

*A Case Study of How Unanticipated Preservers Work on Preserving Local Culture
Relating to Textiles in Northern Thailand*

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Abstract

This paper aims to present how unanticipated preservers have been part of preserving local culture, particularly in making textiles. The paper contributes to the understanding of the foundations of local cultural heritage practices relating to textiles, to contemporary practices of preserving local culture (LC), and to perspectives on ‘preserving heritage skills’ with different types of participants who have been involved with conserving LC. These participants also shared their perspectives and their challenges when preserving LC, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic. The research combined participant observation with practice-based auto-ethnography and gathered further data through in-depth interviews and a focus group. The research focuses on key actors who are involved with safeguarding LC in Northern Thailand through their contribution to textiles practices. In Northern Thailand (the Lanna Kingdom) where LC and Buddhist practices are heavily intertwined with heritage textiles. Moreover, local people still practise LC and they have been very proud about presenting their culture and calling themselves Lanna people and still use the local Lanna language. Therefore, local people have a strong mind-set for preserving their culture, as well as those unanticipated preservers who are monks, weavers, local business women and foreigners who live in the Lanna Kingdom. The research explores their various modes of involvement in safeguarding LC, identifies their common problems and considers their suggestions for designing a potential framework to model ways which will safeguard LC, particularly in heritage textiles. Lastly, the research shows the importance of ‘flexibility’ and ‘adaptability’ as crucial for preserving LC in today’s world.

Keywords: Safeguarding Cultural Heritage, Northern Thailand, Heritage Textiles, Buddhism

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Introduction

This paper aims to present how unanticipated preservers have been practising contemporary preserving local culture (LC) activities, particularly in making textiles with different types of participants involved in protecting local culture. The research focuses on key actors involved with safeguarding LC in Northern Thailand through their involvement in textile practices. Moreover, the research has focused on anticipated preservers engaged with conserving local cultural practice but not as a primary responsibility, or their job. They have shown passion and willingness to work either with public or private projects.

This research was developed from my PhD thesis. I started collecting data in 2016 as part of a residency project with the British Council. In 2019, I undertook fieldwork in Northern Thailand, interviews and a focus group with selected participants from different career paths who had experience with safeguarding heritage textiles practices. In 2022, I revisited two local weaving communities as I was concerned about how they work under unexpected circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, this paper aims to present participants' perspectives and challenges when preserving LC, primarily through the pandemic.

Literature review

The literature review shows that the modern concept of safeguarding cultural heritage needs to consider that inscribing each intangible heritage or local tacit knowledge skills may cause a conflict between nations. Different nations and cultures have different views about the preservation of heritage and the use of local tacit knowledge. On the other hand, we should have focused more on co-owners or cross-cultural enrichment (Foley, 2014). According to Noor (2019) reported in ASEAN Focus, the members consented that historians would respond to such movements by perceiving that much of what we take for granted as 'ours' in Southeast Asia is the consequence of cultural borrowing and sharing joint development and cross-cultural enrichment. For example, 'Batik' has been inscribed as a national art of Indonesia but can be seen in Malaysia and Southern Thailand. Indonesia and Malaysia have a common historical background and cultural heritage (Chong, 2012).

Likewise, when considering who is a preserver, the tacit knowledge owner or any actors involved with safeguarding activities can be called a preserver. Logan and Smith (2019) suggested that safeguarding is no longer dependent on top-down interventions by governments or heritage experts but, in contrast, people who are involved or are interested in local communities can be safeguarding actors. Therefore, a renewed approach to heritage studies should focus on heritage management and conservation and the processes of production, consumption, and engagement with heritage in its many and varied forms. Previously, Buckland (2013) had intimated that people involved in transferring cultural heritage knowledge could range from generations of family members to academics and professionals such as teachers, researchers, historians, and other related fields that support education, such as librarians, museum curators, and archivists.

This paper focuses on the anticipated preservers, such as people from different industries who have experience of safeguarding cultural heritage activities. Those closest to the local weaving community are the Buddhist monks because the Buddhist temple is still the centre of the local community in the Lanna Kingdom. Also, weavers should be considered to

be preservers as well. They are the tacit knowledge owners and the people who pass this knowledge on to others.

Research methodology

The research study comprised fieldwork to collect data in Thailand using participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group methods combined with multi-visual recordings and text-based research approaches. I focused on transcribing and then analysing audio and visual data from the fieldwork in the language of the collection. Self-reflexivity using autoethnography was considered part of the research to reflect narratives relating to the study and experiences while doing fieldwork.

Findings and Discussions

*The first part was modified from my PhD thesis.

