

Rediscovering the Past from the Future of the Community: The Creation of a Youth  
Guide Club and the Revival of Local History in Baan Bor Luang, Bor Kluea, Nan  
Province

Chayaporn Sittisun<sup>1</sup>, Thatchakorn Thaseekaew<sup>1</sup>, Worrasit Tantinipankul<sup>2</sup>

1 Royal Project Foundation and King's Recommended Project Supporting Center, King  
Mongkut University of Technology Thonburi

2 School of Architecture and Design, King Mongkut University of Technology Thonburi

Abstract

Baan Bor Luang is an old community with a history of producing rock salt for over 700 years. Located in the northern frontier province of Nan with two mountain ranges of Luang Phra Bang and Phee Pan Nam, Bor Luang Village was difficult to access by land-based transportation in the past; therefore, it has been neglected by the government and was a stronghold of communist insurgents in the mid-70s. However, with the expansion of transportation networks into the area with a rich history of salt production and mountainous rainforests, Baan Bor Luang has experienced a growth in the number of visitors and tourism-related businesses that could eradicate historic remnants of this village. This paper presents the collaborative work of the university researchers (KMUTT) in the region aiming to stimulate local community members to realize their area's historical significance by organizing a local history youth group. This research began with the establishment of a network of local scholars, followed by the identification of children and young students with talent and interest in local history. These youth were trained as history researchers in the village and guided in their media production of exhibits about the village story for visitors. As a result of this project, today there is an enthusiastic group of youth who can present the history of the village and who have produced a collection of local narratives. The group also generated significant revenue from tour guide services and raised awareness of Baan Bor Luang's cultural heritage within the community. The young guides of Baan Bor Luang represent the hope for cultural heritage preservation movements in the future. However, there is the question of how the community can cope with the rising number of tourism businesses and the conflicts among members in the community as a consequence of booming tourism business.

## Introduction

Nan today is one of the northern provinces of Thailand. In the past, Nan was an independent state comprised of local people who had settled along the Nan River valley. Nan civilization was established around the same time as the Sukhothai Kingdom (1238) and possesses unique Buddhist architecture reflecting its cultural and political connection with Sukhothai, Lanna, Lan Xang and Pagan civilization. Moreover, with a cool climate year-round, Nan possesses natural resources including unique forests, mountains and a river valley landscape. From Department of Tourism data, in 2515 Nan hosted around 732,446 tourists and generated revenue of 1,956,020,000 Thai Baht.<sup>1</sup> Bor Kluea District is one of the popular districts in the province for tourists. The name Bor Kluea refers to the location of historic salt pits that are concentrated in the area of Baan Bor Luang village.

Bor Kluea District is located in the northeastern part of Nan Province bordering the People Democratic Republic of Laos in the east. The district is comprised of 4 sub-districts with 39 villages. Baan Bor Luang is the village in Nan possessing the salt pits and their history of sending salt to the ruler of Nan as annual tribute. The salt production here is associated with the history of Nan and its relationship with the Lanna Kingdom centered at Chiang Mai, since one of the motivations of King Tilokarat of Chiang Mai's attack on Nan was to acquire this area as part of his Lanna Kingdom. As mentioned previously, Baan Bor Luang village has long been historically important for Nan Province. However, the younger generations do not know their own local history, and their parents' generation can remember very little about the history of the salt pit.

Therefore, the research team from KMUTT initiated the project to study the local history of Baan Bor Luang led by a youth group from Baan Bor Luang School. The main objective of the project was to educate the young generation of Baan Bor Luang to learn the local history of their village which possesses cultural heritage of historic salt pits and the livelihood patterns of villages in the past. Moreover, the students who participated in the project became tour guides who can inform tourists about Baan Bor Luang's local history. The project also cultivated a sense of local pride and made the younger generation realize the value of their unique history and local culture. As a result, they were inspired to preserve, and revive their community's cultural heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> Internal Tourism by Region in 2015, Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Sports

### Research Methodology

KMUTT framed key principles of studying and writing history in modern time (Collingwood, 1994) as followed. First, historians must be conscious to validate any accuracy of evidence. Second, study process in history that is scientific method is questioning information. Third, writing history must be derived from evaluation of all ideas, information and conclusion. Forth, studying process in history requires analysis and investigation of information to obtain solution. The process in studying history can provide children guideline to study in other fields in the future. For methodology in researching and presenting history of Baan Bor Luang local minority community, the team operated by conducting oral history, interviews of ordinary people, workshop, mapping method, and public exhibition. The revived local history provided the community sense of belonging (Hayden, 1997).

