

Long-term Strategies for Thai Heritage Preservation: Civil Roles in Lopburi Province

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I strongly believe that, at present, the preservation of Thai heritage (by which I particularly mean physical sites such as religious monuments, communal buildings, historical sites and ancient artifacts, which should be taken care of by everyone including the responsible governmental agencies) is in a critical and problematic state. Thai people fail to preserve the value of cultural heritage to hand down to future generations. Instead, they allow it to be encroached upon and damaged for the sake of infrastructure development such as roads, irrigation canals and dams. The problems are many: expansion of settlements; lack of appreciation of the value of heritage; failure to implement laws; officials in charge of heritage who neglect their ethical and creative duty; renovation by improper methods; and vote-seeking politicians who allow historical sites to be encroached. Everywhere, public good is sacrificed for personal benefit, and ignorance and corruption prevail.

With more than three decades of experience in active participation in Thai cultural heritage preservation in Lopburi Province, I am able to state that this is an era when the attempts at preservation of Thai cultural heritage are hopelessly ineffective. The efforts of those who are intent on preserving Thai heritage will probably do no more than delay the destruction a little, because the process of destruction proceeds at a rate one hundred times faster than the efforts of preservation. Thai society today is focused on a limited number of concerns. Capitalism flourishes much more than spiritual values. Political factions fight for power to run the country. The market and economic development take center stage, and image is everything.

There is, however, a possibility – even a likelihood – that this situation will not last forever, and cultural heritage will become better appreciated. There are still many people who are concerned about the destruction of cultural heritage, and even more who could be mobilized to take an interest in preservation. In this essay, I recount my experience with campaigns to preserve cultural heritage in Lopburi, a province on the eastern side of the Central Region. Lopburi City is well-known as a very ancient political

center, and as a “second capital” in the reign of King Narai (1656–1688). But the surrounding province also has many prehistoric archaeological sites, caves, forests, mountains and unique ethnic communities –in short, a very rich cultural heritage. In this essay, I offer two main principles which, in my experience, are key to success in conservation work; and review the outstanding problems in Lopburi City.

The people’s role in Thai cultural heritage preservation: the case of Lopburi

In 1974, a group of Lopburi citizens formed the Club for Conservation of the Antiquities, Ancient Monuments and Environment of Lopburi Province (hereafter called the “Lopburi Conservation Club”). The group included businessmen, teachers, military personnel and news reporters. These people had lost faith in the officials responsible for historic objects and sites because these officials had allowed the sites to be encroached upon by housing developments and damaged by fortune hunters digging for amulets, and because the officials had no strategy to conserve these sites by educating the general public about their value. The Club was formed to help conserve the heritage of Lopburi more effectively.

To ensure that the Club’s activities had some continuity, it drew up a charter (Figure 1) which defined the objectives of the Club and established an executive board. The Club has now been in existence for almost forty years and has many accomplishments to its credit, principally projects which government was incapable of achieving, as will be detailed below.

The Lopburi Conservation Club has been raising funds to improve the environment of historic sites, particularly in cases where historic sites were obscured or surrounded by housing or commercial buildings. At Wat Bandai Hin, the Club purchased both the land and the buildings which were blocking the frontage of the stupa and donated them to the Fine Arts Department so that the obstructions could be removed and the monastery extended to the roadside. In another case, the San Paolo Church, which had been used as an astronomical observatory in the reign of King Narai

