

**THE PRESERVATION OF THE WOODBLOCK DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE IN  
VIETNAM  
- FROM THE RISK MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE**

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**Summary**

Until 2016, Viet Nam already had 6 Documentary Heritages honored and recognized by the UNESCO. 50% of which (3/6) were woodblock heritages, including: the Woodblocks of Nguyen Dynasty, the Buddhist woodblocks of Vinh Nghiem pagoda and the Woodblocks of Phuc Giang School in Ha Tinh. To protect the priceless documentary heritage listed above, the Government and the Authoritative agencies, pagodas, families have actively taken measures to preserve and to promote the value of the woodblock heritages. However, aside from the physical and temporary measures, we believe that the preservation of woodblock documentary requires careful planning and well-coordinated long-term sustainable measure. From the Risk Management perspective, our thesis will discuss aspects with a view to propose a scientific basis for finding measures to preserve the woodblock documentary heritage of Viet Nam.

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**1. Risk Management – the scientific basis for the preservation of the woodblock documentary heritage**

Risk (R) are the unexpected events or uncertainties that may happen unwantedly, causing damage, loss, dangers, and hardship for people<sup>1</sup>. Though unwillingly, people always have to face the risks. Instead of letting it be, humanity has always been looking for ways to minimize and control the as much of the risk and unpredictability as possible, while preparing the mentality as well as measures to overcome or recover from the unfortunate event as they happen, and even take the chance created by these events to bring development. That is the foundation for the theoretical science of Risk Management (RM)

Currently, there are multiple definitions of RM. For this particular thesis, we would like to employ the following definition: ***Risk Management is the process of approaching the risk in a scientific and systematic way to identify, control and prevent it, as well as to minimize and recover from the loss, the undesirable effects caused by the unfortunate event, and to learn and accumulate the experience from the events so as to change and develop.***

In the field of Archives, the preservation of the archived documents and material is for the purpose of prevent and overcome the undesirable influence of the environment over humans, to protect and to prolong the lifespan of the documents. In other word, the objective of the

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<sup>1</sup> Trinh Thuy Anh 2006) “*Research on some Risk Management measures for the transport construction projects in Vietnam*” Master degree thesis. Vietnam National Library, code LA 06.0544. 1.

preservation of the documents is to prevent and to recover from the unfortunate occurrence that might happen to the documents and materials.

However, to achieve that objective, the agencies and managerial entities of the documents and materials often employ the following approaches:

- *First*, after facing some actual unfortunate occurrence such as fire, explosion, the loss or missing documents..., the archive agencies would focus on finding the causes and preventive measure (which means they try to prevent the event after it already happened). At any place where unfortunate events have never occurred, the risk management work would most likely be neglected.

- *Second*, though never been exposed to the risk, or exposed only to minor risks, the archive agencies would still actively do researches to forecast the risk and to devise the procedure, method to control and minimize the risk RR or devise the possible scenario for overcoming risks.

The first approach shows that the agencies, while having the good intention, lack action. And for the second approach, the managerial agencies of the documents and materials actually take action. While the first approach is Risk Handling, the second is what Risk Management is supposed to look like.

By applying the analysis above in to the field of archive in general as well as for the woodblock heritage in particular, we believe that the preservation of the heritage should follow the second approach. Should it be approached from the Risk Management perspective, the preservation of woodblock heritages in Vietnam would be executed scientifically and systematically with a higher sense of initiative.

## **2. The Application of Risk Management theory in preserving woodblock heritages in Vietnam**

Until now, all the RM researches in Vietnam (Trinh Thuy Anh, 2006; Doan Thi Hong Van, 2010; Tran Thanh Tung, 2017...) generally agreed that the content of RM includes the following core subjects:

- Identify, analyze and measure the risks
- Control and prevent the risks
- Actively minimize the risk and overcome the unfortunate events as they happen.
- Learn from the unfortunate event, take the experience so as to change, adjust and develop.

