

Preserving Modern Local Skills: A Case Study of Embroiderers in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Abstract

The paper contributes to developing local embroidery skills in Northern Thailand (Chiang Mai) on the interplay between traditional and modern practices. This paper is qualitative research with a practice-based method that combines in-depth interviews, participant observation, and autoethnography to examine how local cultural skills have adapted to contemporary demands through a case study of local embroiders. In the past, embroiderers in Chiang Mai specialised in traditional Lan Na design patterns for local garments (Lan Na is a specific place in Northern Thailand). However, as the demand for conventional clothing declined, numerous local garment factories were forced to close. Embroiderers, therefore, started shifting their focus from traditional patterns to modern designs, raising a critical question about the preservation of local skills *“If local practitioners (embroiders) no longer engage with traditional designs, is it still valuable to preserve these local cultural skills?”* In conclusion, the research presents ‘an explanation of how local embroidery practices have evolved’, highlighting the perspectives of key stakeholders such as academics, local designers, and those who are involved with local embroiders. The findings emphasise the complex dynamics of cultural preservation in the face of changing social needs and contribute to broader discussions on the value of preserving local skills in a modern context.

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

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Introduction

This study proposes to explore how traditional embroidery has changed in nature in the Lan Na Kingdom (Northern Thailand) and what that change has come to mean for cultural preservation today. The study is grounded in traditional craft skills in Chiang Mai province in northern Thailand, specifically in the San Kamphaeng district, well-known for local artisan production and manufacturing, from traditional umbrellas and pottery to signature textiles in silk and cotton.

Traditional Embroidery and Lan Na Design

The Lan Na embroidery designs, created by local embroiderers, reflected the kingdom's identity and heritage. They were generally used on traditional garments and deeply woven into the fabric of local life and daily routines. Historically, San Kamphaeng district was a major hub for artisans and local factories, therefore, the district is a key location setting for this study.

During the 1980s and 1990s, San Kamphaeng was bustling with embroidery workshops and both large and small garment factories, producing pieces rooted in the characteristic Lan Na design tradition, especially for tourists and visitors. This industry shaped the lives of many artisans, passing down skills through generations.

However, as seen from today's situation (in 2024), the demand for local traditional clothes has considerably declined. With fewer people purchasing these items, local garment factories have had to close, deeply impacting embroiderers who specialised in these traditional designs, forcing embroiderers to adapt their skills to survive.

Shifts in Demand and Skills Adaptation

This decline in demand for traditional clothing has forced embroiderers to rethink their craft. Local embroiderers in San Kamphaeng have shifted from creating traditional designs to working with more modern, and contemporary patterns. This raises an important question for cultural preservation: *if the local practitioners are no longer creating traditional designs, do their skills still represent something worth preserving?*

Literature Review

Lan Na Textiles

Over seven centuries, whether under self-governance or external rule by Siam or Burma, the Lan Na people have maintained much of their distinct cultural identity (Prangwatthanakun & Naenna, 1990). This identity is evident in their religion, architecture, and the unique practices that define Lan Na culture (Conway, 2002). Lan Na heritage textiles have represented an important ingredient of this culture (Prangwatthanakun & Naenna, 1990) and are symbolically associated with the blending of social and religious traditions within it (Conway, 2002).

In addition, dress and textiles played a significant role in tributes and gift exchanges between the Lan Na courts and neighbouring courts, including those in the Shan States, Luang

Prabang, Sibsong Pan Na, China, Burma, and Siam. These exchanges served as symbols of loyalty and mutual acknowledgment (Conway, 2002).

More recently, according to Singhanan (2015), Lan Na textiles remained a staple in Northern Thailand, with traditional tube skirts (Sin or Sarong) still worn by Lan Na women for temple visits and special occasions. Textile shops and galleries, offering both cotton and silk, are concentrated in Chiang Mai's Mueang district, including areas like Waroros Market, Tha Pae Road, Nimmanhaemin Road, Charoenrat Road, Watgate, and Robinson department store. Additionally, districts like Mae Chaem, San Kamphaeng, and Chom Thong are home to numerous textile shops and factories, where cotton and silk fabrics are sold by the yard.

