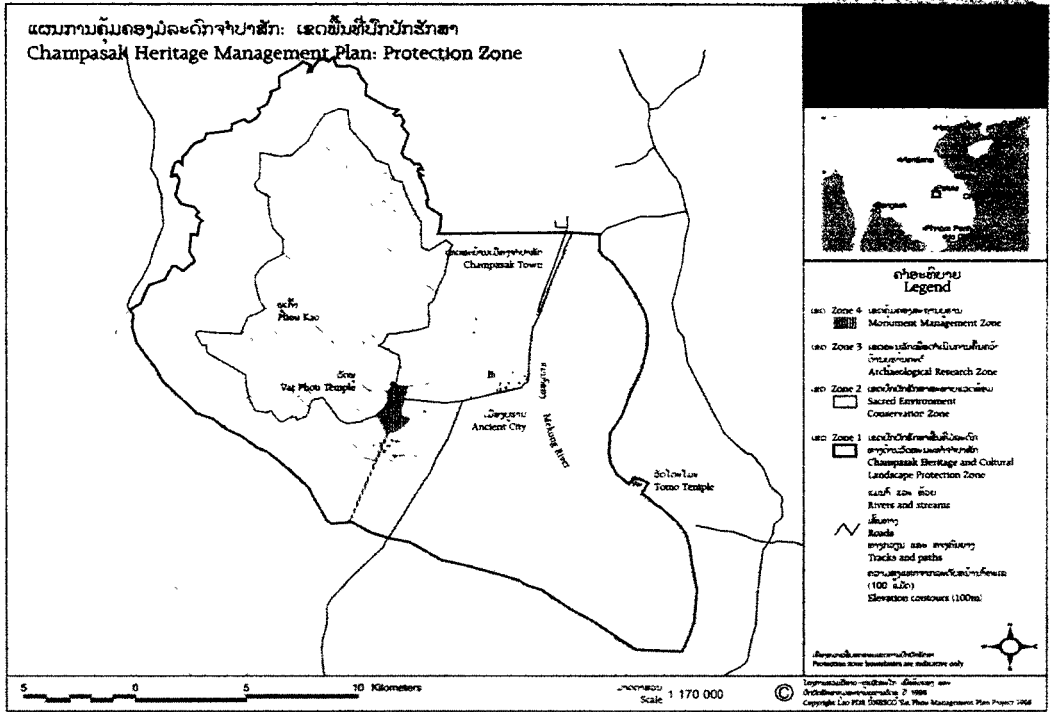


Fig. 2: Protection Zone of the Champassak World Heritage
 Source: UNESCO 1999: 351

conservation of cultural heritage, from site planning and management, through the technical aspects of restoration, to tourism and local community development.

In relation to the point mentioned above, project capacity-building activities did not only target selected Lao project counterparts, but were also directed at local people who inhabit the Vat Phou area as well. Attention to the integration of the local community is the second key to the success of this project. If cooperation of the local community had not been mobilized, the project would have never been successful. Therefore, beside capacity-building, another principle which must be emphasized is the commitment to sustainable socio-economic development of local communities (villages) on the basis of the unique heritage which they share and the presentation of which concerns this project. This principle permeated all project activities from design through to execution. For instance, when Mr. Pichard, a French architecture specialist in our team, laid out the plan for the restoration work for Vat Phu monument complex, he designed the most basic and simplest methods and instruments to be used for the restoration work (Pichard 1997, 1998; UNESCO 1999); for it is those methods and instruments that local people will use after training. Because these methods are easy to master, local people will really be able to participate in the

restoration work. Holding to this principle, it is clear how to move forward into the future. At the end of this project, we recommended that it not be extended into a large-scale and heroic restoration and preservation work at Vat Phou by using the most advanced fancy, expensive and technically complicated equipment. Rather, the intention is to proceed with a long-term and step-by-step restoration plan which should be *designed by Laotians and carried out by Laotians* (English Heritage 1996; Nishimura and Sikhaxay 1998; Pichard 1997; Preusser 1997; Young 1997).

In this regard, the project has adhered to and applied Romer's Rule (Kottak 1994), the most basic concept which now prevails in the field of developmental anthropology (e.g., Pottier et al., 2003). According to this rule, realistic development promotes change but over-innovation does not; many changes are possible if the aim is to preserve local systems while making them work better; successful projects respect, or at least don't attack, local cultural patterns. Thus, effective development draws on indigenous cultural practices and social structure (Kottak 1994).

V. Conclusions

As seen in the description of this project, the implementation of any project is a step-by-step and trial-and-error process. In this process, external knowledge comes to the local members of the project. However, the author would like to stress that at the same time, local knowledge also comes to external participants. Therefore, development projects (works for World Heritage nomination in this case) is not a one-way, but rather a bilateral operation. In this regard, it is misleading if we assume that the project is the imposition of a biased idea on local people. The present project is not really a "colonialistic" operation at all. Rather, the project implementation is a very careful and somewhat "reluctant" operation.

We hope that the present paper as an ethnographic account concerning the World Heritage nomination process, provides suggestions for future archaeological site management projects in the region. One of the reasons for its success is the tight cooperative work between the Lao counterparts and the international experts who were from many countries but who worked as one seamless team. The very close coordination between the sectors in the project insisted upon by UNESCO was another important factor leading to the success of this project. Without an intensive effort to coordinate researchers and restorers from a variety of fields, implementation at this project would not have been so complete and so successful. The national-level and local-level administrations have also been extremely cooperative and supportive, so that there were no difficulties in implementing the project. The project was provided with a maximum level of governmental services to ensure that the project progress smoothly.

Finally, the close monitoring and backstopping of the project by the UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture and his staff was indispensable in assuring full support and smooth and efficient execution of the project.

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