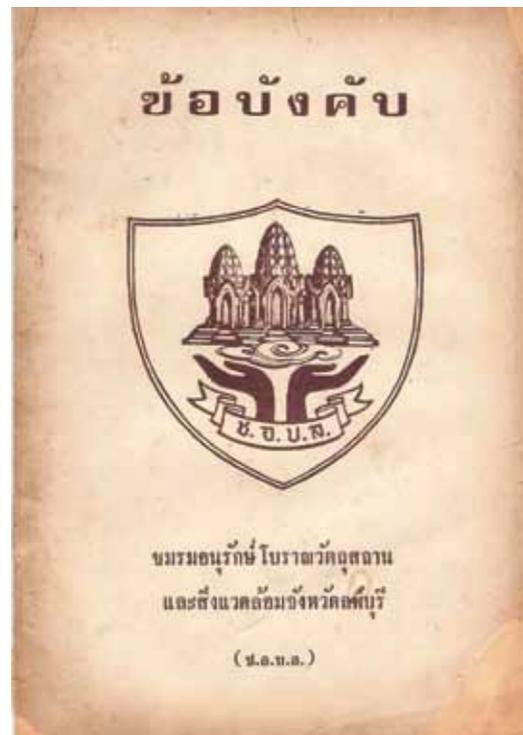


Figure 1. Charter of the Club for Conservation of the Antiquities, Ancient Monuments and Environment of Lopburi Province, 1974



Figure 2. A performance organized by the Lopburi Club at Prathinang Yen, a 17th century monument and first site for astronomy study in Siam



Figure 3. Annual ceremony to reinforce spiritual value at Wat Phra Sri Ratanamahathat, Lopburi.

the Great, was becoming obscured behind commercial buildings under construction. With funding from the General Hom Holomyong Foundation, the Club helped to coordinate the purchase of this land, its donation to the Fine Arts Department and demolition of the commercial buildings under construction.

The Club negotiated with the owners of houses surrounding the ordination hall of Wat Puen to move it elsewhere so that the Fine Arts Department could improve the landscaping of the wat to its current beautiful state.

The Club organizes annual training programs for teachers in Lopburi to make them aware of the value of historical sites and objects.

The Club organizes annual campaigns to make the public aware of the value of historic sites and objects as well as encouraging people to participate in such activities as Lopburi Conservation Day and Lopburi Merit-Making Day.

The Club prints and distributes academic information about historical sites and objects in Lopburi.

Manpower and funding

The formation and continued work of the Lopburi Conservation Club has depended on support from both government agencies and the general public in terms of manpower and funding. Manpower is provided by volunteers from the Club itself or other associations in its network, with occasional participation by soldiers, monks and schoolchildren. Soldiers and schoolchildren are involved mostly in campaigns to raise support, such as processions to publicize the Club's projects.

The Lopburi Conservation Club has a policy that each project must raise funds to cover all its expenses, which usually are not very large. Each project has a fund-raising committee which uses various methods. The main source of funds is donations from government agencies, private companies, various foundations and the general public. However, the Club also raises funds through such activities as selling books, selling shirts or organizing study trips. Projects must be self-supporting and work within their own resources so that the Club has no problem with budget deficits.

A recent example was a project to create a permanent exhibition display about King Narai the Great and donate it to the Fine Arts Department for the King Narai National Museum (the branch of the National Museum in Lopburi) in 2004. The budget was estimated at one million baht, and the fund-raising committee raised this total using various methods such as holding a charity bowling competition.

As a participant in the activities organized by the Club since 1977 and as president of the Club for four two-year terms, I had the opportunity to lead the Club into many campaigns and struggles over a period of eight years. On the basis of this experience, I would like to share some ideas on what I believe are useful considerations for preserving Thai cultural heritage.

Lesson 1: Academic information is a vital element in campaigns to preserve cultural heritage and the environment

Government projects to create infrastructure and develop the economy are often one cause of deterioration in both cultural heritage and the environment. Mounting

opposition to such actions by formal process – such as presenting letters or petitions to the officials responsible or by feeding information to the media, in the hope that the officials will think again and revise their decisions – is totally ineffective. Government agencies will either sit on the matter or answer ambiguously.

The officials involved know that such matters are thorny problems that began long before they came to office and that taking any action might affect the electoral chances of some local politicians and thus have unexpected repercussions on themselves. Besides, the general public may feel bored by such issues and think that their everyday cost of living is a more important issue.

