



Creative and Cultural Districts in Thailand



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Foreword from the British Council

The British Council has worked with over a thousand creative hubs globally since 2014. We see creative hubs as communities of support for artists and creative professionals first and foremost, as well as key elements contributing to a growing, inclusive and sustainable creative economy.

Creative hubs have featured greatly in our programming, as partners, collaborators, producers and researchers. We focus on nurturing networks of hub leaders who share, learn, innovate and support each other towards strengthening their communities, and when appropriate, we help facilitate platforms for dialogue between these largely grassroots (and sometimes informal) organisations and the relevant policy makers. Big or small, rural or urban, **creative hubs almost always respond to a local need, bringing about potential for social and economic advancement in their areas.**

In Thailand, the Government's 4.0 policy has highlighted the creative economy as a key driver for advancing Thailand's growth, by promoting innovation and creativity in all sectors. At the same time, the Creative Economy Agency was established in 2018 to lead Thailand's creative economy agenda. This opportune context has sparked increased public and private investments in innovation and creativity agendas, with a recorded emphasis on creative districts and, more recently, **creative hubs as catalysts for social and economic changes.**

Therefore, this deep dive into the interlinks between hubs and the neighbourhoods they are nestled within was a timely exercise. The research was commissioned in September 2019 as part of The British Council's South-East Asia regional Creative Hubs for Good programme. **In Thailand it sought to explore the role of creative hubs in the development of cultural and creative districts.** The research was carried out in the latter part of 2019, before the covid-19 virus crisis had stunned the world.

The covid-19 crisis from 2020 has undoubtedly affected the culture and creative sector too. For creative hubs and cultural districts, the immediate effects count the closing of physical shared spaces, the indefinite halt of tourism, a ban on all live gatherings, a forced push towards digitalisation, and a steep deterioration of creatives' livelihoods, among others.

We hope this in-depth report could help in the restoration process, as we also hope the culture and creative sector will demonstrate once again its resilience and innovation potential.

*May 2020
Roxana Apostol & Patcharawee Tunprawat
British Council*

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Executive Summary

1 Our six-month study sought to provide a snapshot of the dynamics of creative and cultural districts in Thailand. We focused on each place's unique hard and soft infrastructures and its social capital to understand the development and sustainment of a vibrant creative ecosystem.

2 The four districts studied include Songkhla Old Town in the south, the Wua Lai district in the northern city of Chiang Mai, Charoen Krung in Bangkok and Sakon Nakhon in the northeast. The study offers different cultural, historical and social contexts to understand the impact of creative districts on the social and economic development of a place.

3 Two of the locations in this study have been designated as creative districts by the Thai government (Charoen Krung in Bangkok and Chiang Mai). Creative districts are considered as a key strategy to revitalise and drive the local economy through the promotion of creative activities and communities. These districts reflect a global trend in leveraging creative industries to catalyse social and economic development.

4 Songkhla Old Town is an old port town with multicultural heritage, where urban regeneration is driven by the restoration its historical Sino-Portuguese and Sino-European buildings. In Chiang Mai, a new influx of ideas, people and activities are building upon Lanna culture, mixing new approaches with traditional practices. In Charoen Krung, the oldest and most diverse neighbourhood in Bangkok, the redevelopment and relocation of the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) to this area has made it a prominent government-led creative district model. Sakon Nakhon has combined its famous indigo-dyeing practices with sustainable resource management to ensure both the environment and the community benefits.

5 Each creative district has its own unique identity and ecology, representing different models of development. There is no universal model that will work in all contexts. How a place fosters creative activity is linked to its local environment, the available hard and soft infrastructures and the interactions among local people with those beyond. In short, they cannot emerge without these pre-existing conditions.

6 A common thread across the four different creative districts is the interdependency between culture and creativity. A culturally vibrant place provides authentic building blocks for its redevelopment through creative activities, which in turn generate new social, cultural and economic assets.



TOP A textile exhibition at the 2020 Bangkok Design Week in Charoen Krung
BELOW The opening night at the 2019 Sakon Hed festival in Sakon Nakhon

7 Creative districts bring many social, cultural and economic benefits. These include sharing and innovating local craft practices, diversifying opportunities, and attracting new and returning talent to repopulate regional cities – thereby revitalising communities and the local economy.

8 The important role that individuals and organisations play in bridging and linking with other groups, networks and organisations cannot be underestimated. They extend the value and impact of a place's soft infrastructures by bringing in new ideas, connections and access to resources that otherwise would not be accessible.

9 Government policy and initiatives should equally prioritise investment into hard and soft infrastructures. It is important to nurture skills, talents and human resources for creative clusters to flourish.

10 For governments and groups driving urban regeneration through the development of creative districts, it is important to mitigate negative effects. Common issues include displacement of local residents due to rising property prices, excluding local voices during development, and the resource burden from increased tourism that deteriorates the authentic creative atmosphere of a place. A focus on sustainable development and attention to community needs are important strategies to ensure the longevity and vibrancy of a creative community.

Introduction

This report presents insights from a six-month study into four creative districts to better understand the unique features of their creative ecosystems. The four districts are Songkhla Old Town, Chiang Mai (the city and the Wua Lai area), Charoen Krung in Bangkok and Sakon Nakhon. Chiang Mai and Charoen Krung have been designated by the Thai government as creative districts. While Songkhla Old Town and Sakon Nakhon are not formally designated, British Council Thailand requested their examination due to the increasing creative activities in these locations. This study confirms that there are an abundance of creative activities, communities and industries to consider them worthy of recognition as creative districts.

All four districts are home to various creative hubs, ranging in size, membership, activity and purpose. These hubs can be defined as physical, distributed and temporary places of gathering that bring people from a variety of sectors together to support networking, business development and community engagement. This definition expands upon a previous British Council report¹ that explains creative hubs as including emerging, transient and dispersed groupings, which were evident in these districts as significant in fostering creative activities.

Another notable feature of the creative districts studied is that they incorporate and build upon the abundance of cultural capital that provides authenticity. For example, Songkhla Old Town has a 150-year-old history reflected in a large number of heritage assets, which have been carefully restored and repurposed. Chiang Mai's past as the capital city of the Lanna Kingdom, with long traditions of dance, music, craft, silversmithing and architecture, continues to inspire contemporary practices and products. Charoen Krung is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Bangkok, created by successive waves of Chinese, Muslim and European settlements, and these multicultural influences are still celebrated in events, festivals and markets that take place among its long, narrow thoroughfares. In Sakon Nakhon the local indigo plant, grown along the Songkhram River, has made this town famous for its indigo-dyed textiles, with local wisdom passed down from previous generations. These all indicate how the profusion of historic culture and traditional techniques become rich cultural capital and are actively incorporated into contemporary creative activities. This cultural capital is continually revived and remade as an inspirational source to generate new forms of creativity and culture.

¹ British Council (2015). Creative HubKit: Made by hubs for emerging hubs. https://creativeeconomy.britishcouncil.org/media/uploads/files/Creative_HubKit.pdf



A stall selling locally produced indigo-related products at the 2019 Sakon Hed festival in Sakon Nakhon

This study reflects the global trend for incorporating arts and cultural projects into the development of cities and how these are yielding positive impacts in attracting new (or returning) talents, tourists and businesses. Many cities or districts that do not have original assets are inventing new narratives, landmarks and occasions, which can often run the risk of being formulaic reproductions of 'placelessness'.² In this post-industrial, globalising landscape, places that protect and promote their distinct cultures can be assured of socio-economic vibrancy.³ As this study demonstrates, culture is fundamental to creativity and vice versa. According to Zukin, 'A creative city is one that has learnt how to use its cultural capital to attract innovative businesses and services as well as members of the mobile "creative class"'.⁴ This means outdated notions of history and heritage as dusty, passive and frozen in the past are recast as features that provide authentic experiences, viewing them as assets that are difficult to transport or replicate anywhere else. Each creative district studied is abundant with such cultural assets and capital, which in turn inspire, attract and generate creativity in a productive cycle that brings about benefits for the immediate members and those beyond. This is a cyclical pattern of sustaining advantage: '[c]reative production processes can attract enterprises and individuals involved in the cultural sector, generating important multiplier effects in the local economy, and raising the aesthetic value of creative production locations. Creative production is also attractive because it is associated with dynamism and orientation towards the future...'⁵ This means the creative abundance, cultural authenticity and generative potential of each district equals in significance to other creative cities globally.

² Evans, G. (2003). Hard-branding the cultural city – from Prado to Prada. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(2), 417–440.

³ Ray, C. (1998). Culture, intellectual property and territorial rural development. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 38(1), 3–20.

⁴ Zukin, S. (2004, September 13). *Thematic paper: Dialogue on urban cultures: Globalization and culture in an urbanizing world* [Conference presentation]. World Urban Forum, Barcelona, Spain. https://mirror.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/3070_67594_K0471966%20WUF2-2.pdf

⁵ Richards, G., & Wilson, J. (2006). Developing creativity in tourist experiences: A solution to the serial reproduction of culture? *Tourism Management* 27(6): 1209–23, 1213. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2005.06.002>.

Background

This research was commissioned by British Council Thailand to analyse the role and value of cultural and creative districts in Thailand. It is part of a wider British Council-led programme of research into the creative economy in Southeast Asia, which also includes research in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. In a growing environment of creative entrepreneurship, British Council Thailand has been undertaking a range of research and development activities to promote a wider recognition of the value of the creative industries.

Creative industries have always played an important role in enriching Thai culture. Different forms of creative activities encompassing crafts, visual arts, dance, performing arts, design and architecture reflect Thailand's rich heritage, indigenous knowledge and practices. Throughout the country's history, creative communities formed organically – for example silversmithing in the Wua Lai neighbourhood in Chiang Mai, and indigo dyeing in Sakon Nakhon.

The concept of the creative economy expands the notion of creative industries, as governments worldwide recognise the part played by creative activities in contributing to the wider economy. The creative economy has been identified by the Thai government's 4.0 policy as key to overcoming the middle-income trap, by promoting innovation and creativity in all sectors. This policy has sparked a lot of changes in Thailand in regard to government and private investments in innovation and creativity agendas. This policy places emphasis on creative hubs, and more recently creative districts, as catalysts for social and economic change. This can be witnessed by the establishment of the University Creative Counsel Network (UCCN) in 2017, in order to drive the innovation-based economy at a local level.

The UCCN consists of nine major university hubs across Thailand, working directly with local communities and entrepreneurs to support the development of local creative products and services. The Creative Economy Agency (CEA) was established in 2018 to lead and deliver the country's creative economy agenda. In 2017, the Thai government identified three creative districts – Charoen Krung, Chiang Mai and Chonburi Bang Saen – aimed at revitalising these areas and driving local economies through the promotion of creative activities and communities, enabling long-term development of creative businesses and infrastructures. It is also important to point out that while the term 'district' is used by the Thai government to denote different governance boundaries, this report builds upon the definition provided by the Creative Economy Agency stating that a creative district is 'an area designated for business and service promotion in creative industries',⁶ and includes:

- Firms and businesses engaged in creative industries, either offering products or services to businesses or the public.
- Individual creative people (artists, innovators, designers, etc) who produce the creative products and services.
- Places where firms and individual creatives can come into contact and transfer ideas. Examples include neighbourhoods or villages where there is a high concentration of creative people. This also includes creative hubs, which offer more dedicated meeting places for creatives to gather and exchange ideas.

Our study also included other features and networks that were nominated as significant in establishing and sustaining creative activity from local sources and experts.

⁶ Creative Economy Agency. (2020, March). *What is creative districts?*
<https://www.cea.or.th/en/creative-district>



Top
Creative workshop at Baan Kang Wat, one of the craft villages in Chiang Mai

Right
Street art around the Talad Noi neighbourhood in Charoen Krung



Approach

In order to understand the creative ecosystems of the districts studied, we undertook a situational analysis of the four locations by combining a literature review, semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops, supported by visual analysis and synthesis methods. This means our approach was informed by expertise from peer-reviewed and grey literature, and together with local community knowledge, considering these as credible sources. The interviews with academics and key actors in each district helped us identify notable features, people and factors to map the development, challenges and sustainment of each creative district. These interviews were supplemented with workshops with different actors involved in the creative districts to map important assets, features, networks and infrastructures. 'Playful Triggers'⁷ were used as a proven visual method to assist people in sharing and learning local knowledge of their community and place. This ensured that we were guided by principles of participatory action research, to respect lay knowledge as expertise and open up participant-led dialogue to elicit collective knowledge towards mutual learning. Thematic analysis⁸ was then used to analyse the aggregated data.

Another salient principle informing our approach was to draw from sources that were local, Thai or from Asia. Where such sources were not available, we drew upon established scholarship, such as Landry's definition of creative cities⁹ and Putnam's framing of social capital.¹⁰ We also used Thai names when preferred or when translations were not provided. The Thai researcher (Khemmiga Teerapong) was also critical in informing and guiding the team to follow cultural protocols and decipher complex nuances. By being reflexive of power, gender, social and political dynamics during our research, we believe this report provides a robust and respectful analysis of the data that was generated to enable its access and interpretation by a global readership.

There are also limitations to this six-month study. The unique and dynamic conditions that enabled each district to conceive a distinct creative identity, including its geographical location, history and culture, mean that specific details such as its exact size, development pathways and delivery models cannot be provided without extreme simplification

⁷ Akama, Y. (2015). Continuous re-configuring of invisible social structures. In E.A. Bruni, L.L. Parolin, & C. Schubert (Eds.), *Designing technology, work, organizations and vice versa* (pp. 163–183). Vernon Press.

⁸ Guest, G., MacQueen, K.M., & Namey, E.E. (Eds.). (2012). *Applied thematic analysis* (pp. 49–78). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384436>

⁹ Landry, C. (2004). *Imagination and regeneration: Cultural policy and the future of cities*. Comedia.

¹⁰ Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

and significant inaccuracies. Creative districts are not like creative hubs that are distinct and contained in terms of location, organisation, membership and development. The creative districts studied are not governed by a single entity and bounded physically by brick and mortar – rather their value is generated by the diversity of actors and networks, who are virtual, temporary or permanent, engaging fluidly with soft and hard infrastructures. Each district attracts tourists, local residents, the general public and visitors from elsewhere that produce the distinct vibe, knowledge and economy, which means it is impossible to capture it all exhaustively. The study

is also limited by the number and availability of the participants who contributed their knowledge, yet those who took part in the workshops and interviews provided invaluable information that augmented second-hand sources. This study emphasises the dynamic and salient features best captured in the ecosystem visualisations for each district. They should be seen as compelling representations of infrastructures and social capital that have been gathered and demonstrated through first-hand data, and in turn provide snapshots of how the creative districts have emerged, been sustained and are currently constituted.



Visually mapping out hard infrastructures during a workshop with Songkhla's creative and local communities

The Ecology of Creative and Cultural Districts

The characteristics of the local environment and people's interactions plays an important role in fostering creativity.¹¹ In our study, we have seen the importance of the local environments, consisting of hard and soft infrastructures, in determining how likely it is that ideas and creative activities are able to emerge and flourish. The districts we have studied can be considered an 'interaction arena'¹² where a variety of ideas, experience and knowledge of different individuals are shared and adapted. These long-term, persistent, frequent and varied interactions can only happen if the people are located in the same local milieu.

Hard and soft infrastructures are important in scaffolding creative and cultural ecosystems.¹³ As such, we examined the infrastructures of the different districts and how they interact and complement each other to develop their unique creative milieu. Hard infrastructures are tangible assets such as roads, buildings, transportation and communication systems. Soft infrastructures include intangible assets such as culture, people, communities, events and languages. Hard and soft infrastructures are complementary and dynamic, combining to offer a socio-material environment for a 'creative milieu' to develop.¹⁴ These infrastructures determine how a city approaches opportunities and problems, what type of atmosphere is present, and the incentives, regulation and policies in favour of conceiving and implementing creative activities.¹⁵

Each case study provides further details about these infrastructures as distinct assets and the dynamic engagement in each creative district. For example, the successive waves of migration in the history of Songkhla Old Town and Charoen Krung have resulted in distinctive built environments with narrow roads and old heritage buildings. This intermingling of cultures and practices often provides the seeds for a creative milieu to emerge, where sociability, exchange and the mixing of ideas accelerate opportunities. While the concentrated area of Songkhla Old Town has enabled the community to remain physically connected, the organic street layout and multi-generational residents of Charoen Krung have meant that large-scale property redevelopment has been kept at bay. This is unique in Bangkok. Chiang Mai's creative milieu is very much linked to its socio-religious roots, with temples acting as important historical creative hubs, enabling crafts such as silversmithing in the Wua Lai neighbourhood to be sustained and flourish. This broad range of artistic heritage in turn has drawn in many creatives from outside Chiang Mai to live and work there, attracted by its slower pace of life and the pre-existing creative infrastructure. In contrast, in Sakon Nakhon the most important infrastructure is the natural resources – the indigo forests that have enabled textile-dyeing activities. In each case we demonstrate how different built and natural environments have shaped each district's unique creative identity.¹⁶ They provide the prerequisites for the activities or atmosphere of an area to develop.

¹¹ Westlund, H., Andersson, M., & Karlsson, C. (2013). *Creativity as an integral element of social capital and its role for economic performance*. Working Paper Series in Economics and Institutions of Innovation 330, Royal Institute of Technology, CESIS – Centre of Excellence for Science and Innovation Studies. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/hhs/cesisp/0330.html>

¹² *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³ Landry, C. (2004). *Imagination and regeneration: Cultural policy and the future of cities*. Comedia.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Yencken, D. (1988). *The creative city, Meanjin*, 47, 597–608.

¹⁶ Landry, C. (2012). *The origins and futures of the creative city*. Comedia.

Soft infrastructures also include the social network dynamics of a place. These relationships create social capital, which in turn strongly influences the creative economy and environment of a creative district that contribute to flourishing conditions.¹⁷ Examining the social capital of a district, and how creativity contributes to its unique culture, knowledge, communication and values, allows an understanding of how soft infrastructures function. Formal and informal groups can play an important role in building social capital – interpersonal relationships that facilitate trust, cooperation, reciprocity and a shared sense of identity, understanding, culture and values.¹⁸ A notable observation by researchers of creative industries characterises 'buzz' as an important feature of creative places and networks. This is described as 'a thick web of information, knowledge and inspiration which circulates between the actors of a cluster'.¹⁹ Flexible, organic and informal configurations are observed in creating a 'buzz' in semi-social places such as cafes, open spaces and after-business gatherings where conversations, brainstorming and topic-specific discussions can take place.²⁰ While the main research prioritises creative hubs and districts where people cohere in a particular place to engage in creative work – thereby creating recognised identities and consistent ventures – the study also noticed a range of talks, festivals, workshops, occasional markets, art exhibitions and design competitions, which are often mobile, transitory and tailored, that stimulate dynamic environments and act as social connectors. Geographical and relational proximity is also important in cultivating productive

conditions for creatives through repeated face-to-face interactions to share tacit knowledge, skills and practices.²¹

Using a social network mapping approach, the research team sought input from members of the creative community in each location to identify the different social capital present in the different districts (see page 10 under 'Approaches'). This provides an understanding of direct and indirect resources enabled by the social networks to support a creative ecosystem. Bonding, bridging and linking actors, referred to as 'leaders', 'influencers', 'gatekeepers' and 'alpha pups', were often identified in the network mapping in our study. These are individuals who have been significant in connecting people and strengthening a district's creative and cultural ecosystem. Bonding social capital generally describes connections within a tight-knit group or community such as family members, close friends and neighbours. This reflects close relationships between members who are often interconnected and interact frequently. In our study, bonding relationships were found to reinforce close horizontal ties to anchor and provide a supportive creative community, as seen in Chiang Mai's craft villages. Bridging refers to a type of social capital that connects different groups of people normally separated across organisations, locations and generations, or even across societal divides such as religion, class or region. We have identified an abundance of actors who *bridge horizontally* to connect with people with shared interests to exchange and obtain external knowledge, information and resources. Linking social capital are relationships that work across explicit, formal or institutionalised power or authority.²² This study has identified the effectiveness of those who *link vertically* with groups beyond the proximal to broker other important assets and influences.

