



SPEAKER 2: MRS PIJKA PUMKETKAO

LITTLE PEOPLE IN CONSERVATION: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL NORMS

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ABSTRACT

Recent debates on the conservation of historic buildings in urban area have raised much public awareness in the Northern region of Thailand. The 'living heritage' such as temples has been turned into an arena of confrontation between divergent conservation approaches. The dilemma has arisen from the cultural distance between the imported idea of valued, unalterable heritage and the popular perception of Buddhist image, which emphasises their 'cult value' (Peleggi 2002). The devotees consider the temples (*wat* in Thai) as places of worship rather than works of art or archaeological evidences. So, the act of restoring in this practice intends to enhance the efficacy of objects and places, keeping alive their sacred power (*saksit*), but not necessarily preserving the original materials. The situation is getting critical because many abbots in this region prefer to renovate their temple by imitating Bangkok architectural style, the country's model of modernisation. This is part of a wider urban landscape transformation in this region, which arouses fear of losing local cultural identities in the process of urban standardisation.

Civil associations or conservation groups have emerged as a social intermediation figure in the field of heritage. In recent decades we have observed a situation in which individuals have come together to establish conservation groups, providing advice to the decision-makers on local temple conservation / restoration activities. They play an active role of "passeur" (mediator) between local and international levels. This paper examines this role of mediator through the case study of a restoration project at Wat Pongsanuk in Lampang province, operated by 'The Little People in Conservation' group. How does this conservation group appropriate and adapt the international notions to the local concern? How do they associate the conception of the sacred and social ties in local communities with their own understanding of heritage? It questions the relevance of imported notions relating to heritage conservation in Thai society, and focuses on the reception of external cultural features: appropriation and contextualisation that produced a hybridised outcome, a conservation practice that takes better account of the local way of life.

BIODATA

Pijika Pumketkao-Lecourt is an architect specialized in heritage conservation and a PhD candidate at the University of Paris-Est. Since 2014, she coordinates the research project "Patrimot, Words of Heritage in Urban and Architectural Project in Southeast Asia: Circulation, Reception, Creation". Her research explores adaptation and contextualization of international heritage principles in a Thai setting, with a particular interest in the practice of everyday life, the conception of the sacred and social ties in local community, its political and economic organization underlying its heritage approach

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In Thailand, as in many other countries in Southeast Asia, the increasing public awareness of the local cultural heritage has been concomitant with the urban landscape transformation. While the ideology of urban conservation planning in Thailand still focuses on the protection of national ancient monuments of ‘great tradition’, the civil society associations have raised awareness about the possible disappearance of a distinctive local/regional cultural identity as a result of globalization. For legitimizing this ‘little tradition’ of urban life, the civil society associations have recourse to international notions used in the field of heritage. They have rapidly adopted the notion of ‘intangible heritage’ in order to give account of local vernacular heritage. We argue that, through a process of appropriation, adaptation and contextualization of this international heritage notion, this adoption has led to the creation of inventive endogenous discourses and practices that draw on the conception of sacred and social ties in local communities and produce values at the crossroads between local and global.

The restoration project of the Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong at Pongsanuk community provides an opportunities to explore this matter. This case started from a polemic between the different ways of restoring: while the abbot and some devotees tended to rebuild a new viharn (preaching hall), the other residents of the community preferred to conserve the old one. In order to avoid the destruction, a resident called a historian of Lanna art, Woralun Boonyasurat, met the abbot and the other residents, in an attempt to raise their awareness about the heritage significance of this building. The negotiation took place, following which many meetings and workshops were organized. During four years of work, this project involved several stakeholders: monks and the local community of Pongsanuk, as well as local authorities and academics from Chiang Mai and Bangkok. This was the starting point of ‘The Little People in Conservation’ group, which aims was to help generate awareness about heritage significance among local communities and to assert their distinctive local/region cultural identity.