My experience teaches me that, besides submitting letters of protest to the responsible government officials and feeding information to the mass media, the revelation of solid and detailed information based on study by the academic profession is enough to make responsible officials and consumers of the news sit up and take some interest in matters concerning protection of heritage or the environment.

Obtaining such academic information requires cooperation between local people such as schoolteachers and interested laymen along with external academics. Once such information is made public, it gets discussed and debated over and over again in seminars and events as well as being repeated in the media. Once a matter concerning destruction of heritage at official hands receives wide exposure in the media and public domain, officials are forced to give the matter new consideration. There are many successful instances. For example, concessions granted for detonating explosives in several mountain areas of Lopburi had to be cancelled after the significance of the mountains had been academically proved.

However, conservationists have to be constantly aware that their opponents may also have their own academic information. The law requires an Environmental Impact Assessment before approval of any potentially harmful project. To make the report credible, the project owner will commission researchers from a university or well-known consultancy company. From experience, such reports are invariably favorable towards these projects. Businessmen supported by officials will refer to these reports to gain legitimacy. Conservationists, then, have to be careful that their studies have equal or superior academic merit than those commissioned by their opponents. In my experience, securing academic information of equal or better merit than those in such commissioned reports is not too difficult. There are still many officials and academicians both outside and inside universities, who are willing to contribute their expertise without any compensation.

To support this point on the use of academic information to block projects destructive to cultural heritage and environment, I will cite two cases as examples.

The construction of the Pasak Chonlasit Dam

Between 1994 and 1999, a small dam was constructed across the Pasak River at the border between the provinces of Lopburi and Saraburi. The dam was named Pasak Chonlasit by His Majesty the King. As a result, a reservoir of about 100,000

rai was created and about 7,700 households were forced to move from their homes.

There was little opposition to the project because the area inundated above the dam was mostly agricultural land and village sites rather than watershed forest or other rare and valuable natural resources. The only issue of concern was that displaced villagers should be fairly compensated in terms of both money and adequate facilities for health, education and public utilities at their new location.

But another tricky matter emerged. The impact assessment report commissioned by the government concluded that this project had only minimal cultural impact as only four archaeological sites would be flooded, all of which would be restored, while the village communities were of recent settlement. In essence, the dam construction posed no problems related to archaeological evidence or culture.

When government made this impact assessment public, the Club did not believe its findings. In the area along both sides of the Pasak River where the dam was being constructed and where the reservoir above the dam would be, there were numerous prehistoric archaeological sites. In addition, the communities on both sides were long-settled with their own identity evident in lifestyle, fabric weaving, dress, sculpture and entertainment. These communities belonged to an ethnicity known as Thai Beung. The Club then campaigned for excavation work, studies on the Thai Beung, and construction of a museum so that the archaeological and cultural heritage of the area could be rescued and displayed before it was all inundated under the reservoir.

The Club made use of academic information to oppose the government and officialdom over this matter. It organized seminars; held exhibitions of archaeological finds such as pottery, iron tools and stone axes; held exhibitions on Thai Beung ethnology; had articles published in leading national newspapers; and escorted reporters to visit the site and see the evidence with their own eyes.

These activities convinced the public that the dam construction would certainly impact on cultural heritage. Eventually, the government ordered the Fine Arts Department to investigate and excavate archaeological sites in the area as a matter of urgency because the dam was already under construction and the water already rising. Government also commissioned a study of Thai Beung culture and built a museum in the grounds of the Pasak Chonlasit Dam to exhibit everything of value rescued from the inundation.

A key factor in this campaign was the contribution of community intellectuals from the locality, students from the Faculty of Archaeology at Silpakorn University, and media professionals interested in archaeology, history and culture.

Publicizing knowledge about the value of Thai Beung cultural heritage at the time the dam was under construction had another long-lasting impact. The displaced Thai Beung communities established their own conservation club and cultural center at Khok Salung in Phattana Nikhom district, Lopburi. This has become a new center for ethnological study.

