Monastery Museums in Thailand

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SAC projects on museums

• SAC, in collaboration with the the department of anthropology, Sinlapakorn University, and the Lek-Prapai Foundation, has a history of supporting wat and local communities to set up local museums.

  Wat Muang in Ratburi, and Wat Khao Yisan in Samutsongkhram are two such cases.
Current Project

• Since June 2003, we have begun a new project making a survey of small, local, community-based museums in many parts of Thailand.

• The objectives of this project are to have an overview of the development of small, local museums, and assess their needs for capacity building.
Development of Museums in Thailand

• Modern museums began in mid 19th C
• Royal collections
• Public display of art and archaeological objects
• Recent trends: city museums, district museums, science museums, children museums etc.
• 43 national museums, run by the Department of Fine Arts
• “Museum Fever” resulting from the PM’s vision
Other museums

- private museums
- monastery *wat* museums
- school museums
- cultural centres
- list of 291, may be more
New museum movement

• local, community-based, ethnic, individual

• emphasize consciousness of local history and identity, appreciation of regional and local identity, indigenous knowledge

• process of learning of community members and visitors
Why new movement?

• decentralization, increasing local resources
• education reform, local curriculum
• intellectual movements: local wisdom, indigenous knowledge, community culture, alternative development
• tourism
museums and local history

- religious items (buddha images, offerings, manuscripts, cabinets, etc.)
- archaeological finds, antiques,
- temple/household utensils
- folk material culture
- objects of curiosity, potentially ‘dangerous’ objects

objects are sites of unwritten history and memory of the common people within a local context.
Wat Khao Yisan
Samutsongkhram
manuscripts

- Wat Khao Yisarn has a large library of manuscripts. They are inventoried, but only very few are read and transcribed.

- Manuscripts and local history: local variants of the standard version, repository of knowledge before modernity period (religious version, astrology, divination, folktales, medicine)
Wat Takat Ngao library, Chantaburi
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Wat Fang Khlong, Nakhon Nayok, Museum of Phuan Folk Culture
200 years old *pha sin* (lady’s tube skirt)
Museum and local identity

• In the process of constructing the phuan museum, families donated items in their collection and stories about them to the museum.

• Some members of the community travel to their places of origin in Laos.

• Revival of weaving techniques, phuan language course
Collection of shadow puppets, Wat Ban Don Rayong
Wat puppet theatre

• With the collaboration of a theatre group from Bangkok, the abbot of wat Ban Don set up a theatre and trained students to perform.
Wat Lai Hin Luang
Lampang
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• Carved wooden banner, a form of offering to the Buddha in northern Thailand.
• Carved wood cabinet for storing manuscripts
Can anyone guess the use of this glass cabinet before it was donated to the museum?
tools for digitizing monastery museums

- software for making inventories
  - simple input forms for entering data
  - ‘standard’ metadata tags suitable for local museums, including classification
  - images, descriptions
  - related stories from local inhabitants

- network of monastery museums
  - clearing house of inventories
  - search engine
  - mapping of search results
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potteries collection from wat Khao Yisan

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Will local museums benefit from database?

- Research, input from scholars
- Tool for recording local history, exchange of information between generations
- Indigenous knowledge content for local school curriculum
social, cultural impacts of digitization

• digitization may create some dilemmas
• wat museums are unwilling to publish their collections because of fear of theft, antiques traders, loss of control
• who will decide what to keep private and what to go public?
• digitization may be useful for preserving cultural heritage, transmission of local knowledge to the next generation, but it can also create local tension