

Defining Local Heritage in the Case of Bypassed Towns: A case study in Photharam community, Ratchaburi province

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Abstract

Each town always has its own characteristics and heritage; although it may not be outstanding enough to be on a World, National, or regional heritage list or to be a tourists' destination. Yet these place may be very pleasant places in which to live and so they are presenting real heritage that is certainly meaningful to their own local communities. Today, the trend of nostalgia tourism is very popular, especially traveling to the old districts and old living communities which are still rich with distinctive architectural style and identity, as well as presenting local culture and traditions that can suggest a long succession of customs and beliefs. Thailand has many old communities and old towns scattered around the nation. In the past, most of them were ignored by tourists although, when the nostalgia tourism movement became a new trend, some have promoted themselves to be new tourism destinations which contain elements of a nostalgia-laden atmosphere, especially in the area around Bangkok. The old buildings, that look like something from the past, are the first things that will be presented and promoted as an emblem or heritage of the community. Although old buildings are one of the cultural elements that can show the characteristics and identity of each community or town, nevertheless in the context of these small towns which may seem indistinguishable from each other to the eye of the passing traveler, it is often hard to recollect which building belongs to which town. Yet these buildings and other landmarks are still to be seen as real, albeit local, heritage. So the question arises of what constitutes local heritage in the context of a seemingly undistinguished small town?

Introduction

Thailand is rich in tourism resources that fascinate both Thais and international visitors. The outstanding significance of each tourism place represents important factors that attract tourists while other towns which are not seen as significant or beautiful will be defined as bypassed towns. There are many small cities or towns in Thailand which play a role as a

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mere place on a route or journey to some other destination. Thailand has many old communities and old cities scattered around the nation. In the past, most were ignored by tourists but when the nostalgia tourism movement became a new trend, some of them have gradually promoted themselves to be new tourism destinations which contain elements of a nostalgia-laden atmosphere, especially in the peripheral areas around Bangkok. This research concentrates on Photharam community in Ratchaburi province which would seek to promote itself to be a new tourist destination. Photharam community is located in the Photharam subdistrict, Photharam district of Ratchaburi province, a central province about 80 kilometers west of Bangkok. In the past, Photharam had been developed from a small community to a significantly larger town. It had become a significant trading community of the Maeklong river and was the place of exchange goods junction and also traditionally boats station for water transportation between Ratchaburi province and Kanchanaburi province. After 2500 B.E, however, Photharam market declined; many local people, especially of the younger generation, moved out to Bangkok and other big cities, leaving mostly only the older generations. Nowadays, the aesthetic value of Photharam has been eroded but remains appreciated by local people; so they founded “The Forget Photharam Not Club” for enhancing its life and local lifestyle by using tourism as a main attraction for reviving the local economy.

Materials and Methods

This research concentrates on the Photharam community which is located in the old town area at the west of the Photharam Railway station in Photharam municipality, Ratchaburi province. The research article aimed to understand the points of view of local people and the factors that they use to express their identity and define the concept of the local heritage of the town, which is commonly seen as bypassed without any outstanding significance.

The researcher conducted site visits and open-ended questions for in-depth interviews with residents for the data collection^{*}, with the aim of exploring the community regarding its local heritage and the factors that its people use to define their local heritage for Photharam and thereby a sense of local identity. The key informants were local people who have continuous living in Photharam and members of the “Forget Photharam Not Club”. The

^{*} Interviewing used snow-ball sampling for selecting local people to be interviewees by starting at the members of the Forget Photharam Not Club. The questions focused on the story of Photharam, memories of local people, development of Photharam community, ideas of local heritage, character and identity of the town.

analysis follows the framework of Relph's triad (to be discussed below), to describe Photharam's identity.

