

The Promotion and Development of Civic Historians to Enhance Locality in Thailand

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Abstract

This research aims to contribute to and expand the historian's knowledge network formation, focusing on the local people who strongly feel connected and highly cherish their local historical stories. Wherewith local development needs to begin with people who grew up to reach sustainable development in each local community. Besides, the local knowledge created in each community critically makes further understanding of the background and potential each community could bring to policymaking and development prediction. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to civic historians' value, meaning, and dignity in each local community, raising their equal status with mainstream historians and creating and developing local historical storytellers. This interdisciplinary research does mix between historical and other social sciences research methods. It conducts qualitative research, documentary research, and in-depth interview to analyze the critical information and use it for the training program to be civic historians. The result of this research finds that the keys to developing storytelling are two main points: the development of historical research and storytelling skills, leading to the design of the training program focusing on the main points and changing the framework of history subjects to further develop history. The training program's contents emphasize three main topics: the change of mindset in history, learning new historical methods, and updated storytelling. The contents lead to making valuable history have more value creation.

Keywords: History, Locality, Thailand

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Introduction

History is a science that examines the past, conducted by individuals in the present who seek to understand and establish the origins of past events and narratives. In Thailand, many individuals are interested in studying history, often referred to as "Amateur Historians." This term serves to distinguish them from professional historians. The presence of amateur historians in Thailand is evident through the establishment of clubs dedicated to researching local historical information and sharing it with the public through various social media platforms.

The group of amateur historians is an intriguing subject of study due to their enthusiasm for exploring family stories, communities, and localities, driven by their passion and love for knowledge. However, the information gathered by these individuals often needs more analysis and criticism in historical research methodologies, resulting in a lack of credibility. The focus on studying community-specific or local stories aligns with the approach of local history; by delving into the thought processes, wisdom, and cultures of diverse localities, understanding these stories can offer insights into people's consciousness, way of life, and the values inherent in their cultures. This approach also corresponds to a relatively new historical field known as microhistory, which highlights the stories of ordinary individuals who are often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives but hold significance within their local communities.

Thus, developing this group of historians, and equipping them with proper research methodologies and critical thinking skills, will facilitate the dissemination of knowledge in local development. Furthermore, an essential skill for amateur historians is storytelling, as they are responsible for conveying historical narratives to individuals seeking information. Cultivating and enhancing the skills of amateur historians will facilitate the utilization of their knowledge by related agencies involved in community development and the wider public.

Background

In Thailand, the interest and knowledge of history and culture in specific regions are rare among the population. Traditionally, amateur historians interested in their community or locality undertake the study of local history. This division between professional and amateur historians became more apparent in the late 19th century; a clear distinction existed between the two groups. Local history studies intersect with other fields, such as ethnographic studies, urban history, environmental history, and public history. It complements the study of national history, although professional historians tend to focus on the history of the nation-state rather than the movements within individual communities.

Based on this information, the concept of civic historians emerged. It is rooted in two main ideas: the participation of the public sector in opening up study and learning opportunities related to their own identity and historical concepts, and the exploration of history from below, which focuses on the experiences and perspectives of ordinary people. This approach challenges traditional political history narratives that emphasize war and the dominance of the nation-state, as well as the "great men theory" that focuses on the actions of influential figures. Instead, it highlights the role of ordinary individuals who play significant roles in the history of their localities. This method of studying history is suitable for those interested in the subject outside of academic circles.

Typically, various groups often create local history narratives for different purposes. Opening up spaces for collaborative studies of local history between professional historians and amateur historians, and elevating the professional standards of amateur historians to become civic historians, are crucial steps in promoting and expanding the local knowledge network. However, in Thailand, there needs to be more recognition, discussion, or value attributed to amateur historians, which contrasts with the circulation of historical knowledge through print and online media established by professional historians. It is essential to bridge this gap and elevate the standards of amateur historians to promote and expand knowledge networks at all levels.

The research aims to contribute to forming a knowledge network among historians, focusing on local people who strongly connect to and hold high regard for their local historical stories. It recognizes that local development should ideally start with the people raised and grown in a particular place, leading to sustainable development within each local community. Moreover, the local knowledge created in each community critically contributes to understanding the background and potential that the community can bring to policymaking and development planning. Therefore, this research aims to highlight the value, meaning, and importance of civic historians in local communities, elevating their status to that of mainstream historians and fostering the creation and development of local historical storytellers.