¹⁷ Westlund, H., Andersson, M., & Karlsson, C. (2013). *Creativity as an integral element of social capital and its role for economic performance*. Working Paper Series in Economics and Institutions of Innovation 330, Royal Institute of Technology, CESIS – Centre of Excellence for Science and Innovation Studies. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/hhs/cesisp/0330.html>

¹⁸ Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

¹⁹ Bathelt, H. (2008). Knowledge-based clusters: Regional multiplier models and the role of 'buzz' and 'pipelines'. In C. Karlsson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on cluster theory* (pp. 78–92). p. 86. Edward Elgar Publishing.

²⁰ Lee, M. (2015). Fostering connectivity: A social network analysis of entrepreneurs in creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21(2), 139–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2014.891021>

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Gilchrist, A (2009). *The well-connected community: A networking approach to community development*. Policy Press.

Key Features of Songkhla Old Town



Top
Sculptures outside Kid+D

Next page from top
Sculptures outside Red Rice Mill, Songkhla Station cafe, A.E.Y. Space

Songkhla is one of the largest provinces in the south of Thailand, neighbouring the Malaysian states of Kedah and Perlis. Songkhla Old Town has flourished as a port for more than 300 years. It has traded with bordering countries since the 17th century and supported a strong fishing industry until the early 2000s. The current Songkhla town was established in 1842, along with a city wall that surrounds the port town. The study focuses on Songkhla Old Town, centring around three streets – Nakorn Nok (ถนนนครนอก), Nakorn Nai (ถนนนครใน) and Nang Ngam (ถนนนางงาม). Its multicultural heritage, particularly Muslim and Chinese, is evident in the remaining and restored buildings, shrines and temples. Revival efforts by various groups, spearheaded by Songkhla Heritage Trust, have significantly changed the Old Town over the past ten years. These efforts have coincided with the city's aim to be recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. When this happens, it will undoubtedly bring international recognition, marking Songkhla Old Town out as a destination to experience heritage, culture and creativity.



Population approx.
15,346 (2019) in
Mueang Songkhla
District (เขตอำเภอเมืองสงขลา)



- Significant presence of heritage buildings and features such as the Red Rice Mill and A.E.Y. Space that are concentrated around three main streets. These are treasured by the locals as creative hubs.
- Renovation of cafes, local museums, galleries, modern shops and dilapidated buildings, breathing new life into the Old Town and increasing its creative value.
- Existing infrastructures continuing to provide access, encouraging different generations, cultures, types of knowledge and practices to travel and cross-pollinate, enabling circulation of ideas and information.
- Accessible and sociable environments that are conducive to building proximal relationships in the community.
- Educational institutions that are bringing opportunities for partnerships and collaboration with people from beyond.
- Finding and maintaining regular sources of funding through mixing personal, business and non-governmental sources and linking with larger networks, such as the Songkhla Heritage Trust, the Association of Siamese Architects (ASA) and the Rajamanala University of Technology Srivijaya (RUTS).

Key Features of Chiang Mai

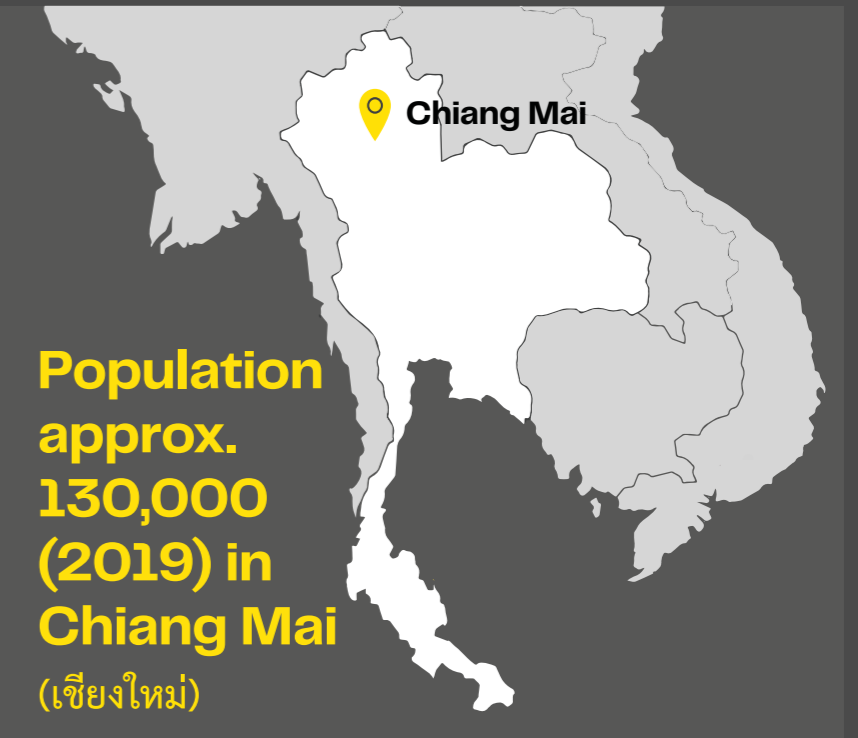
Chiang Mai is considered Thailand's cultural centre, designated by UNESCO as a Creative City of Craft Art and Folk Art in 2017. Located in a mountainous region in northern Thailand, it is the second largest province in the country. The city of Chiang Mai was established in 1296 as the capital of the Lanna Kingdom. Influences of the Lanna culture are still strong, as seen in the range of traditional practices such as pottery, silverwork, wood carving, silk embroidery and lacquerware. It is arguably Thailand's oldest creative district, helped by the migration of craftspeople during Phra Chao Kawila's reign at the end of the

18th century. They settled in craft villages around the city connected to local temples, and passed down their expertise across the generations. In the past ten years, various central government initiatives have encouraged the transition from everyday crafts to practices that are more artistic and higher in value, generating more cultural and economic value. Chiang Mai exemplifies how a creative economy can be sustained and flourish through a close connection to cultural and religious heritage and an ability to modernise existing practices.



Top
Weave Artisan Society interior

Next page
A shop at Baan Kang Wat creative hub



- Temples can be considered Chiang Mai's traditional 'creative hubs' where craftspeople learn, practise and pass on creative practices. Temples continue to be Chiang Mai's creative heart – such as Wat Sri Suphan in the Wua Lai district, which is the centre for silversmithing and hosts regular markets and events.
- Lanna culture is Chiang Mai's unique asset and tourist attraction, providing opportunities for innovation by mixing traditional and contemporary methods, technologies and materials locally and brought in from elsewhere. Temples and craft villages act as creative hubs for old and new practices to blend and flourish.
- Old and new craft villages sustain traditional practices while bringing new energy, talent and people together. Baan Kang Wat in Tambon Suthep has become known for hosting various artistic and creative events.
- The family-like network of craft communities such as San Kamphaeng and Bo Sang is unique to Chiang Mai, where the place of work is also the place of residence.
- There are more than 200 creative spaces that contribute to the creative vibe, activities and growth of the city, providing opportunities for discovery, collaboration and circulation of ideas.
- The provision and development of a variety of transportation infrastructures, including a second international airport and light rail, to accommodate the increasing number of visitors.
- Various organisations (e.g. Creative Chiang Mai, Weave Artisan Society) and major national and international events (e.g. TEDxChiangMai, Chiang Mai Design Week) maintain the diversity of creative output throughout the year.
- A number of government initiatives have injected funds and vitality to develop Chiang Mai, attracting digital nomads and sectors in IT, education and tourism for complementary, cross-sector innovations.

Key Features of Charoen Krung



Top
TCDC during the 2020 Bangkok Design Week

Next page from top
Editorial design exhibition at House No 1 warehouse during the 2020 Bangkok Design Week and street art in Talad Noi neighbourhood

Charoen Krung is one of the oldest neighbourhoods of Bangkok. It started as a commercial hub in the capital city, leveraging its strategic location next to the Chao Phraya River and major routes. As a trading centre, it attracted Chinese, Muslim and European migrants, who settled and built a network of bridges, hotels, temples, churches, mosques and shops located on long, narrow thoroughfares that have come to characterise the area. In 2017, the Thai government designated Charoen Krung as a creative district and relocated the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) to an abandoned postal office. This move, and the significant infrastructural renewal, has increased the number of new creative spaces that have emerged in the past five years. Taking advantage of the number of abandoned buildings, many new businesses have turned these spaces into desirable art and creative spaces. Charoen Krung is now considered a model of government-led creative district developments in Thailand.



Two districts Samphantawong (เขตสัมพันธวงศ์) and Bang Rak (เขตบางรัก) has approx. 70,000 residents (2019)

- The district boasts original and iconic landmarks, representing a variety of architectural periods, including contemporary renovations and high-end hotels. These unique features attract local and international visitors, who are also fuelling creative activities.
- Home to the oldest and most diverse community, settled here through different waves of migration. The district is populated with a mix of temples, churches and mosques, alongside schools catering to the different religious communities. This gives it a strong sense of place and heritage. It has kept the heart of the district alive, and continues to have a neighbourhood feel.
- Excellent connectivity as a trade and transportation hub with roads, the river and the BTS and skytrain system.
- Thai governmental support through the TCDC and CEA has catalysed this historic neighbourhood into a contemporary, creative district.
- Prominent creative events such as Bangkok Design Week, TEDxCharoenkrung and art and design exhibitions have further raised its profile as the creative destination in Thailand.



Key Features of Sakon Nakhon

Sakon Nakhon is located in the northeast corner of Thailand, surrounded by lakes, rivers, wetlands, mountains and extensive farmland. Its distinguishing feature as a creative district is the long-held tradition of indigo dyeing and weaving. Sustainable and organic practices that build on the cultural and natural assets of the district have also increased, owing to the popularity of the Sakon

Hed festival. Sakon Nakhon illustrates how strong bonds can be sustained through a commitment to gather at dedicated times, and shows how traditional knowledge and close connection to nature can sustain a vibrant creative community.



Top
Opening night of the 2019 Sakon Hed festival at Farm Hug

Next page
Hand-woven fabric on display in Mann Craft



- Abundance of natural resources, such as the three large bodies of water, Phu Phan mountain range and two fertile basins is cherished by residents who enjoy the lakes and parks where they gather and celebrate important religious events.
- The indigenous indigo plant proliferates on the banks of the Songkhram River, making this area famous for its indigo-dyeing and weaving. Knowledge and expertise passed through generations have created family-specific dyeing techniques and diverse practices, led by the women of the family.
- The indigo industry is the main driver of the creative economy, and its associated community groups, products and shops all feature prominently in Sakon Nakhon's creative milieu. Government policies and initiatives to modernise its production techniques have enabled their products to be marketed nationally and internationally.
- Dispersed creative members come together through the Sakon Hed festival and the strong bonds cultivated hold the creative community together.
- Educational institutions play an important part in the revival of indigo-dyeing practices, and continue to support the industry by improving its quality and efficiency.
- Local and returning entrepreneurs have been developing modern, natural and sustainable products, contributing to Sakon Nakhon's creative landscape.

Modelling Good Practice for Creative Districts

Although all four creative districts vary in terms of their constituent parts, key characteristics are summarised below to propose thematic 'good practice' for shared learning with other locations in Southeast Asia.

Revalue Cultural Assets

UNESCO's report on creative communities in Asia Pacific²³ states the importance of protecting and sustaining the rich cultural mix of a region. Each case study has shown the importance of restoring existing historical places sensitively and respectfully, often involving local communities, and transforming them into new cultural assets, such as places to learn, share or experience creative activities. The most conspicuous is Songkhla Old Town, which is continuing to preserve its rich cultural heritage while also transforming places into new sites of creative activity. These examples echo several studies in Penang, Shanghai, Hanoi and Tokyo, together with Western urban regeneration and cultural planning literature, that affirm the importance of adapting industrial infrastructures and heritage buildings, often led by artistic and cultural actors.²⁴

Transmit and Update Local Craft Practices

Key to sustaining a vibrant creative district is the ability of the creative community to preserve, transmit and update craft traditions. This is evident across all the case studies – as seen, for example, in Weave Artisan Society's approach (Chiang Mai) to form a new kind of creative hub – not solely based on traditional crafts alone, but by bringing different craftspeople together and enabling new and unique collaborations. Sustaining local and traditional crafts by creating new products and adding value are known strategies undertaken by various creatives in Asia and worldwide. This innovation goes hand in hand with sustaining income for local craftspeople and creatives, marketing opportunities and often boosting the local economy.²⁵

²³ UNESCO (2005). *Asia Pacific creative communities: A strategy for the 21st century*.

²⁴ Gu, X. (2014). Cultural industries and creative clusters in Shanghai. *City, Culture and Society* 5(3), 123–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2014.07.005>.

²⁵ Sing, T.Y., & Yoh, S. (2016). Rehabilitation methods and revitalization strategies in the old inner-city areas of rapid growth cities in Asia. *Urban and Regional Planning Review* 3, 1–20.

Generate New Cultural, Social and Economic Capital

The revival of Songkhla Old Town through the regeneration of its cultural heritage, the refurbishment of architecturally rich sites and increased interactions between new and old actors, spaces, activities and groups has contributed to making it an inviting place to live again, and has attracted new cultural tourists. In Sakon Nakhon, the Sakon Hed network has been particularly successful in bringing together local artisans and social enterprises to create new local products using organic produce and celebrate the unique cultural and economic heritage of the place. The success of the Sakon Hed festival demonstrates how different local practices can be leveraged to generate new cultural and economic capital. This trend parallels planned and organic emergence of creative clusters and capital around the world.

Encourage Diversity

A key feature in all the case studies is their diverse mix of cultures, heritage and history. Research has shown that cultural diversity can boost creativity and innovation in cities.²⁶ Some of the districts studied are already based on diverse constituents as a result of trade migration, such as Songkhla and Charoen Krung, while others have a rich ethnic mix due to proximity with national borders, such as Chiang Mai and Sakon Nakhon. All districts are experiencing further diversification as they become more attractive places to live and work, driven in part by the creative-led urban regeneration efforts.

However, a culturally diverse population does not automatically lead to intercultural collaboration. As observed in Charoen Krung, the lack of collaboration between the Muslim and Chinese communities is mainly caused by being governed by different district offices. TCDC and CEA are initiating ways to bring these communities together, enabling residents to take advantage of their cultural diversity and engage in more intercultural collaboration.

Attract New and Returning Talent

The various regeneration initiatives observed in the case studies have created new spaces, events and activities that have the cumulative effect of reviving interest and attracting locally born natives back to live and open new businesses. Here, capacities that facilitate freedom of expression and open attitudes towards experimentation, even within formal and established norms of Asian culture, are substantial factors in enhancing creativity.²⁷ Additionally, the case studies revealed that new talents are drawn to these locations because of established infrastructures, resources and networks that are already in place, especially in Chiang Mai – where the proximity to a range of craft practices, materials and markets have always made it an inviting city for creatives to work in. More recently, digital nomads are attracted there due to government support for new start-ups in creative and tech businesses. High capacity telecommunications and efficient transport systems are vital infrastructures for continuous exchange of information.²⁸ Furthermore, sustaining a healthy pool of human resources with appropriate skills is important.²⁹ Other studies in Asia observe that graduates from world-class higher education institutions are playing key roles in creative clusters around Tokyo, Hong Kong and Taipei. This maps directly onto key individuals in the case studies who studied overseas at prestigious institutions and have returned to play critical bridging roles through, for example, the Nakorn-nai Art Street group (in Songkhla Old Town) and the Sakon Hed network (in Sakon Nakhon).

^{26a} Zhang, C. (2019). The Chinese mosaic: Cultural diversity and creative cities. *Journal of Regional Science*, 59(2), 214–227.

^{26b} Ottaviano, G.I.P., & Peri, G. (2005). Cities and cultures. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 58(2), 304–337.

²⁷ Daniels, P.W. (2012). Changing landscapes of services and restructuring in Asian cities. In P.W. Daniels, K.C. Ho, & T.A. Hutton (Eds.), *New economic spaces in Asian cities: From industrial restructuring to the cultural turn* (pp.17–30). Routledge.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Cultivate a Creative Atmosphere

The intimate and walkable scale of Songkhla Old Town helps engender a sense of community and belonging. This intimate scale is also evident in the numerous craft villages in Chiang Mai, where the temple is often the focus of the community. Proximity, both geographical and relational, can cultivate frequent opportunities for talking, sharing skills and exchanging ideas that circulate between creative actors.³⁰ Semi-social places such as cafes, galleries and co-working spaces are flexible, organic and informal, cultivating productive conditions for creativity.³¹ Common parallels can be drawn with studies of creative industries in Asia – for example, Daniels concludes that creative firms that are often small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) prefer affordable, flexible and less prestigious accommodation compared to those sought by financial services.³² This means creative aggregation is more likely to find a home in the periphery of cities that are often in economic or social transition, yet have various social, economic and cultural interactions to enable growth and capacity for innovation. Songkhla Old Town, Sakon Nakhon and Chiang Mai can be described as peripheral to major urban centres under transition, while still providing good transportation access to enable movement of people and ideas.

Building Community Through Hard and Soft Infrastructures

The varied historical, social and geographical contexts of each case study offer different examples in how creative communities are built and sustained. Wu³³ and Daniels³⁴ point out how innovation capacity for Asian cities is often strongly determined by state-led initiatives and policies, combined with private sector capital, as seen in the digital industry in Malaysia, multimedia in Singapore and leading-edge technology in Japan. Echoing such trends, the districts studied in Thailand had central government initiatives that supported various projects and gave injections of energy, such as One Tambon One Product (OTOP) in Chiang Mai. However, Wu³⁵ notes that state-led policies have emphasised investments in hard infrastructures rather than soft infrastructures, when the latter are important for nurturing skills and human resources for creative clusters to flourish. The support of soft infrastructures through multi-sector investments is exemplified by the Kid+D co-working space and tourist information centre in Songkhla Old Town. The Chiang Mai Creative City Development Committee is the result of multifaceted efforts from central government, businesses and community groups. Indigo-dyed textiles in Sakon Nakhon have successfully found new market opportunities through support from international and national schemes focused on rural development and entrepreneurship, which helped to modernise and revitalise the industry.

