

Collective Actions and Heritage of the Neighborhood

Wua-Lai, Chiang Mai



Pijika Pumketkao-Lecourt

The accelerated growth since the 1990s of Chiang Mai, the economic capital and tourist center of the northern region of Thailand, has erased many urban legacies. The development of mass tourism and speculative construction have contributed to a profound transformation of the spatial and social landscapes of the old urban neighborhoods. Fearing a loss of local identity due to urban and social changes, local people have initiated a number of collective actions to promote their local heritage as a resource for surviving in an era of globalization.

The city of Chiang Mai has recently adopted a conservation approach that is in line with the international systems of heritage identification promoted by UNESCO. In 2015, Chiang Mai University, in collaboration with the municipality, created a tentative list: an inventory of monuments, sites, and cultural landscapes for inclusion on the World Heritage List. In 2017, the city was registered in the Creative Cities Network in order to highlight the local know-how and traditional craftsmanship of local communities, and to include them in 'sustainable' urban development. This trend in heritage conservation has been driven by citizens and local experts, who take into account the diversity of urban heritage on its two sides, tangible and intangible. Moreover, this heritage approach reflects the local people's recognition of ordinary urban heritage, which has historically been excluded from official heritage definitions proffered by the national authorities. It also shows the increasing power of citizen movements to defend the "heritage of community" (*moradok chumchon*) that has developed in Thailand since the 1990s.¹

The residents of Wua-Lai, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Chiang Mai, have participated in such citizen movements to protect their local cultural and urban assets. This neighborhood is well known for its silver craft skills, inherited from Tai Shan silversmiths who immigrated from the Salween river valley in Shan State to Chiang Mai, the former capital of Lanna Kingdom, in the 19th century and settled outside the ramparts to the south of the royal city.² In the first half of the 20th century, almost every household in this neighborhood had their own workshop for producing silverware. The common products were household goods and prestigious items for ritual and ceremonial occasions, including silver bowls (*salung*) and elaborated silver plates and trays.³ Since the 1960s, Chiang Mai has been promoted as a center of domestic and international tourism of the Northern region. Wua-Lai was branded as the "Silver Village," where customers can come into direct contact with producers. By the mid-1980s, following the government's economic policy, a center for export-oriented craft production was created at San-Kamphaeng village, situated 13 kilometres east of the city. The development of the new artisan center caused the decline of Wua-Lai's crafts trade in the 1990s. Moreover, the craft market became more competitive; many marketplaces were developed in the city center, such as Night Bazaar and Tapae Walking Street. Another major threat was the absence of successors to many Wua-Lai silverware producers. Today, there are only a few young people who are willing to learn and practice the production of silver crafts.

In response to the economic decline, the residents of Wua-Lai have initiated a number of collective actions and projects for reviving their livelihood, but also for protecting and transmitting their unique craft skills. We found that they often developed economic regeneration projects (e.g., weekend craft markets, community enterprises, etc.)

in relation to heritage projects and the construction of neighborhood identity. Based on the recent research conducted within the framework of SEANNET, this essay focuses on the collective projects run by the residents of Wat Muen-Sarn, one of the three groups of dwellings in the neighborhood of Wua-Lai. Through the analysis of heritage practices and discourses, I scrutinize how the residents use local cultural and urban assets in contemporary projects.

Sacred place and craft: resources for collective action

Buddhist temples (*wat*) are central to the social and spiritual life of villages and urban neighborhoods in Thailand. Many residents in the vicinity of Wat Muen-Sarn regard themselves as *sattha wat Muen-Sarn*, a grouping or collective of the people owing a common allegiance to Muen-Sarn temple. They also call themselves *chaoban wat Muen-Sarn* ("villagers of Muen-Sarn temple"). The *wat* is, therefore, closely linked to social identity and to the sense of belonging to a neighborhood. It asserts the existence of a group of householders as a social unit. Furthermore, beyond the religious sphere, the temple plays a key role in community life. It is a meeting place for neighborhood residents. Most of the collective activities take place at the temple: neighborhood committee assemblies, polling stations, festival ceremonies, and more.

Based on the multifunctional and social character of the temple, the neighborhood committee – a group of residents and monks – also uses the temple to host a community museum. During the 2000s, they started to inventory and collect old masterpieces of silverware and lacquerware in the neighborhood. The abbot (*chaowat*) supported the project by helping to promote it and convincing residents to donate their families' heirlooms. A collection of silverware and lacquerware is now displayed in a vacant building of the temple. In this way, the family legacies are transposed into the community museum and thus become a shared heritage and marker of neighborhood identity, providing a focus for local pride. The museum also displays information panels telling a 200-year history of Wua-Lai. These recount the displacement of people and craftspeople from Shan State and Sibsongbanna for repopulating and rebuilding the city of Chiang Mai after 18th-century guerrilla warfare. The historical narrative stresses the importance of Wat Muen-Sarn temple as the anchor point of Wua-Lai villagers and silversmiths who immigrated from the Salween river valley in Shan State.

