Collective Actions and Heritage of the Neighborhood

Wua-Lai, Chiang Mai

The accelerated growth since the 1990s of Chiang Mai, the economic capital and tourism 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.

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 sarath wat Muen-Sarn, a group or collective of people owning a common allegiance to Muen-Sarn temple. They also call themselves chao ban 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 households as a social unit. Furthermore, beyond the religious sphere, the temple plays a key role in community life. It is a meeting place for the local residents. Most of the collective activities take place at the temple: neighborhood committee assemblies, polling stations for elections, etc. Based on the multifunctional and social character of the temple, the neighborhood committee and non-profit organizations such as monks – also use the temple to host a community museum. During the 2000s, they started to inventory and collect old masterpieces of silversware and lacquerware in the neighborhood. The abbot (chao awat) supported the project by helping to promote it and convincing residents to donate their families’ heirlooms. A collection of silversware and lacquerware is now displayed in a vacant building of the temple. In this way, the family legacies are transposed into the sacred sphere and the museum 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 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 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 (1259-1858), 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 silversware 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 Sukhotha (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 Thai concept of merit (bun) and the long-standing tradition of Thai social and professional groups collaboratively constructing sacred structures for their neighborhoods. Based on the concept of almsgiving, residents donating to 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 13 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 within the community museum was illustrated in image. Furthermore, this art space was made sacred by the monks of the neighborhood, each depicting a venerated monk (kruba) of Chiang Mai and Wat Muen-Sarn, as well as by a low relief wall mural of the sacred hill of the Northern region. Hence, the sacred and the secular are combined in one place. The realm of the sacred infuses and legitimates the craftmanship 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 sociality that create the potential for collective action. 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, artist, 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 Mahamukat Buddhist University.

In response to the economic decline, 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 enterprises. 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 now 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 increase of 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.

Notes


Fig. 1 (above): The Silver Art Gallery Sukhotha at Wat Muen-Sarn Temple (Photo by the author, 2018)