Sarong of San Kamphaeng District

According to Chainan (2023), who researched the Sarong (โสร่ง, traditional tube skirt) in San Kamphaeng district which has a signature weaving pattern known as "San Kamphaeng", named after the district, which has been used for over 100 years.

Furthermore, when HM Queen Sirikit visited San Kamphaeng district, she was intrigued by silk gowns and ordered that Miss Thailand, who was going to participate in the Miss Universe pageant that year, wear silk gowns from San Kamphaeng in a ready-to-wear sarong for the contest. As a result, silk gowns became famous worldwide at that time, and it was considered a very prosperous era for silk gowns from San Kamphaeng. From Chainan's research (2023), it was also found that few still make sarongs, which have been incorporated. A group was created to operate various activities, including the Chalermrach Cultural Centre and the San Kamphaeng Silk Museum. The group works to build strong unity and develop itself, such as taking training courses offered by government agencies, which are available to university students, school students, or individuals wishing to study or visit the wisdom of the San Kamphaeng district. Nevertheless, research on the San Kamphaeng Sarong presented a lack of design development and a limited ability to produce various items made from local fabric, resulting in a decline in demand for local weaving textiles.

Traditional Embroidery

Numerous studies conducted on traditional Thai weaving textiles but for embroidery, there are still limited studies. However, there are some studies dealing with minor ethnic groups, for example, the Hmong or Akha hill tribes. In Thai "Pha Pak (ผ้าปัก)" is the term for embroidered fabric, for example, the Hmong or Akha hill tribes. In Thai "Pha Pak (ผ้าปัก)" is the term for embroidered fabric. When searching for data about Pha Pak, usually information comes from the government sector. For instance, the Sustainable Arts and Crafts Institute of Thailand (SACIT) has conducted research and documented the Hmong tribe's embroidery, as well as the development of new designs, such as "Pha Pak Kor Luang" (ผ้าปักกอหลวง), which originates from local hill tribes.

Moreover, Thai embroidery has been part of royal artisan techniques, as seen in embroidery art templates of nature and landscapes for fabric embroidery, by the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (SUPPORT) of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand (2007).

The concept of comparison between handicraft and digital craft replacement had been seen from Devi and colleagues' (2019) research which is based in India, comparing digital embroidery with traditional hand embroidery. They highlighted the complexity of the embroidery process, from interpreting designs to meeting the production demands of embroidery machines. Despite this complexity, the results that can be achieved with digital embroidery are often well worth it, offering something unique that cannot be achieved by other means. Hand embroidery, valued for its complexity and the hours of effort involved, commonly tends to be more expensive because so much time is taken.

The Role of Fashion Designers

From the research of Nirunpornputta (2022), my own PhD research, when focusing on how fashion designers have worked on preserving heritage textiles, they shared the same perspective on how to conserve traditional textiles. Fashion designers used fashion design approaches whereby the textiles are seen as one kind of fabric, a 'raw material' for creating modern clothes, or contemporary clothes following global trends.

Additionally, they considered that 'preservation' was counter to sustainable developments. They considered the design before preservation when working on traditional textiles. Similarly, the fashion designers said in Nirunpornputta (2022)'s research that they considered those textiles as a material, a type of textile before concentrating on the value or the story behind those textiles. Moreover, they made a difference between meanings of 'heritage textiles' and 'traditional textiles': the first are those textiles which they are kept and appear untouchable while the latter is textiles that they can use in their fashion design as they believed traditional textiles made from heritage skill approaches are suitable for contemporary design. Lastly, the pricing of both heritage textiles and traditional textiles are matter of interest. Therefore, fashion designers must consider their business before preserving heritage textiles in their ways, though they propose to support local communities.