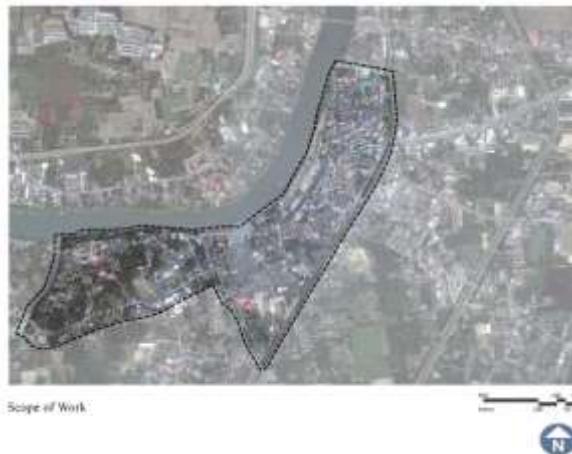
Hogg and Dominic (1988: 2) state that "identity is the people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others", whereas Woodward (2007: 1-2) extends the concept of Hogg and Dominic to state that "identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not". When the concept of identity was applied to communities and cities, Lynch (1981, quoted in Oktay, 2002: 261) said that "... like individuals, cities should have character and distinctions; therefore, identity means the extent to which a person can recognize or recall a place as being distinct from other places". Relph (1976: 48) expressed the idea that "three components of place (static physical appearance, the activities and the meanings) are the raw materials of the identity of places. In addition, Relph added that apart from the previous factors above which identify place identity, interrelation between them are others factors to present identity. Physical context and activities combine to give the human equivalent of locations within the 'functional circle' of animals; setting and meanings combine in the direct and empathetic experience of landscapes or townscapes; activities and meaning combine in many social acts and shared histories that have little reference to physical setting."

As previous mentioned physical appearance, activities, and meanings and the dialectical links between them are the elementary structural relations of that identity, but these are not complete. There is another important aspect or dimension of identity that is 'sense of place'. Najafi and Shariff (2011: 187) have explained that "Sense of Place usually is defined as an overarching impression encompassing the general ways in which people feel about places, sense it, and assign concepts and value to it".

Results

Physical features or appearance

Landscape of Photharam: Photharam is located at the eastern bank of the Maeklong river, with the river as the western boundary to the community while the railway which



parallels it is the eastern boundary.



Figure1 Photharam community

Source: Adapted from Google Earth

Figure2 Talad Bon area

Source: Adapted from Google Earth

Photharam community is divided into three parts or talad(market): Talad Bon, the northernmost of these, comprises a lot of one and two storey wooden buildings which mostly are located along both side of small road that parallel the Maeklong river; besides, some elevated houses can be seen at the bank of the river.

Talad Klang, the second of the old town's areas which is the smallest part, is an especially distinctive part of Photharam. Because this area was seriously burnt in 2509 B.E., lots of its old wooden shophouses were lost. Therefore, some concrete buildings were built in replacement, although some wooden shophouses still remain. Apichart Udomseth (personal interview: 2012), head of the Forget Photharam Not Club, has said that this area is charming and presents a good combination because the shophouses which are located at the upper part and at the opposite end of the area are built from wood while the middle part is of concrete.



Figure 3 Talad Klang area

Source: Adapted from Google Earth



Figure 4 Talad Klang area

Source: Adapted from Google Earth

Talad Lang, the third and southernmost area, is also an area of factories, especially for fish sauces. There are many type of building in this area such as wooden row houses for laborers who worked at the factories, though abandoned now, also single houses in a Thai style, and the concrete buildings of the fish sauce factories.

Narrow lanes: The areas of Talad Bon and Talad Klang are interconnected with narrow lanes especially at Talad Klang since Talad Klang was the center for goods transfer both by river and train; therefore, the streets were built for convenient transfer. Preecha Pravek (personal interview: 2012) stated that, in the past, local people always traveled by walking, cycling, and using carts for carrying goods to merchants at the market; thus, the width of street is appropriate for these reasons but it is not appropriate at present when cars and trucks are the important vehicles. Apichart Udomseth (personal interview: 2012) has further observed that the narrow streets are the identity of Photharam while the confusion of directions which causes from the street maze is the charm of the town and tourists who come to Photharam may get lost in this confusion of streets and alleys.

Concrete road along the Maeklong river: There is a concrete road parallel to the Maeklong river. The exact date and time of road construction are unknown. Riwcharoenritkul (2012, pp.60-61) explained that “in the past, Photharam had a long and wide sand beach, around 2 kilometers, at the bank of the river when the water level decreased to the lowest level; thus, it was a proper place for lay by of boats and ships and this space was set up to be a place for trading and exchanging of locals and neighbors.” This concrete road was built to counter the problem of soil erosion and landslide at the bank after the sand sucking industries

devastated the area. The most significant casualty of long-term sand dredging had been a renowned sand beach in front of the town; so the concrete road might be seen as a demeaning replacement for a major and renowned natural feature of the region.

Activities and functions

Activities and functions which related to social, economy and religious were taken into considered and analyzed. After analyzed found that Photharam plays various roles i.e.

1. Living and working place: Photharam is the workplace of many people especially merchants. . Although it plays a key role as a work place, on the other hand it is still a home for local people who have lived here for a long time.