The civil society associations play an active role of “passeur” (mediator) between local and international levels. This paper examines this role of mediator through the case study of a restoration project at Wat Pongsanuk in Lampang province, operated by ‘The Little People in Conservation’ group. How does this conservation group appropriate and adapt the international notions to the local concern? How do they associate the conception of the sacred and social ties in a local community with their own understanding of heritage? This research focuses on the reception and localization of western heritage principles in a Thai setting, with a particular interest in the redefinition of heritage

¹ The article makes use of material from my PhD thesis, under the direction of Dr Nathalie Lancret, and from a joint research project “Patrimot: Words of Heritage in Urban and Architectural Projects in Indonesia and Thailand: Circulation, reception, creation”.

notion for the claim of local identity, the resilience of the northern Thai spatial cultures and the practice of everyday life in a context of globalization.

The figure of mediator

Christian Pedelahore de Loddis analyses a social intermediation figure, what he calls “passeur”, in contemporary transformations of the urban space in Vietnam. In his essay, the “passeur” represents ‘a key intermediation figure in the sense that due to his social status and what he does, he acts as a bridge and establishes links between traditions and modernities, between local ways of doing things and exogenous knowledge’. The “passeur” is the most dynamic and inventive stakeholder of urban fabrication, Pedelahore de Loddis argues. Producing adaptive models when gradually disseminated throughout the community, the “passeur” provides inspiration for the practices and strategies of stakeholder’s local urban affairs (Pedelahore de Loddis 2010, 22-24).

In Thailand, the civil associations or the conservation groups have emerged as a social intermediation figure in the heritage field. In recent decades we have observed a situation in which individuals have come together to establish conservation groups, providing advice to the decision-makers on local temple conservation / restoration activities. I turn now to the specific example of ‘The Little People in Conservation’ (LPC) group. The majority of people in LPC group (historians of art, artists, and architects) associate a scholarly, intellectual openness to the exogenous with the enriching experience of travel and education abroad. This openness to the international, as Pedelahore de Loddis observes, give a strategy and leading position to these people who have the ability to appropriate the exogenous models / knowledge and generate an endogenously developed conservation ethic.

The LPC group occupies a position that establishes links between local ways of restoring and international conservation norms. Such a position can also be viewed as “mediator”, a notion borrowed from Carmignani (2002), a key intermediation figure who intervenes between two or more parties, bringing opposite positions closer to each other. The mediator needs to find common ground between the parties in order to make the connection, and seeks the *tertium quid* (third element) for ensuring the relationship (Carmignani 2002, 10-11).

In the case of Pongsanuk, the dilemma has arisen from the cultural distance between the imported idea of valued, unalterable heritage and the popular perception of Buddhist image which emphasize their ‘cult value’ (Peleggi 2002, 30). The devotees consider the temples (*wat* in Thai) as places of worship rather than works of art or archaeological evidences. The Buddhist concept of merit (*bun*) plays a central role in the action of people in building, maintaining and restoring temples. These buildings - especially those containing the sacred objects, such as the relics and Buddha images - act as a field of merit, generating possibilities for individuals to make merit by donating money or materials for their restoration (Byrne 2014, 87-88). It is in this perspective that the temples have been continuously developed, enhanced, widened and modified through the centuries, as in many sites in

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Bhutan and Burma observed by Pichard (2008, 38-43). So, the act of restoring in this practice intends to enhance the efficacy of objects and places, keeping alive their sacred power (*saksit*), but not necessarily the continuity of material or fabric. This gives them back their complete and proper form, fresh-looking and beautiful buildings, which represents the continued existence of the village's sacred place. The sacred places of temple are central to urban neighbourhood life, they confirm the existence of the community group, and their physical quality presents the prosperity and the well-being of their village (Wanliphodom 2016).

As we see the results of previous restorations at Wat Pongsanuk, the other buildings around the Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong were modified or rebuilt. Indeed, their deteriorated wooden structures were demolished and replaced by steel-reinforced concrete. Thus they were changed from Lanna style to central Thai style Buddhist architecture. This is part of a wider urban landscape transformation in northern Thailand, influenced by the central Thai or Bangkok architectural style, the country's model of modernization, which arouses fear of losing local cultural identity in the process of urban standardization.