The Lanna kingdom and people

'Lanna' or 'Lan Na' kingdom

When referring to 'Lan Na (or Lanna ล้านนา Kingdom)', it means a 'Kingdom of a Million Rice Fields' (translated by RTGS), and it is a precise area in Northern Thailand. The historical timeline of the kingdom is open to debate, resulting in it being shown as referring to different years. Nonetheless, this research followed the work of Ongsakun (2018), as most modern research relating to the Lan Na Kingdom has often used Ongsakun's timeline.

'Local Lanna people, local practitioners'

After I visited about 20 local communities in Northern Thailand, the British Council residency team recommended several outstanding communities. I selected two local communities interested in business models or ideas to develop their communities. The first was the Paw Phafai community-based in the Pua district, Nan province. The vision of the leader of the community, Kumpanuch (known as Pa Paw), was unlike other heads of local weaving communities. She is always keen to learn new knowledge and is open-minded. She related how she joined all the events and seminars for training weavers, learning business and marketing and always welcomed outsiders to visit her community so that she could gain experience and knowledge from them.

The second community is located within a temple, namely Pa Bong. Wat means temple in Thai. Therefore, I call this place Wat Pa Bong. Due to the passion of Abbot M for this temple, realised that this community was a weaving community before, and all women in his he wants to preserve local weaving skills within the Pa Bong community. His mother was a weaver, as well as his mother's friends. He then mother's generation could weave. Thus, he asked each house that still had a traditional loom to donate to the temple so that he could build a weaving house within the temple because his enthusiasm for bringing back the of lost traditional skills in the community enabled retired women to earn income.

Private sectors, unanticipated preservers

To define unanticipated preservers, I have divided performers into four main groups; those who have participated in Buddhist activities, fashion and textiles designers, businesswomen, and foreign organisations or foreigners. All these groups have been involved with preserving cultural heritage activities, as they have shown devotion and willingness to work with public or private projects.

Fashion designer, the connectors and product developers

Fashion designers are people with whom local weavers have experience working, as designers are consistently chosen as part of both public and private projects. The head of safeguarding and developing local wisdom of silk in the Queen Sirikit Department of Sericulture (The Silk Department) clarified that the reason for working with fashion designers is to establish Thai textiles' capabilities in diverse designs and occasions. Thus, fashion designers recreated a significant role in bringing their design expertise into the heritage textiles made by traditional techniques. The head of the Knowledge Management Division, The Support Arts and Crafts International Centre of Thailand (SACICT), shared an idea for conveying fashion designers to perform for heritage textiles that, before, most local weavers solely weaved textiles for traditional tube skirts. Therefore, textile preservers from both private and public sectors wanted to develop textiles for Thai people or international markets; we must create internationalise garments to look more contemporary.

Preserving cultural heritage through hotel business

To focus on businesswomen, they worked on public projects but focused on producing products in the long term. Nonetheless, the businesswomen I interviewed had not worked with authorities and preferred to work independently. I interviewed the founder and manager of Raya Heritage hotel, located in Chiang Mai province; they explained that the hotel team workers wanted to create the hotel as a 'living museum', conveying a story through the place. The hotel's concept is called 'the riverside life', which was the place of crossroad culture. The site was a port for international vendors from Myanmar, Laos, and Yunnan, China, who sold their products. Consequently, the Lanna culture has a touch of those cultures from neighbouring countries. The hotel has been enlightened by the story and transformed into the concept through interior design, services (for example, exhibition, spa, and local foods in the restaurants), and local products. Additionally, the team continued working with local craft makers and had three significant outcomes regarding preserving heritage textiles: interior decorations, a craft shop, namely 'Him Gong' and exhibitions.

Westerners who preserve Lanna cultural heritage

The foreign organisations such as The British Council or the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), both organisations have sufficient funds and focus on what they want to accomplish. Still, foreign organisations and foreigners working with heritage textiles worked with businesswomen's projects. Academics and experts have frequently been part of private projects, as well as royal projects. Also, foreign organisations hired academics to be part of projects as researchers. Only a few projects from the private sector needed academics to be part of their projects, as the purposes of the private sector are focused on business first while preserving cultural heritage is a consequence of their business sustainably.

During fieldwork in Chiang Mai, a capital province of the Lanna Kingdom, several participants referred to two westerners who lived and worked with local heritage textiles. The first person is a violinist and an artist who published her works relating to local materials, particularly on hill tribes' ethics. The second person had a background working in academia and published academic works; she was a lecturer and operated a studio to create local textile products and workshops. The first person used multimedia to illustrate her works, whereas the second person was a lecturer who became a textile maker and businesswoman. They have taken various directions regarding working with cultural heritage. Their passions regarding heritage textiles, specifically ethical materials, encouraged them to keep working on their paths.