Methods

This research employs qualitative research methods, primarily focusing on documentary research. The research process involves the following steps:

1. **Gathering information from amateur historians:** This involves collaborating and government agencies, such as the Provincial Cultural Office, to identify groups initially cooperating with these agencies, such as local communities driven by historical interests. Online data from platforms like Facebook or websites presenting local history information from different provinces are collected and categorized to analyze the groups of amateur historians in each locality. This analysis aims to identify limitations, obstacles, and differences among amateur historians to find ways to elevate their standards to match those of professional historians.
2. **Involving scholars studying local history:** This includes historians, social scientists, and social studies teachers, as well as anthropologists. They provide insights into the problems, obstacles, and limitations based on their experiences working with amateur historians. The data from these interactions is extracted and developed into guidelines for solving the identified issues. The research team fosters two-way communication between amateur historians and academics, combining their information to review, analyze, synthesize, and find solutions collaboratively. This process aims to improve the standards and address challenges together, ultimately designing a training course for public historians.
3. **Involving researchers in the Learning City Project:** This includes local government agencies, civil servants, and the general public, with at least 40 individuals attending training sessions to develop civic historians. To successfully promote knowledge of local history, arts, and culture, involving individuals who work locally is essential. Furthermore, being a learning city involves developing specific expertise in each area. Therefore, the research team selects a group of researchers from the Learning City project

who may need an understanding of their region's history and culture or help utilize existing knowledge effectively. This group serves as an experimental target audience (pilot test) during the creation of civic historians. The aim is to provide them with expertise from the training they can apply to their research projects, which are part of the Learning City Development Project.

Results

Based on the analysis and synthesis of the data, the research team has identified several key concepts that are important in the development of civic's historians. These concepts are summarized as follows:

1. **Love for Local History:** The study of local history or community should begin with a genuine love and interest in history. Individuals who possess this love and passion should be allowed to participate in representing the network of people in each area. They can serve as individuals who truly understand and appreciate the uniqueness of their locality.
2. **Subject-Centered Education:** Education should start by focusing on the subject matter of history. Even seemingly small historical details can provide a broader perspective and deepen the understanding of history. Exploring various aspects and narratives can fill the missing pieces of the historical puzzle.
3. **Inclusivity and Multiple Perspectives:** The study of history has no definitive answer. Adopting an inclusive approach and considering multiple perspectives is vital for a comprehensive understanding. For example, when reading about Chiang Mai legends, individuals may have different interpretations and opinions.
4. **Contextual Understanding:** Historical developments should view within political, social, and local economic contexts. This understanding should go beyond the central state authority's influence and recognize each locality's unique dynamics and characteristics.
5. **21st-Century Skills:** In line with the skills required for global citizens in the 21st century, creative thinking and effective communication are essential. Therefore, the research project aims to transform the appreciation and recognition of local history into a value that can further develop. This shift in perspective seeks to create a positive social impact and contribute to sustainable development.

By embracing these concepts, the development of civic historians can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of local history, empower individuals to contribute to their communities and promote a more holistic approach to historical research and interpretation. Next step, the research findings have led to designing a training program to promote the creation of Civic historians. The program focuses on two main areas: the development of historical research skills and storytelling abilities. Created the training programs with three objectives in mind:

1. **Changing Mindset:** This objective addresses the perception that studying history is uninteresting. Participants are encouraged to adopt a new perspective through "History is Wider than you think" and "History and National Development." The goal is to inspire participants to become more interested in studying their local history and understand the distinctive identity of their province.

2. **Learning Historical Research Methods:** This objective focuses on teaching participants practical skills in historical research methods. To make the training more accessible and engaging, the topic "History is All Around Us" allows participants to choose their interests and expertise as a starting point. The training covers topics such as "Local History I Know" to assess participants' existing knowledge and exchange insights and "Applied History and Local Development for Income Generation" to demonstrate the practical application of history in local development.
3. **Storytelling:** Storytelling is a crucial skill for civic historians, as storytelling often conveys historical information. The training program introduces participants to storytelling techniques that go beyond traditional formats. Topics such as "Media and Local History Presentation" highlight the value of local history conveyed through various media platforms, and "Storytelling through a Creative Innovation" explores storytelling from both the sender's and receiver's perspectives.

The training program involved 45 participants from 11 provinces. The goal was to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to become influential civic historians capable of researching, presenting, and sharing local histories compellingly and engagingly.

Conclusion

The research project aims to uncover and disseminate the lesser-known local histories in Thai society, which often remain unpublished or little-known. By engaging individuals who know about the history of their local communities or cities, the project contributes to sustainable urban development by recognizing these areas' historical growth and dynamics.

In-depth knowledge of local history can apply to urban planning and preserving historical and cultural sites. Many cities in Europe and the United States utilize the expertise of local historians to understand the context of various societal phenomena, such as natural disasters, social conflicts, and population migration. The knowledge gained can be shared with city developers and urban planners, facilitating the construction of infrastructure systems that consider environmental conservation and establishing heritage preservation areas.

The development of civic's historians creates a network that fosters the exchange of knowledge among individuals within a locality, the general public, and local government entities. This knowledge utilizes to formulate city development plans and ultimately contribute to sustainable urban development in Thailand.

In conclusion, the project also focuses on nurturing and developing civic history storytellers. The findings emphasized the importance of developing historical research methodologies and storytelling skills for civic historians. As a result, the training program addresses both aspects while promoting a conceptual shift in approaching history. The training program's content focused on three main subjects:

- Changing mindset toward history.
- Learning historical approaches.
- Enhancing extended techniques to create valuable and appreciated narratives.

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