³⁰ Bathelt, H. (2008). Knowledge-based clusters: Regional multiplier models and the role of 'buzz' and 'pipelines'. In C. Karlsson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on cluster theory* (pp. 78–92). Edward Elgar Publishing.

³¹ Lee, M. (2015). Fostering connectivity: A social network analysis of entrepreneurs in creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21(2), 139–152.

³² Daniels, P.W. (2012). Changing landscapes of services and restructuring in Asian cities. In P.W. Daniels, K.C. Ho, & T.A. Hutton (Eds.), *New economic spaces in Asian cities: From industrial restructuring to the cultural turn* (pp.17–30). Routledge.

³³ Wu, W. (2005). Dynamic cities and creative clusters. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3509. Washington, DC.

³⁴ Daniels, P.W. (2012). Changing landscapes of services and restructuring in Asian cities. In P.W. Daniels, K.C. Ho, & T.A. Hutton (Eds.), *New economic spaces in Asian cities: From industrial restructuring to the cultural turn* (pp.17–30). Routledge.

³⁵ Wu, W. (2005). Dynamic cities and creative clusters. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3509. Washington, DC.

Significance of Bridging and Linking Social Capital

In all creative districts, there are several actors who are effectively bridging horizontally to connect with people with shared interests to obtain external knowledge, information and resources. Groups such as A.E.Y. Space, Weave Artisan Society and the Sakon Hed network perform unique bridging roles by integrating inspiration from elsewhere with local assets, and thus demonstrate considerable abilities to adapt, absorb, combine and transform existing spaces, value and practices. These bridging roles extend the value and impact of soft infrastructures by creating welcoming spaces for local and outsider creative groups to cohere and maintain connection, assimilate new ideas and incubate environments conducive to collective creativity.

Other groups such as Songkhla Heritage Trust, Creative Chiang Mai and the TCDC perform roles that link vertically with groups beyond the proximal, with different possessions of power to broker other kinds of assets and influences. These actors link different sectors, such as creative, business, public, research, education, government and community sectors, which provide interdisciplinary and cross-sector opportunities for knowledge sharing. Most notably, they have access to certain resources, ideas, services, support and information that link grassroots organisations and decision-makers, and this is observed as playing a positive role.³⁶ This role is also evident at both individual and organisational level. In Songkhla, key influencers in Songkhla Heritage Trust, have been crucial in bringing financial, institutional and political clout to heritage conservation efforts, while in Charoen Krung TCDC has been the key catalyst in linking the creative community with governmental support and funding.



Mapping of soft infrastructures with Sakon Hed network members in Sakon Nakhon

³⁶ Westlund, H., Andersson, M., & Karlsson, C. (2013). *Creativity as an integral element of social capital and its role for economic performance*. Working Paper Series in Economics and Institutions of Innovation 330, Royal Institute of Technology, CESIS – Centre of Excellence for Science and Innovation Studies. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/hhs/cesisp/0330.html>



Top
Naturally dyed coloured
yarns used in Sakon
Nakhon's weaving industry



Left
Painted mural in
Charoen Krung

Mitigating Effects of Gentrification

It would be remiss not to mention that other studies have shown how urban regeneration also comes with further issues, such as local residents' voices being excluded from decision-making processes; social and geographical segregation; dissatisfaction with growing tourism; and negative impacts from gentrification,³⁷ which all combines to decrease the quality of life that had initially made such creative districts appealing in the first place. Gentrification describes a phenomenon observed initially in Western cities where working-class neighbourhoods were transformed into more affluent ones while displacing existing residents. Keane, in his study of creative clusters throughout China, noted similar trends internationally, where disused buildings were turned into creative businesses that may or may not have any connection to the local identity or culture.³⁸ Residents bemoaned the crass commercialisation and loss of authenticity, resulting in an increase in land value and rents. The same concerns were observed in all the districts studied, especially in Chiang Mai, where gentrification has already had an effect on property value, causing artists and designers to move out of the Nimmanhaemin Road area in search of more affordable and authentic living. This trend has also been observed in Songkhla, where local residents have highlighted rising rents in light of the growing development in the Old Town. This process of commercialising surviving heritage sites and turning spatial remnants of the bygone era into new builds – such as alleyways in traditional neighbourhoods – often typifies the type of gentrification happening in East Asia.³⁹

At grassroots level, groups are aware of the potential pitfalls of gentrification and are finding ways to combat this. For the communities living in Charoen Krung, being able to band together and resist large-scale urban redevelopment has been an important strategy. Individual ownership of the properties has also made it difficult for developers to conduct wholesale clearance and redevelopment of entire neighbourhoods without the consent of a large number of people. In Sakon Nakhon, the focus on sustainable development and drawing on local funding is a way for locally embedded networks such as Sakon Hed and YEC to mitigate the negative effects of gentrification. Although gentrification unfolds differently in different contexts, it is important for governments and grassroots groups to critically evaluate their strategies and policies to ensure the commercial benefits of redevelopment are invested back into the community.

³⁷ Sing, T.Y., & Yoh, S. (2016). Rehabilitation methods and revitalization strategies in the old inner-city areas of rapid growth cities in Asia. *Urban and Regional Planning Review*, 3, 1–20.

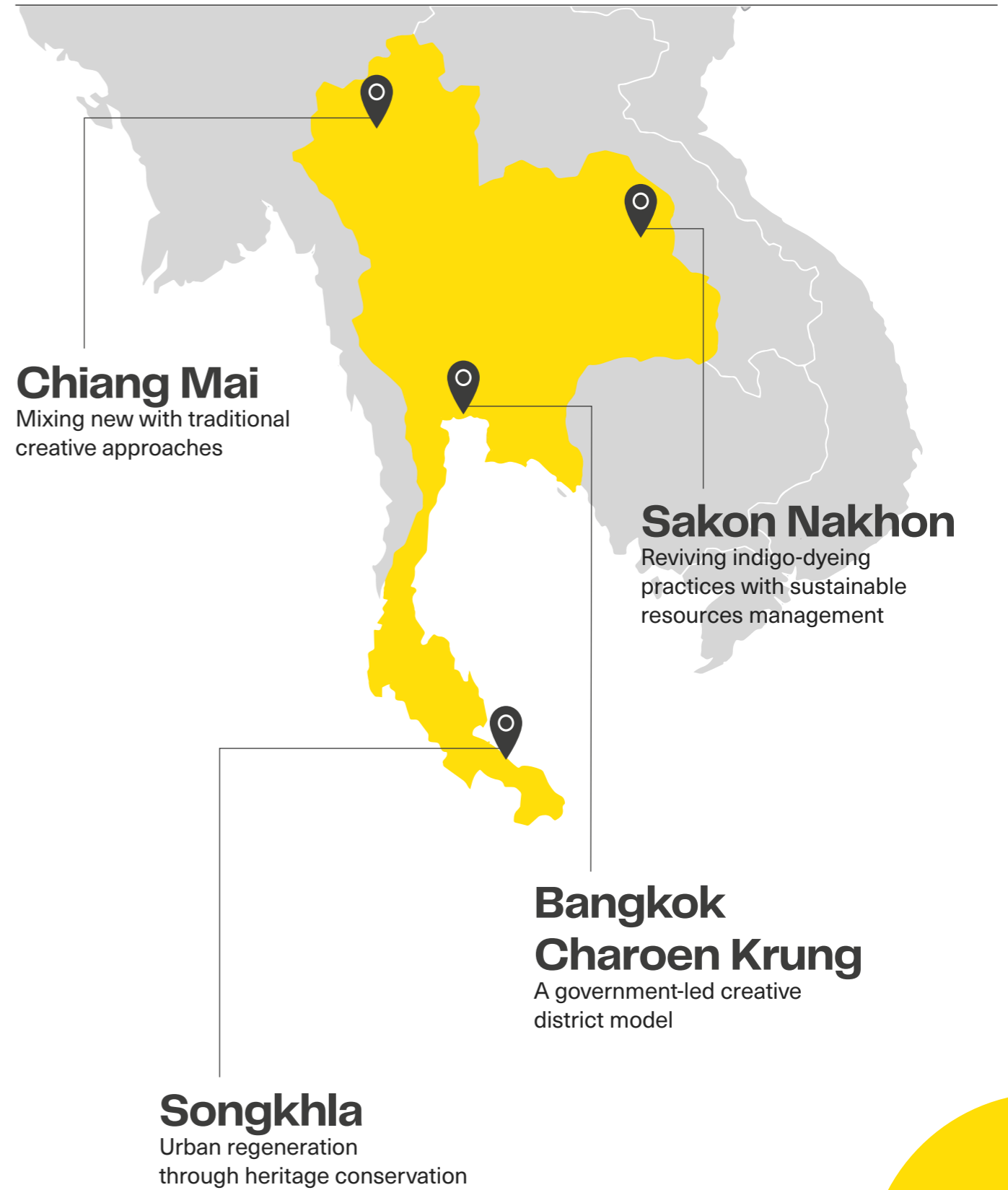
³⁸ Keane, M. (2009). *Creative industries in China: Four perspectives on social transformation*. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15(4), 431–443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630902989019>

³⁹ Shin, H.B. (2018). The geographies of gentrification in East Asia. *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter*, 79, 15.

Creative Districts: Case Studies



Clockwise from top left
 Songkhla Heritage Trust at Red Rice Mill, TCDC and CEA at the Grand Postal Building during the 2020 Bangkok Design Week, Sakon Hed festival and soft infrastructure mapping with Chiang Mai communities



Executive Summary Songkhla

The city of Songkhla located in Songkhla Province has three historical cities – Lam-Son (แหลมสน), Khao-Deng (เขาแดง) and Bo Yang (บ่อยาง). This case study focuses on Songkhla Old Town (สงขลาเมืองเก่า) in Bo Yang, where there is a high concentration of creative and cultural activities. Although not officially designated as a Creative District by the Thai government, it has the potential to develop into one.

Songkhla Old Town is home to various creative hubs, such as Red Rice Mill, A.E.Y. Space and Kid+D, which have grown rapidly in the past five years. These share similar characteristics, with a creative hub defined as 'a place, either physical or virtual, which brings creative people together. It is a convenor, providing space and support for networking, business development and community engagement within the creative, cultural and tech sectors'.¹

Our study identified a variety of physical spaces, informal groups and dispersed networks that are significant in fostering creative activities. A notable feature of these activities is that they build on the existing abundance of Songkhla Old Town's cultural

capital, such as historical preservation along with intergenerational and intercultural connections that are sustaining heritage. Culture and creativity are equally important in generating distinctive experiences of new cultural forms. These forms in turn generate dynamism and innovation, as seen in many other creative and cultural clusters around the world.²

Informal groups and dispersed networks in Songkhla Old Town have catalysed temporary, event-based participation by various people, enabling unique experiences. This indicates that culture and heritage in Songkhla Old Town are constantly revived and engaged with as sources of inspiration, generating new cultural and creative activities. This case study includes observations on a variety of creative hubs to understand how key actors and networks are playing a vital role in sustaining vibrant creative districts. Altogether, the hard and soft infrastructures of Songkhla Old Town, and the instrumental bridging and linking roles played by key members of the community, are summarised in supporting the development of a vibrant, creative ecosystem.

¹ British Council (2015). Creative HubKit: Made by hubs for emerging hubs, 4. https://creativeeconomy.britishcouncil.org/media/uploads/files/Creative_HubKit.pdf

² Richards, G., & Wilson, J. (2006). Developing creativity in tourist experiences: A solution to the serial reproduction of culture? *Tourism Management*, 27(6), 1209–1223.



Songkhla Old Town is home to various creative hubs, such as Red Rice Mill, A.E.Y. Space and Kid+D, which have grown rapidly in the last five years.



Yaring Alley in Songkhla Old Town, looking towards Songkhla Lake

Background



Songkhla boasts a rich cultural heritage dating back many hundreds of years.

It is one of the largest provinces in the south of Thailand, sharing a border with the Malaysian states of Kedah and Perlis. Its natural lake, the largest in Thailand, acts as a protected harbour for fishing vessels to access the Gulf of Thailand. As a port, the city of Songkhla has always hosted traders and migrants from different parts of the world. Muslim traders from Sumatra first settled in Singora (in the Kao Dang area) in the 17th century. They were followed by southern Chinese traders before the Thais moved to the province.

The current Songkhla was established in 1842, along with the addition of a city wall surrounding the port. The Old Town area centres mainly around three streets – Nakorn Nok (ถนนนครนอก), Nakorn Nai (ถนนนครใน) and Nang Ngam (ถนนนางงาม). The decline in the commercial fishing industry operating from the Old Town, a key economic driver since the early 2000s, coupled with the trend for younger generations migrating to Bangkok or abroad for education and work, has meant that the population decreased from 51,412 in 2008 to 15,385 in 2018 in Mueang Songkhla District (ภาคีคนรักเมืองเก่าสงขลา). Its economic regeneration has mainly been heritage focused.

Songkhla Old Town has historically been a business district for Chinese residents and the merchant traders from Malaysia, Portugal and The Netherlands. As such, it is known for its many Sino-Portuguese and Sino-European historical buildings and practices that sustain traditional cultures. Songkhla Heritage Trust (ภาคีคนรักเมืองเก่าสงขลา) is a network of local residents and a key driver behind restoration projects on the three main streets of Songkhla Old Town, which have significantly improved over the past ten years and have attracted heritage tourism. When the Thai cabinet voted in 2010 to recognise Songkhla as one of the ten most important towns involved in forming the nation, local conservation and heritage groups spearheaded by Songkhla Heritage Trust were mobilised to apply for UNESCO World Heritage Site listing. At present, the main role of Songkhla Heritage Trust has been to organise several key events as a way to generate interest and demonstrate Songkhla's strong heritage credentials.



Yaring Alley, joining Nakorn Nok, Nakorn Nai and Nang Ngam Streets in Songkhla Old Town



The Old Town area centres mainly around three streets – Nakorn Nok (ถนนนครนอก), Nakorn Nai (ถนนนครใน) and Nang Ngam (ถนนนางงาม).

These heritage-related activities have succeeded in bringing a new lease of life to the Old Town and attracting attention from creative groups and networks. In the past five years there has been a rise of small businesses involved with creative activities in cafes, studios and galleries. The Old Town's rich cultural heritage has influenced this movement, and in turn inspired new tangible and intangible products that sustain it. Interviews and workshops with the younger generations, returning from studies and work in Bangkok and elsewhere, show strong potential in contributing to Songkhla's creative vibe, bringing business opportunities and developing the community economy. This case study provides examples of activities by various hubs, groups and networks such as Nakorn-nai Art Street (NAS), Songkhla Craft, Art Mill and Songkhla Forum. They host diverse gatherings such as exhibitions and competitions to connect individuals and organisations, catalysing financial support for projects, increasing engagement and connectivity.

Further opportunities will undoubtedly arise when Songkhla Old Town is recognised internationally as a destination to experience heritage, culture and creativity. Inviting public figures such as Lady Sirikitija Jensen (ท่านผู้หญิงสิริกิติยา เจนเซน) to be the chairperson at an international heritage symposium in Songkhla in 2019 has generated attention from government and other organisations, which may lead to favourable, longer-term support. An increase in tourism may bring more opportunities, but many have also voiced concerns about considerable changes to the town and community. For example, further development of the Old Town may lead to higher costs of rent and living. This will make it less affordable for local residents who may be forced to move out. Songkhla's creative and cultural leaders are acutely aware of these challenges and are actively discussing these issues with their communities to prevent possible negative impacts.

Typology of Songkhla's Creative and Cultural District



The creative and cultural activities taking place in Songkhla Old Town are concentrated around three main streets, and as such offer a unique geographical context. The hard infrastructures identified as important by the local community often reflect the rich cultural heritage of Songkhla, such as notable historical, creative and transportation hubs.

In Songkhla Old Town, creative activities have been increasing over the past five years. Soft infrastructures were observed in groups, networks and organisations that host various activities, facilitating connections and knowledge exchange and nurturing conducive environments for creative work to flourish. The study has thus distinguished key actors that play an important role in constituting the soft infrastructures of Songkhla Old Town's creative district. These actors perform specific connections, such as a horizontal 'bridge' between those with overlapping interests to access knowledge and social capital, and a vertical 'link' with groups outside the community that leverage power, influence and resources.³ The study identifies those that are effective in building social capital and a strong creative ecosystem.

Inside Songkhla Station cafe on Nakhon Nok Street

^{3a} Gilchrist, A. (2009). *The well-connected community: a networking approach to community development* (2nd ed). Policy Press.

^{3b} Woolcock, M. (2001). The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes. *ISUMA Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 2(1):11–17.

Hard Infrastructures

Songkhla Old Town has three main, parallel streets, less than one kilometre in length, making it a walkable size that creates an accessible and sociable environment conducive to building close relationships in the community. Interviews with locals, and network visualisations, reveal how residents know one another, are aware of what is happening and recognise how things have changed in the area. Building restorations have often been undertaken sensitively, listening to oral histories of the residents who have lived there for many years. For example, the APO store was repaired in homage to the apothecary store that had served the community previously. Compared to large, urban-dense environments where cars are the preferred method of mobility – reducing chance encounters and the ability to notice everyday scenes at a walking pace⁴ – the intimate size of Songkhla Old Town facilitates community engagement with cultural and creative activities in the area.



Workshop on mapping of hard infrastructures

⁴ Wood, L., Frank, L.D., & Giles-Corti, B. (2010). Sense of community and its relationship with walking and neighborhood design. *Social Science & Medicine*, 70(9), 1381–1390. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2010.01.021>

A key attribute of Songkhla Old Town is the significant presence of heritage buildings and features that are treasured by the community. Nakorn Nok, Nakorn Nai and Nang Ngam Streets have been the main focus of heritage preservation by Songkhla Heritage Trust due to the number of historical and religious buildings with important architectural features. Many old shop houses indicate multicultural living nested among culturally significant places, such as the City Pillar Shrine (ศาลหลักเมือง), Guan Yu Shrine (ศาลเจ้ากวนอู) and Baan Jean Sam Hong (บ้านจีนสามห้อง), which have traces of international relations between Penang (a Malaysian northern state) and Songkhla. Such old shop houses on Nakorn Nai Street have been renovated into cafes, local museums, galleries and modern shops. These buildings attest to important conservation work that facilitates cultural and creative activities, evidencing rich cultural layers. In the past three years, large street art murals have appeared around the three main streets, commissioned by the local government in an effort to attract cultural tourism to Songkhla Old Town.

The legacy of its history as a port town that frequently received traders and overseas migrants endures through a further intercultural mix. The town's hard infrastructures, such as bridges and piers, continue to provide access, encouraging diverse people, cultures and practices to cross-pollinate. The circulation of different ideas and information is a notable catalyst for creativity to flourish.