During the past years, the document and material preservation in general, and the preservation of the woodblock heritage in particular, has been executed more or less within the the objective and content of RM. However, we still find the process incomprehensive and unsystematic. In the section below, we would like to analyze and present some proposal regarding the RM preserving the woodblock documentary heritage in Vietnam.

### ***2.1. Identify, Annalyze and Measure the possible risks that could happen to the woodblock documentary heritage***

Risk identification is the constant and systematic process of identifying the risks that could happen to the managed objects in general and the woodblock documentary heritage in particular. Risk identification has to be done by researching, making thesis, dissertation...and by using the following scientific methods:

*First, investigate using surveys to identify and analyze the risks:* The survey questionnaire is meant to be designed based on the origin of the risk RR or the environment of occurrence, including the following contents: The risk that already happened to the agency, the scale of the loss, the frequency of the risk and the preventive measures that has been employed as well as their effectiveness. Based on the result, the research agency or group will make a list of risks and ask the surveyed people which is the most frequent risk and what kind of risk it is.

*Second is the expert method:* This method involves interviewing the people who have a lot of experience and technical expertise, who have spent years working with the woodwork heritage, or have done a lot of researches on the risks that could happen to the woodblocks. The expert would do the analysis and express their opinion and insight over the matter.

*Third, the method involves comparison, benchmarking and charting:* using the data from the surveys the insight of the experts, the researcher will have to make comparison and perform benchmarking to create a chart of the many risks possibly occurred to the woodblock documents. The data must reflect the research result of the nearest 10 or 5 years to identify the patterns in the effects of the physical environment and the social environment toward the woodblocks (e.g: The pattern of tropical storms that might caused flooding in the woodblock storage; behavior of weather and climate in the time of climate change...)

The result of the Risk Identification process is to have a list of all risks that did occur and may occur to the woodblocks. This is the first step in RM

After identifying the risks, the next step is to measure and evaluate the risk.

To identify the risk is the crucial initial step. However, risks are of many kind with various level of impact. The agencies have the responsibility to taxonomize the risks and to find the suitable preventive measures. And in order to do that, they have to measure and evaluate. To measure and evaluate the risks, the researchers often employ the most two popular method – quantitative measurement and qualitative measurement.

- *Quantitative measurement:*

According to Trinh Thuy Anh (2006), Nguyen Thi Quy (2009), Doan Thi Hong Van(2013), the quantitative measurement is used to measure and evaluate the risks via the indicators such as costs, time, resources. The risk scenario is estimated using the data related to the measured object.

e.g: The frequency of flood in the Northern provinces of Vietnam. If the woodblock heritage storage in Vinh Nghiem pagoda (Bac Giang) is flooded with the flood height of 50 cm then how long will it take for the water to retreat, and how long will the recovery (sundry) take? How many people will be required? How much will it cost? And what percentage of the woodblocks would be cracked or broken?

- *Qualitative measurement:*

Qualitative measurement is applied to the risks that are difficult to observe, the risk that might have subjective causes. This method relies on the evaluation of the experts to rank the risks of different predictability and different level of impact, such as:

- + The frequency of the risk: Nearly never, rarely, and frequent
- + Level of risk: Very high, high, moderate, low and very low.
- + Level of impact: Very serious, serious, and not serious

e.g:

During the making of the thesis “Risk Management in Archiving”, we experimented the mentioned methods to paper documents. As a result, we identified a number of risks related to the paper documents, including:

- 1/ Risks of natural catastrophe
- 2/ Risk of the preservation’s atmospheric environment not meeting the standard
- 3/ Risk of war and dispute
- 4/ Risk of inconsistent legal environment
- 5/ Risk of limited administration capacity
- 6/ Risk of mistakes in execution of operation
- 7/ Risk of the staff’s lack of awareness and misbehavior
- 8/ Risk of limited staff capacity
- 9/ Risk of inadequate security measure
- 10/ Risks in the transportation of documents
- 11/ Risk of run-down facilities
- 12/ Risk of fire or explosion of the storage building during repairment

After applying the measurement methods, the results reveal that the most prominent risks to the documents mostly belong to the social environment group, including: the inadequate and inconsistent legal system on Archiving, limited and inconsistent administration capacity of the archive agency and the staff’s awareness as well as the possible mistakes in operation execution of the archive staff.

