World Heritage and Urban Communities in Thailand: Historic City of Ayutthaya, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province and Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province

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Thailand ratified the UNESCO 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1990. One year later, two cultural heritage sites in Thailand were inscribed onto the World Heritage List; these were the Historic City of Ayutthaya and the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns and Ban Chiang Archaeological Site was inscribed in 1992. The State has two other cultural heritage sites on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative Lists and more than ten sites were listed on the national lists which were approved by the National Committee for the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Heritage (the National Committee). In 2007, the government introduced a policy to recommend every Historical Park in Thailand as a World Heritage Site through a top-down process. This policy was not successful as sites of national significance did not necessarily meet the World Heritage criteria for inscription. Hence, no new World Heritage Sites have been inscribed in the last twenty years (Fine Arts Department, 2012).

The participation of local communities in the management of World Heritage Sites and their protection has been considered topical especially within the recently celebrated fortieth anniversary of the World Heritage Convention in 2012, of which the theme was World Heritage and Sustainable Development: the Role of Local Communities (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016 (a)). Additionally, two other cultural heritage sites in Thailand were added to the Tentative List. These are the Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat in 2012 and the Monuments, Sites and Cultural Landscape of Chiang Mai, Capital of Lanna in 2015 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016 (b)). The submission of these sites was a bottom-up process; both of them were proposed by the local communities.
This article is about the participation of urban local communities in the World Heritage system, and the obstacles surrounding the operationalisation of the Convention looking at both top-down and bottom-up processes of cultural World Heritage in Thailand in the last twenty years. This will be illustrated through the comparison of two contemporary urban communities. The first of these is the Historic City of Ayutthaya, which was proposed to be inscribed on the World Heritage List by the central government. The second is the Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat, a cultural heritage site on the World Heritage Tentative List, which has been proposed by the local community.

Administration of World Heritage in Thailand

The Royal Thai Government is the State Party to the Convention and the implementation is carried out by the National Committee which administers World Heritage in Thailand. The Deputy Prime Minister is the President of The National Committee and the Minister of Natural Resource and Environment serves as the Secretariat of the Committee. The National Committee also has a role in the designation and supervision of the three subcommittees for World Heritage administration: these are the Subcommittee of Cultural World Heritage (Cultural Subcommittee), which has the Minister of Culture as the President and the Director General of Fine Arts Department (the DG of FAD) as the Secretary; the Subcommittee of Natural World Heritage (Natural Subcommittee), which has the Minister of Natural Resource and Environment as the President, and; the Subcommittee of Territory (Territorial Subcommittee), which has the Minister of Foreign Affairs as the President. Both the Cultural and Natural World Heritage Subcommittees have responsibility for the selection of sites to be proposed to the World Heritage List, which are then considered by the National Committee prior to submission to the World Heritage Committee. The Subcommittee of Territory advises on international affairs for the World Heritage. One of the main roles of the National Committee is the assessment of potential nominations for World Heritage inscription in Thailand and presents to the Thai Parliament for submission on behalf of the Kingdom of Thailand (Fine Arts Department, 2012). The structure of the World Heritage administration at the national level of Thailand operates through governmental bureaucracy and there are no options for public participation.

Cultural World Heritage Administration

Cultural World Heritage administration is directly under the authority of the Fine Arts Department, an organisation of the Ministry of Culture. Work is divided between two offices of the Fine Arts Department (FAD): the Office of Archaeology and the Regional Offices of Fine Arts Department (the Regional Offices). The Office of Archaeology is the focal point of cultural World Heritage in Thailand.
and liaises between the inner offices and other relevant organisations. As the Secretary of the Subcommittee of Cultural World Heritage, it advises on World Heritage management and acts on the policy of the National Committee. The Office of Archaeology also gives guidance to the Regional Offices in Cultural World Heritage management, both technical and academic. The Regional Offices are the administrators for the physical features of the area and carry out academic research of the cultural heritage sites which are located within their jurisdiction (Fine Arts Department, 2012).

Administration of cultural heritage sites and World Heritage sites in Thailand is the statutory responsibility of the General Director of the Fine Arts Department (DG of FAD) under the Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museum, 1961 as amended by Act (No. 2), 1992 (Fine Arts Department, 2013 (a)). This highly bureaucratic cultural heritage legislation has been enacted by the military government since 1961. The DG of FAD has the authority to designate heritage sites in Thailand and all the other aspects pertaining to the management of listed assets. The Academic Committee for Ancient Monument Conservation (the Academic Committee) acts as the advisor to the DG of FAD (Fine Arts Department, 2013 (b)). The Academic Committee is formed of officials from the FAD and external experts who represent various academic and bureaucratic interests. Within this process there is no public participation despite the fact that the people’s rights in relation to their cultural heritage were acknowledged in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand version 1997 (Government Gazette, 2014). However, when a site is considered to be of national or international importance, management is reserved for the government and the public can only contribute on a passive level. Usage of the monuments, such as for events or festivals, requires permission from the DG of FAD (Fine Arts Department, 2013 (c)).
The Historical City of Ayutthaya

