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3.1 Community Outreach Programme in Phrae, Thailand



By the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA), Thailand

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Established in 1978, SEAMEO SPAFA promotes awareness, professional competence and the conservation of cultural heritage across Southeast Asia. The centre specializes in the fields of archaeology, fine arts, performing arts and cultural studies, and conducts research, training, consultation services and information dissemination. SEAMEO SPAFA aims to advance mutual knowledge and the understanding of cultural/ethnic diversity among SEAMEO Member Countries.

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I. Abstract

For several years, the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA) has been working with a group of people to raise awareness of the rich natural and cultural heritage of the northern province of Phrae, Thailand. Local efforts, coupled by partnerships with government agencies and private institutions, have gradually spread the message that heritage is best taken care of by the very people to whom the heritage is bequeathed. At the same time, local participation is made more effective because a sense of ownership, through dialogue and engagement, is firmly established right from the very start.

Outlined here is how SEAMEO SPAFA lent its support to activities local people initiated themselves, such as a book house for children, city tours, architectural preservation programmes, and community archaeology projects.

The over-riding theme is that “development programmes” have to be initiated by the community. In doing so, ownership of such programmes is more entrenched in the consciousness of the target beneficiaries, increasing the likelihood of the sustainability of such efforts.

II. Project Description

Phrae is a small province in northern Thailand which was established in the 11th Century A.D. Its capital is the town of Phrae, a walled city whose townscape reflects the traditional archaeology of the era, with the City Shrine in the middle of the city. The Phrae City Wall, about two kilometres in circumference, forms an important part of the life of traditional communities. They believe that the city wall is a sacred living entity. Among the nine temples located within the city wall area, three are listed monuments, and they are still used and

supported by their traditional communities.

Many heritage places relating to the former traditional rulers of Phrae have become present-day tourist attractions, such as the Khum Chao Luang Museum (the former residence of the last ruler) and the Wongburi House, a residence built by the first wife of Chao Luang, created in the European “gingerbread style” mixed with traditional architecture that now functions as a museum. There are a number of other historic houses still standing in Phrae, such as an estimated seventy to eighty unique wooden houses of architectural significance.

In terms of intangible heritage, some communities within the city wall still practice their traditional crafts such as the silversmiths. One of the traditional crafts of Phrae is the art of Mohom or indigo-dyed clothes.

However, as time has passed, Phrae is now encroached by modernism. Since it is not a famous tourism destination, the development in Phrae is going quite slowly and does not drastically impact the heritage. However, the effect of change is continuous; old houses are being demolished almost every day while young people are leaving town to find job opportunities elsewhere.

To address the need for more sensitive treatment of Phrae’s heritage, a volunteer group known in Thai as Luk Lan Muang Phrae¹ (LLMP), was organized in 2003. LLMP is composed of active members of the traditional community from all walks of life, including students, monks, and elders. At the time of its inception, the group was one of the very few community groups working on heritage preservation in Thailand.

The collaboration of LLMP and SPAFA can be divided into three stages as follows:

1. 1st Stage: Pilot Project (2004-2005)

While other known community-based heritage conservation efforts in Thailand at that period stemmed from the advice and leadership of people outside the community, the case of Phrae is an exception. SEAMEO SPAFA² and ICCROM³, under the Living Heritage Sites Programme⁴,

1 The term literally means “children and grandchildren of Phrae”.

2 Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts.

3 International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Properties, Italy.

4 The programme aimed at five Mekong countries in Mainland Southeast Asia. See Section IV.

chose to work with LLMP on the programme's pilot project in 2004-2005. The pilot project was the first to take place among three projects of SPAFA-ICCROM's Living Heritage Sites Programme in mainland Southeast Asia from 2004-2009. It aimed to engage the traditional community in understanding their heritage and traditional conservation processes and to further develop methods for continuous care through a participatory approach. It also attempted to promote active collaboration between the traditional community and the heritage authority. Conservation architects from the Bangkok Office of the Fine Arts Department (FAD) formed part of the project team to work with LLMP and SEAMEO SPAFA.