Erawan Mountain

In 2004, when a concession was to be granted for a limestone quarry and cement factory at Erawan Mountain, the people of Chong Salika village near the area started a protest, fearing that the industry would harm the environment and the serenity of the village.

They came to consult the Club in the hope of finding support for their protest. The Club went to survey Erawan Mountain and found it was a beautiful place with at least ten caves, some containing prehistoric remains, and many rare birds. The limestone quarry project was, therefore, not only a threat to peace and quiet, but also to the valuable natural environment and to archaeological sites. The Club agreed to join the opposition, and campaign to have the whole mountain area of about 1,500 rai declared a conservation area under government protection for the study of natural sciences.

As usual, a company applying for such a concession has to provide an environmental impact assessment for the government to scrutinize and evaluate. And as usual, of course, the research team, no matter whether it was commissioned from a university or private consultancy company, produced a report supporting the company's project and aiding government approval. For example, it reasoned that once the limestone had all been blasted away, trees could be replanted in the whole area. And once the cement factory had been built, a green zone could be designated



Figure 4. Members of the Lopburi Conservation Club talking at Erawan Mountain

and planted with trees as a refuge for the animals and birds of the area.

The strategy adopted to oppose this project was to collect academic information on various aspects of the value of the Erawan Mountain. Cooperation was sought from several government agencies and foundations to assemble information on the natural and historical value of the area.

The Lopburi regional office of the Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture made a survey of archaeological sites on the mountain. The findings, which included pottery sherds dating to the late prehistoric era, and indications that the caves had been used as burial sites, proved that the area was an important archaeological source.

The Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation surveyed the botany and wildlife of the mountain. They found many rare plants such as *Mok rachini* (*Wrightia sirikitiae* Midd. & Santisuk), a species discovered in Thailand and named after the queen, *Mok lueang* (*Wrightia viridiflora* Kerr), *Jan pha* (*Dracaena loureiri* Gagnep), and *Jan daeng* (*Adenium obesum*), as well as various protected species of wildlife including macaque, fox, civet, porcupine, bats and various birds, especially the limestone dancer (*Napothera crispifrons*), a rare species indigenous to this area.

The Seub Nakasathian Foundation sent a specialist to explore eight caves on the mountain. His report found the mountain was a rare example of an area where several caves of outstanding value could still be found in their natural condition. Preservation of these caves in their natural condition would be of benefit for the study of the geology, environment and archeology of the Central Region of Thailand, since most mountains in the region had been altered by religious institutions, tourist facilities, or mines and quarries.

All this information was assembled to prove the true value of Erawan Mountain, and to contradict the impact assessment report commissioned by the company behind the project. The officials involved in the decision making at different levels were of different minds. However, eventually neither the limestone quarry on the mountain nor the cement factory at its foot gained approval. Instead, Erawan Mountain was designated by the government as a non-hunting area under the protection of the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, which established



Figure 5. Prehistoric artifacts found at Erawan Mountain

an office there. The people of Chong Salika village then got together to establish the Erawan Resource Center, a sort of mini museum providing public information.

Lesson 2: Insiders with a direct stake in the cultural heritage must participate in its preservation

Outsiders who fear that projects initiated by either the government or private sector will impact cultural heritage conservation, and who want to protest against their implementation, will find it difficult to succeed because they are not close to the problem and cannot grasp the issues involved in great detail; and hence will not be able to convince other members of the public. Only those close to and directly affected have the legitimacy to come out in opposition at the first stage.

When a damaging project is halted or cancelled, that is not the end of the affair. There are government officials willing to cooperate with predatory businessmen for corrupt gain. They may reverse an earlier decision and bring a project back to life at any moment, especially after a lapse of time when the protest has died down. Therefore, only local conservationists who are close to the problem can sustain opposition over the long term.