The researchers started the project by establishing the “Youth tour guide of Baan Bor Luang” by brainstorming with the group of local teachers and students who previously had done volunteer activities with the research team. The group of 31 students from local schools in the vicinity of Baan Bor Luang enrolled in the project. The implementation of this research project can be separated into two phases. The first phase was about collecting local information and historical evidence. Students and children of Baan Bor Luang conducted a survey for general information of the area, the history of the village, and culture and traditions of processing salt from saline water in a salt pit. The second phase was about training students and children to operate as tour guides so that they could use their data and knowledge in communicating the local history of Baan Bor Luang village more effectively. During the training program, students learned the importance of local tourist destinations in conjunction with local art, culture and traditions. Moreover, students learned the importance of preservation of both natural and cultural tourism resources. The training program also provided them with the principles of the tour guide profession, such as how to host visitors and improve personality and develop communication and preparation of destinations for visitors. The Baan Bor Luang Youth Tour Guide Group was founded in February of 2015. Among 31 members, they are 4 boys and 27 girls representing roughly half of the children in the village. Twenty one of them are primary school children from Baan Bor Luang School and Baan Bor Yuak School. The group worked on both phases at the same study period.

The students started the first phase of learning the history of Baan Bor Luang by brainstorming, thinking and questioning how to acquire more information about the

story of places, events, rituals and traditions in their community. From the brainstorming session, they put together list of information including parts that they already knew and parts they needed to research further. Furthermore, they planned to conduct the research by interviewing elderly members in the villages, inviting Nan's local scholars to lecture, and researching secondary sources from the Internet and the library. The data they collected was diverse and needed references. KMUTT researchers assisted the children in drawing conclusions and creating connections between information from interviews and data from academic papers as well as conducting fieldwork. Some members of the group discovered old artifacts, textiles, written materials, and historical images from interviews with the elderly. After consulting with the researchers, students concluded again with their own writing and developed storyboards. They reviewed their findings with researchers and trainers again before finalizing the story. From the collection of data the students had surveyed and analyzed with KMUTT researchers, the book "History of Baan Bor Luang" was composed for the Baan Bor Luang tour guides to use as their handbook and some were distributed to visitors. The book is comprised of 5 major stories:

- 1) The history of the village settlement;
- 2) The process of making rock salt from saline water in the pit;
- 3) Rituals and beliefs about making salt;
- 4) History of salt trade in the north;
- and 5) History of local Buddhist temples in Baan Bor Luang Community.

The second phase was about developing skills in storytelling. The main activities were a training program for coaching children and youth to be tour guides and field trips to cultural sites and historic places in the city of Nan. For the tour guide training program, children and youth were trained for 60 hours by instructors from the community college of Nan. The field trip to visit other cultural sites and historic places in Nan province facilitated them to exchange knowledge and experiences with other youth guide groups. They learned new ideas and understood the role of story tellers in the community. The children and youths of Baan Bor Luang today are not only tour guides telling the history of the village to visitors but are also representatives of the community, organizing exhibitions, contributing to TV programs, magazines and other medias, and selling the village history books. These activities encouraged them and boost their confidence to continue more volunteer work with their community.

Historical information from field research

Historic places and artifacts

Regarding research on important historic places in community, the team of children and youths conducted field surveys and interviewed the elderly in the village.

