

THE CHALLENGE OF RUNNING ETHNOLOGY MUSEUMS: BETWEEN ART AND HISTORY MUSEUMS IN THAILAND

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The National Museum Bangkok, the first museum of Thailand (141 years old)
Image courtesy of the Office of National Museums, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

The origin and development of Thailand's national museums is linked to the royal collection of art objects and antiquities. This wonderful collection, which was presented to the national museums, and the government's policy to preserve artefacts found in ancient sites has ensured that the 42 national museums throughout the country are full of art objects and antiquities. This collection is a defining characteristic of the national museums. The only exception to which is the unique National Museum of Ethnology.¹

Thailand's National Museum of Ethnology was founded in 1996, in honour of His Majesty the King's golden jubilee (Thai: *Kanchanaphisek*). Thus, the official name of the museum is "The *Kanchanaphisek* National Museum". Under the jurisdiction of the Office of National Museums, Fine Arts Department, two buildings were built for the museum; One of them has been used as the Central Storage space for the Office and the other for the National Museum of Ethnology.

In 2007, I was the Director of the museum and worked on the master plan for the museum based on the concept and objective that

the museum should be a learning centre for the culture and traditions of all of Thailand's ethnicities. According to our research at the time, more than 60 ethnic groups including Thais (75 per cent), Chinese (14 percent) and other ethnicities (11 percent) live in Thailand. Although the fundamental idea of establishing the museum was to introduce and showcase all ethnic groups of the country, the museum gave priority to the minority groups, which are more than 40 in number. Some of these groups have become vulnerable due to irreversible change.

While working on the master plan, our museum staff collected data, materials and ethnographic objects from various sites. Although the written master plan was completed before my departure from the museum to take up the Directorship of the National Museum in Bangkok in 2009, till today no permanent exhibition has been organised and it has yet to officially open to the public. Only the visible storage galleries and the occasional temporary exhibitions at the office building have been opened to some visitors. Why has this situation gone on as it has?

This paper discusses the past and current challenges that the National Museum of Ethnology and local museums of ethnology have encountered, addressing the tension between a top-down governmental policy and ground-up strategic plans undertaken by museum personnel who strive to fulfil the museum's goal.

SOME FOCAL POINTS OF GOVERNMENT POLICY THAT IMPACT THE MUSEUMS

1. Over the past two decades, the government has promoted the local identity and cultural diversity of Thailand in order to support the main policy of decentralisation of government administrative bodies. The national museums had to follow the government's policy by allowing local ethnographic objects and folk

traditions to be exhibited in some other national museums. Three national museums, *Roi Et* in the Northeast, *Satun* in the South, and *Suphan Buri* in Central Thailand were established to serve this policy. They are sometimes known as "City Museums" rather than as National Museums.

2. In 1995, the government supported the Fine Arts Department's project of building the National Museum of Ethnology at Pathum Thani Province, 30 kilometres to the north of Bangkok. Due to the country's economic crisis in 1997, followed by frequent political changes, the government did not approve a five-year construction plan of a 'large-scale' exhibition and the management of the National Museum of Ethnology. The government has merely allocated budget for maintaining the office (with museum staff) and a visible storage building, and for small temporary exhibitions.

3. Over the past two decades, the government adopted a policy of "lifelong learning" and developed a strategy to increase "learning sites", either in schools or temples, so as to make them unlimited in number. There was a growing interest in smaller museum and community-based projects. Due to voluntary collectors, who lacked the basic knowledge of museology and conservation to handle objects, a large number of ethnographic materials and folk handicrafts were collected, stored and exhibited improperly. Furthermore, the stories, origins or provenances of objects were poorly recorded.