2. Meeting place: Open space along the river or the fresh market are the meeting places of local people, especially the fresh market in Talad Klang.



Figure 5-6 Meeting place of local people

Source: Author

3. Place for food production: Mutsha Pratansakul (personal interview: 2012) saw Photharam as the cafeteria of people who live both inside and outside Photharam. There are many small restaurants and food shops scattered around the town. Importantly, the foods are not expensive and are delicious. Local people are always proud of their local food and are pleased to recommend the special restaurant of each kind of food.

4. traditional festival spaces: For special occasions such as the Songkran or Loy Kratong festivals, temples still play a role of conserving Thai culture and continuing traditional practices. Further, the wats themselves present architectural distinction and can be read as subtle documents of the towns ethnic identities.

5. Sacred spaces: Activities that relate to religion and rituals are still practiced in the area.

Meanings and symbols

The town's motto is 'kon suay Photharam', a town of beautiful women, which is also the beginning of the Ratchaburi province's motto. This refers back to a story of the arrival of King Rama V when he was returning from a third travel to Sai yok by boat in 2431 B.E.. At that time King Rama V saw the ladies, who are the combination of different ethnicities, and said that Photharam people are beautiful. In addition the wording 'kon suay Photharam' reminds one of the different ethnic groups who live in Photharam because, when Saipin Kaewngarmprasert (personal interview: 2012) was a child, she recalls that she had Mon, Chinese, Lao, and Thai students as classmates.

There is a local slogan to the effect that "Thais live at the river basin, the Laotians live in the upland, the Mon live near the river and Chinese people dwell at the market", reflecting the distinctive characters of various ethnic groups in Photharam. Moreover, this slogan suggests the guiding concepts of each ethnic group to select land for their permanent settlement.

Place names: Names of places in Photharam link to the events or activities that happened there. Song Prapad road refers to King Rama V and the local pride that once the King visited their hometown; in turn, Cooley Alley indicates this as a work place and the home of laborers who are always the important key to goods distribution and transfer.

Sufficient living: These suggest that local people are sufficiency conscious, frugal and not extravagant with money; they also suggest a wider commercial confidence in the town's economy – banks can operate profitably here. Yai Uar-afoonchai (personal interview: 2012) claimed that Photharam people are rich but they live a simple life, they always save their money; hence, different banks appear here.

The above each factor is analyzed separately. Then, intertwining between physical settings and activities, physical settings and meanings, and activities and meanings are shown as follows.

1. Relations between the river and local people: It might also be said that the connection of local people and the Maeklong river still persists though not very obviously. In the past, local people always relied on the river in both direct and indirect ways such as fishing for food, for consumption and use for households, as the place for bean sprouts plantation etc. In the present day, these activities disappeared; however, the less production-focused or economic activities still remain such as recreation and for a meeting point. Yai Uar-

aroonchai (personal interview: 2012) explained that even though the sand beach has vanished, he would still like to walk by the river because it has a good atmosphere; in addition, the smell of the water make him feel fresh and happy. From analyzed found that the relations between local people and river be shown in two types are sand beach and cleansing bean sprouts.

1.1 The sand beach: Although at present, the sand beach has disappeared, victim of the sand dredging industry, the area that once was the sand beach will still be a place of many activities that have survived from the past. Every day, local people will use this place for their recreation, a meeting point and other outdoor activities, just as old local people did in the past, especially for special occasions such as the sand beach festival which takes place every year around January for cerebrating the coming winter and for good luck. Mutsha Pratansakul (personal interview: 2012) recalled that local people always had a deep connection with the sand beach. It was a playground for children, a place for planting bean sprouts, it would be a locale for recreation, also a meeting place of people or a bathing place. It is said that every activity of local people was connected with the sand beach.

1.2 Cleansing bean sprouts: The procedure and techniques for planting bean sprouts have changed from in the past when they were planted at the riverbank, nevertheless they will still be cleaned at the river. It might be said that the connection between bean sprouts and the river – more specifically the sand beach – still continues, albeit more in memory.

2. Photharam as trading center: Talad Klang still plays a role as a trade center and place of food production. The daily market routine runs from 04.00 A.M.to 09.00 A.M. in the morning on the road in front of the clock tower in Talad Klang, and in the evening the night market will be active in front of Wat Photharam. During day time, a fresh market will be open inside the Talad Klang. Apichart Udonseth (personal interview: 2012) stated that Photharam has never died, only it is not vibrant like in the past. Food production such as bean sprouts, fish sauces and black tofu continues, but fish sauce is the only product that is distributed to outside the community.