The following hard infrastructures have been identified as the most significant:

Creative Spaces for Gathering

Red Rice Mill (Hub Ho Hin: หับ ไร่ หิ้น หรือ โรงสีแดง) is a unique, restored landmark and a popular Instagram destination with tourists. It serves multiple purposes – as the head office of Songkhla Heritage Trust, as well as housing a public library, learning centre and community space for events. **A.E.Y. Space** is a destination for artists and filmmakers that hosts exhibitions by prominent Thai artists, including Vernacuristics by Saran Yen Panya, and The Cloud Journey 05 and FotoMoMoSo by Beer Veerapong Singnoi. **Art Mill Songkhla Art Centre** (หอศิลป์สงขลา) is a former lumber mill that has been renovated as a contemporary art venue. The centre hosts exhibitions throughout the year, inviting prominent Thai artists to showcase their work and give talks, as well as forging strong connections between artists and well-known art and design universities in Bangkok. **Songkhla Pavilion**, located in Hua Khol Deang (หัวเขาแดง), is becoming a notable venue for exhibitions of local and national artists. The public sculpture in bamboo was created to represent environmental concerns, sustainability and ecotourism. Hua Khol Deang is being promoted as an attractive tourist destination and has become the focal point of a nascent ecotourism industry in Songkhla. **The Old Town Gate and City Wall** are important historical landmarks in Songkhla. In 1836, the centre of Songkhla moved from Leam Son to Bor Yang (the Old Town area) and subsequently a wall was built to protect the town from invading forces. Although only 1.2km of the wall remains, it has now become an important public space where large creative and cultural events take place.

Centres of Tradition, Spirituality and History

Temples and shrines are the centre of traditional culture, spirituality and belief in Thailand. Many temples and shrines in Songkhla Old Town represent traditional Hokkien Chinese settlement and are located on **Nang Ngam Street**. The **City Pillar Shrine** is considered by the locals as being the heart of the community and a central symbol of power. **Songkhla National Museum** (พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติสงขลา) is the main historical learning centre for the public. The 100-year-old building is also recognised as an important heritage site and was originally the home of Praya Suntranurak (พระยาสุนทรานุรักษ์) or Nead Na Songkhla (เนตร ณ สงขลา), Songkhla's mayor in 1878.

Markets

Markets, both permanent and temporary, enable creative activities such as craft making, local product trading and community engagement. These markets are centres to support, promote and sell the works of new generations of local crafters, designers and artists in Songkhla.

Transportation infrastructures

Tinsulanonda Bridge (สะพานติณสูลานนท์) and the **piers** are important hubs connecting Songkhla Old Town with its surrounding areas. At 2,640 metres, Tinsulanonda Bridge is the longest bridge in Thailand and connects Songkhla Old Town with Yor Island (เกาะยอ). The bridge and piers are considered a key factor in driving economic growth by providing improved accessibility to Songkhla Old Town and Songkhla Lagoon, enabling increased activities and connectivity.



Figure 1. Key infrastructures of Songkhla Old Town

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1 Red Rice Mill | 7 Songkhla National Museum | 13 APO Store |
| 2 A.E.Y. Space | 8 Markets | 14 Songkhla Station |
| 3 Art Mill Songkhla Art Centre | 9 Tinsulanonda Bridge + Piers | 15 Kid+D |
| 4 Songkhla Pavilion | 10 Baan Jean Sam Hong + ASA Cloud | 16 Songkhla Heritage Trust |
| 5 The Old Town Gate and City Wall | 11 238 Inspiration House | 17 Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya |
| 6 City Pillar Shrine | 12 Heartmade Cafe | 18 Songkhla Vocational College |

Soft Infrastructures

Cultural and social capital are unique resources that not only distinguish a place but also determine a city's capacity to nurture and mobilise ideas, talent and creative organisations.⁵ Songkhla has a number of vibrant and active networks that contribute to the development and sustainment of its cultural fabric.

Cultural Regeneration

Several groups and organisations, often using the hard infrastructures identified earlier, are generating a variety of cultural and social capital. For example, **Songkhla Heritage Trust** is located in the Red Rice Mill. The Mill has become the focal point of the regeneration effort, mainly because it houses the trust, but also through the creative and cultural activities that are hosted on the premises throughout the year. Songkhla Heritage Trust is the largest network representing local residents. It promotes Songkhla as a heritage site by spearheading many redevelopments to improve the three main streets. While its focus is on heritage conservation, it also accommodates cultural and creative activities and projects. This organisation is prominent in the ecosystem map (p. 45, fig. 2) as a connector between local government, educational institutions, public and private sectors.

Nakorn-nai Art Street (NAS) is a network of designers and artists in Songkhla Old Town. It is one of the most active groups in Songkhla, involved in restoring dilapidated buildings into art and design spaces in Nakorn Nai, Nakorn Nok and Nang Ngam Streets, renewing creative and cultural infrastructures. NAS has organised events such as talks, film nights and art and photography exhibitions at A.E.Y. Space, APO store, Ong Art Cafe and Baan Jean Sam Hong, attracting creatives from around the region to share work.

Songkhla Craft is a collective of shop owners (Heartmade Cafe, Little Bookstore and Postcard Shop) in the Old Town that share interests in creative activities. This group is relatively new, having been established in the last few years, and has taken advantage of the new interest in creative activities in the Old Town. The owners organise sporadic, small-scale events in their shops that provide unique experiences and have become a popular tourist attraction. They offer a place for creatives to gather and showcase their work and have been identified by local residents as important places for informal and temporary places of creative gathering.

In contrast, **Songkhla Forum** is a long established network, started in 1993 with the main objective of improving living conditions in Songkhla and incubating active citizenship for the younger generations. The network comprises a group of media workers and volunteers working on social issues, environmental concerns and educational programmes for children. They connect community social innovation initiatives with development organisations such as UNICEF and The Bright World in Our Hometown, using various creative methods for engagement.

⁵ Landry, C. (2004). *Imagination and regeneration: Cultural policy and the future of cities*. Comedia.

Due to the renewed interest in Songkhla's architectural heritage, the **Association of Siamese Architects Under Royal Patronage (ASA)** has opened up a local chapter in Songkhla. The ASA is the oldest and most well-known architecture association in Thailand. It has recently become more involved in funding conservation and community development as some of its members are also connected with hubs and networks in Songkhla. In 2010, it expanded to include the ASA CAN: Community Act Network, focused on projects for community development, and in October 2019 the ASA opened a new office at **Baan Jean Sam Hong** (a recently restored building) to provide co-working facilities and further cement its presence in Songkhla.

Intellectual Leadership and Places of Learning

Educational institutions provide intellectual leadership and places of learning for generations of creative talent. While their buildings are hard infrastructures, their soft infrastructures are important in bringing opportunities for partnerships in the area and collaboration with people from beyond. **Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya (RUTS)** (มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลศรีวิชัย), **Songkhla Rajabhat University (SRU)** (มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสงขลา) and **Thaksin University** (มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ) in Songkhla provide art, design and architecture courses. These local institutions educate and nurture young artists and designers and encourage people from different disciplines to work together. Their staff are active in cultural heritage and urban regeneration and are able to generate collaboration with educational institutions overseas and sources of funding from research councils. Staff are also engaged in conservation and redevelopment through their research projects, and they often host creative activities that connect public and private organisations. For example, the Creative Market Place organised by RUTS provides a platform for collaborations between the local community and students.

Kid+D is the innovation lab at RUTS, located on Nang Ngam Street. It was established as a community business incubation hub for students and the public in 2018. With financial support from Chevron Thailand, Kid+D has now become a co-working space for creative entrepreneurs and a tourist information centre. Kid+D and RUTS have collaborated with local government organisations and other national and international universities to initiate and host creative events such as Startup Thailand League 2018, Urban Development Student Workshops 2019 and the Lad Sang Doa light-up market (ตลาดแสงดาว) in the Old Town.



Red Rice Mill



Top
Workshop on mapping of soft infrastructures

Right
Characteristics of key actors in Songkhla's creative ecosystem



Building Social Capital in Songkhla Old Town

Many residents perform a key role in connecting people across different communities, groups or organisations that otherwise might not interact or collaborate. The majority share similar characteristics – for example, they were all born and raised locally. They display a strong local pride in initiating, driving and supporting creative activities, motivated by similar desires to contribute to Songkhla Old Town. Most have returned here from work or studies elsewhere, either due to family obligations or the increase in available business opportunities. They range in backgrounds and professions – from artists, architects and academics to ex-politicians, business people, shop owners and urban planners – and this diversity enables each to contribute in different ways. Some can offer financial resources and spaces, and others with strong social capital can draw in collaboration and in-kind support from other organisations. The local academics can bring students to participate in cultural and creative activities as alternative spaces for learning. The study identified several local residents and grouped them under bridging and linking roles they performed, which are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. They were selected for exhibiting typical characteristics of these roles. Also, key actors who perform leadership roles in facilitating bridging, bonding and linking social capital were identified as being collaborative, generous, supportive, philanthropic, community-led and being passionate about Songkhla's heritage.

Bridging ideas, fields and knowledges

The co-founders of the most active and creative group, Nakorn-nai Art Street (NAS), perform unique bridging roles by integrating inspiration from elsewhere with local assets, demonstrating considerable abilities to absorb, combine and transform existing spaces, values and practices.

Members of NAS represent a younger generation of Songkhla who are returning to contribute to the development of the creative and cultural milieu of the place. Often born and raised locally, but having studied and worked away, they have been drawn back by the rich cultural heritage of the Old Town and have been actively involved in its redevelopment. Their initiatives usually involve restoration of dilapidated buildings, turning them into new creative gathering spaces, usually inspired by the cultural history of the city. For example, one of NAS's members, Mr Pakorn Rujiravilai (ปกรณ์ รุจิระวิไล), converted an old building into an art gallery to bring more cultural activities into the Old Town. This became the A.E.Y. Space, a purpose-built exhibition space with an artist studio on the second floor. The space now hosts temporary exhibitions, artist residencies, documentary club gatherings and film festivals, and is recognised as a key destination for artists, designers and filmmakers. It is also used for workshops and classes for students, providing collaborations with artist networks and artist residency schemes. Its activities have brought in external groups to contribute and collaborate with groups in Songkhla. Exhibitions held at A.E.Y. Space and the Ong Art Cafe showcase work from other creatives and also attract external creative communities to the Old Town.

Other restoration projects include the conversion of a 150-year-old Hokkien medicine shop into the Apothecary of Singora (APO) store that sells locally made products with a modern cafe at the front.

NAS performs an important bridging role by brokering knowledge and practices between different fields and internal/external groups. It has organised a temporary theatre for independent art films and documentaries, and hosts talks and discussions every Friday night. The restoration efforts by members of the NAS network have also raised interest in the architectural and cultural

heritage of the shop houses. For example, Baan Jean Sam Hong (formerly three Chinese shop houses), was turned into the Museum of Building and Living and is now the headquarters of the ASA's new co-working space in Songkhla.

Through bridging roles, NAS's soft infrastructures extend the value and impact of creating a welcoming space for local and outsider creative groups to cohere and maintain connection, assimilate new ideas and incubate an environment conducive for collective creativity.



Nakorn Nai House No. 3

A.E.Y. Space on Nakorn Nai Street
- exterior and interior



Together, the co-founders established the Nakon-Nai Art Street (NAS), a network of designers and artists that organise and support art, design, photography and film events in Songkhla Old Town.

Linking Authority and Influence

Several influential organisations perform a vertical linking role between grassroots groups and external bodies to bring in considerable resources and knowledge. One such linking role is undertaken by Songkhla Heritage Trust. This network originated from an informal group of Songkhla residents who were concerned with the deteriorating condition of the town, linked in part to the decline of the fishing industry. In its role as a formal body that could seek governmental support for its conservation efforts in the Old Town, it has acted as the district's key connector between local government, educational institutions, and public and private sectors. It is an effective connector between various creative hubs and forges strong links with local and central government, and public and private organisations. A key factor for the trust's prominence in the community and success in drawing in funding and support from internal and external organisations can be attributed to the influence of its leader, Mr Rangsi Rattanaprakarn (รังสี รัตนปรการ).

Mr Rangsi is one of the founders of the network and has played a key role in financially supporting activities and projects of the trust. His family owns Red Rice Mill and was instrumental in turning it into a cultural hotspot in the Old Town by adding sculptures of rice mill workers and restoring it to its iconic red colour. The trust not only benefits from his patronage but also his influence and standing in the community. He served as an advisor in the Thai government before his retirement, which arguably has provided him certain access and familiarity of political knowhow. Family ancestry and his continuing prominence in the community indicates the enduring trust, respect, relationships and local knowledge built up over many years. These features are noticed in linking roles that establish social cohesion and stability, which in turn decrease uncertainty and facilitate investment decisions in an economy.⁶ The trust's success in

gaining funding and sponsorship from government and private companies such as Chevron and PTTEP demonstrates the unique position of Mr Rangsi and his leadership in the trust, which accords with linking forms of social capital that leverage trust, power, finance and influence with key decision-makers.

Educational institutions have also played an important role in connecting local community organisations, academic institutions, local businesses and government agencies, and several were identified as important hard and soft infrastructures for the creative hubs and district of Songkhla Old Town. RUTS, located in Songkhla city centre, has been a prominent actor amongst the educational establishments. It offers training to budding new creative talents, and it has been active in promoting creative and cultural practices through the establishment of creative markets, festivals and events. It has also been running exchange study programmes with other local universities such as Thaksin University and SRU, as well as internationally with Chinese, Singaporean and Malaysian universities. These activities have been driven by key academics such as Dr Jaray Suwannachat (ดร.จเร สุวรรณชาติ), the vice-chancellor of RUTS. Not only is Dr Jaray in a position of influence in the University, he is also a well-respected local expert on cultural heritage urban regeneration. He and other local academics are active members in the Songkhla Heritage Trust, and work closely to bring expertise and influence from different parts of the community to work towards regeneration efforts.

Due to their educational focus, universities also have access to funds and external groups not normally available to other networks. They have been able to attract government-sponsored research funding to support collaborations with other institutions and community organisations, to use creative and cultural activities as a platform for urban regeneration. For example, RUTS'

innovation centre, Kid+D, is used as a business incubator in Songkhla and has become a hub for students and the public to experience design workshops and creative activities. It has become a focal point for RUTS' creative activities within the community. Kid+D is supported by the Thai government, with private organisations such as AIS (a prominent Thai telecommunications company) sponsoring the annual Lad Sang Doa

market, which originally emerged from funding by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) aimed at developing community tourism in Songkhla. The vertical linking evident in Kid+D illustrates how research funding leveraged from government benefits local businesses, residents and students, and typifies the uniqueness of social capital that intersects business, research, education, government, public and creative sectors.

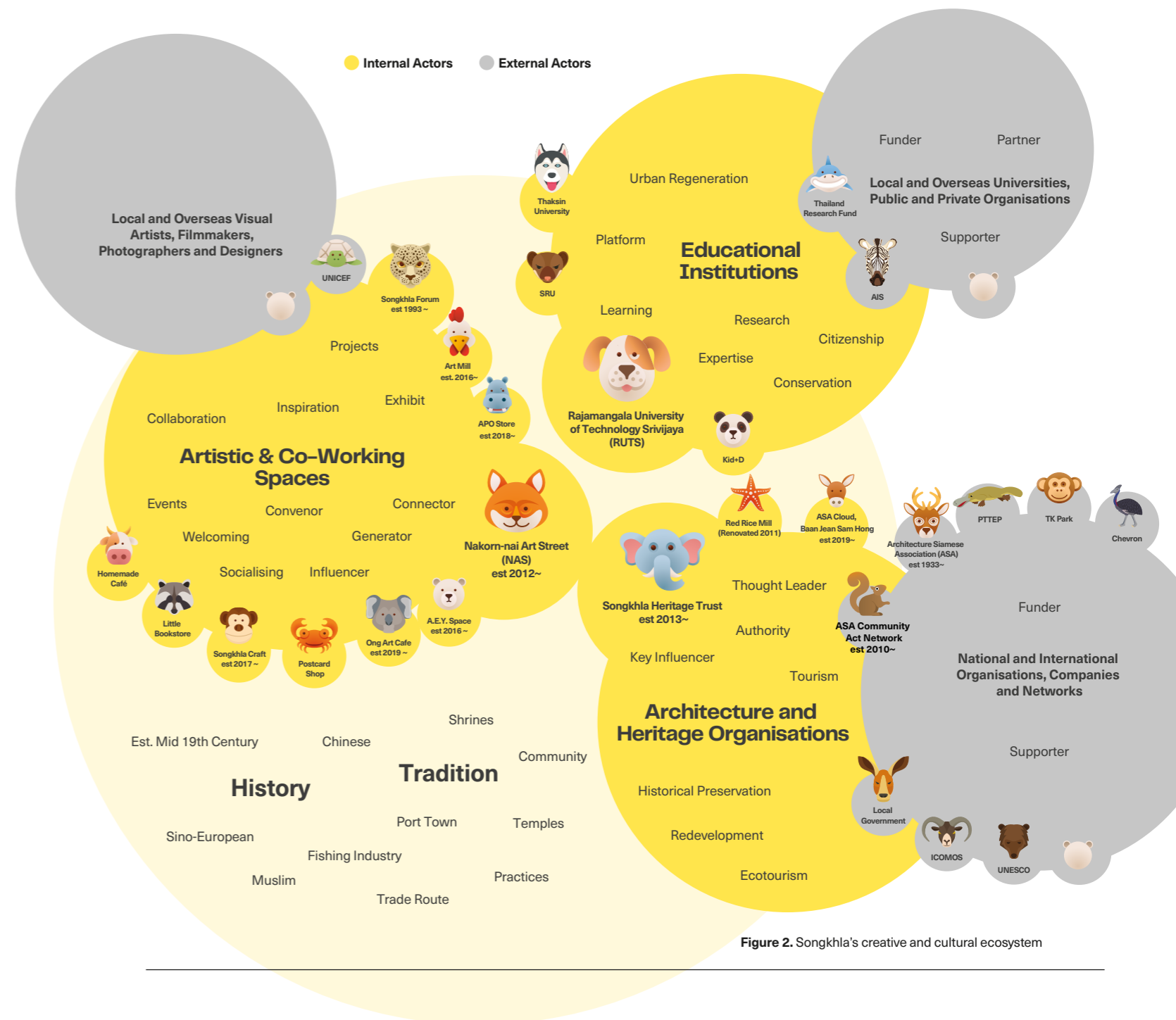


Figure 2. Songkhla's creative and cultural ecosystem

⁶ Westlund, H., Andersson, M., & Karlsson, C. (2013). *Creativity as an integral element of social capital and its role for economic performance*. Working Paper Series in Economics and Institutions of Innovation 330, Royal Institute of Technology, CESIS – Centre of Excellence for Science and Innovation Studies. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/hhs/cesisp/0330.html>

Key Characteristics of Songkhla Old Town's Creative District

Examining Songkhla Old Town through multiple dynamic layers and assets allows this study to arrive at the following assessment of the role and purpose of this particular creative, cultural district.