4. Her Majesty the Queen's initiative to promote local and ethnic textiles and handicrafts was adopted as a government policy and lent to a government strategy to promote them in domestic and global markets. One of the government policies on the issue that had been implemented by several bodies under the jurisdiction of the Fine Arts Department including the Office of National Museums and Regional

¹ Amara Srisuchat, "Proposed Activity Programmes for Cooperation among Asian Museums", in *Museum and Urban Anthropology: Proceedings of the International Conference* (Hanoi: Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, 2008), 17-20, 123-129



Visible storage of the National Museum of Ethnology, Pathum Thani Province
Image courtesy of the Office of National Museums, Thailand

National Museums was the project on the “Creative Fine Arts”²

THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS’ GROUND-UP STRATEGIC ACTIONS FOR BEST PRACTICES

The Office of the National Museums, a government body for implementing government policies in the preservation of material culture, the development and maintenance of standards and the promotion of National Museums and other museums has collaborated with the 42 national museums throughout the country to design ground-up strategic actions to implement government policy successfully.

The approved ground-up proposals were supported by the government and the national museums that had an influence in shaping the government’s policy and strategy of best practices. This created a win-win situation for our stakeholders:

1. Apart from opening up a space in the regional National Museums’ buildings for exhibiting ethnographic items, the National Museums had to arrange several training programmes on ethnology for its staff. Although it placed excessive demands and responsibility on the staff, it was a good opportunity for the regional National Museums to provide new knowledge to museum staff to share with visitors so as to prevent the loss of Thailand’s ethnological art and crafts.

2. The establishment of the “National Museum of Ethnology” led to an official meeting on the revision of the National Museum’s definition and mission, for instance; according to the 1961 *Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums of Thailand*, a ‘National Museum’ is established to be a place for keeping antiques or objects of art which are State property. Thus, ethnographic objects are excluded from this by law.³ After discussion, directors and curators of all the National Museums requested a further revision of the 1961 Act so that ethno-

graphic objects and ethnographic related issues could be included in the definitions and missions of National Museums. We finally agreed to proclaim that any ethnographic object in a National Museum is regarded as an object of art that should be protected, according to the Act. However, the declaration is in practice workable only in the National Museums. It does not yet cover the ethnographic items that exist outside the National Museums. Therefore, they are not legally protected and we are completely losing more of them day by day.

3. The five-years allocated for the construction of the National Museum of Ethnology in the museum’s master plan was subject to reconsideration in light of economic considerations. The Office of National Museums realised that the National Museum of Ethnology had not kept pace with the master plan because of budgetary constraints. It was better to propose a long term plan for the construction of exhibitions and additional buildings for the museum. A promising new development came from the government’s acceptance of the proposal. It provided the capital for permanent exhibition buildings of the National Museums of Ethnology on the condition that the exhibition

buildings would be built one by one. This would take several years to be completed. However, the museum’s research and outreach programmes connected to the exhibitions have continued to be financially supported.

One of the successful examples of the implementation of the National Museum of Ethnology’s programme is the *Story-telling from our Elders: The Ethnological Forum*. The forum was designed to invite a number of indigenous scholars from various ethnic groups to share their knowledge and experience of various aspects of the way of life of their ethnic group. This included their views on ethnic material culture in relation to the modern globalised world and on ethnographic items as museum objects. This was a way to increase opportunities for ethnic people of all generations and all levels to learn from each other. Contact between the participants from different ethnic groups and socio-cultural backgrounds enhanced the museum staff’s and participants’ capacity for developing a wider network.

4. When the local administrative sectors and communities adopted the government policy on the “life-long learning centre at hometown”, a



Some groups of visitors are allowed to access the visible storage of the National Museum of Ethnology
Image courtesy of the Office of National Museums, Thailand

² Amara Srisuchat, *Elaborate Vintage Textiles and Clothing* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 2015), 8-9.

³ *Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums*. B.E. 2504 (1961) As last amended by the *Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums* (No.2), B.E. 2551 (1992). (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 2010), 40.



Textiles of ethnic groups exhibit in the Special Exhibition “Elaborate Vintage Textiles and Clothing” at the National Museum Bangkok on August 14 - November 4, 2015
Image courtesy of the Office of National Museums, Thailand



House of the Thai Song Dam ethnic group, used as the local museum of the ethnic group
Image courtesy of the Office of National Museums, Thailand

large number of “storehouses of folk crafts and art”, which are called “museums”, were founded throughout the country. Knowing that taking finds from archaeological sites and ancient monuments are illicit, the local museum stakeholders avoided taking objects of antiquity to place in their “museum.” Thus, they preferred to acquire ethnographic objects, such as household utensils made of wood and textiles and clothing of ethnic groups and handled them regardless of their fragile condition. To collect fragile ethnographic objects, such as those, without knowledge of museology and conservation has caused serious damage to the objects. According to the national law, the government’s budget is designed to support the National Museums, which are government agencies. There are no provisions for the state to subsidise private or local administrative sectors for maintaining museums and collections. To overcome the problem, the Office of National Museums plans to deepen its involvement in the improvement of these “museums” that are filled with ethnographic collections.