Common problems from working on safeguarding cultural heritage textiles

Unanticipated preservers shared their related problems, which I concluded into three topics.

1. *Weaving heritage textiles is a job for older people and is made for the elderly*

Most people's perspective to traditional textiles. One well-known designer said to help and support cultural heritage textiles especially with ethnic patterns, he did not have enough power to inspire Thai people to wear ethnic textiles clothes. Hence, he often selected only plain Thai textiles that had been made following traditional processes, with no ethnic patterns for making dresses for his brand. Furthermore, the perception of a 'weaver' as a job for 'older people' could be a reason for young adults being unwilling to work on such textiles, as explained by a senior member who worked for SACICT. He also considered that older people had been trained as weavers for almost their entire life, while younger people brought new ideas from design techniques that they learned from western countries, creating new designs. Thus, they both have different expertise.

2. *Lack of continuation*

One businesswoman said Thailand has unstable politics, causing a lack of continuation of public projects in the long term. Two fashion designers also said they were designers who had been working with various public projects for about a decade. They had to work from the same starting point for almost every project, which they felt meant that there was no new development, causing them to lack motivation, and become bored, although they were willing to help and support local practitioners.

3. *Memorising, demonstrating but not recording*

The uses of memorising and demonstrating provides a robust method that is widely used for learning tacit knowledge, the 'Kru pak luk cham' (ครูพักลักจำ). The approach has been operating as part of Thai's culture. It is an idiom word meaning they have learnt by observing what teachers were doing without asking their permission and have never been taught by teachers, which the Lanna textiles expert it said could be one of the reasons for mistakes. During fieldwork, I heard this word in terms of describing how weavers have learnt about weaving and dyeing textiles.

Therefore, these three common problems cause unanticipated preservers to work on safeguarding heritage textiles. The images of heritage textiles are for older people, causing a decline in the number of weavers. It is their challenge to change the image and to promote a

career path working in heritage textiles. However, due to unstable politics in Thailand, it was not easy to continue working on each project. Therefore, businesswomen preferred to do something other than work with public projects and run their private projects instead. The final challenge was focused on local weavers, who are tacit knowledge skills owners. However, they usually need to improve in recording their methods of practising weaving textiles, causing difficulty in passing on or using their know-how to work on new developments.

*The second part was collected data in 2022.

Challenging of preserving cultural heritage activities during the pandemic

I collected data through casual conversations with participants via text messages, video calls, and observations in early 2022 as I was concerned about the participants' situations in the Post-Covid era. I also revisited the Wat Pa Bong and Paw Phafai communities in October 2022 for participant observations and in-depth interviews with Abbot M and Pa Paw. The findings of this paper are presented as three main topics.

1. Collapse of the community and acceptance of the changes in Wat Pa Bong



Image 1: Abbot M left the new building, where the textile shop on the right was closed.

When I revisited Wat Pa Bong in 2022, I was shocked as I had seen no one. The weaving house, the weaving space, and even the textile shop was closed. I met Abbot M in a new building, where we sat on the ground floor and had an interview.

Abbot M started telling a story; the pandemic of Covid-19 did affect this community, even the temple since all weavers in this community were older women, more than 70 years old. Their grandchildren and their children did not want them to gather in the temple due to the risk of catching Covid. Also, they considered their health, that they should no longer being doing hard work such as weaving textiles. As a result, only a few weavers were still working in the community, meaning there was less production capacity.

When I visited the temple in 2016 and 2019, the weaving textiles house was hectic. They had massive orders all year round because they weaved a piece of local textiles for making a

traditional tube skirt, called, in Thai, ‘Sin’. Sin is still a crucial object for women in the Lanna kingdom because Lanna people still wear Sin for special occasions. However, when I visited in 2022, I saw no sign of what I had seen before.

Abbot M said if the weaving community has to close, let it be. He can accept it. He said he opened this community with a passion for safeguarding local skills in textiles, but all the weavers are older women like his mother. Their children or grandchildren did not want to be a weaver, even though he had encouraged them and told them they could make an income from weaving traditional textiles. He said that, since 2019, he knew that the community would have to close one day, but until his last breath, he would try his best to keep the community alive. Also, because of the pandemic, some weavers passed away, some retired from working as a weaver, and there were no younger weavers. The weaving community was in danger of closing. Abbot M said he would try his best to run the community but if he failed he accepted that the community had to close.