Revaluating Cultural Assets

Various creative networks, most notably NAS and Songkhla Heritage Trust, have undertaken significant restoration projects to preserve the Old Town's rich cultural heritage while opening up these spaces as sites of learning, sharing, gathering and connecting – making them notable artistic scenes for hosting local and external creative activities. This allows meaningful revaluing of cultural assets as well as the creation of new cultural value.

Generating New Cultural and Economic Capital

The revival of its rich cultural heritage, combined with dynamic interactions between the actors, spaces, activities and groupings, contribute to its growing creative and cultural capital. This in turn makes Songkhla Old Town an attractive place to live and visit, thereby opening up new business avenues. The building restorations taking place in the past five years have helped rejuvenate the Old Town – turning dilapidated buildings into cafes, art galleries and museums has made Songkhla a cultural tourist destination.

Attracting New and Returning Talent

The increasing number of creative spaces, events and activities has revived Songkhla as a creatively rich place, attracting locally born natives back to live and open new businesses. This cumulative effect makes this town appealing for potential creatives and entrepreneurs, such as students choosing to study at various colleges and universities, and mature professionals who are invited to exhibit and participate in events. A.E.Y. Space is an exemplar in organising a variety of events such as film nights, talks, exhibitions and artist residencies. These are undoubtedly capturing new and established talent, reflecting how other creative hubs in different areas in Southeast Asian countries are providing opportunities for artists to develop their work, nurturing artistic developments and connecting with new audiences and markets.⁷

⁷ Low, L. (2017). *Connecting creative communities: Creative hubs in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and The Philippines*. British Council. <https://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/resources/connecting-creative-communities-creative-hubs-mala/>

Building Community through Hard and Soft Infrastructures

The intimate and walkable scale of Songkhla Old Town enables a sense of community and belonging. As noted elsewhere, creative hubs are becoming a 'go-to' place for the younger generations – rather than generic and overly commercialised shopping malls – to provide professional development and self-actualisation for those who are keen to pursue personal interests and seek connection with like-minded others.⁸ Knowledge exchanges, collaboration and networking are supported by the various soft infrastructures identified, allowing their impact to extend further to connect with businesses, organisations, markets and cultures beyond this district. The hosting of the International Symposium on Asian Port Towns and Maritime Trade Route in October 2019 brought a range of national and international heritage experts to Songkhla, while the artist in residence programme at A.E.Y. Space has brought international artists and designers to collaborate with the local creative community. Various welcoming places and new infrastructures such as the Red Rice Mill, Kid+D and creative markets in the Old Town increase chance encounters by locals and visitors alike, enabling different people to meet. Fostering this diversity can avoid insular 'bubbles', facilitating knowledge exchange and broadening perspectives, which are notable features in promoting creativity.

Sustaining Social Impact

Songkhla Old Town can be viewed as a crucible for revitalising neighbourhoods, breathing new life and purpose into vacant and deteriorating assets for the benefit of existing and new residents. There are also several enterprising initiatives that are achieving various social outcomes, improving living conditions, supporting active citizenship while also creating new economic opportunities for the local residents. For example, the Ecotourism group has been working with the Hua Khol Deang community in Ampor Singora to develop ecotourism in the area. The work undertaken by the Songkhla Heritage Trust to regenerate Nakorn Nok Street has transformed it from an undesirable red-light district to a hub of creative and cultural activities. The Red Rice Mill supports educational activities for younger generations in Songkhla by providing public spaces, a library and free music lessons to local children. One of Songkhla Forum's projects is The Young Citizen, which provides activities such as writing a visual/textual diary about everyday garbage, proposing creative and sustainable ways of using paper and making lunch boxes from banana leaves to offer to Buddhist monks. These activities aim to improve quality of life as well as incubate active citizenship among children. Together these represent a significant social impact within this creative district.



The building restorations taking place in the past five years have helped rejuvenate the Old Town – turning dilapidated buildings into cafes, art galleries and museums has made Songkhla a cultural tourist destination.

⁸ Phonghanyudh, K., & Kaewlai, P. (2019). *Creative hubs mapping: Bangkok*. British Council. <https://www.britishcouncil.or.th/en/programmes/arts/creative-hubs/creative-hubs-mapping-bkk>

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A.E.Y. Space

www.facebook.com/Aeyspace

อาษา

Association of Siamese Architects (ASA)

www.asa.or.th/en

อาร์ตมิล

Art Mill Songkhla Art Centre

www.facebook.com/ArtMillSongkhla

ฮาร์ทเมด

Heartmade Cafe

www.facebook.com/Heartmadecoffee
[andeatersongkhla](http://andeatersongkhla.com)

คิตตี้

Kid+D

www.facebook.com/historiccenter

Nakorn-nai Art Street (NAS)

www.facebook.com/nakornnaiartstreet

มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลศรีวิชัย

Rajamanala University of Technology Srivijaya (RUTS)

www.rmuts.ac.th/en

ทับ หัก หิ้น หรือ โรงสีแดง

Red Rice Mill

www.bit.ly/39Rn4cr

ภาคีคนรักเมืองสงขลา

Songkhla Heritage Trust

www.songkhla-ht.org

พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติสงขลา

Songkhla National Museum

www.finearts.go.th/songkhlamuseum

มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสงขลา

Songkhla Rajabhat University (SRU)

www.skru.ac.th/eng

มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ

Thaksin University

www.tsu.ac.th/eng/about.php

Apothecary of Singora shop on Nakhon Nok Street

Executive Summary Chiang Mai

Thanks to a flourishing tradition of craft practices and a strong drive for innovation, Chiang Mai (เชียงใหม่) is considered one of the most creative cities in Thailand. Officially designated in 2017 as UNESCO's Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art,¹ Chiang Mai is home to many creative businesses and cultural initiatives that preserve and innovate traditional practices of pottery, silverwork, wood carving, silk embroidery and lacquerware – particularly of the Lanna tradition, dating back to the foundation of Chiang Mai in the 13th century.

The uniqueness of Chiang Mai lies in its traditional practices, which are prevalent in various craft villages in the city, combining with new, often community-based art initiatives, galleries and studios where artists, artisans and entrepreneurs can experiment with alternative techniques,

materials and product designs. While there are many creative hubs and craft villages in Chiang Mai, this report mainly focuses on the Wua Lai area (วัวลาย), located south of the walled old city, where traditional silversmithing practices exist alongside efforts to create new points of reference for a growing community of young, returning creative talent. In Wua Lai, temples act like creative hubs, maintaining, promoting and sharing Lanna traditions, while contemporary creative hubs enable intergenerational and interdisciplinary collaboration and provide access to resources and opportunities. This unique blend of hard and soft infrastructures, including social networks, present characteristics that are significantly different to other creative districts in Thailand, providing a worthy case for examination.



Weave Artisan Society creative hub

¹ UNESCO. (2017). Chiang Mai. UNESCO Creative Cities Network. <https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/chiang-mai>



**Chiang Mai (เชียงใหม่)
is considered one of
the most creative cities
in Thailand.**



A shop at Baan Kang Wat creative hub

Background



Chiang Mai Province has a population of 1.7 million.

Located in northern Thailand, Chiang Mai was established in 1296 as the capital of the Lanna Kingdom (อาณาจักรล้านนา), a reign influenced by Indian culture and Sanskrit language between the 13th and 18th centuries. Various craft practices contributed to making the city a renowned trade centre due to its proximity to the Ping River (แม่น้ำปิง) and major trading routes.

With the decline of the Lanna Kingdom and the wars for control by the Burmese reign that followed, Chiang Mai was abandoned between 1776 and 1791. Later, the Lanna Kingdom – including Chiang Mai – became a tributary of Bangkok and the city was rebuilt and repopulated by King Kawila (พระเจ้ากาวิละ), who resettled rural residents in Chiang Mai city and restored historical buildings and temples. Such initiatives resurrected the city's culture, including music, dance, ceremonies and craft practices. Craft villages began to form in different districts in Chiang Mai Province. Some emerged during the city's repopulation efforts, when war captives with different trades and ethnicities were brought to Chiang Mai from Burma and nearby regions.² Bo Sang (บ่อสร้าง) became known for paper umbrellas and San Kamphaeng (สันกำแพง) for silk. In Chiang Mai city, a community of silversmiths formed in Wua Lai that made silver products for domestic use.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Chiang Mai grew in popularity as a tourist destination, and handicrafts were further promoted as a symbol of northern Thai culture. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Thailand transformed from a mainly agricultural economy to an industry-based one, and new transport infrastructure facilitated the introduction of industrially produced goods into rural areas. Crafts were threatened by mass production and began to decline, but in Wua Lai the high demand for silver products from tourists catalysed silversmithing practices to modernise and offer a greater variety of products.

Today, Chiang Mai Province has a population of more than 1.7 million people, of whom 130,000 live in the city. Most local residents speak the Lanna language (Kum Muang: คำเมือง) and practise Lanna traditions. The majority of the creative businesses build upon Chiang Mai's traditional practices of pottery, silverwork, wood carving, silk embroidery and lacquerware. This combination of traditional culture and practices with contemporary art spaces, galleries and studios where artists, artisans and entrepreneurs can experiment with new techniques, materials and designs is a key feature of Chiang Mai's creative vibe. The city is also the second largest IT and tech cluster in Thailand, with an estimated 1,000 start-ups;³

² Johnson, A. (2010). Rebuilding Lanna: Constructing and consuming the past in urban northern Thailand. Doctoral dissertation, Cornell University.

³ StartupBlink. (2019). Cities global ranking of startup ecosystem. <https://www.startupblink.com/>

it is a popular destination for digital nomads who work remotely,⁴ though it is unclear if they settle here long-term.

This case study focuses on Wua Lai as a creative district that exemplifies Chiang Mai's unique blend of traditional and contemporary creativity. It draws on examples from other creative hubs and craft villages around Chiang Mai city, such as Baan Kang Wat (บ้านข้างวัด) in Tambon Suthep (ต.สุเทพ) which shows promising signs of becoming a creative district in the future. This means not all creative districts are included in this report – for example Nimmanhaemin Road (ถนนนิมมานเหมินท์), which has a proliferation of creative businesses along its

main strip and many also housed in a brick landmark building called One Nimman. In recent years, increase in domestic tourism and gentrification has pushed the residents here to rent and renovate their homes as hostels, with little care for the preservation of the traditional Lanna architectural style. This commercial growth and rise in rent has pushed many creatives to set up workspaces outside the city, giving Nimmanhaemin Road a commodified 'shopping mall' atmosphere in stark contrast to other districts that retain cultural capital and community ties. Negative impacts of gentrification, as observed in other case studies, continue to be a concern.



Wat Sri Suphan

⁴ Creative Chiang Mai. (2019). Chiang Mai creative mapping 2019-2020: A report on the creative diversity of Chiang Mai. http://www.creativechiangmai.com/org.php?sorgcate_

Typology of Chiang Mai's Creative and Cultural District



Various infrastructural developments have combined with the preservation and promotion of intangible heritage, including cultural, spiritual and traditional practices. Since the 1990s, creativity and its interaction with other economic sectors such as tourism, business and entrepreneurship have resulted in the development of a unique environment where traditional practices and values contribute to cross-sector innovation. This results in a vibrant and dynamic environment where creative activities can thrive.

The study has identified key infrastructures that contribute to the sustainment and development of Chiang Mai's creative and cultural assets. Old craft villages still exist alongside more recent community initiatives such as Baan Kang Wat in Tambon Suthep or Weave Artisan Society in Wuai Lai, discussed further in this case study. The diversity of creative organisations is evident in the Creative Chiang Mai report (2019-2020)⁵ that mapped 200 activities. Building on this map, the most influential infrastructures have been grouped in this case study based on the roles they perform to promote and sustain the creative conditions of Chiang Mai. Traditional craft communities, new enterprises and institutional initiatives are interwoven with horizontal 'bonding' and 'bridging' ties within and between groups with overlapping interests and goals, as well as vertical 'linking' of social capital that grants access to external resources. The study identifies these relationships as constituents of local social capital and a strong cultural and creative environment in Chiang Mai.

Creative workshop at Baan Kang Wat

⁵ Creative Chiang Mai. (2019). Chiang Mai creative mapping 2019-2020: A report on the creative diversity of Chiang Mai. http://www.creativechiangmai.com/org.php?sorgcate_

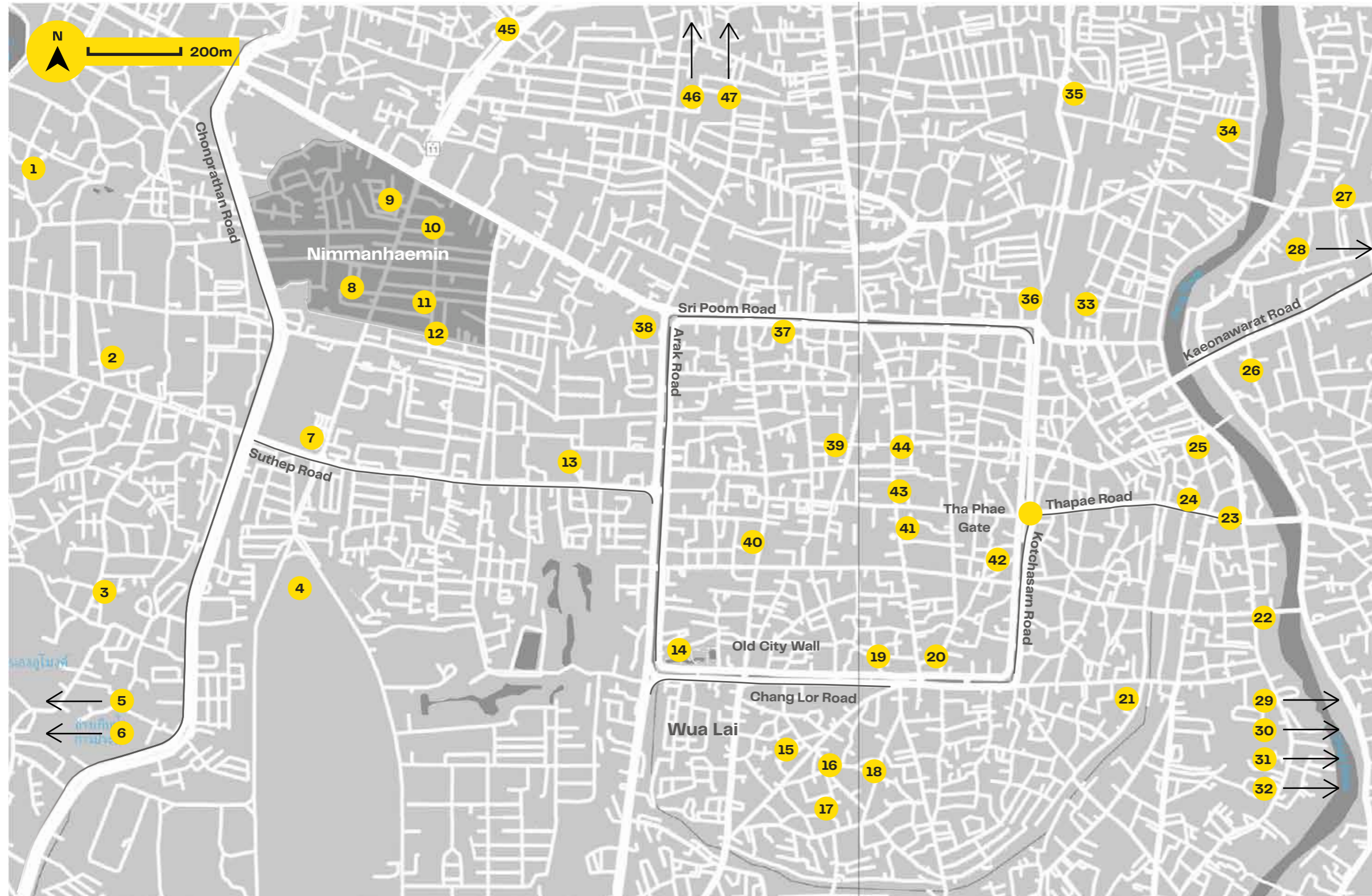
Hard Infrastructures

Whilst Chiang Mai has been modernising with various facilities – hotels, cinemas, sport complexes, shopping malls, supermarkets and hospitals – these stand alongside enduring historical features. Chiang Mai's city centre is surrounded by moats, walls, gates and architectural façades, containing 40 ancient Buddhist temples. Hundreds more still stand outside of its walls. Eighteenth-century craft villages in this region still operate to preserve and pass on time-honoured craft practices, yet many people are concerned with how Lanna wooden architecture is threatened by

redevelopments that disregard traditional building and planning practices. As Chiang Mai undergoes significant urban development – a steady increase in tourism being its main driver – it faces challenges in planning hard infrastructures in a way that supports the soft infrastructures. It also faces challenges in its ability to attract and retain talent and nurture and mobilise ideas.