The first case study is the Historic City of Ayutthaya, which was the capital city of Siam Kingdom for more than four hundred years from the thirteenth through to the eighteenth century. Ayutthaya is located on the flood plain in the central region of Thailand. It is an island surrounded by three rivers on the upper side of the Gulf of Siam. It is a significant site of ancient civilization; it was a trading and economic centre in South-east Asia, which connected the East and West at that period. Ayutthaya was destroyed and its ruins were abandoned in 1767. The Historic City of Ayutthaya was inscribed as a cultural World Heritage site in 1991 with the criterion iii of the World Heritage Criteria (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016 (c)). It was proposed as a World Heritage Site by the central government.
The World Heritage's property of Ayutthaya is in the heart of Ayutthaya's city island, and covers an area of approximately three hundred hectares. It includes the principal ancient monuments such as the Royal Palace, Phra Si Sanphet Temple, Ratchaburana Temple and Phra Mongkonbophit Temple but does not cover the whole of the city’s island and significant heritage sites including the Chaiwattanaram Temple are outside of the area. The National Economic and Social Development Plan (version 1961) designated Ayutthaya province as an industrial area because of its excellent transportation (Office of National Economic and Social Development Board, 2016). The surrounding area of the Historic City of Ayutthaya is occupied by large factories and residential areas. The location has high potential for industrial growth. However, Ayutthaya is also a top tourist attraction for both international and domestic tourists who come for the temples and the tourist attractions which have been built up around them (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2016). As such, there is an overlap between the needs of the present urban community for growth and the conservation needs for the protection of the authenticity and integrity of the World Heritage Site.
Conflict between ancient monument conservation and economic development often occurs in Ayutthaya. This can be seen in the way in which central government policies are imposed on the local authorities, resulting in conflict over land use such as limitation of building's height, inappropriate use, and damage to the ancient monument which are subject to national conservation legislations. An example of these conflicts is the site’s boundary which cannot be extended due to resistance from the local community which occupies parts of the historic city. The Master Plan for Conservation specifies the eviction of the inhabitants of the World Heritage area. As a result there have been instances where archaeological remains have been destroyed by local people fearing eviction.

Another example of conflict over the site is the removal of shops and parking lots at the Phra Mongkonbophit Temple; these shops and parking lots were removed in line with the Master Plan because they were considered unsympathetic to the ancient monument. This plan has been strongly resisted by the trading community because the location provided by the authorities is far from the main sightseeing sites. Despite several negotiations, no solution has been found for this conflict. The Government is concerned that the World Heritage status might be in danger because of the unauthorised commercial developments near to the site. The imposition of these restrictions has resulted in a negative attitude towards the World Heritage Site by the trading community. The trading community is indifferent to the World Heritage status as they run small businesses in Ayutthaya aimed at the local pilgrims (Matichon Public, 2016 and MGR Online, 2016). The negative attitude of local Thai people towards the World Heritage at Ayutthaya was the result of protest in the other World Heritage inscription projects in Thailand such as Phra Prathom Chedi in Nakhon Prathom province (Fine Arts department, 2011 (a) and MGR Online, 2011).

The Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat

In contrast to the Historic City of Ayutthaya, the local community has been much more involved in the addition of Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List. The conflict surrounding the proposed inscription of the Temple of Preah Vihear as a World Heritage Site raised issues of nationalism which led some people in Thailand to distrust the UNESCO process and the ideals of shared heritage (Silverman 2011 and Raymon, 2014).

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1 The associated legislations of the ancient city of Ayutthaya including the Master Plan for Conservation and Development of the Historic City of Ayutthaya which has been approved by the cabinet and conducted by the committees at national and local levels, the Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museum, 1961 as amended by Act (No. 2), 1992, the Ratchaphatsadu Land Act, 1975, the City Planning Act, 1975, the Building Control Act, 1979 and the Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act, 1992 as amended by Act (No. 2), 1992 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016).
However, the dispute also raised awareness of World Heritage in Thailand. This case raised Nakhon Si Thammarat people’s awareness of World Heritage. They are proud to have their important religious heritage site proposed as a World Heritage Site. Nakhon Si Thammarat is a major province in the Southern part of Thailand. The city centre is an urban area which overlaps with the ancient town. It was a major city of Tambralinga state during the Sri Vijaya Kingdom period, in the eighth to twelfth century CE. The early community of Nakhon Si Thammarat was located on a main sand bar of the Malay Peninsula of the Gulf of Siam and was a port town of the ancient Eastern World where it was connected to other ancient states including Indonesia, China, Sri Lanka and Persia. Besides the political and commercial relationships, archaeological evidence of religious relationships with ancient India and the Middle East including Brahmanism, Buddhism and Islam was found on Nakhon Si Thammarat. Nakhon Si Thammarat was a centre of Theravada Buddhism which had a close relationship with the Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The Buddhist Monk Pontificates from Sri Lanka brought the Lord Buddha’s relics to Nakhon Si Thammarat. The ruler of Nakhon Si Thammarat built a stupa to contain the relics at the site of the present principal stupa of Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan. This is a masterpiece of rounded stupa, called Lanka style, which spread across the southern part and other parts of Thailand until the present day. This stupa of Wat Phra Mahathat is a symbol of the unwavering faith in Buddhism of the local people on the peninsula (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016 (d)).