Research Methods

Since Crouch and Pearce (2012) suggested that observation is a fundamental method in social research and a crucial tool for ethnographers, the primary method used in this fieldwork was participant observation. This involved living in Northern Thailand, engaging with local practitioners and communities, and actively participating in ongoing social activities. Using a practice-based research method allowed me to actively participate in the environment I was studying. I used autoethnography to reflect on my own experiences within this cultural setting. Additionally, autoethnography allows for the identification of the relationship between insiders and outsiders (Ellis & Adams, 2014).

I also conducted in-depth interviews with embroiderers, academics, and local designers, combined with participant observations of the embroidery work itself. In-depth interviews can vary in their level of structure, and informal discussion during the interview allows the researcher to identify and explore new questions and topics (Sugarman & Sulmasy, 2001).

The interviews for this research were face-to-face. Shuy (2002) recommended that face-to-face interviewing of practitioners is advisable as it tends to provide a more valid outcome. Additionally, Shuy (2002) suggested that such conversations should incorporate open-ended questions, as these are less likely to influence the answers and are particularly suitable for exploring complex issues.

This combination of approaches enabled this study to adopt a holistic approach to local embroidery to understand both the emotional and technical dimensions of embroiderers' experiences in adapting their craft.

Collecting Data

The Field Research in Chiang Mai

The data collection was conducted in May 2004. There were three main interviewees during data collection: Singhanan, a Lan Na historian and expert; Fongkam, the head and founder of Baan Phu Ka, a local embroidery community in San Kamphaeng district, Chiang Mai; and lastly, Assistant Professor Thianchai Aksrondit, an academic lecturer, a local designer at Chiang Mai University who focuses on local cultural heritage preservation.

For observations and interviews, I visited a village in San Kamphaeng district, Chiang Mai, as Singhanan said there is one village in this district that is well-known for local embroidery. Singhanan took me to the village and introduced me to Fongkam. We visited Fongkam's house, where she was embroidering clothes she had ordered from a local brand (Images 1, 2). The design patterns for the embroidery were created by the designer and owner of the brand. They are modern designs, but some elements are simple local patterns that have been widely used as part of local textiles in Lan Na. Nevertheless, the designer rearranged the elements and brought them together into one garment (Image 3).



Image 1: Fongkam Was Working on Aksrondit's Project and Image 2: Fongkam Community's Work for One Local Brand by Dr Pathitta Nirunpornputta (2024)



Image 3: Embroidery Details Made by Fongkam's Community and Designed by One Local Brand by Dr Pathitta Nirunpornputta (2024)

Singhanan and I also saw Aksrondit's works, as he has been involved in local embroidery preservation and began working on and developing projects with Fongkam's community. I later interviewed Aksrondit to collect data about his lectures and design projects with his students, focusing on local embroidery. He also explained how he started providing assignments for his students and how he encourages local embroiderers to improve their skills, trying to use old techniques and local patterns for different purposes. He started the project as textile art pieces related to Buddhism and Lan Na culture, with his students designing the art pieces alongside Aksrondit (Images 4, 5).



Image 4 and 5: Aksrondit and His Students' Design Works Embroidered by Fongkam's Community by Dr Pathitta Nirunpornputta (2024)

Aksrondit also mentioned the exhibition (Images 6, 7) he and his students worked on together to present the embroidery artworks created in collaboration with the Baan Phu Ka local embroidery community. He aimed to encourage local artisans to take an interest in local embroidery, just as they have in weaving. Traditional weaving has been a focus for both local communities and academics for a long time. However, local embroidery has received limited

attention, which he believes should be preserved. He sees it as another opportunity for local artisans to acquire an additional skill, alongside weaving. Singhanan agreed with Aksrondit and added that, having met various groups of people across the Lan Na Kingdom who work with Lan Na textiles—whether textile experts, academics, textile artists, or weavers—she rarely saw anyone mentioned local embroidery. However, she had seen some textiles, including embroidery, in temples, which is similar to what Aksrondit mentioned about seeing embroidered textiles in temples.