Bo Sang craft village



- 1 Chiang Mai University Library
- 2 Chiang Mai University
- 3 Wattana Artspace
- 4 Airport
- 5 Suthep
- 6 Baan Kang Wat
- 7 CMU Art Centre
- 8 Asian Culture Station (Closed)
- 9 Dom Cafe
- 10 Art Mai? Gallery
- 11 C.A.P. Studio
- 12 Seescape Gallery
- 13 Maharaj Nakorn Hospital
- 14 Buak Hat Park
- 15 Wat Sri Suphan, Lanna Crafts Wisdom Museum, Ancient Lanna Arts Study Centre, Silver Temple Foundation
- 16 Wat Muen San
- 17 Friend For All Children Foundation
- 18 Weave Artisan Society
- 19 Baan Phor Liang Meun Terracotta Arts (Closed)
- 20 Pratu Chiang Mai Market
- 21 Steel Market
- 22 Redchilli Cooking School
- 23 Baan Tuck Art Centre
- 24 Cotton Farm
- 25 Warorot Market
- 26 Woo Cafe, Art Gallery & Shop
- 27 Lanna Wisdoms School
- 28 Payap University
- 29 Bo Sang
- 30 San Kamphaeng
- 31 Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum
- 32 Chiang Mai Art Museum
- 33 TCDC Chiang Mai
- 34 Plants and Fruit Market
- 35 Jingjai Market
- 36 Bus Station
- 37 Simply Happy Coffee
- 38 Ram Hospital
- 39 Chiang Mai City Arts & Cultural Centre, and Historical Centre
- 40 The Meeting Room Art Gallery
- 41 Lanna Architecture Centre
- 42 S.A.C. Art Lab
- 43 Supachet Studio
- 44 Lanna Folklife Museum
- 45 Food Market
- 46 Chiang Mai National Museum
- 47 Highland People Discovery Museum

Figure 1. Key infrastructures of Chiang Mai near the Old City Wall

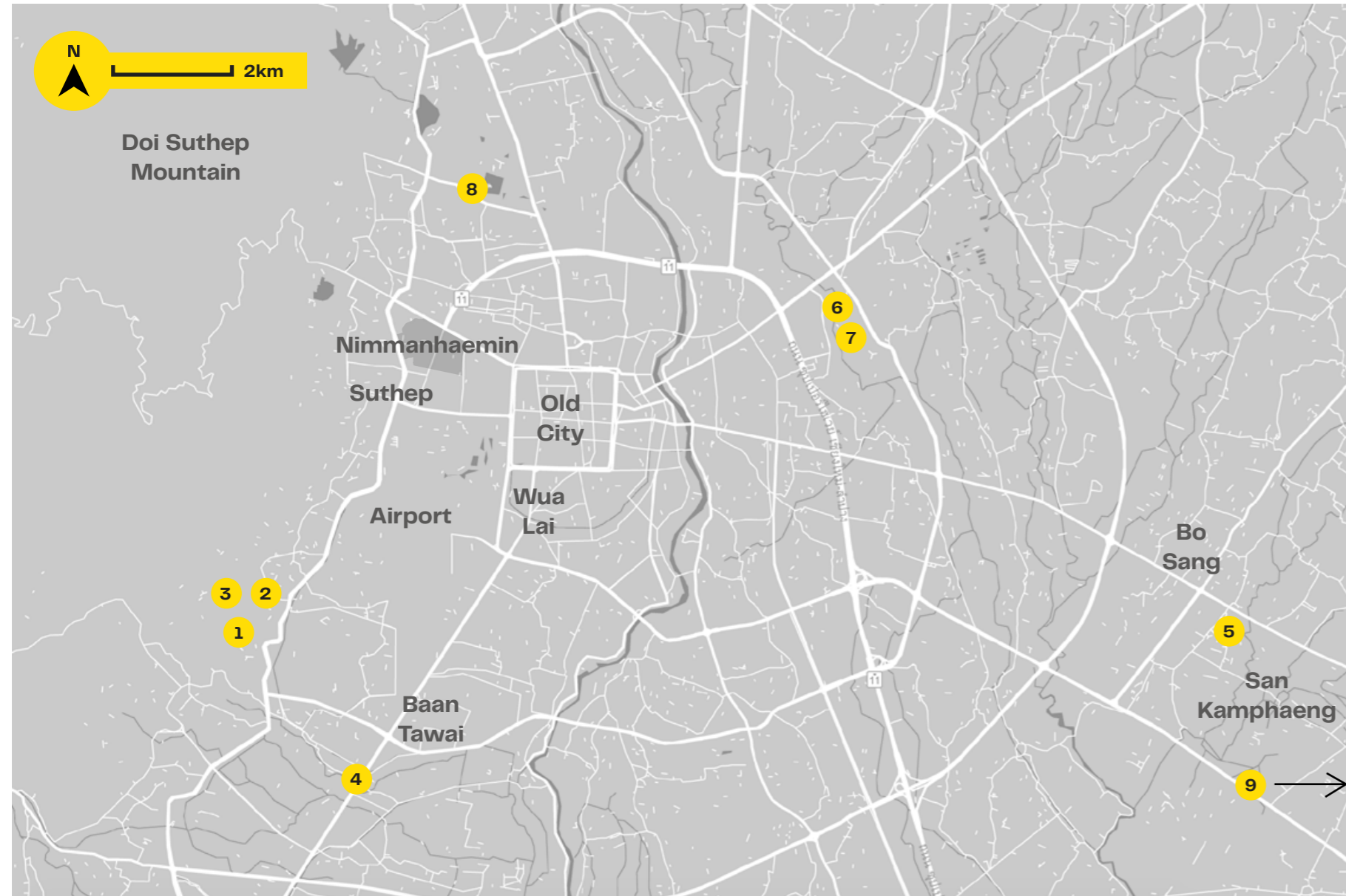


Figure 2. Key infrastructures of Chiang Mai

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Pongnoi Community Art Space | 6 Payap University Library |
| 2 Rumpueng Loudspeaker | 7 Payap University |
| 3 Baan Kang Wat | 8 Highland People Discovery Museum |
| 4 North Chiang Mai University | 9 Chiang Mai Art Museum |
| 5 MAIAM Contemporary Art Museum | |

Temples as Creative Hubs

Temples and religious practices play a key role in sustaining knowledge about craft – for example handcrafted silver. Buddhist temples influenced by Lanna culture are places to observe the distinctive Lanna architectural styles and Buddha images, and their rituals and practices are embodied in the buildings and objects. **Wat Sri Suphan** (วัดศรีสุพรรณ), a temple in Wua Lai, is a significant focal point for Lanna culture. Together with another temple nearby, **Wat Muen San** (วัดหมื่นสาร), they are known for impressive handcrafted aluminium and silver decorations that cover the roofs, outside walls and interiors, including the Buddha statues. Supported by the local government, Wat Sri Suphan is promoted as a public space for silversmith training, organising art and craft events and opening up its facilities for events. For example, promotional events such as the weekly Lanna Cultural Show, also known as Chiang Mai Unplugged, offer music and dance performances, night-time light shows, temple tours and Lanna food and products for sale. Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, there are Buddhist activities at the temple such as meditation and conversations with monks. Every Saturday, Wua Lai Road holds a night market, and there is a flower festival in February. The Lanna Craft Wisdom Museum, the Ancient Lanna Arts Study Centre and the Silver Temple Foundation, located at Wat Sri Suphan, all contribute to the preservation of Lanna traditions and the transmission of practical knowledge.

If creative hubs have attributes as physical places of gathering that bring people from a variety of sectors together to support networking, business development and community engagement, then arguably Wat Sri Suphan and Wat Muen San in Wua Lai can be considered as creative hubs as well as religious centres where silver craft is taught and products sold. Wat Sri Suphan offers vocational training, where the tacit knowledge of silversmithing is shared with future generations. Today, the temple also offers short, practice-based courses that are very popular among tourists, enabling Lanna culture to continue flourishing.

Craft Villages

Various craft villages have appeared in Chiang Mai Province as a result of repopulation efforts in the 18th century and migration from surrounding areas to the city. Over the years, local craft traditions were established in different areas. **Baan Tawai** (บ้านทวาย), famous for woodcarving, **Bo Sang**, famous for paper umbrella production, **San Kamphaeng**, famous for silk, and **Wua Lai**, famous for silverware, were known craft communities where skills were passed on from one generation to the next. Originally, the products of these craft communities served daily life and were not intended for commercial purposes. The relatively recent transformation of these products into commodities has opened up opportunities for creativity, cross-sector collaboration and the invention of new forms and techniques. In Wua Lai, families and craftspeople live, work and trade in outdoor workshops attached to their homes and sell their products by displaying them on the street and in local markets.

New Creative Community Spaces

Alongside traditional craft villages, new community spaces are emerging. These projects often involve spaces that are owned by the founder and shared with, or rented, to artists and craftspeople as studios and showrooms. For example, **Baan Kang Wat** in Tambon Suthep was designed by its owner, Mr Nattawut Ruckprasit (นัฐวุฒิ รักประสิทธิ์), to contain several studio spaces surrounded by open public space. Similar examples in the area are Rumpueng Loudspeaker (ร้านเปิงกระบอกเสียงสถานี) and the Pongnoi Community Art Space (ไปงน้อยคอมมูนิตีอาร์ตสเปซ), hosting contemporary art exhibitions, community events, workshops and residency programmes. In Wua Lai, Weave Artisan Society aims to provide a point of reference for local manufacturers and creatives, bridging traditional craft practices with the younger generations of local creatives.

Educational Institutions

Educational institutions play an important role in fostering the blend of culture, tradition and creativity. For example, the **Lanna Wisdoms School** (โรงเรียนสืบสานภูมิปัญญาล้านนา) was established in 2000 by a public-private partnership of community members, the government and the private sector. The Lanna Wisdoms School started as an art and craft annual market, then became a school under the initiative of Phra Putapojvarapon (พระพุทธพจนวราภรณ์ หรือ จันทร ภูสโกล), the previous abbot of Wat Chedi Luang.⁶ The school sustains Lanna wisdom through teaching, research and publishing, and coordinating public and private sectors to provide regular Lanna-related activities and events. Institutions such as **Chiang Mai University** also contribute to the growth of the creative scene through their programmes. Students from other cities and abroad are attracted here to become artists, designers and aspiring entrepreneurs who often make Chiang Mai their home after graduation.

Museums and Art Spaces

There are a mix of public and private art spaces, which include established museums and small cafes and galleries that showcase local and international artworks. Long-standing museums include the Highland People Discovery Museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์เรียนรู้ประชากรบนที่สูง), the Chiang Mai National Museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติเชียงใหม่), and Northern Thai Information Centres at Chiang Mai University Library (ห้องสมุดมหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่) and Payap University Library (ห้องสมุดมหาวิทยาลัยพายัพ). Others have been established more recently such as MAIAM Contemporary Art Museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์ศิลปะร่วมสมัยใหม่เอี่ยม), Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Centre (ศูนย์ศิลปะและวัฒนธรรมเมืองเชียงใหม่), Lanna Architecture Centre (ศูนย์สถาปัตยกรรมล้านนา), Chiang Mai Historical Centre (หอประวัติศาสตร์เมืองเชียงใหม่) and Lanna Folklife Museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์พื้นถิ่นล้านนา). Galleries, workshops, studios and coffee shops such as Woo

Cafe, Meeting Room Art Gallery, Gallery Seescape, C.A.P. Studio and S.A.C. Art Lab follow recent trends for alternative artistic spaces. These places contribute to the creative growth of the city by curating inspirational exhibitions and hosting artist residencies. As visualised in the ecosystem map (pp. 66-67, fig. 3), galleries and cafes are valued for providing opportunities to experience new trends. Participating in events such as exhibitions fosters relationships, exposes people to different cultures and enables personal and community growth. The proliferation of such spaces has catalysed the Chiang Mai Creative Mapping project and the Chiang Mai Art Map to keep track of the burgeoning creative scene by listing craftspeople, designers, artists, galleries, performance spaces, residencies and studios.⁷ These spaces promote personal and community growth by providing easily accessible exposure to culture and new experiences, brokering relationships between creative professionals, facilitating collaboration and the circulation of ideas, organising group exhibitions, offering inspiration and a window on emerging trends.

Markets

Markets or 'kard' (กาด) in the Lanna language are a vital lifeblood for creative districts to promote and sustain local craft practices. Ratchadamnoen Street in the city centre, Tha Phae Sunday Market at the main city gate and Wua Lai Street south of the city wall are weekly markets where local products are sold, including Lanna craft products. Wat Sri Suphan organises the Saturday markets in Wua Lai, in collaboration with the local government. **Nimmanhaemin Art & Design Promenade (NAP)** market is a more recent event attracting a good mix of locals, Thais and overseas visitors that gives visibility to young, emerging local artists and craftspeople.

⁶ Jarusawat, P. (2017). *An exploration of the potential for collaborative management of palm leaf manuscripts as Lanna cultural material in northern Thailand*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield. <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/19631/>

⁷ CityNews. (2015, October 5). *Chiang Mai art map available around the city*. Chiang Mai Citylife. <https://www.chiangmaicitylife.com/citynews/general/chiang-mai-art-map-available-around-the-city/>

Transportation Infrastructures

Chiang Mai's legacy as a strategic trade route continues through the development of transportation infrastructures, bringing people, resources and influences with them. The city has attracted digital nomads, thanks to contained living costs (compared to other economically developed cities), quality of life, and easy access with daily flights, bus and train links to Bangkok and other major international cities. The city is also a popular tourist destination. In 2019, it received an estimated

11 million visitors, increasing four per cent from the previous year.⁸ Foreign visitors make up 60 per cent – half of them are from mainland China, and the number is expected to rise. A new airport will be completed by 2025 to ease traffic at the existing Chiang Mai International Airport. The Chiang Mai light rail project will commence construction in 2027, with three tracks running above and underground, reducing congestion and improving mobility in the city.⁹ These reflect Thai central government initiatives to develop infrastructures across the country, including in Chiang Mai.



Mapping hard infrastructures in Chiang Mai

⁸ The Nation Thailand. (2019, November 11). *Flat growth in tourist arrivals to Chiang Mai*. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30378237>

⁹ CityNews. (2018, July 16). *Light rail construction approved for Chiang Mai*. Chiang Mai Citylife. <https://www.chiangmaicitylife.com/citynews/general/light-rail-construction-approved-chiang-mai/>

Soft Infrastructures

Enduring and Sustaining Lanna Culture

A significant soft infrastructure of Chiang Mai is its rich Lanna culture that encompasses architecture, masonry, silverware, woodcraft, textiles, weaving, sculpture, dance, cooking, language and sacred writings. This northern region was, and continues to be, a melting pot of art and craft traditions since the ninth century, revived during King Kawila's reign 200 years ago that brought in communities of craftspeople to repopulate the city. This deep heritage has survived various adversities, such as the disenfranchisement of Lanna culture and prohibition of its language in the mid-20th century in favour of cultural homogenisation and national unity by the Thai government.¹⁰ Buddhism teachings were translated into Thai and there has been a decrease in the everyday use of Lanna language,¹¹ yet its resilient heritage endures through art and craft traditions. The introduction of central government policy that recognised Chiang Mai as the centre of the Thai tourism industry in 1960, and the celebration of the city's 700th founding anniversary in 1996, revived interest in Lanna traditions. Lanna scripts were reintroduced in monastic teachings, and the community-based preservation of Lanna culture started to gain popularity, with at least 50 clubs, courses and community groups dedicated to the preservation of Lanna language and traditions.¹²

This unique story of tenacity and regeneration provides a nourishing, soft infrastructure upon which other, new forms of art, culture and creativity flourish, evident in clothing, accessories, music and dance. Local materials such as silk, silver and wood are important resources for producing creative work today, in turn maintaining knowledge, techniques and practices into the future. All these products are widely available throughout Chiang Mai and promoted as authentic ways to experience the city,¹³ generating valuable income for local craftspeople and transmitting further creative and cultural value to domestic and overseas visitors. Lanna Buddhism, beliefs and practices can be learnt and experienced in identified hard infrastructures, such as museums and temple grounds. The importance of wisdom, knowhow and beliefs were highlighted by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) Thailand in the latest draft of the Bangkok Charter.¹⁴ This aims to ensure tangible and intangible aspects of Thai heritage are valued by institutions and the general public for conservation. Lanna culture is the region's unique asset and selling point, providing opportunities for innovation by mixing with contemporary methods, technologies and materials locally and brought in from elsewhere.

¹⁰ Jarusawat, P. (2017). *An exploration of the potential for collaborative management of palm leaf manuscripts as Lanna cultural material in northern Thailand*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield. <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/19631/>

¹¹ Charoenmuang, T. (2011). *Kon Muang: Prawatsat Lannasamaimai po so 2317-2553* (Kon Muang: The modern Lanna history from 1774-2010). Chiang Mai Creative Urban Solutions Centre.

^{12a} Jarusawat, P. (2017). *An exploration of the potential for collaborative management of palm leaf manuscripts as Lanna cultural material in northern Thailand*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield. <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/19631/>

^{12b} Saengngam, P., Wongsakul, S., Boontha, S., & Chinawong, N. (Eds.). (2005). *Lanna wisdom classrooms: Lively classrooms and learning wisdom for self-sufficiency*. Lanna Wisdoms School.

¹³ Schedneck, B. (2017). Presenting 'Lanna' Buddhism to domestic and international tourists in Chiang Mai. *Asian Journal of Tourism Research*, 2(3), 102-122.

¹⁴ Pumketkao-Lecourt, P. (2016, March 14-15). *Little people in conservation: Bridging the divide between local and international norms* [Paper presentation]. Workshop on the heritage of ancient and urban sites: Giving voice to local priorities, Singapore.

Weave Artisan Society

Weave Artisan Society is housed in a former ice factory, nested in the Wua Lai silversmithing area. While there are plenty of coworking spaces in the city that cater to its burgeoning population of digital nomads, Weave aims to bridge the younger local creatives and consumers with local wisdom and traditional craftspeople. It runs a continuous programme of workshops, exhibitions and residencies, and has a cafe for casual drop ins. These strategies raise the venue's profile, give exposure to creative work and showcase the art and design processes that lie behind the end products. It also provides space for creatives to meet clients and customers, access staff and equipment, and contribute to the visibility of creative businesses through PR and marketing. Weave brings creative energy into this district of local manufacturers, not exclusively as a consumer destination but in order to serve Chiang Mai's creative community. Being involved in, or partnering with, events such as Chiang Mai Design Week or TEDx Chiang Mai has been important in establishing it as a creative hub.



Mapping Chiang Mai's soft infrastructures

Creative Chiang Mai

Creative Chiang Mai is an alliance of organisations made up of Chiang Mai University, North Chiang Mai University and Payap University, together with members of private and government sectors. This consortium chairs the Chiang Mai Creative City Development Committee, which was set up in 2010 by central government. Its task is to develop strategies, raise funds and facilitate coordination and information sharing across stakeholders both horizontally and vertically. The organisation also implements activities and projects such as TEDx Chiang Mai, a recurring public speaking event inspired by the famous TED format, and the Chiang Mai Design Awards, which celebrate innovation and creativity across a range of design categories. The yearly Creative Chiang Mai report, now in its third edition, is becoming a useful resource in providing a map of creative places and initiatives in the city.

Internationally Visible Events

As evident in the Creative Chiang Mai report, there are numerous creative programmes every year. Most notable is the annual Chiang Mai Design Week – hosted by the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) Chiang Mai – that has been running since 2014. Jointly held for and by designers, craftspeople, artists and entrepreneurs, it showcases innovations and provides a conversation space for sharing work and knowledge among local, domestic and international visitors. Chiang Mai Design Week opens studios and venues around the city for the public, providing visitors with a rich calendar of talks, exhibitions, workshops, concerts and tours. In 2019, the event was extended from the usual nine days to 15 days, attracting around 200,000 visitors from all over the world and raising 200 million baht for the local economy.

Government Policies and Initiatives

Alongside the designation as a Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art by UNESCO, a number of government policies and initiatives have injected funds and vitality to develop Chiang Mai, reflecting its recognition as a notable creative place. The continual development of hard infrastructures has been discussed earlier. Beyond those, other examples include the National Innovation Agency (NIA), which aims to establish the city as an innovation ecosystem for agritech, tourism and design, and support start-ups that are linked with community products, services and businesses to improve economic development in the region. Grants are considered to selected start-ups and university or vocational college students who have solid business ideas to develop.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Chiang Mai Provincial Administrative Organisation (องค์การบริหารส่วนจังหวัดเชียงใหม่) has shown commitment to protecting and promoting the city's crafts heritage. Through the central government entrepreneurship policy and programme One Tambon One Product (OTOP) โครงการหนึ่งตำบลหนึ่งผลิตภัณฑ์, it supports local craftwork to promote national and international trading.¹⁶ The city promotes OTOP products through the Lanna Expo, a yearly showcase of products from northern Thailand that covers crafts, gastronomy and design. Many small-scale producers have accessed marketing and communication workshops through the OTOP programme.