Bridging the divide between local and international norms

In order to reduce this cultural distance, the LPC group tried to compromise on co-existence of the opposite approaches: not to fossilize the living sacred building while protecting the region's architectural identity. The objective of this inventive approach is twofold: on the one hand, to emphasize the specific local / regional values and practices and, on the other, to raise the community awareness about heritage significance. The project was organized in four stages: 1) raising the community awareness about heritage values; 2) securing funds for the project; 3) historical research and documentation about remaining building fabric and; 4) conservation intervention. All along the phases of this project, the LPC group has built a partnership with members of the community through consultations and open dialogue, sharing their views and experiences. This revealed the local history and the continuous social, economic, cultural ties between members of the community and their temple.

During the stages of securing funds and historical research, the group organized workshops with history of art and architecture students as well as professors from Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Their workshops aimed to study and document physical evidence of building fabric, but also to provide visual and materials (drawings, photographs, models) as a tool to communicate with members of the community. The result of the workshops and the works of an artist-photographer during the documentation enabled them to organize several travelling exhibitions inside and outside Lampang. During this phase, the LCP group communicated with outsiders and other organizations through photos, booklets, lectures, and media. The contents of their communications have emphasized the local history, the local custom and beliefs, and the specific Lanna Buddhist architecture, claiming their own distinctive cultural identity.

In order to legitimize the local practice, the LPC have produced their own discourses on 'intangible heritage'. They have elaborated this international heritage notion by applying the concept of *Nāma-Rūpa*². It has been used to refer to the spiritual attributes of built heritage that are inseparable from its physical fabric. They have related the spiritual properties to the sacredness of the place that relate both to Buddhist philosophy and to beliefs in supernatural attributes of old places. The site topography of temple and the viharn's decorative elements have been interpreted through Buddhist philosophy and cosmology. They have emphasized the *uniqueness* of the viharn's architectural character, a pavilion on a cruciform floor plan with the three tiered roofs, a mix of Lanna and Burmese styles, testifying to strong Himalayan Buddhist influence (Woralun 2006, 200). They have also given an account of Lanna spirit cult associated with the temple space, by reviving the 'Fon Phi Mod, Phi Meng, Phi jaonāi' rituals, the spirit trance dances honouring the ancestors and the guardian spirit of a village.

The final phase, conservation and intervention, was operated as a collective work between local residents, monks, traditional craftspersons, academic advisors of the LCP group and local authorities. They have taken an approach to viharn restoration that adapts to international principles. It has preserved and consolidated the part of the original wooden structures and decorative features that were not damaged. For parts that were inappropriately modified or repaired during the last restoration in 1957 (concrete coating for the roof, changing some damaged wooden pillars by concrete ones), it has replaced them by traditional materials: teak wood, satay chin (lacquer work), and gilding, in order to recover the original character of Viharn Lanna. For decorative features that were too much damaged, it has replaced them by new ones, using traditional materials and techniques. In this case, the "authenticity" is found in a continued distinctive character of Lanna Buddhist architecture. For the sacred elements of the viharn, Buddha votive tablets, most of which were stolen, it has replicated them by following the Buddhist ritual. During the intervention, an archaeological excavation was conducted with the advice of agents from the Fine Art Department. The archaeological research enabled to find twelve pillars under the ground of the viharn. Their marks were left on the ground in order to indicate traces of previous building. These were left as evidence of the effort to contextualize the international principles and professional norms for local comprehension and usage.

The architectural restoration of the Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong was recognized with an Award of Merit in the 2008 UNESCO Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation³.

Giving priority to local voices

² In Sanskritized Thai terms *rūppatham / nāmatham* (*rūpa-nāma + dharma*), drawing on the concept *Rūpa-Nāma* in Buddhism. *Nāma* describes the spiritual or essential properties of an object or being, and *Rūpa* the physical presence that it manifests. They are mutually dependent and inseparable. In the communications of Woralun Boonyasurat, she uses the more familiar Thai terms: *kāi* (body) and *jī* (mind or spirit) which are more comprehensible for Thai people.