The research team found that there was a total of ten salt pits. Seven salt pits are still in use while the other three were abandoned. Only two of them are popular tourist destinations. The previous research and written information was not clear about the number of salt pits. Some indicated that there were only six salt pits with unclear locations. For instance, research indicated that there was a salt pit called Bor Khae in Baan Nam Khae village, but from the survey, Bor Khae is in the Baan Bor Yuak village while the Bor Yuak salt pit was abandoned. The salt pit at Baan Bor Yuak was actually called Bo Tong since there was a pipeline made of metal. The research team also found evidence of 16 historic Buddhist temples<sup>2</sup> in the village of Baan Bor Luang and its vicinity, while today there is only one left which is Baan Bor Luang temple. The evidence of temples also signified the long history of political involvement with the salt trade and tribute as the new rulers of northern principalities built temples to mark their possession of new territory.

#### Origin of Baan Bor Luang Village

The stories about the origins of the salt pit (bor kleua in Thai) and ancestors of Baan Bor Luang Community are very diverse. The minority Lua told the story of Lua old lady whose body generated salt. Some elderly told the research team that their ancestors came from Mongolia to the city of Chiang Saen in the Lanna Kingdom and moved to Bor Kluea because of their knowledge of boiling salt. However, according to Walailak (1991), the ancestors of Baan Bor Luang community could be the Tai Lue from Sipsong Panna in Yunnan Province of China, since they shared similar beliefs, rituals and traditions with the community in Baan Bor Luang. They have similar rituals of worshipping the village house spirit and establishing a city pillar or “Sao Jai Mueang” for the village. Moreover, some Tai Lue produced salt in Bor Hae which is in the south part of Sipsong Panna using a similar process to the practice of making salt at Baan Bor Luang.

#### Rituals and traditions in the past

People of Bor Kluea had four major ceremonies in the past. First, the biggest event in Baan Bor Luang is “Ngan Gaem” or the annual village guardian spirit worshipping ritual. In the past, the ritual to worship guardian spirits of the village was a grand event of the year, and village members organized festivities for 7 days. The

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<sup>2</sup> These temple are Wat Prasat, Wat Na Mueang, Wat Na Bong, Wat Mon Koo, Wat Ton Tong, Wat Tarn Chum, Wat Ta Pong, Wat Piang Kuk, Wat Ton Mueang, Wat Hang, Wat Ton Kwan, Wat Chom Chaeng, Wat Ton Moon, Wat Phrathat Nong Kaew, Wat Na Kam, and Wat Baan Bor Luang.

present generation of villagers still continue this event, but at the present time, the village reduced the rituals and festivities to only three days. The younger generation of youth in the village did not participate as much as before. This research project made them realize the origin of it and understand the practice.

Secondly, another important event related to the salt pits is “Phithi khor Sai nam Kluea,” or the ritual for requesting saline water streams, which is organized every three years. However, the young generation rarely participates in this ritual. Third is the ritual of changing the city pillar which was called “Plean Sao Jai Mueang” or “Plean Sao Lak Mueang.” This ritual is unknown for the young generation of children and youth since it would take place rarely, only when the pillar was critically damaged. Finally, the most important event of the Bor Kluea community in the past was “Song Suay Kluea” or sending salt as tribute to the Lord of Nan at the city of Nan. The tribute was abolished after the coup in 1932 that ended the absolute monarchy and the central government administration centralized at Bangkok became fully functioning.

The Lord of Nan’s position came to an end in 1931 with the last lord of Nan, named Chao Mahaphromsurathada. In the pre-modern era, the community of Bor Kluea prepared 7,395 kilograms of salt and delivered it to the Lord of Nan every year in 220 oxcarts. Since the community of Bor Kluea Tai was the one who boiled the salt water and made salt, the task to deliver salt belonged to the Lua community of Bor Kluea Nuea. Nan city needed to cultivate rice to feed Bor Kluea delivery carriers. These rice fields are today the Nan International Airport. The practice no longer exists, and without studying the history of Bor Kluea, the younger generation of children would not know this important event in the past.