From the example above, it is clear that: the same risks might happen to the woodblocks. And despite that, recently, just like the case of paper documents, we have been only focusing and emphasizing on the risks caused by nature such as natural catastrophe, war, fire, explosion while neglecting the possible risks caused by the social environment<sup>2</sup>. Even though the most prominent risk lists for the woodblocks may not match with that of the paper documents, we would like employ the example to emphasize that: Before thinking up the measures to preserve the woodblock documents, we must first conduct objective researches. The research from RM perspective will help the archivists as well as the government agencies and organizations responsible for preserving the woodblock documentary heritages to find more thorough and systematic measures for the preservation and security protection of the documents.

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<sup>2</sup> Read more in Tran Thanh Tung: *The gaps in organization system, document system – the potential risk for archived documents in Vietnam*”. Vietnam Document management – Archive Magazine 7/2017

## 2.2. Control and prevent risk in preserving woodblock documents

Control is to apply measures, technique, tools, strategies, action plans,... to prevent or minimize the loss and the undesirable influences that may happen to agencies, organizations<sup>3</sup>, or a specific object, in this case, the woodblock documents.

This is the focus, the core of RM; since by doing this step well, the risk will be controlled and the unfortunate events will never happen, or will be extremely unlikely to happen.

According to researchers, there are many measures that can be taken to control and prevent the risk. To apply these measures to the case of woodblock documentary heritage, we will have to take the following steps:

- *First*, actively prepare for and avoid the risk as well as find ways to eliminate the causes of the risk, especially for the risk with high probability.

Risk Provision is to devise an early warning mechanism for the risk. For example, in preparing for and forecasting natural catastrophe, Beth Lindblom, Preservation Consultant Walpole and Karen Motylewski, former director of Northeast Document Conservation Center, U.S researched proposed a Disaster Preparedness and Response plan<sup>4</sup>. According to the authors, agencies and organizations can minimize or avoid the risk by having a systematic and thorough readiness response plan against the disaster. However, to devise a disaster response plan is a really complicated work. The plan must include identifying risks, thinking up measures to reduce the risk, devising a response plan for when the unfortunate events happen, identifying the resources available during the event, and devising a priority response plan. The authors also remarked that, to minimize the risk, the agencies and organization must constantly redo the statistics, improve the storage condition, and comply with the security procedures...

In Vietnam, the research and provision for risks related to paper documents was cared for with the practice of paper document insurance. In 2003, Nguyen Thi Tam developed the master degree thesis: "*Measures for paper document insurance at the National Archives*". The author stated that document insurance is to take the measures necessary to make copies of the document. The practice of making back up copies of a document is to protect the document in the event of anything undesirable happening to the original. In 2005, author Le Nguyen Ngoc also researched and mentioned the topic of preventing the deterioration of archived document, published on the Archive Magazine Vietnam no. 6/2005. For the first time the concept of preventive preservation was mentioned in Vietnam. According to the author, preventive preservation is a set of measures applied to prevent the natural or human caused deterioration to the archived documents. While passive preservation would only focus on fixing the broken documents and the identified damage, preventive preservation would tackle the root causes of the damage on the documents .

Recently, National Archive IV has executed many projects, in which the matter of preparation and early warning for the risks related to woodblock documents was brought up. In addition, the practice of insurance and making insurance topic for the woodblocks document

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<sup>3</sup>Doan Thi Hong Van (2013): "*Risk and Crisis management*" Statistics Publisher 2013; p 76

<sup>4</sup>Beth Lindblom Batkus: "*Natural Disaster Preparedness and Response plan*"(Translated). Reference from tailieu.vn

were also first implemented. At the National Archive IV and Vinh Nghiem pagoda, a number of important woodblock documents were replicated and used to cater for tourist visits, so as to limit direct touching on the originals. That was one of the necessary preventive measures.