On the other hand, Fongkam said her community survives on orders from local brands that use local embroidery with modern designs. She explained that the community has not worked with local embroidery patterns for a long time, except for the work with Aksrondit and his students. She believes modern design is key to helping her community stay employed. However, if there are orders requiring local patterns, the community needs them to be shown, as the younger generations have not seen them before. She recalled the local patterns she used to make, such as the San Kamphaeng pattern, which featured simple dots like an asterisk symbol (*) and lines that decorated collars and shirt plackets. These designs were originally made for local people and later for tourists and visitors.



Image 6 and 7: Aksrondit and His Students' Exhibition
by Aksrondit (2024)

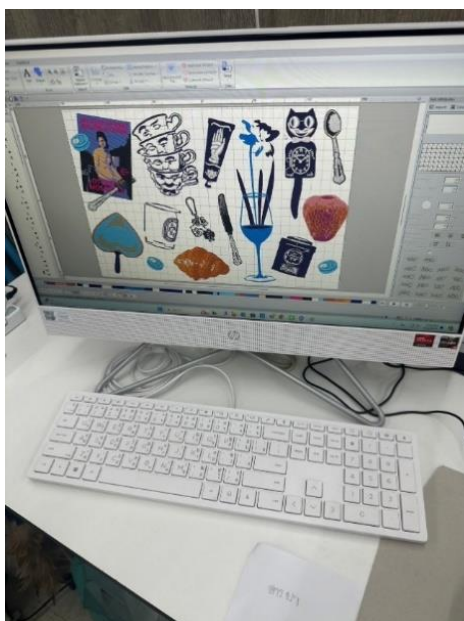
Singhanan also mentioned that people have seen embroidery in local markets and consider this skill is made for commercial garments, as many hill tribes across the Lan Na Kingdom create embroidery for their textiles and commercial purposes. I visited local markets with Singhanan and also found embroidered textiles. However, Singhanan explained that most of them are made by hill tribe people, called Pha Naka (ฝ่านากา) who live along the borders between Thailand and Myanmar (Image 8).



Image 8: Pha Naka (ผ้านากา) I Found From a Local Market in Chiang Mai
by Dr Pathitta Nirunpornputta (2024)

Design Practice – Reflecting While Gaining Experience on Embroidery

I gained experience working with digital embroiderers based in Bangkok and a local hand embroiderer based in San Kamphaeng district, Chiang Mai. The data mainly focused on gaining experience with local embroiderers in San Kamphaeng district. However, I used the modern design I had worked on with the digital embroiderer earlier, which allowed me to compare experiences working on embroidery using different approaches.



Images 9 and 10: Working on Digital Embroidery
by Dr Pathitta Nirunpornputta (2024)

As seen in Images 9 and 10, digital embroidery can produce precise designs on a digital screen. I used Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator to create each element and learned how to use

a machine and programme specifically for Brother's embroidery machine with digital embroidery.

I designed a tablecloth based on my concept of whimsical objects that I like, laying them out on the table and transforming objects from my bedroom into graphics for embroidery using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. The design was then transformed into pre-embroidery artworks using the PE-DESIGN 11 programme, which is specialised for digital embroidery machines.

The workshop used a BROTHER PR680W machine, which was limited to six colours per run. Markings for plates in each block of the pattern were assisted by embroiderers, while I marked each plate four times to achieve the desired size of approximately 100 x 100 centimetres. Each block was switched to a different thread colour, rather than each motif in the programme.

To correct minor errors related to slipping marks on each plate that caused inexact alignment, I added extra details to fill the gaps and complete the work. The tablecloth was sewn with another cloth for the other side and decorated with small lining for additional decoration.

For the experiment with local hand embroidery, I spent more time creating this piece compared to the digital embroidery one. The digital embroidery took time only when designing on Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, while the embroidery machine took around one hour to finish one block of the frame. However, for hand embroidery, I had to spend more time drawing all the elements using a pencil and preparing all the yarns for Fongkam. Although I used the same design, I transferred patterns onto the fabric by using pencil drawings and a light board to allow me to see the patterns through the front of the fabric.