#### Process of making salt in the past

From research about the history of the village and local knowledge in this area, we found that the process of making salt from saline water had changed significantly. For instance, in the past, most of the equipment was made from bamboo. Large bamboo was used to deliver saline water and store it until salt settled at the bottom but today villagers use PVC pipe to drain salt water to settle in cement tanks. In the past, circular weaving bamboo plates or “Por” were used to store salt but now wooden boxes are used. The pots for boiling saline water used to be clay but now are metal. The pots and pans were bought from the Chinese of Sipsong Panna and they were much smaller than what we have today. Moreover, villagers used to put an ivy called “Khrua Thao Poon” to boil with saline water for whiter and cleaner salt but now no one used it.

### Contested history

The village history that the youth research team discovered challenged some of their parent generation's normative beliefs and the youths also questioned the role of adults in development of the village that destroyed historic sites. For instance, the youth estimated the age of the salt pit at approximately 700 years. According to the legend of Bor Kluea, that salt pit was found during the reign of the first lord of Nan, Phraya Phukha in 13<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, most of adults in the village had informed visitors that salt pit was found around 800 years ago. Moreover, this was written on the information board at the salt pit. Therefore, there were some villagers and local officials who pressured the children and youths to change this part in the History of Baan Bor Luang book. However, the youth team insisted on using their data and challenged adults to find more evidence to prove their claim.

Some adult criticized the details of the salt trade in the past, such as the claim that salt was exchanged for fish sauce on the ground that fish sauce is a similar product to salt. The children and youth also indicated that the story was from the compilation of interviews with the village elderly and their information should be valued. Although some adult villagers disagreed with the historical facts that the young research team found, most of the parents of the children in the youth guide group supported the new history book. The activities of the youth guide group became famous and generated significant supplementary income for the children's families during the tourist season period, so a majority of villagers supported the children's claim.

The children and youth also found the location of historic but deserted temples of Wat Tontong and Wat Tan Chum which possessed historic evidence and Buddhist artifacts as well as stone inscriptions. However, the site of the two temples together became the new hospital of Bor Kluea, burying 400 years of old historic evidence of the Baan Bor Luang community. Moreover, they found old images of the shrine of Wat Baan Bor Luang that was constructed in the traditional Tai Lue style. The temple was heavily damaged by rocket grenades during the fight between Thai army and communist insurgents in the 1980s and was reconstructed in 2003 in the standard Central Thai style. The bridge crossing Mang River was a bamboo bridge and was traditionally reconstructed every year before the rainy season but later was constructed as a permanent structure in concrete. However, the concrete bridge was prone to collapse during heavy rainstorms. The young researchers also questioned why those promoting new development disregarded their cultural and historical heritage of the village. The young generation expressed their wish to preserve historic

elements of their village as much as possible in the future. For instance, local materials of bamboo and wood should be used for construction instead of concrete structures.

#### Conclusion

Through this community learning process and research into local history, youths in the project were reintroduced to the history of their village and contributed to strengthening the reputation of the Baan Bor Luang community. The local history project ignited children and youth passion for the past, and inspired them to pay attention to the village's decision-making process with regards to historical and cultural heritage. Instead of being passive listeners in society, children became the ones who offered new details about the community's history. Moreover, there were some unclear details about the history that prompted further investigation and study by a new generation of youth who sought opportunities to collaborate with villagers and local scholars. In addition, the youth acquired various lessons and skills as follows:

1. Understanding their background and history of Baan Bor Luang village thus realizing the importance of history for their local identity.
2. Developing learning skills from critical thinking, analyzing data and solving problems using systematic methods.
3. Developing skills in public presentation and story telling.
4. Developing roles and duties of youth in community tourism development.
5. Reviving the relationship between young generation and elderly generation through the village survey and interviewing with elderly.

From the community learning process to the youth tour guide training program, children gained significantly subsidiary income for their family and became famous during the high tourist season. As a consequence, the villagers also gain more revenue from tourism activities. This research concludes that the community should continue to support the project with children and youth as follows:

1. The community should realize the importance of learning activities for children and youth and support children activities.
2. The community should participate in the learning process and activities with children and youth in the village.
3. Learning activities for children and youth should conform with the contexts and local wisdom of the community.
4. Learning activities should be compatible with the current problems and needs of the community.

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