1 Preah Vihear is a temple located on the Thailand-Cambodian border. The issue of ownership of the temple has impacted diplomatic relationship between Thailand and Cambodia. In particular during the World Heritage nomination process of the temple by Cambodia between 2007 and 2012. As a result it can be argued that an undercurrent of unease towards World Heritage has developed, as some Thais associate this case with the idea that World Heritage brings conflicts and violence.
Figure 4 Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat ©Bhadravarna Bongsasilp
The Dean of Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University (the current President of Nakhon Si Thammarat Cultural Affair Council) is responsible for increased awareness of World Heritage amongst local people in Nakhon Si Thammarat. He proposed to the Governor of the Province that the site merited consideration for nomination to the World Heritage List. As a result the National Committee assigned the Fine Arts Department to support the local community in the initial stages of the World Heritage process (Fine Arts Department, 2012). At the same time, the local community also asked the Director Office of Archaeology, who is also a local person, to provide support for developing the nomination (Srisuchat, 2016 and Sukrakan, 2016). The key individuals in this process were professionals from the local community. Although they represented the expert community, they were able to communicate in the local dialect and understand the culture of the area. This represents a shift from the previous case where experts were considered to be outsiders.

Without the local community’s interest in their heritage, which is linked to their sense of cultural pride and identity, this project would have never been successful. The sense of local identities of the communities living in the Southern territories of Thailand increased their interest in education on how to preserve their cultural heritage. Another factor in this successful collaboration was the community’s great respect for the former teacher and the local experts; they were able to trust them more than they would have done with outside experts. In addition, the community was able to learn about World Heritage and local perspectives were incorporated into the nomination process. The community is proud that their area of local religious significance could become a World Heritage Site. The local community was involved in collaboratively identifying the physical boundaries of the site, and identifying its significance based on their knowledge of it and in line with the construction of national narratives. This nomination both raised funds from local businesses and received funding from the central government (Fine Arts Department, 2011b).

In contrast to the way by which Ayutthaya was nominated to the World Heritage List, at this site the local community had a significant role in both starting and leading the process of placing it on the Tentative List. The government bureaucrats adapted to their new roles as consultants for academic and administrative purposes. The budget of the project from the government was given directly to the local authorities resulting in local cultural heritage management being placed in the hands of the local community. In addition, there were public hearings regarding every procedure, which acted in accordance with the policy of sustainable development of the government at that time and the strategy of the World Heritage Committee in their fortieth anniversary celebrations (UNESCO World
Heritage Centre, 2016 (a)). As a result, there has been much more effective collaboration with the local community in bringing current commercial practices within the site in line with the conservation plan for the monuments. Due to this, it only took two years to add this site to the Tentative List, which is a very short time compared to other sites which have gone through the more common top-down process (Ministry of Culture, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case studies have shown that local community participation is a rewarding approach to World Heritage management in urban centres. The requirements for conservation can cause conflict with the present urban community who live alongside the ancient monuments. By involving the local community in the process of World Heritage inscription, these communities can collaborate with conservation experts to create an appropriate site management plan. In the case of the Historic City of Ayutthaya, the World Heritage site has been inscribed and managed through a top-down process. Despite more than twenty years of sharing knowledge of the site with the local community, the level of community engagement with the site's values appears to be less than at the other case study site, Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat. Here, the local people have participated in every procedure relating to the World Heritage nomination. Although their local cultural heritage site is not a World Heritage site, listing on the Tentative List made the local people more aware of and engaged with their heritage. The myriad benefits which the local community reaped from taking part in this process include maintenance of the site as well as numerous collaborations with various sectors focused on conservation of the physical features of its cultural heritage and cultural landscape and other infrastructure projects in the local area. The participation of a local community who believed in the value of World Heritage and engaged in a bottom-up process of nomination resulted in the sustainable protection of cultural heritage, unlike the top-down approach taken at Ayutthaya where the World Heritage process was guided by the bureaucratic procedures imposed by the central government.

Bibliography


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