It should be noted that this initial project did not address a specific site or monument, but rather focused on areas of the town where there seemed to be strong community members who were interested in preserving their traditional culture. Forums, dialogues, and cultural mapping were initiated in the early stages of LLMP's work. Another interesting aspect of LLMP's approach is its focus on the intangible aspect of heritage, not the physical heritage, because the awareness level among the public was still rather low.

The project ended with an international workshop on "Empowering Community" organized by SEAMEO SPAFA and ICCROM. This gathered a number of professionals working in the field of community engagement in conservation to study examples in Phrae. This workshop put an emphasis on the role of LLMP as a local driving force in heritage conservation while LLMP was also working with other partners on the subject.

The accomplishment at this stage is the acceptance from local government and local people that LLMP is an important steering factor at the provincial and community levels in terms of heritage preservation. A marked increased interest in heritage among the Phrae local government units and the public was noted. This was judged by the number of projects relevant to heritage conservation implemented in following years.

2. 2nd Stage: Awareness Raising Activities (2006-2007)

Following the initial project, LLMP modified its structure in 2006 to adapt to the changing environment. The group transformed into a network which connects like-minded people together, while still allowing members to pursue activities of their own interest. This stage saw the development of various awareness raising activities accomplished by LLMP with continuous support from SPAFA and local government units. The Local Architectural Heritage Preservation Club, part of the LLMP Network, was founded during this period.

2.1 Book House

In September 2006, SEAMEO SPAFA and representatives of the Bangkok FAD Office started to work with Ms. Sunantana Sanprasert, one of the founding members of the LLMP, on the Book House Project at the Hua Kuang Community, located in the city wall area.

The Book House Project was founded as an awareness-raising programme on heritage preservation for local school children. This was done in collaboration with members of LLMP, the Hua Kuang Municipality School, the Hua Kuang Community Committee, as well as with members of the village and other relevant organizations, such as the Municipality and the Provincial Cultural Office.

Activities in the Book House are supported by SEAMEO SPAFA under the project called “Community-based Awareness Raising Programme for Children on Local Heritage Preservation”.

Part of the Book House’s initiatives is to inspire children to learn more about their cultural and natural heritage including historic sites, archaeological sites, museums, temples, and natural sites. Children are also encouraged to know more about traditional practices, such as indigo dyeing, recycling, gardening, music, games and story-telling, through hands-on learning from local experts. The project has been operational for over two years now and has engaged about 70-80 children, with about 20 regular members.

2.2 Bicycle Tour and Cultural Exhibitions

In 2007, LLMP received funding from the Municipality to organize a series of monthly awareness-raising activities. The project is known as Poh Ban Ew Muang, a phrase from the northern dialect which means: “let’s see and tour our city”.

The bicycle tour around the city was held monthly. Those who joined the tour witnessed the rich history of Phrae as seen in different heritage buildings, old houses, and temples. Elders and wisdom leaders explained the significance and story of each place. The tours were always followed by Kad Laeng or an organized evening food market, which was a kind of local food revival project. This project has now finished, but local government units took over the idea and have organized similar tours for press and media people to showcase



Photo: SEAMEO SPAFA

Bicycle tour in Phrae

the heritage of the city. At present, bicycles are provided free of charge for tourists while a map of old Phrae is being made by LLMP and sponsored by the PAO.

The heritage tour took place, usually in conjunction with a cultural exhibition, at the monthly walking street fair, which was funded by the PAO. The cultural exhibition would show films and various exhibits related to local heritage and the preservation of the old quarter of Phrae. With assistance from SPAFA and FAD, the Local Architectural Heritage Preservation Club produced a map of old houses and historic buildings in the city wall area, which was shown at the exhibition.

3. 3rd Stage: Research and Conservation (2008-Present)

The present stage sees a number of research and conservation activities which are collaborative efforts between SPAFA and LLMP, along with local partners and communities that can lead to an actual site conservation and management.

3.1 Architectural Preservation

Phrae's unique wooden architectural heritage, which dates back over 100 years, is vanishing quickly as a result of urbanization. The Local Architectural Heritage Preservation Club has worked with support from SEAMEO SPAFA on a project called Tung Jai Ban Kao or Old House Conservation Award, which rewards house owners who take good care of their properties with a certificate and a banner. The banner can be hung outside these exemplary houses. An old house documentation project took place at the same time.

