

Understanding the International Conservation Ethics: A Thai perspective

In the field of architectural conservation today, UNESCO provides a set of ethics as an international guidance with which conservation practice in all countries may be complied. From a global perspective, the effort is made to sustain the heritage of all cultures that is of universal value to humankind. However, the ethics must be exercised with deep awareness of local differences in order to prevent decline of cultural diversity. The idea creates a paradoxical ground on which local difference is maintained together with the universal culture of humankind. Thailand, as a member country of UNESCO, adopts the ethics as a philosophical guidance by which conservation of the heritage is practiced. This essay proposes that if International Conservation Ethics (ICEs), which originate from Western scientific culture, is to be adapted to specific local cultures. There are three mechanisms of the ethics of which conservationists must be aware, so that differences in conservation practice around the world can be accepted on the same ground.

Of its five principles, the ethics are based on two concepts. One of which is minimal intervention. The other is minimal loss of the original fabrics. The latter provides flexibility to practical application of the former because it is extremely difficult to intervene without any loss of the original materials. In addition, sustainability is, currently, included so as to ensure the process of passing the heritage to the next generation. Interpretations of the five principles must stem from comprehension of these concepts. The adoption of these two concepts results in a rather "international characteristics" of cultural properties around the world. The characteristics reflect limited ways in which people treated their cultural properties, in other words, limited ways which ICEs suggest to be appropriate for looking after our cultural property. Bearing in mind that, the paradox occur on the condition that all conservation practices are based on a conservation process, which should be assumed that being universal. The process consists of three questions; why conserve, what to be conserved and how to conserve. It was important to understand the value of the subject matter before making decisions on its future. The values provide the rationale behind the decision as to 'Why Conserve' or 'Why Demolish'. They also help to identify 'What is to be conserved' and 'How to conserve'. The value may be assigned from emotional perspective e.g. the sense of nostalgia, wonder or beauty. The subject matter may also be rationally evaluated by historical, economic or environmental values. The conservation process offers a rational conceptual framework for critical decision-making about our cultural environment.

Within the rational conceptual framework, this essay proposes that if the ICEs is to be exploited as a global framework, there are three questions which conservationists should ask themselves so that local differences is bring to light. The questions are 1. Approach to the world: ways in which each group of people views the world - what their priority is; 2. Awareness: knowledge of the environment in terms of spiritual and physical; and finally 3. The notion of ownership: ways in which cultural properties is owned. It asks about duty and right of peoples to whom the cultural property belongs. Ownships come in the forms of guardians of the property, owners who have full authority, or merely a humble user.