According to our mission, the National Museums have to transmit and disseminate knowledge of artistic and cultural heritage to the general public. We have to provide academic knowledge and practices to government museums, local museums and temple museums based on their requests so as to develop such museums. Thus, we decided to work in close cooperation with the non-national museums to improve the quality of their collections and professional standards of their personnel. Several long-term projects to back-up and develop local museums have been submitted to government administrators and some have received government budget allocations to implement them.

The Office of National Museums’ project of “Best Practice” is a “museology training course” that offers training opportunities to per-

sonnel of museums belonging to other government entities (e.g. school museums, museums of local administrative sectors, temple museums, or private museums). It was designed to help both unskilled and poorly skilled personnel to learn either theory or practice with experts and senior curators, conservators and technicians of the Office of National Museums. From 2003 to 2015, 180 participants from government, local and private museums attended the training course. They became strong personnel that worked on improving exhibitions and collections in their museums. The project is very important for the future of museum development, and will greatly enhance the museums’ network and links across the country.⁴

5. Some activities of the National Museums were designed according to the Ministry of Culture’s policy of raising awareness of the value of cultural assets with regards to the economic development of the country and promotion of material culture for tourism. The activities that were able to capitalise on the National Museums during the creation of a creative economy that intended to generate wealth and sustain the country’s development are as follows:

- 1) The promotion of artistic souvenirs or products made and inspired by objects of art, antiquity and ethnographic objects in the National Museums.
- 2) The organisation of an animated film and short-film contest on the theme of “Museums for All.”⁵
- 3) The occasionally night programmes of the National Museums. Today, the term “Nocturnal Visit to the National Museums” or “The Night Museum” is well known to the public. It has become a new trend in visiting the National Museums.⁶

⁴ Sornlak Khamtrong, “Developing Wider Museum’s Network through a Museology Training Project”, in *Museum Newsletter No. 4 July-September 2014*, (2014), 8-9.
⁵ Duangchai Pichitnarongchai, “Thai Museum Day’s Activities at the National Museum Bangkok”, in *Museum Newsletter No. 4 July-August 2015*, (2015), 13-15.
⁶ Thatson Tantiwong, “Nocturnal Visit to the Palace Museum or the Night Museum”, in *Museum Newsletter No. 3 May-June 2015*, (2015), 13-15



Household utensils of the Thai Yuan ethnic group, Local Museum of Ethnology in Ratchaburi Province
Image courtesy of the Office of National Museums, Thailand

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Due to the needs of ethnic groups and the different contexts of people in society, the government can no longer see the National Museum of Ethnology as the sole responsibility of the government. Therefore to promote peace among the majority and minority groups, the government needs to create partnerships not only between government officials at all levels, but also with social enterprise and private enterprise that share the museum's goal. The National Museum of Ethnology must work closely with other government bodies and private entrepreneurs by connecting related agencies vertically and horizontally from the national level, provincial level to the ethnic community level through the innovative projects that answer the people's needs. In terms of regional perspective, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

has declared the 2020 ASEAN's vision, and one of the goals is to be a community of caring societies. In a 21st century global society, the knowledge and demand for understanding minorities to solve the challenge of the conflict between the majority and minorities of certain countries, of migration, and of the loss of the minorities' tradition and culture is a serious issue that has to be addressed. As such, the ethnology museum's framework needs to be able to respond to global challenges. This requires collective response with a strategic vision that is global in character, rather than one which is limited by national or regional frontiers. The utilisation of the National Museum of Ethnology or local museums of ethnology as mediators of cultural heritage will reduce the gap between ethnicity and nationality, which is a factor that prevents people from living together peacefully.

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