In the second half of 2009, SEAMEO SPAFA received a grant from the US Embassy in Thailand entitled the "US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation 2009" to support LLMP's effort in conducting a community-based architectural heritage preservation project in the old quarter of the town.

This project conducts architectural and historical research on traditional wooden architecture and techniques, which aims to document, through computerized drawings, the structures' styles, materials, techniques, and history. Activities to raise public awareness on the conservation of traditional architecture are regularly conducted as well.



The house owner receives an award of Old House Conservation Award by SEAMEO SPAFA

At the end of the project in September 2010, a book, in both Thai and English, on the traditional architecture of Phrae was published, together with a map of old houses. It is intended to create and maintain a network of traditional homeowners, acknowledged by local government units. This initiative, backed by a large scale conservation project hosted by the Phrae Provincial Administration and the Municipality, will focus on the adaptive reuse of old houses.

3.2 Community Archaeology Project

The prehistoric site in the village of Natong was discovered by the local community many years ago. In 2008, a formal survey of the site revealed that the burial site is dated between 2,000 to 4,000 years old. The Community Archaeology Project at Ban Natong commenced in January 2009 by the local community, in collaboration with SEAMEO SPAFA, LLMP, FAD, and Silpakorn University.

The excavation garnered participation from students enrolled at the Provincial Office of Non-formal Education. Villagers and students from Natong Village also took part in the excavation. The site received a lot of interest from the local public and the excavation was featured on local cable programmes, newspapers, radio, and a national TV programme.

At the end of the excavation, SPAFA submitted parts of a skeleton to be dated in the United States which revealed the site dated back to at least 4,500 years ago.

Eventually, the community decided to set up a small exhibition space in the village temple to keep the artefacts and the 4,500-year-old male skeleton that was found during the excavation. The exhibit has since been moved to an old school building near the site. The museum serves as a learning centre for villagers as well as the local public. Since the establishment of the museum, the village has received a large number of visitors who were interested to learn more about the past of Phrae. A long-term plan for heritage management and tourism at Ban Natong has also been drafted.

In 2010, following a request from the village committee, SEAMEO SPAFA and FAD have continued their collective training on heritage management for villagers as well as assisting them to find funding to set up a permanent museum. The Phrae Provincial Administration Organization has supported a new museum, while the villagers have acted as heritage



Photo: SEAMEO SPAFA

Local school children participates in the excavation at Ban Natong Prehistoric Site

custodians. The school compound was turned into a learning centre on matters such as heritage management, cultural and eco-tourism. Training activities on related subjects were organized on site for villagers and interested individuals.

SEAMEO SPAFA has continued to work with the Ban Natong community and local partners in order to assist them to establish and manage the museum and the learning centre.

III. Significant Impacts

As a SEAMEO SPAFA-supported initiative, the community outreach programme shows how other organizations can work with communities rather than for communities. This approach, if done correctly and sincerely, can help minimize concerns over sustainability, community acceptance, and local ownership.

The involvement of SEAMEO SPAFA in this initiative has been continuous rather than a one-off intervention programme. The partnership with LLMP was developed and has been sustained throughout the years and SEAMEO SPAFA has been sensitive to the needs of the community and has provided support according to what initiatives community leaders feel are the most important and relevant.

The approach that LLMP, along with SEAMEO SPAFA, believes in is to reawaken a sense of ownership and confidence among traditional communities so that they take responsibility to take care of their own heritage.

While the impact of the project is directly local, or at least the direct beneficiaries are the people of Phrae, the successful implementation of the partnership with the LLMP and other agencies can be a useful guide, if not inspiration, for other local, national, or regional initiatives.

Two books are to be published as an outcome of this project: one on working with children in heritage preservation, using the examples of the Book House project; and another on architectural heritage preservation. The books have been disseminated in the region to be used as guidelines for working with local communities in heritage conservation.

Besides, an international workshop on “Conservation, Communication, and Community”, another collaboration between SEAMEO SPAFA, ICCROM, and LLMP was instigated in August 2010 in Phrae in which participants learned from the experiences of SPAFA and LLMP.