According to Fongkam, she preferred me to draw all the patterns on the fabric and prepare the yarns for embroidery. The colours I selected were based on my design, but I allowed her to use yarns selected according to her design perspective. Fongkam used her sense of colour to create the artwork on the fabric I gave her. From my view, as Aksrondit said, when he first worked with local embroiderers, he also let them use their aesthetics and sense of colour to work on his design. They used genuine, vibrant colours, just as they would normally use for their local textiles. Later, he had to select colours according to trends to guide them, as he wanted to create a more modern design. As a result, as seen in Image 13, the final work created by Fongkam is vibrant and colourful.



Image 11,12,13: Working on Local Hand-Embroidery Techniques
by Dr Pathitta Nirunpornputta (2024)

Findings

Traditional vs. Modern Perspectives

Through these conversations and observations, I found a range of perspectives on preservation. Academics, local designer, a local practitioner are concerned that moving away from traditional designs means losing touch with Chiang Mai's heritage. They worry that if modern designs take precedence, future generations may no longer recognise the distinct styles of Lan Na embroidery. Nevertheless, the head of the local embroidery community also argued that modern adaptations are necessary to keep embroidery alive and relevant. By evolving with current tastes and markets, these skills can remain economically viable, allowing artisans to make a living from their craft.

Key Voices From the Community

One example comes from an embroiderer (the head of the embroidery community) I interviewed, who expressed a sense of loss about moving away from traditional patterns. She described these designs as her 'cultural roots,' something deeply personal that is now fading.

There are only a few projects relating to traditional embroidery patterns, with far fewer orders compared to modern embroidery designs created for commercial purposes. She also added that modern patterns allowed her and members of the community to be part of making garments that appeal to younger generations, drawing them into the art of embroidery in a way that traditional designs might not. These contrasting views highlight a dynamic tension between honouring heritage and adapting to survive – a balance that embroiderers are constantly negotiating.

Experiment – Comparing Handicraft and Digital Embroidery

To deepen my understanding of the value of local hand skills, I conducted a comparative experiment using the same design with both handicraft and digital embroidery techniques. The goal was to assess not just the visual outcome but also the intangible qualities each method contributes, such as the time, effort, and personal touch involved in traditional hand embroidery. This experiment revealed distinct contrasts. Handicraft embroidery, though time-

intensive, presented a sense of texture, warmth, and uniqueness that digital embroidery could not replicate. Each stitch by hand carried a sense of personal investment from the artisan, adding a unique character that reflected their skill and connection to the craft.

In contrast, digital embroidery, while precise and efficient, lacked this level of personal expression. The findings underscore the meaning and value that local hand skills bring—not just as a visual outcome but as an embodiment of cultural heritage and individual artistry.

Implications for Preservation

This study brings us to a complex understanding of preservation. In today's globalised, rapidly changing world, preserving skills does not necessarily mean keeping things exactly as they were. Instead, it may mean allowing skills to evolve so they can be sustained. What does this mean for local embroiderers? To 'preserve' may mean recognising both the value in traditional forms and modern adaptations that sustain them. This approach respects the continuity of the craft and the necessity of change.

Conclusion

The main question of the study, *"If local practitioners (embroiderers) no longer engage with traditional designs, is it still valuable to preserve these local cultural skills?"*, the case of Chiang Mai's embroidery, from the head of the embroiderer village to academics and experts, this study suggests that local skills should be viewed as living, evolving elements of culture. Embroiderers will continue working as local embroiderers as long as their skills allow them to earn greater profits. Safeguarding, in this sense, is not about freezing a skill in time but about keeping it viable and meaningful. By embracing both traditional and modern elements, we can help these skills endure in a way that resonates with today's world.

Acknowledgments

This study is a case study that mainly focuses on local embroidery in San Kamphaeng district and reflects my experiences from working on design, as well as both digital and hand embroidery. The study aims to understand the value of hand embroidery and how to preserve these local techniques, should they be considered worth preservative. Consequently, future researchers could expand further research on the value of preserving local traditional crafts, as this study is limited to one specific location.

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