There are outsiders who are knowledgeable in a well-rounded way, who can consider a local issue in a larger context, and who can network with other groups in similar situations. Cooperation between insiders and such outsiders is thus crucial to the success of any preservation campaign.

In any locality there are certainly some local people who have a sincere interest in conservation. In any threatened area, forming a local conservation club under the leadership of local insiders is vital. This will prove a powerful strategy for preservation of local cultural heritage. At the same time local clubs should be affiliated with a provincial body to gain access to knowledge exchange as well as for socialization.

There are several examples of cultural heritage conservation clubs founded by local people.

Sab Champa Ancient City and Jampi Sirindhorn Forest Conservation Club was established to conserve the site of a Dvaravati city which has remains of religious monuments enclosed by a moat and dyke. To highlight the spiritual value of this ancient site, the club initiated a city merit making ceremony which became an annual event. The club also induced the Fine Arts Department and Silpakorn University to excavate the monuments in the ancient city of Sab Champa and to conserve a small nearby forest.

Wat Lai Conservation Club was founded in late 2011 to campaign for cleanliness and tidiness around a late-Ayutthaya monastery renowned for its stucco work depicting the life of the Lord Buddha on the wall of the assembly hall. The club also upgraded the monastery's museum to a proper standard.

The Local Boat Conservation Club at Wat Yang Na Rangsi was founded by



Figure 6. Information Center established by the local conservation club at the Dvaravati site of Sap Champa.



Figure 7. The Lopburi Club succeeded in preventing quarrying at Samor Khon Mountain



Figure 8. Wat Pun in the heart of Lopburi city before and after a clean-up by the local conservation club.

people residing near Wat Yang Na Rangsi where there is a museum of local boats. The museum was established by the Lopburi Club with the aim of both preserving the monastery's old pavilion and displaying in that pavilion a collection of boats commonly used in the area. The club members participate in keeping the museum clean and solving any problems at the museum such as flooding, roof leakage and deterioration of the displays. They also welcome and guide visitors to the museum.

Erawan Mountain Conservation Club was founded by the people living around the Erawan Mountain. The club focuses on study and eco-tourism at the mountain, and protecting the natural environment from damage caused by man and forest fires. The club has also established a center for the study of the mountain's natural science and archaeology.

Samor Khon Mountain Conservation Club was founded by people who live at the foot of Samor Khon Mountain with the objective of educating their fellow local residents about the value of the mountain in terms of its history, archaeology and natural science. The club has also established a local museum.

The Museum and Local Learning Resource Club of Lopburi Province brings together the founders and managers of thirty-one museums and resource centers in the province. These museums have collected and exhibited material related to ethnology, natural science, art and culture. This club serves as a center for academic exchange and mutual assistance.

Problems in preservation work in Lopburi

In Lopburi Province, monuments fall into two categories, each of which has its own specific problems in terms of conservation.

First, there are areas which have a cluster of several historical sites, such as city walls, moats, tanks and religious monuments. Good examples include the ancient Dvaravati-era settlements in Lopburi itself, Sab Champa (Tha Luang District), and Dong Marum (Khok Samrong District). Some, such as Sab Champa and Dong Marum, are still virtually undisturbed and should be prime sites to become conservation areas. However, there are no regulations defining who should take the responsibility. At other places which should become conservation zones, such as Lopburi City and Wang Phai (Ban Mi District), the remains have already been so damaged that rescuing them will be very difficult.

Second, there are individual sites such as Wat Phra Sri Rattana Mahathat, Wat Lai, Phra Prang Sam Yot, Phaulkon's House, Wat Sao Thong Thong and Wat Tongpu.

The problems facing conservation for each of these categories is different. In the case of the clustered sites, any conservation work has to appreciate the site as a whole, and needs considerable skill because of the scale and complexity. In Thailand, there is no single example of a large-scale historical zone where the conservation work has been successful. Even at locations listed as World Heritage sites, such as Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, conservation work has been very sporadic.