As over 100 applicants expressed an interest in joining the course, this interest clearly shows how the case study of Phrae has inspired and interested professionals working in heritage conservation in Southeast Asia and beyond. Therefore, SEAMEO SPAFA has decided to organize another workshop on the same topic in Phrae to answer the needs of the region.

It is expected that the collaborative efforts of SEAMEO SPAFA and LLMP will be ongoing, while SEAMEO SPAFA is delighted to share experiences with other communities and professionals, both local and regional.

IV. Success Factors

The aim of LLMP is for Phrae to become a living heritage town where the traditional community enjoys and cherishes their tangible and intangible heritage. LLMP aims to instigate sensible and responsible heritage conservation, management and tourism, though it should be noted that none of the activities were initiated to promote tourism. The purpose is not to “freeze the city in time”, but to preserve valuable heritage through an approach based on traditional wisdom and the full awareness of the traditional community. The ultimate goal of LLMP is to be able to forge a sense of heritage ownership among the traditional community and to propose recommendations which can be included in national agendas regarding community participation in heritage conservation.

SEAMEO SPAFA’s role in the work of LLMP is to support the network and its work in the community. The collaboration stems from SEAMEO SPAFA and LLMP’s shared approach of community inclusion and participation in heritage management. It has to be noted as well that SEAMEO SPAFA collaborates with those who have a passion for their heritage and identity, rather than acting as experts and instructing people what to do. The very fact that SPAFA came on board after LLMP had established itself and while the founding members were deep into their work to raise awareness about the community’s heritage is a tribute to LLMP’s drive and determination to lead local heritage preservation efforts.

After seven years (2004-2010), the work of LLMP has now progressed towards historic conservation and archaeological research. However, dialogue and awareness-raising activities still count as the number one priority. One of the positive aspects of the working approach of LLMP is that the planning, directions, and decision-making all come from within the local community. The projects implemented aim first hand to benefit local people, not tourists and they are not for income-generating purposes.

The joint working approach of LLMP and SEAMEO SPAFA also taps into locally available resources which are to be used with respect, while recognizing local wisdom and people. This approach will undoubtedly promote a strong platform for long-term heritage conservation.

The collaboration with local government units is a way to recognize the roles of these offices in preserving cultural heritage, since they also have mandates to do so and most staff of the local government units are from the province and part of the larger Phrae community. Instead of duplicating work, LLMP thinks that it is possible to join forces with local government partners. As a result, most of the projects of LLMP are funded by local government on an ad-hoc basis.

At the same time, SEAMEO SPAFA utilised its network with national agencies and institutions, such as the Fine Arts Department and Silpakorn University, as well as international organizations such as ICCROM and the US Embassy in Thailand in order to make sure local efforts receive appropriate support.

With this on-going approach, LLMP has reawakened and reaffirmed a sense of ownership in local heritage in many traditional communities. It is hoped that each traditional community will be able to carry out work and make their own decisions, with support from the LLMP network and other partners such as SEAMEO SPAFA.

IV. Lessons Learned and Potential for Project Expansion

LLMP and SEAMEO SPAFA are fully aware that traditional communities need to have strong voices and an awakened sense of confidence which will allow them to deal with others as equal partners. The most important thing is that their voices need to be accounted for more than the needs of others, since traditional communities make the heritage come alive. All projects to be carried out should stem from the needs of the local communities, which will make the projects relevant, sustainable, and truly meaningful.

The most important aspect of working with the local communities is respect. There needs to be a mutual respect on both sides, which can be created through the process of dialogue. It is crucial to be respectful of local ideas, systems, and beliefs, and to always take into account the opinions of members of the local communities who are the custodians of the cultural heritage.

SEAMEO SPAFA is currently working with LLMP and other local partners on other heritage preservation projects including the restoration of the 118-year-old missionary house at the Phrae Christian hospital, and the establishment of the Natong Community Museum. In order to expand the impact of the Phrae project to other areas in region, SEAMEO SPAFA is exploring the possibility of working with partners in other SEAMEO Member Countries to carry out cultural heritage preservation projects with a focus on community involvement, which will provide a platform for an exchange of ideas and experiences between members of the Phrae communities and other communities in the region. It is expected that the Phrae model can be used as an example for other communities, which will enhance heritage preservation in the region.



Photo: SEAMEO SPAFA