³ More details in <http://www.unescobkk.org/culture/heritage/wh/heritageawards/previous/2008/award-winners/2008mr3/>

In order to ensure the survival of Wat Pongsanuk, which has a double function as a sacred place of neighbourhood life and as a local 'living heritage', the LPC group have empowered people of Pongsanuk community to actively take part in the decision-making process and to assume responsibility for sustaining the future of this temple. While seeking to ensure the authenticity of Lanna architecture, the main aim of LCP group was to revive a sense of collective accomplishment and pride in their shared history and roots.

"[...] While seeking to restore a significant heritage structure, the main purpose of the project was to revive the traditional sense of cooperation inherent in the community way of life of Northern Thai people. The participation of community members in the maintenance and repair of religious structures has a long history in Northern Thailand. The Wat Pongsanuk project helped to revive these practices and to instil a new sense of responsibility in the hearts of local residents. [...]" (Boonyasurat and Siripun, Project profile, 2008).

Nowadays many local temples in Northern Thailand have undergone a loss of support from local inhabitants. Today the decision-making power on restoration projects rely on abbots and agents of national authority (Fine Art Department). The approach of the LPC group has brought inhabitants back into the community's collective action and has encouraged collaboration between the monks and inhabitants, the traditional caretakers of the temple. In such a case, the conservation project has been served as a mechanism for strengthening social ties within the community. An "open-door" approach has been applied to construct a dialogue between different parties, allowing everyone to be a stakeholder and promoting local involvement in conservation activities (Boonyasurat and Srisomwongwathana, 2010).

During the restoration work on the viharn, many Buddhist artefacts including manuscripts chests and pulpits as well as jataka painting banners and wooden Buddha images were found. This was the starting point of the museum at Wat Pongsanuk, applying the "community-based" approach. In the creation of this museum, there was a process of collecting, documenting, cataloguing and restoring, under the advice of the agents of Fine Art Department and academics from Chiang Mai and Silpakorn universities. The monks and the volunteers from the community have been trained to manage the collections and to take care of the museum. The process of researching information on each artefact has led to the revival of some traditional Lanna Buddhist ceremonies and practices as well as the local skills of weaving bamboo mats known as *sart yang*, which have been lost. Today the museum of Wat Pongsanuk has turned into a knowledge center on Lanna artefacts outside the classroom. It has also participated in the UNESCO Museum-to-Museum Partnership Project and has become the venue of the training workshops for the other temples in Lampang Since 2009.

The viharn's restoration and the community-based approaches echo the principles of the UNESCO *Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, which emphasize the fundamental cultural rights as well as the sustainable dialogue between culture and development. In order to sustain the support from community's members in the contemporary life, the LCP group has reinforced the link between local

people and their cultural heritages. They have built up a sense of pride in Lanna architectures and artefacts through the transmission of local people's knowledge and expertise, taking place in the activities of the community-based museum, the training workshops of Lanna artefact's collection management, as well as in the rituals and Buddhist ceremonies, the moment of renewing memories and associations of the community. As Smith (2006, 2) mentioned, "the real sense of heritage [...] when our emotions and sense of self are truly engaged, is [...] in the act of passing on and receiving memories and knowledge. It also occurs in the way that we then use, reshape, and recreate those memories and knowledge to help us make sense of and understand not only who we 'are', but also who we want to be."

Conclusion

The heritage discourses and practices elaborated by the LPC group, through a process of adaptation and contextualization of the international heritage notions, are conceived in an inclusive and participatory manner. They are based on local 'ongoing dynamics ontology' (Byrne 2014) related to popular religions, local knowledge and skills. Acting as a 'mediator', the LPC group have tried to bridge the gap between the different parties in the conservation process as well as to reinforce the ties between the local people and the cultural heritage. They have attempted to raising the community awareness about the heritage value, without ignoring the sacredness of the place. In their view, keeping alive the sacred power of place and renewing the pride of Lanna art are the way to sustain the 'living heritage'. Furthermore, the LPC group's effort of giving voice to local community can be viewed as a counterpoint to the 'authorized' heritage discourses (Smith 2006) of the Thai national government, which mainly takes into consideration the material aspects of culture and marginalize the Lanna ordinary cultural heritage and identity.

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