Aside from that, the making of response plans in the unfortunate scenarios, such as: the scenario of fire and explosion at the document archive; the scenario of typhoon or flood; the scenario of war... Given these scenarios, the agencies and organizations can organize frequent rehearsals for the staff and the responsible people to practice for the outbreak of unfortunate events.

- *Secondly*, Prevent the loss by taking necessary steps to minimize the risk and the possible damage from the risk.

To prevent and minimize the risks to the woodblock documents, the first important matter that the agencies and organizations have to focus on is to issue regulations for the preservation and secrecy of the documents; to organize trainings for managerial staffs; professional expertise trainings according to the procedures and to issue the sanctions in the event the regulations are violated.

By taking the steps above, on the basis of the identification and measurement, the archiving agencies responsible for preserving the woodblocks can take the following measures: to issue a specific requirement for the number of inventory turns, for the number of woodblock's relocations over the year; to set a limit on tourist access the archives and the preservation chambers; and to regulate the number of woodblocks displayed during exhibitions...The National Archive IV has been doing these tasks very well. On the other hand, at Vinh Nghiem pagoda (Bac Giang), due to the lack of space inside the woodblock storage, only a very limited number of people could enter. However, in the near future, the woodblocks will be relocate to another larger storage; and as the new storage will be larger, the pagoda will need to take extra measures prevent and minimize the risk to the woodblock documents.

### ***2.3. Take initiative to limit the damage and recover from the unfortunate events***

In risk management, this is the last resort, since the objective of RM is to prevent the unfortunate events from happening in the first place. However, even if all the measures were taken, unfortunate events could still happen. In reality, through the latest reports and researches, we have to admit that that a number of unwelcome occurrence has already happened to the woodblock documents. After multiple relocations, passed on through multiple managerial entities, undergoing multiple natural disasters and wars, in combination with men's lack of awareness and mishandling, nowadays, the collections of woodblocks are no longer complete. The phenomena of bent, warped, character loss and character wear-off are common. Many researches were conducted and many measures were proposed to minimize and recover from the unfortunate events happened to the woodblock documents, such as:

- Restoring the woodblock documents after floods
- Fixing the concave and cracks
- Eliminating mold
- Restoring the missing/worn off characters, etc.

These are some very practical and effective measures. However, the matter of minimizing and recovering from unfortunate events would always require answers from more perspectives provided by the managers and the scientists.

#### **2.4. *To learn and take experience from the events, so as to change and develop***

Before, when mentioning unfortunate events, people would always consider them from the negative viewpoint, saying that the events were foregone, and that the loss could never be recovered from. This was exceptionally true for documents in general, and for the Woodblock heritages in particular. When one or multiple woodblocks are lost, it's impossible to find replacement (or a new version). There were many lines, words on the woodblocks that had been destroyed, lost, and could not be restore. When the woodblocks were bent or cracked, we had to live with it...

However, in the new RM perspective, everything could be looked from a more positive perspective (though little). This originated from the hard truth that nothing is safe facing natural disasters, unpredictable accidents, or the flow of time...Thus, the people, agencies and, organizations responsible for preserving and archiving the woodblock heritages must have the mentality to face the risk, to research and propose theses and projects on preserving the heritages to prevent, control and forecast the hazard. And when the unfortunate events happen, we have to fight it, to figure out ways to minimize the damage and recover from it.

Lastly, while the events are foregone, some of the loss might be possible to recover from, but the more important thing is the lesson and the experience that we can take from them by doing research, reviewing and sharing, which could help us prevent the recurrence of the events in the future.

With the experiences and the measures already applied for the past years in preserving the woodblocks of Nguyen Dynasty, the National Archive IV will continue the agencies, entities, pagodas and families responsible for the preservation of woodblocks in Bac Giang, Ha Tinh and many other locations in Vietnam. At the same time, we will need to learn from our international colleagues.

The upcoming Science Conference on the preservation of woodblock, which will be held in Vietnam, is meant for that purpose. To develop is to share./.

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