Characteristics of key actors in Chiang Mai's creative ecosystem

^{15a} Rohaidi, N. (2019, June 11). *Thailand reforms procurement for startups*. GovInsider. <https://govinsider.asia/connected-gov/thailand-reforms-procurement-for-startups-theresa-mathawaphan-chief-strategy-officer-national-innovation-agency/>

^{15b} Royal Thai Embassy, Washington, DC (2018). *Ministries will fund Chiang Mai startup hub*. <https://thaiembdc.org/2018/05/10/ministries-will-fund-chiang-mai-startup-hub/>

¹⁶ Royal Thai Embassy Singapore. (n.d.). *What is OTOP?* <https://www.thaiembassy.sg/friends-of-thailand/p/what-is-otop>

Building Social Capital in Chiang Mai

For a large city like Chiang Mai, it is impossible to map dynamic social networks bounded by particular districts, so it will necessarily be partial and lacking some details. However, the network visualisation (on pp. 66-67) provides critical snapshots of how various groups are perceived to participate in Chiang Mai's creative and cultural ecosystem. For example, groups associated with educational institutions such as lecturers and students are important for learning, skill-sharing, exploration, motivation through fun and providing supportive environments. Temples are identified in providing opportunities to learn about life and gain spiritual, soulful experiences. This complex ecosystem shares how various individuals, groups and organisations together nourish this creative ecosystem through values of well-being, discovery, self-expression, productivity, connectivity, friendship and ground-up support. Also, key actors who perform leadership roles in facilitating bridging, bonding and linking social capital (see previous page) were identified as being good listeners, open-minded, creative, friendly, understanding, energetic, positive-thinking, peacemakers, generous with time and having local wisdom and being able to invest time.

Mixing, Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Founders and initiators of creative communities perform significant bridging roles. Common characteristics include the ways in which the founders engage their peers and friends in collective projects. New typologies of creative spaces are emerging alongside traditional craft villages, which historically have had mixed residents, workshops and trade spaces where these communities functioned as an extended family, characterised as bonding social capital. Bonding links are 'enduring multifaceted relationships between similar people with strong mutual commitments, such as among

friends, family and other close-knit groups'.¹⁷ Expert interviewees explained that families who live in the same craft village have outdoor workshops attached to their homes and sell their products by displaying them on the street and in local markets. Such communities rely on mutual trust, support and the sharing of resources and skills. The crafts here have evolved from religious and everyday use to become integrated with contemporary forms and techniques in recent times.

This familial bonding of communities and practices arguably provides fruitful structures for bridging links to anchor particularly new and external members who are joining, to develop a strong, creative community over time. Members bring different skills or assets, thus exposing others to new ideas, values and perspectives to generate opportunities for cross-pollination and innovation. Baan Kang Wat is an exemplar, where the founder has endeavoured to retain the spirit of a close-knit community where people can collaborate. Weave Artisan Society is another, where the co-founder, Mr Julian Huang, spent three years building relationships with artists, artisans and designers, particularly young talents who have their studios outside of the city centre, and negotiating resources and opportunities before opening its doors to the public. Mutual trust is an essential element in bonding social capital, and this process cannot be rushed – Mr Huang states that it has to be slow, organic and respectful. The key is to create the right environment to foster skill-sharing and mutual support. He has invested time in building such relationships with local creatives, as Weave aims to showcase the hidden stages and processes that underlie the end products – which in turn requires the artists and designers to reveal their unique techniques that may have been previously undisclosed. In order to prevent the loss of talent to other locations such as Bangkok and overseas, Weave provides support and direction to returning talent and the emerging graduates who Mr Huang meets through his teaching at Chiang Mai University.

¹⁷ Gilchrist, A. (2019). *The well-connected community: A networking approach to community development* (3rd ed.). Policy Press.

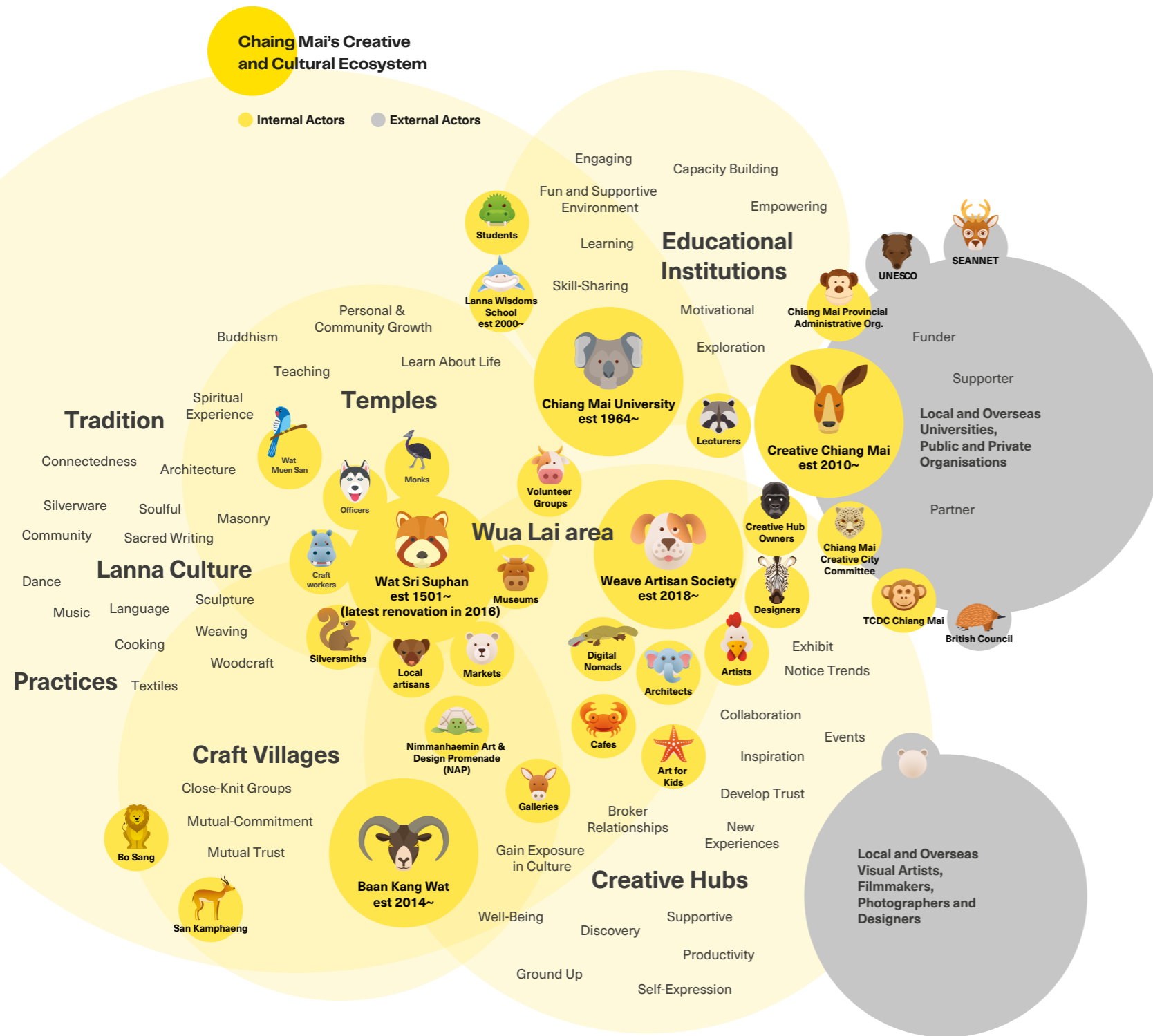


Figure 3. Chiang Mai's creative and cultural ecosystem

Linking Authority and Influence

The actors with authority and influence are often referred to as 'alpha-pup', 'authority', and 'key-holders' during the network mapping exercises. They have connectivity, power and leadership, enabling various creative and cultural initiatives. They were noted as playing key roles in linking to external networks. For example, the Creative Chiang Mai network has been influential in linking with internal and external organisations and networks such as SEANNET (Southeast Asia Neighbourhoods Network) and UNESCO, while the governor of Chiang Mai is known to work collaboratively with the TDCD Chiang Mai, local universities, public and private sectors and the Chiang Mai Creative City Development Committee to enable and sustain creative initiatives.

Again, temples play an important link in brokering relationships between organisations, tourists and local residents to access authorities and powerful resource providers. Northern Thailand has a

reputation for 'charismatic' monks, stemming from a tradition of messianic leaders among the Karen (ชาวภาคตะนาวศรี) population. This belief was revived in the late 19th century by the monk Khruba Sriwichai (ครูบาทศรีวิชัย), who was seen as a central figure of Lanna resistance to Siamese oppression. Since the boom of Lanna tourism in the 1960s, new generations of Khruba (a respectful epithet for these charismatic monks) have emerged. Khruba monks today are adept at using different forms of communication (including social media) to connect to a wide range of followers, from impoverished communities to urban elites.¹⁸ In this study, the abbot of Wat Sri Suphan in Wua Lai was observed in playing a key role in connecting with high-ranking monks in the area to promote silversmithing, creating the world's first silver chapel. He has brought silversmiths and various people together at the temple to host events, provide silversmith training and sell products at their markets. The Ministry of Culture has provided significant financial support to build and market Wat Sri Suphan as a cultural centre.



Mapping soft infrastructures in Chiang Mai

¹⁸ Cohen, P. (Ed.). (2017). *Charismatic monks of Lanna Buddhism*. NIAS Press.

Key Characteristics of Chiang Mai's Creative District

Sustaining and Innovating Local Craft Practices

Various communities of creative people, both traditional and recently established, work to preserve, sustain and innovate craft traditions in Chiang Mai while establishing venues for learning, connecting, and sharing skills and resources. This effort to both preserve and innovate ensures that Chiang Mai continues in its status as a creative city, and allows the enhancement of cultural assets and the continuous evolution of values supporting creativity. The identified hard and soft infrastructures in this study support knowledge exchange, collaboration and networking among this diverse range of creatives in Chiang Mai. Arguably, more places that favour interaction between traditional craftspeople and contemporary artisans are welcomed. As the city grows as a point of reference for creatives, it is crucial that the necessary policy instruments are put in place to ensure sustainable growth that is respectful of local traditions and communities.

Blending Spiritual, Cultural and Creative Values

Temples in Chiang Mai are 'living heritage' – active places of worship where Lanna traditions are sustained and shared. Monks build upon their positions of influence to mobilise capital and labour and draw attention to local assets and issues, gaining the support of Chiang Mai local authorities as well as people in the community. These influential figures can provide the community with opportunities and resources to develop cultural and creative activities and products, ensuring the preservation and transmission of traditions. This in turn benefits the local economy by adding value

to cultural assets and promoting them on an international scale. Chiang Mai's rich cultural heritage, dynamic creative scene, and popularity as a tourist destination nationally and internationally all contribute to its growth as a cultural centre and creative city. This trend is only expected to increase, thanks to the major transportation infrastructure work planned in the coming years.

Attracting New Talent

Chiang Mai is the second most important city in Thailand in terms of its number of start-up companies. This trend is set to continue in attracting more start-ups, particularly craft and design businesses, assured by Thai government policies to support the flourishing start-up ecosystem. Events such as TEDx and Chiang Mai Design Week, among many other art and design events throughout the year, are important incentives for creatives. It may take several years to determine how the new community of expats, digital nomads and returning talents integrate more fully into the local ecosystem, and in turn which hard and soft infrastructures enable new talent to grow, connect and flourish.



Baan Kang Wat

Links to Mentioned Sources

บ้านข้างวัด

Baan Kang Wat

www.facebook.com/Baankangwat

บ้านถวายเป็น

Baan Tawai

www.ban-tawai.com

C.A.P. Studio

www.chiangmaiarthonpaper.com

Chiang Mai Centre Museums (Chiang Mai City Arts & Cultural Centre, Chiang Mai Historical Centre, Lanna Folklife Museum)

www.cmocity.com

ห้องสมุดมหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่

Chiang Mai University Library

www.library.cmu.ac.th/cmul

Creative Chiang Mai

www.creativechiangmai.com

พิพิธภัณฑ์เรียนรู้ประชากรบนที่สูง

Highland People Discovery Museum

www.highlandmuseum.or.th

พิพิธภัณฑ์ศิลปะร่วมสมัยใหม่เอี่ยม

MAIAM Contemporary Art Museum

www.maiiam.com

Meeting Room Art Gallery

www.facebook.com/themeetingroomartgallery

Nimmanhaemin Art & Design Promenade (NAP)

www.nimmansoi1.com

ห้องสมุดมหาวิทยาลัยพายัพ

Payap University Library

www.lib.payap.ac.th

ไปรษณีย์คอมมูนิตีอาร์ตสเปซ

Pongnoi Community Art Space

www.facebook.com/pongnoi

ร้านเปิงกระบอกเสียงสถาน

Rumpueng Loudspeaker

www.rumpuengartspace.wordpress.com

S.A.C. Art Lab

www.sac.gallery

Gallery Seescape

www.galleryseescape.co

TEDx Chiang Mai

www.tedxchiangmai.com

Thailand Creative Design Centre (TCDC) Chiang Mai

www.tcdc.or.th/chiangmai

วัดศรีสุพรรณ

Wat Sri Suphan

www.watsrisuphan.net

Weave Artisan Society

www.weaveartisansociety.com

Woo Cafe

www.woochiangmai.com

Next Page Clockwise from Top

Weave Artisan Society, Wat Sri Suphan, Baan Kang Wat and One Nimman



Executive Summary Bangkok Charoen Krung

Charoen Krung (เจริญกรุง) is an old trade centre that boasts many original initiatives, including Thailand's first public school, first luxury hotel and first road. Reflecting these origins, today Charoen Krung is known as a prime creative district in Bangkok. Its northern end is next to Yaowarat (Bangkok Chinatown: เยาวราช), while its southern area connects to Taksin Bridge (สะพานตากสิน) and Sathorn Road (ถนนสาทร), providing easy access to public transportation (BTS stations) and main business areas (Sathorn and Silom: สาทรและสีลม). Charoen Krung's infrastructure developments began in the 1700s, with successive waves of Chinese, Muslim and European settlements, whose influences are etched in the roads, bridges, hotels, temples, churches, mosques and shop fronts interspersed through its long, narrow thoroughfares. Descendants of these communities have strong familial bonds and sustain various cultural and creative practices.



Charoen Krung shop front

Due to its strategic location, importance as a trading hub and historically diverse cultural assets, the Thai government has invested heavily in this neighbourhood to develop it as a creative district. The relocation of the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) in 2017 catalysed a purposeful drive to build on rich cultural resources and form a vibrant creative district in the centre of Bangkok. With the TCDC at the epicentre, the creative district designation includes an area spanning Talad Noi in the north and Taksin Bridge to the south. Leveraging central government support and connecting district offices with design studios and local communities, the Creative Economy Agency (CEA) founded in 2018, encompassing the TCDC offices in and outside Bangkok, has been instrumental in raising the profile of Charoen Krung as a creative destination. It organises nationally prominent events such as Bangkok Design Week and various ongoing programmes that support creative businesses. As a result, in the past three years the number of galleries, cafes, shops, studios and start-ups have grown. These relatively new initiatives, combined with Charoen Krung's rich and layered cultural heritage, have enriched an area that is unique in Bangkok. As seen in other creative districts featured in this report, these tangible and intangible assets in the area are important ingredients for the creation and sustainment of a creative environment. Charoen Krung has transformed from a historical area of importance to being recognised as a major creative district in Thailand.



The relocation of the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) in 2017 catalysed a purposeful drive to build on rich cultural resources and form a vibrant creative district in the centre of Bangkok.



Bangkok Design Week 2020 outside the TCDC and CEA office in the Grand Postal Building

Background



Charoen Krung is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Bangkok that have grown as part of urban development in Thailand since 1700.

Located outside the old city wall along the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya River (แม่น้ำเจ้าพระยา), it has historically been well connected. Under King Rama IV's direction to improve the infrastructure in Bangkok, Charoen Krung became the first area to have a paved road, which was initially named 'New Road' but later changed to 'Charoen Krung', meaning 'the prosperous city'.¹ This name was subsequently adopted for the whole district.

Diverse cultures such as Chinese, Thai-Muslim, Thai-Catholic and Europeans have been living together here for more than 200 years, since the Rattanakosin period begun in 1782. The first to settle here were local Thais and migrants from mainland China. The north end of Charoen Krung has been the main Chinese residential area since the 1780s, and businesses were established in Yaowarat and Sampeng (สำเพ็ง) nearby to form the Talad Noi community (ชุมชนตลาดน้อย). The Thai-Muslim population then grew rapidly after the Haroon Mosque (ชุมชนมัสยิดฮารูน) was built in 1828. The neighbourhood was further developed during the reigns of King Rama V (1868-1910) and King Rama VI (1910-25) to enhance the country's relationship with the West. The Si Phraya neighbourhood (ย่านสี่พระยา), as it was known then,

was the earliest Western settlement in Thailand. Western-influenced buildings grew rapidly – for example, Victorian architecture can be seen in the monks' residences at the Suan Plu temple (กุฎิพระวัดสวนพลู) and the Portuguese Embassy. Other buildings housed European head offices, such as the Danish East Asiatic Company and the British firm Louis T. Leonowens Limited. During the 1900s, the Catholics increased in numbers, influenced by Portuguese Catholics and pastors. The Assumption Convent School, Assumption College and Assumption Cathedral were built along Charoen Krung Road, providing a strong base for the Catholic community. Altogether, Western, Chinese, Muslim and Thai-influenced buildings have come to symbolise cultural diversity in Charoen Krung.

Today Charoen Krung has grown to include two Bangkok districts: Samphanthawong (เขตสัมพันธวงศ์) and Bang Rak (เขตบางรัก), and continues to be one of the major business areas of Bangkok. These districts have around 70,000 residents, as of 2019. As a historical area, there have been many old buildings unused for years. When the TCDC relocated to Charoen Krung in 2017, it catalysed the area's renewal by turning abandoned buildings

¹ Moonnanus, N. (2016). The Bangkok night. *The Cloud*. https://readthecloud.co/notenation-4/?doing_wp_cron=1582265219.0359981060028076171875

into creative places, and as a result many new creative businesses have moved to the area. The development of Charoen Krung as a creative district owes much to the government's impetus and investment. The CEA has become the key organisation driving and supporting creative activities in this district. It plays a leading role in collaborating with other public and private sectors, such as the Bangkok district offices (สำนักงานเขตกรุงเทพมหานคร), Thailand Tourism Authority (การท่องเที่ยวแห่งประเทศไทย), local businesses and communities to organise national creative events every year – for example, Bangkok Design Week and the Awakening Bangkok festival of light. This has brought new opportunities to the residents and businesses and has drawn further

creatives to the area. Five-star hotels, such as **Mandarin Oriental Bangkok, Shangri-La Bangkok, Royal Orchid Sheraton and Lebua**, enjoy a close location to the river. The area is famous for jewellery, restaurants and art galleries, making it attractive to tourists and business people. Charoen Krung is now considered a model of creative district development that the CEA would like to apply to other areas in Thailand.