Individual monuments should be easier to conserve, especially when the Fine Arts Department is engaged on the task. Yet the media regularly reports problems such as negligence or conservation work that lacks any academic principle and hence sometimes damages valuable historical remains. An example is the restoration work on the Narai Rachaniwet Palace where designs on the walls were painted over, the peak of a gate was modified, and new cement ornamentation was added.

Both types of problem stem from a single overriding cause – the failure to establish a clear policy on conservation. This needs to be set out in detail.

1. There is no policy to decide which sites of cultural heritage are prime targets for conservation and to prioritize sites in order. The national resources for conservation, in terms of both personnel and budget, are limited so there needs to be clear priorities for how they are used. Whether in Lopburi or elsewhere in the country, conservation is carried out on a case-by-case basis. A specific site is chosen because it has support from powerful people, such as politicians. In Lopburi, a site that should be given priority for conservation is the city wall and moat because it is an example of a defensive system constructed for a whole settlement, as well as a large-scale and ancient system of water control. Yet today, the site has already been badly encroached upon and damaged, and there are no government measures to deal with this problem.

2. In the case of large-scale, clustered sites, there is no clear policy on which government agency should take ownership of conservation. The working style of the Fine Arts Department is to proceed monument by monument. As a result, the value of the site *as a whole* is neglected. In Lopburi, this has already resulted in considerable damage to its value as a historical city. This is major example of the destruction of Thailand's cultural heritage.

3. Conservation work that is effective and sustained needs participation from many stakeholders including local government agencies and the general public. My concern, based on my experience in Lopburi, is that such work still lacks coordination between the various people and agencies involved. After conservation work at any particular site is completed, the site is then neglected and, as times passes, it deteriorates again until the Fine Arts Department has to undertake another restoration.

A good example is an old *ubosot* (ordination hall) in Wat Bot Kong Thanu, Lopburi. After the Fine Arts Department had restored this example of late-Ayutthaya architecture, the management of the *wat* thought that the Fine Arts Department would be responsible for maintenance. They let this beautiful *ubosot* become a home to pigeons and did not even keep it clean, so it deteriorated rapidly and soon required another restoration.

The Fine Arts Department needs to make it understood that it is not the owner of such monuments, but is responsible only for planning and executing conservation projects in cooperation with other people.

4. Good monitoring and evaluation is a necessary condition to make the work of government agencies both efficient and honest. The fact that government has no system of using academics and the general public to monitor and evaluate the work of government agencies on the preservation of cultural heritage means that such work lacks direction and constantly results in mistakes.

5. The Fine Arts Department's conservation work on some sites departs from proper principles, such as by bad design, use of poor quality materials and employment of craftsmen without the right skills. These problems led to criticism of the Fine Arts Department's work in Lopburi, resulting in bad feelings.

6. There is not enough academic study into the story behind historical monuments, nor enough activities to build awareness among those involved with any historical site about its importance and the need for conservation.

Conclusion

At this point, I would like to make clear one more time that the current efforts at preservation of Thai cultural heritage are mostly designed to prolong the death throes rather than to preserve forever. Nevertheless, I also believe that these efforts are not a waste of time. In the second half of the twentieth century, Thailand placed

a proper value on preserving cultural heritage. It is possible that, in the future, the values and worldview of the Thai people in this respect will shift again, and spiritual values will matter as much as development. Preservation of the Thai cultural heritage would then become important again. This trend is possible.

In my experience, there are two key strategies to make the public concerned about the value of cultural heritage and ready to participate in projects of preservation, and to induce officials to agree with campaigns for preservation whether for reasons of necessity or true commitment. These two key strategies are: first, to use academic information to convince people of the value of cultural heritage; and second to establish conservation clubs in localities where heritage is endangered. By these means, insiders, i.e., those who have a direct stake in the preservation of cultural heritage, become those who take care of their own cultural heritage in a sustainable way.