Abbot M is a Buddhist monk who is neither a businessman nor a designer. Therefore, he said in a Buddhist way that if it happens, he is ready to accept it. However, I discussed one thing with him, and we were worried. Although I had a connection and could find orders for the community, this is not a sustainable business way because of the limited production capacity, and weavers can only weave traditional local patterns without a new design. This is the limited ability of older weavers in this community. On the day I visited, therefore, I only saw a loincloth with a plaid pattern in blue and red unlike in the past, when I saw more than ten local patterns with countless colours.

The revisiting of Wat Pa Bong made me reconsider the limitations of a preserver. An unanticipated preserver such as an Abbot monk had yet to experience working with public or private sectors because before he taught, his community had already satisfied orders all year round. When unexpected things happen, he cannot solve them by himself alone, and the result causes a community to come to an end quicker than he expected.



Image 2: Loincloth with a plaid pattern in red and blue

2. Lessons from Pa Paw: how to adapt to unexpected circumstances

Unlike the Wat Pa Bong community, when I revisited the Paw PhaFai community, I was surprised that the buildings in the community were renovated and many visitors came to visit the community.

Pa Paw told a story of what happened during Covid-19. For the first three months, from January to March 2020, all businesses and facilities within the Paw PhaFai community were closed; a textiles and clothes shop, a weaving space, a sewing room, a guest house, and a restaurant. She re-opened the restaurant as the first business amongst other businesses within the community because food could be managed more easily. She only needed two chefs and one waiter to run the restaurant. Also, the restaurant staff were much younger than the weavers, who were up to 70 years old. Therefore, running the weaving textiles section during the earlier pandemic was difficult.

It was difficult at the beginning. Everything happened very quickly. We had to close the community. As you already know, most textile weavers are elderly. Therefore, their families were concerned about their health and the risk of getting the Covid-19 virus. Some passed away, so we only had a few weavers left in our community. Your weaving teacher, Yai Wan, also retired from being a weaver. Her family worried about her health, and no one could drive her to the community since they all were busy with their rice farming. (Kampanuch [Pa Paw], October 2022)

Hence, I did not have a chance to see Yai Wan again and the other weavers who I met during the fieldwork in 2018. All weavers I came across during field research days I had never met before. However, Pa Paw said some were part of the community for so long, while some were new members after redeveloping the community. On the other hand, during the earlier pandemic, Pa Paw said it was time to pause everything, including herself. She said it was undeniable that Covid-19 gave her a clear direction, consider what she wanted to do, and the community was improving in a better way.

Just like others, at the beginning of the pandemic, we stopped what we did, including our work in the community. I did not do anything for over three months. It was the first time I had time to be with myself in a long while. I was always busy, as you have seen me, but Covid-19 gave me a break, so I used that time to reflect on what I wanted to do with this community, which is to build a 'learning centre' within the community. (Kampanuch [Pa Paw], October 2022)

Pa Paw first told me about her dream to build a learning centre when I met her in 2019. However, it was only a plan. She needed more time to start this project. She said most weavers are older women, continually retiring each year, or they have passed away. Without newer generations of weavers, soon the community would have no weavers. Therefore, she wanted to build this community as a 'learning centre', so people interested in weaving textiles could take short courses or be partners with any schools or universities. Also, she opened a full-service of homestay within the community. I stayed there before in 2019, but at the time, it was not full-service as they were new to running a homestay business.

As she mentioned the learning centre, I met her on the day she had opening. The activity area was set with bamboo tables and chairs. There was a stage for the fashion show and local musical show. Pa Paw said the provincial governor of Nan province would be the president of the today's opening ceremony. The significant changes in the Paw Phafai community from the last time I visited in 2018 was that the buildings had been renovated.

I started renovating the buildings in the community during the pandemic. A few customers were visiting our community, so I took that opportunity to renovate both three main buildings. If I want to build this place as a learning centre, my target group

is younger people. The community needs to look clean, bright, not dull and old like before, so my aim in renovating the buildings was to attract younger people to feel safe and keen to learn to weave. (Kampanuch [Pa Paw], October 2022)

I agreed with her. I first saw the community in 2022, and it was different from my last time; I told Pa Paw how I was impressed that the community had been changed in a good way. The old sewing room was transformed into a clothes shop; 80% of products were made within the community, while 20% were selected from other communities, explained Pa Paw. The weaving space was placed with tiles on the ground floor and had more lights than before. Lastly, a previous clothes shop was changed into a sewing room, with a bigger space for sewing machines and pattern-making space.