3. Entertainment place: Vic Kru Tawee which was the old theater in Photharam. Saipin Kaewngarmprasert (personal interview: 2012) recounted that when she was a child she watched the movies inside this theatre. This place contains the memory of local people because it was the only theatre and entertainment place in that time. The theatre survives; its place in the lives of inhabitants, however, is now memory.

4. Living local historical museum: Sa tien thong which is the old studio for photographs of Photharam's inhabitants contains the stories and memories of old local people. Saipin Kaewngarmprasert (personal interview: 2012) explained that this place can tell an old story and convey feelings to a new generation, as a younger generation will absorb the atmosphere and can imagine old stories from when people in the past would sit down at the old chair for their portrait to be taken with a still surviving antique camera.

5. Spiritual believes and festivals

5.1 Sand beach festival: Although the sand beach which was the venue of the festival in the past has disappeared, the festival still happens, while respect for the goddesses and gods is still the same and still celebrated in the festival. Moreover, the name of the festival is still "Sand beach festival"; it is a name that will recall that once Photharam had its long and beautiful sand beach at the bank of the Maeklong river.

5.2 Tam prateep activity: Highly respectful prayer will be offered to the Buddha footprint in the wihan at Wat Sai Aree Rak. Apichart Udomseth (personal interview: 2012) recounted how this activity was created to link with the Joodprateep activity that has occurred for a long time; furthermore, this is also for promoting the wihan to be an interesting place because the wihan had been abandoned and neglected in the past.

Sense of place

Local people feel that Photharam is the place of their home, a work place and a place of safety for living. However, everything around themselves seems to them ordinary and not offering anything outstanding or attractive to tourists. However, they are always happy to present and recommend the famous foods of the town and the best shops for each kind of food. It might be that Photharam has developed from the old centre for trade to become simply a place for living well; therefore, activities and the fabric of life that happen inside the community are for this purpose and are not seen as having potential for tourist consumption.

From the study's interviews and observations, it was found that local people do not focus on their houses or the urban fabric but on the activities that connect them to the place. Furthermore, they focus on the memory of the sand beach, as they retain a sense of regret for its loss. It might be that local people have deep connection with the sand beach because in the past they had an experience of it in their daily life. While the sand beach festival is held up as an important annual activity, the local people feel that the atmosphere of the old

festival is lost but it still has to be continued because it recalls that the sand beach was once here and its memory is still important to local people.

Conclusion

The research found that memories and traditional connections to the place are the factors to define local heritage for Photharam people. From interviews with local people, it was found that when the question of the important things in their memory was raised, the sand beach and the Vic Kru Tawee were the most frequent answers. Vic Kru Tawee is an old theatre that has been shut down for a long time while the sand beach has disappeared and been replaced with the concrete road, yet local people still remember these and regret their loss. Note, too, that both Vic Kru Tawee and the sand beach are connected with local people via memories of old activities. Vic Kru Tawee is of the only entertainment form (the village cinema) that has failed to enter the digital age. It is a place that gathers happy memories of local people from another time. Although local people have a connection to the Vic Kru Tawee, nevertheless the connection of local people to the sand beach is deeper. Vic Kru Tawee served as a recreation place or entertainment place for local people but the sand beach acted as a playground for children, meeting place of local people, place for producing bean sprouts and also a place for recreation. In the past, people utilized the sand beach for several purposes and the sand beach was the destination of everyone in their daily routines; hence, local people would seem to have a deeper connection with the memory of the sand beach.

The identity of Photharam in the point of view of local people which they would like to present are

- Good place for living and working place
- Meanings and memories of good old days

These identity are the social and cultural capital of Photharam. If local would like to use their identity to magnetize tourists, they should have some methods to encourage and interpret identity for preserving for example;

- Maintenance ambience of small towns (narrow lenses, wooden houses).
- Support services for local daily living for good living place.
- Present lost memories or loss histories etc.

As a concluding point, it is worth noting that the local people speak of the theatre and the sand beach with a sense of nostalgia. Likewise, it might be nostalgia tourism that would most likely attract the visitor to the town and to many other small, ‘bypassed’ towns like it. Yet nostalgia relates to memory, though also to imagination (the imagining, for example, that Photharam might represent something of a ‘real Thailand’ of the past). Memory and imagination, however, are personal, particular to each individual person. Hence Photharam that might be presented to the potential tourist – its ambience, narrow streets, traditional wooden houses, distinctive architecture of wats and shrines – might be quite different from that residing in the memories of its own citizens.

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