This historic narrative seeks to connect the past of Wat Muen-Sarn and Wua-Lai with the history of the old Kingdom of Lanna (1259-1884), highlighting the historical value of the neighborhood. The museum's exhibition narrative also emphasizes some ancient

artisanal techniques that the craftspeople of Wua-Lai inherited from Tai Shan silversmiths. We thus see the effort made to promote artistic expression and the cultural value of silverware and lacquerware in a mixed Burmese-Lanna style, which are typically excluded from official inventories of national heritage.

At the northern side of the community museum is the Silver Art Gallery Sutthajito [Fig. 1]. The construction of the art gallery was launched in 2002. The neighborhood committee mobilized donated funds for the construction. They stimulated the sense of cooperation and willingness to contribute to this project through the Theravada Buddhist concept of merit (*bun*) and the long-standing practice of Northern Thai society of collaboratively constructing sacred structures for their neighborhoods. Based on the concept of merit, the residents and devotees of the temple saw the donations as acts of "merit-making" (*tham bun*). They donated money and material goods and worked together to build the art gallery. About 43 silversmiths and monks of Wua-Lai contributed their skills to the construction. They also created wall decorations in low relief, depicting the history of Wua-Lai villagers' immigration from Salween river valley, scenes of daily life in the past, silver craft production, and ritual ceremonies of the villagers. In this way, the textual narrative presented at the community museum was illustrated in image.

Furthermore, this art space was made sacred by the presence of three sculptures, each depicting a venerated monk (*kruba*) of Chiang Mai and Wat Muen-Sarn, as well as by a low relief mural representing 12 sacred stupas of the Northern region. Hence, the sacred and the secular are combined in one place. The realm of the sacred infuses and legitimates the craftsmanship and history of the ordinary neighborhood. This sacred art gallery stands today as an emblem of Wat Muen-Sarn. Many tourists from the Wua-Lai Saturday Market and Walking Street come to appreciate the fine craftsmanship in a spiritual atmosphere.

The neighborhood committee based their projects on the following elements: shared identity, sacredness, customary concepts and practices, local attachment, sociable places, shared purposes, strong relations among neighbors, co-operative practices, and partnership. These elements allow for the reproduction of belonging and sociability that create the potential for collective action.⁴ In developing their projects, the neighborhood committee of Wat Muen-Sarn acts as a network consisting of a variety of entities. First, the residents created a strong partnership with monks. The residents were able to propose and manage the projects in accordance with their respective expertise and occupation (e.g., curator, professor, artisan, historian, silver shop owner). Meanwhile, the monks displayed a strong willingness to engage in the neighborhood's activities, especially the abbot's assistant, a young

monk who graduated in Buddhist Studies for Community Development from the Mahamakut Buddhist University. Second, the neighborhood committee widened the partnership to include other civil society organizations in the city. They developed a community-based tourist project with two other craft neighborhoods in Chiang Mai, proposing a visit to the community museums, the artisans' workshops, and local craft shops of the community enterprise. Their aim was to create a supplementary income for the residents and artisans, to raise the visibility of the neighborhood's craft products, and to promote the ordinary heritage of their neighborhood. However, this project is at present disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The collective actions of Wat Muen-Sarn allow us to learn about the autonomy of citizens in conducting neighborhood-based projects, as well as their ability to use and adapt urban resources and deep-rooted cultural practices for contemporary projects. This study also provides insight into citizen movements in the urban heritage field from the neighborhood level. It will be interesting to continue observing the network of neighborhoods and civil society organizations, the way in which the Wat Muen-Sarn neighborhood connects local heritage issues with broader ideologies, and movements that circulate in the city. This is especially so in the context of Chiang Mai's increasing momentum as a heritage city, from the "Chiang Mai City of Crafts and Folk Art" project to the "Creative Cities Network" of UNESCO. This could allow us to learn more about the circulation of ideas, knowledge, ideologies, and urban issues in the city and beyond.

Pijika Pumketkao-Lecourt, International Principal Investigator, SEANNET Chiang Mai team, Postdoctoral Fellow at École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Lecturer at ENSA de Paris-Belleville, France. Email: pijika.pumketkao@paris-belleville.archi.fr

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- 1 Askew, Marc. 2002. "The Challenge of Co-Existence: The Meaning of Urban Heritage in Contemporary Bangkok." in *The Disappearing "Asian" City: Protecting Asia's Urban Heritage in a Globalizing World*. William S. Logan (dir.). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. p. 229-244.
- 2 Penth, Hans and Forbes, Andrew. 2004. *A Brief History of Lan Na: Northern Thailand from the Past to Present*. Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai City Arts & Cultural Centre.
- 3 Gavila, Jirawa. 2000. *Cultural Tourism Alternatives: A Case Study of Wualai Village, Muang District, Chiang Mai Province*. Master thesis [in Thai]. Chiang Mai University.
- 4 Ho, Kong Chong. 2019. *Neighbourhoods for the City in Pacific Asia*, Asian Cities Series. Amsterdam University Press, p.30