I asked her how she came up with all these ideas during this difficult time while other local weaving communities had been suffering from the pandemic. Pa Paw said:

As I said, I did not have time to stop working. Before the pandemic, I only went with the flow, which was good in that way. However, I was always wondering what I wanted for this community. How to make this community last longer and be a more sustainable business? I want to build the community as a learning centre for local textiles. Nevertheless, I need a fund to renovate the place. (Kampanuch [Pa Paw], October 2022)



Image 3 and 4:
Paw Phafai community in 2019 (left) and 2022 (right)

3. Starting / improving / developing

Starting new platforms

Pa Paw's daughter is about 34 years old. Therefore, she knows how important social media and selling on online platforms are. During the pandemic, she was the one who told her mother to continue selling products through social media such as Facebook and the LINE application. She also started posting and updating about what happened in the community on the Facebook page.

My daughter was the person who told me that we need to start promoting our work and selling our work on online platforms. That was where we started earning more income even than before the pandemic. Without the pandemic, I probably would not have started focusing on online platforms because I would think our community was

unprepared and did not need it. But because the pandemic happened, the online platforms were the solutions for our community to sell our textiles and clothes. (Kampanuch, October 2022)

Pa Paw said she could sell more products, and people know about the community more than before. New customers knew about the community from social media and were her online customers. People could travel when the Thai government relaxed the rules for controlling Covid-19. Paw PhaFai's online customers visited the community because they wanted to experience the processes of making textiles and trying new designs of clothes in the community.

Therefore, Pa Paw, who runs the Paw PhaFai community, knew how to use a chance crisis by reflecting herself on the very first aim of building the weaving community. She is always flexible and ready to change whenever it comes. Therefore, she switched the sales platform from onsite to online. Also, she adapted to the community by opening a full homestay service next to the weaving space. Lastly, she knows that her local textile products always need improvement in design and quality.

Developing/ improving design products

When looking at Paw Phafai community's product ranges, the products range from 10 pounds to 400 pounds. As mentioned, the community was renovated, including building a new shop. In the shop, their products are varied, from pieces of traditional textiles to ready-to-wear outfits.

Conventional textiles are essential items of every community. Usually, the difference between each community is the patterns, techniques, and colours. However, Paw Phafai is well-known for ready-to-wear Tai Lue textiles outfits because the community has a sewing and pattern-making room. In 2019, I saw their products; however, the pattern cutting should have been more modern. At the time, they only adapted from basic pattern blocks and used old-style outfits such as still using a thick shoulder pad, making the total look ageing.

Three years later, I revisited this community. This time I saw one corner of the new shop and those outfits shown in the images. They looked different. The cutting was simple but relevant to the current trend; although they have used their Tai Lue pattern, the total look of each outfit can be worn on casual days. When I asked the daughter of Pa Paw, she said that a Thai fashion designer designed this collection. He is well-known as a fashion designer who works with heritage textiles across the country using design approaches combined with local techniques.



Image 5 and 6: design products in 2019 (left) and 2022 (right)

Conclusions

Final reflections and limitations of the study

'We all can be preservers'

The study demonstrates how people from dissimilar work fields and environments have worked to safeguard cultural heritage textiles. Each participant was linked by local weavers, who had chances to work with involved participants from diverse professions. Since unanticipated preservers are people with expertise not mainly based on heritage skill, I added insights into how these participants have carried out activities towards safeguarding heritage textiles, with their careers varying from fashion designers and businesswomen to foreigners and foreign organisations.

The revisit of the communities was part of this research to explore how local practitioners continued working on weaving textiles during the pandemic. Due to limited time, I only visited two communities in Northern Thailand. I revisited the Wat Pa Bong community and Paw PhaFai community, as I was concerned about how they were after the pandemic. Wat Pa Bong was disintegrating. On the other hand, Paw Phafai was improved in a good way. It is not straightforward to compare these two communities since a Buddhist monk runs one community, and a weaver with more business experience runs the other. The revisiting of both communities also made me reconsider the limitations of unanticipated preservers, especially if they do not have experience of working with the public sectors nor private sectors but only as individuals.

Therefore, Pa Paw, who runs the Paw PhaFai community, knew how to use a chance crisis by reflecting on her very first aim of building the weaving community. She is always flexible and ready to change whenever it comes. So she switched the sales platform from onsite to online. Also, she adapted to the community by opening a full-service homestay next to the weaving space. Lastly, she knows that her local textile products always need improvement in design and quality.

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I was supported by Paw Phafai community and Wat Pa Bong community; without them, I would not be able to revisit the communities after I finished my PhD thesis at the very last minute. I was discovering their new paths, whether they were better or worse experiences. This made me learn from them and reconsider my PhD thesis, that there are many ways I could research more from now on.

*Some sections of the paper were modified from PhD thesis, published in July 2022.

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