Charoen Krung shop front

Typology of Charoen Krung's Creative District

As an area continuously developing since the 1700s through successive waves of migration, settlements and royal initiatives, Charoen Krung's hard and soft infrastructures are layered with various historical, cultural and commercial influences.



Warehouse 30 during the 2020 Bangkok Design Week



Top
Outside Warehouse 30



Below
Editorial design exhibition in House No.1 during the 2020 Bangkok Design Week

Hard Infrastructures

Long established hard infrastructures such as major arteries and buildings have been developed further through increased investment since Charoen Krung's designation as a creative district in 2015. New BTS and MRT train extensions make it a major transportation hub, while the river that made it conducive to early trade gives this area a unique advantage for businesses to continue to prosper. As with many old districts, the long, narrow streets and small shops have discouraged large-scale urban development, keeping its underlying historical character intact.

Creative Spaces for Gathering

There are a growing number and variety of art spaces and galleries around Charoen Krung. **Warehouse 30** is the most prominent. Located amongst abandoned warehouses behind the Portuguese Embassy, Warehouse 30 became a landmark when Mr Duangrit Bunnag (ดวงฤทธิ์ บุนนาค), a famous Thai architect and a key player in this district, renovated the warehouses into an art and design hub and market in 2016. His previous project, the Jam Factory, was very successful in turning another abandoned warehouse in Klongsan into an attractive art space. Warehouse 30 is home to a cafe, co-working space, art spaces, design shops and furniture store **P. Tendercool**, and it regularly provides public talks, events and exhibitions. It has become a creative hub for designers, artists and craftspeople to showcase and market their work.

Another unmistakable place for gathering is the **Grand Postal Building** (ไปรษณีย์กลางบางรัก), which was the British Consulate during the 1850s before that moved to Phloen Chit Road (ถนนเพลินจิต) in 1940. Thereafter it was renovated and used as the headquarters of Thailand Post, marking the birthplace of Thailand's postal service.² In 2017, the TCDC moved its main office here with a mission to develop it as a creative district, making it a hive of creative activities and events. The CEA also plans to use abandoned spaces in Charoen Krung for art and design exhibitions – for example, Marine Police Lodging (บ้านพักตำรวจน้ำ) and the Custom House (โรงภาษีร้อยชักสาม).

Aside from the landmarks mentioned above, there are three other prominent art centres – **O.P. Place**, **O.P. Garden** and the **River City Bangkok Shopping Centre**, near Si Phraya Pier (ท่าเรือสี่พระยา). The pier, the largest in Charoen Krung, is next to a bus terminal. Si Phraya Pier is also located near luxury hotels as well as connecting to ICONSIAM, the largest shopping centre in Thailand, across the river. Nearby the pier, O.P. Place on Charoen Krung Road Soi 38 has been a commercial building for more than 100 years, and it won the Association of Siamese Architects' Best Architectural Conservation Award in 2008. Currently it has more than 58 stores, mostly selling luxury furniture, art, antiques and homeware, and is now one of the best places for buying art in the area.³

² Kongma, C. (2019). Central post office in Bang Rak. *The Cloud*. <https://readthecloud.co/grand-postal-office/>

³ Bangkok River. (2020). *O.P. Place*. <https://www.bangkokriver.com/th/place/op-place/>

Next to O.P. Place is O.P. Garden, which was built in the 19th century and is located on Charoen Krung Road Soi 36. In 1936, it was turned into the first polyclinic in Thailand, where Dr Boonsong Lekagul (นายแพทย์บุญสูง เลขะกุล) worked as a medical practitioner.⁴ O.P. Garden was also the private residence of Dr Boonsong, who later became a pioneer of wildlife conservation in Thailand. In 2009 it was renovated by TCC Capital Land and became a shopping arcade with a focus on art, design and craft.

River City Bangkok is another art and craft shopping centre in Charoen Krung. It was built in 1985 by the Italian-Thai Development Public Company (กลุ่มบริษัทอิตาเลียนไทย) and the Mandarin Oriental Group (กลุ่มกิจการแมนดารินโอเรียนเต็ล). River City Bangkok was the first commercial mall on the riverside in Thailand and it has more than 120 creative stores and contemporary galleries inside with collections from Asia and around the world. It is also an art and antique trading centre holding RCB auctions. Since its opening there have been more than 90,000 antiques sold in the RCB forum, a magnet for collectors and traders from around the world.

Iconic Landmarks

Many iconic buildings are situated along the river next to well-known tourist attractions. Several of these are heritage and conservation listed, being more than 100 years old, representing early-modern, Western-influenced architecture in Thailand. For example, the **Portuguese Embassy** was marked out as an important creative landmark due to its cultural significance, architectural heritage and contemporary street art on the front wall. Its presence indicates the long relationship with Portugal, as many Portuguese have settled here since the 1760s. The colonial-style building, which was designed in 1860 using local materials, welcomes visitors and provides tours. Another landmark is **Custom House**, built in 1886 in a neoclassical style, which was used as a customs office and hosted royal events in its banquet hall

until 1959. It later became Bang Rak fire station (สถานีดับเพลิงบางรัก) and then remained empty until 2019, when the owner, the Treasury Department of Thailand (กรมธนารักษ์), began work with the Fine Arts Department of Thailand (กรมศิลปากร) to restore the building, which will continue until 2025. **Charoen Krung Road Soi 30** (ซอยเจริญกรุง 30) or **Captain Bush Lane** (ตรอกกัปตันบุช) is an important historical area of this district that housed early Western settlement. The name hails from John Bush, a British sailor who lived on this lane and worked as the head of the Marine Department of Thailand at the end of the 19th century. Captain Bush Lane connects to the main Charoen Krung Road where **House No. 1** (บ้านเลขที่ 1) is located. It is the first house number in this district, with a unique blend of Thai-Western neoclassical design, making it a landmark venue for hire.

Contemporary landmarks are also noteworthy – for example, standing tall behind the Grand Postal Building is **CAT Tower**, where the Communications Authority of Thailand and Silpakorn University (มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร) are located. Many design and digital media students mingle here with other workers that use it as offices. Some unusual places have also become tourist attractions. **Sathorn Unique Tower** (สาทรยูนิคทาวเวอร์) was planned as a luxury apartment complex but was abandoned in the 1997 financial crisis and became home to itinerant squatters. Urban myths sprung up that it was a haunted building and it has since become an unusual tourist destination.

Tourism is a key driver of Charoen Krung's creative economy. While the area has historically attracted affluent visitors and foreign travellers, its emergence as a creative district has attracted more cultural tourists to the area. Its riverside is populated with luxury hotels, such as **Mandarin Oriental Bangkok**, the first hotel here, with a 150-year history and famous for its hospitality service training in Thailand. Other well-known hotels within the vicinity include **Shangri-La Bangkok**, **Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel** and **Lebua**. Most riverside hotels have their own private piers in order to shuttle their guests between the east and west bank of the Chao Phraya River.

⁴ Time Out Bangkok. (2018, November 15). O.P. Garden. <https://www.timeout.com/bangkok/th/attractions/o-p-garden>

- 1 Goldsmiths Shops
- 2 New Market
- 3 Old Market
- 4 Golden Buddha Temple
- 5 Metro Stop
- 6 Central Train Station
- 7 Pier
- 8 Baan Jam
- 9 Baan Morn
- 10 Puey Ungphakorn Artistic Park
- 11 Chow Suey Kong
- 12 Banyan Park
- 13 Tai Yuan Cafe
- 14 Taingon Cafe
- 15 Hong Wong Kun
- 16 Talad Noi
- 17 Baan Real Rare Talad Noi
- 18 Siam Commercial Bank
- 19 Holy Rosary Church
- 20 River City Bangkok Shopping Centre
- 21 Bus Station
- 22 Speedy Grandma
- 23 House No.1
- 24 Royal Orchid Sheraton
- 25 Portuguese Embassy
- 26 Warehouse30
- 27 P.Tendercool
- 28 The Grand Postal Building
- 29 TCDC
- 30 Muang Kae Temple
- 31 CAT Tower
- 32 Haroon Mosque
- 33 Marine Police Lodging
- 34 O.P. Garden
- 35 The Customs House
- 36 O.P. Place
- 37 Mandarin Oriental Hotel
- 38 Muslim Market
- 39 Assumption Cathedral
- 40 About White Cafe
- 41 Assumption College
- 42 Jewellery Trade Centre
- 43 Assumption Convent School
- 44 Chong Nonsi BTS Station
- 45 Bangkok Christian College
- 46 Surasak BTS Station
- 47 Lebua Hotel
- 48 Bangrak Fresh Market
- 49 Shangri-La Hotel
- 50 Samles Cafe
- 51 Homu Cafe
- 52 Sajja Pittaya School
- 53 Taksin Bridge Pier
- 54 Taksin BTS Station
- 55 Sathorn Unique Tower
- 56 A.P.O. Cafe
- 57 Malet Cafe
- 58 135 Cafe
- 59 Heiji Cafe
- 60 Hindu Temple
- 61 Seize Your Day Cafe
- 62 Hidden Milk Bar
- 63 Fotoclub
- 64 Att19
- 65 The Jam Factory
- 66 ICON SIAM

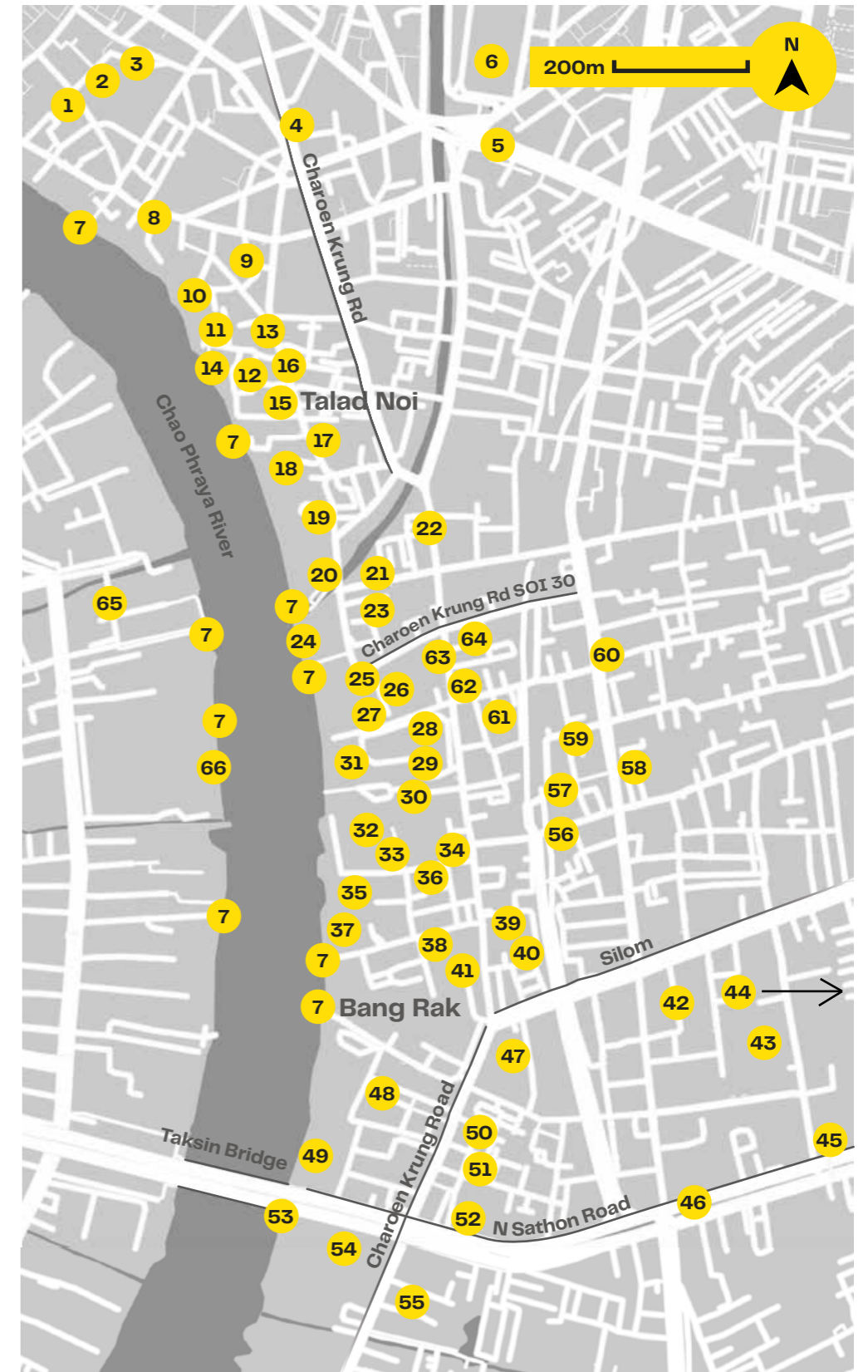


Figure 1. Key infrastructures in Charoen Krung

Religious and Educational Structures

The diverse cultures are reflected in various clusters of schools, churches, temples, shrines and mosques that exist side by side, reflecting Charoen Krung's historical settlement. Religion has always been an important aspect of life here so it's no surprise that schools are strongly linked to religious organisations. These infrastructures serve people with different beliefs, mainly Christians, Muslims and Chinese. **Assumption College** and **Assumption Convent**, both located on Charoen Krung Road, are Catholic schools next to **Assumption Cathedral** (โบสถ์อัสสัมชัญ บางรัก) – a key landmark in the area. These schools provide education to the Christian communities that live nearby. Other schools include the **Bangkok Christian College** (โรงเรียนกรุงเทพคริสเตียนวิทยาลัย), **Sajja Pittaya School** (โรงเรียนสัจจพิทยา) – which is a Chinese (Cantonese) school built in 1919 – and Buddhist schools such as Satee Wat Mahaprutharam Girls' School (โรงเรียนสตรี-วัดมหาพฤฒาราม) and Wat Mahunnopparam School (โรงเรียนวัดมหาพฤฒาราม), which is reported to be the first public school in Thailand. Talad Noi (ตลาดน้อย) in the north has a mix of Chinese, Catholic and Vietnamese buildings. **The Holy Rosary Church** (โบสถ์กาลหว่าร์ หรือ วัดแม่พระลูกประคำ) was built for the Portuguese Catholic community, the Vietnamese Temple (วัดญวนตลาดน้อย) there celebrates Mahayana Buddhism, and the **Chow Sue Kong** shrine (ศาลเจ้าโจซือคอง) is one of the oldest Hokkien shrines in Thailand. Other buildings include **Hong Wong Kun** (ศาลเจ้าโรงเกือก หรือ ศาลฮั่นหว่องกง) for Hakka descendants, the **Muang Kae** temple (วัดม่วงแค) for local Thai Buddhists, and the **Haroon Mosque** (มัสยิดฮารูน) for its strong Muslim community. These religious institutions are also important places to learn traditional arts, such as Arabic calligraphy, which are taught to children in the community at the Haroon Mosque. Famous for its Islamic art, it also provides classes to the public.

Transportation Infrastructures

Charoen Krung Road is the main artery through the district, connecting Yaowarat and Rattanakosin Island (เกาะรัตนโกสินทร์). The Charoen Krung area is walkable, allowing visitors to explore tourist landmarks, cafes and galleries. From the Grand Postal Building where the CEA is located, it is only around a one-kilometre walk to the **Saphan Taksin BTS station** (สถานีสะพานตากสิน), situated at a prime location on the riverside, adjacent to Surasak station (สถานีสุรศักดิ์), **Chong Nonsi** station (สถานีช่องนนทรี) and Sala Daeng station (สถานีศาลาแดง), where the main business areas are located. Saphan Taksin station is Charoen Krung's main transportation hub and the most crowded skytrain station in Bangkok, with more than 27,000 commuters. It was built in 1999 as the terminal station on the Silom Line, though now that line extends to the Thonburi area (ฝั่งธนบุรี) and terminates at Bang Wa station (สถานีบางหว้า). The congestion and increased demand have led to plans to expand and reconstruct Saphan Taksin station.

Charoen Krung has other access points, across **Taksin Bridge** and **Taksin Bridge Pier**. Built in 1980, Taksin Bridge, also known as Sathorn Bridge (สะพานสาทร), crosses the Chao Phraya River connecting Bangkok and Thonburi, providing the shortest route to reach the busy areas of Sathorn and Silom Road. Commuters using the Chao Phraya Express Boats (เรือด่วนเจ้าพระยา) travel to Charoen Krung, Sathorn and Silom using Taksin Bridge Pier.



Street art around Talad Noi neighbourhood



Chao Phraya river



Lebuena Hotel on Silom road

Soft Infrastructures

As one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Bangkok, Charoen Krung has a rich, diverse mix of cultures, communities and languages, shaped by various waves of migration. Grounded and nourished by strong and stable community groups, new creative businesses and communities are increasing in number since Charoen Krung's designation as a creative district. The area is experiencing the benefits and challenges of this influx of new people, including tourism, accelerated by the creative opportunities provided by the area.

The TCDC and CEA

The Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) was founded in 2004 as part of the Office of Knowledge Management and Development, reporting to the Office of the Prime Minister (สำนักนายกรัฐมนตรี) and originally located at the Emporium shopping centre in the Phrom Phong area (ย่านพร้อมพงษ์) on Sukhumvit Road (ถนนสุขุมวิท). The TCDC is a public-facing organisation to raise awareness about the value of design, and support creative activities and businesses. It is active in organising events to connect designers, suppliers and clients, with seminars that encourage creative development and showcase the latest design trends. It acts as a key connector in the creative ecosystem, providing services such as a design library, material library, exhibition spaces, designer network and database. Its relocation to Charoen Krung in 2017 aimed to drive the urban renewal of the area and develop it as Bangkok's first creative district. In 2018, the TCDC expanded into a larger organisation with the new task of encouraging the creative economy, and was renamed the Creative Economy Agency (CEA).

Festivals, Event and Markets

There are many activities all year round in Charoen Krung that bring local residents and visitors together. Markets, events and festivals are a chance to see the diversity of cultures, experience a range of foods and learn about crafts, beliefs and lifestyles. These activities can be grouped into cultural and creative events.

Cultural events include community walking tours, the Vegetarian Festival (เทศกาลกินเจ), the Ancestor Worship Festival (เทศกาลสารทจีน), the Lantern Festival and Chinese New Year (เทศกาลหยวนเจียว), which have mostly been organised and led by local communities. These events are important opportunities that draw the community together, strengthen relationships between different generations and pass on traditions from the older to the younger. For example, the Chow Sue Kong shrine regularly has many events and festivals, beautifully decorated during such occasions to perform rituals and dragon dance. Regular fresh markets also serve different communities.

Prominent creative events include Bangkok Design Week, TEDxCharoenkrung, art and design exhibitions and the Awakening Bangkok festival of light. These are notable for making Talad Noi an attractive area for visitors, and in turn, what was just a residential Chinese neighbourhood has now become a prominent cultural tourist spot in Bangkok. Most creative events are supported by governmental organisations such as the CEA and Thailand Tourism. Bangkok Design Week⁵ is significant to the development and sustainment of the creative district. It generates a lasting and memorable impact and also brings market opportunities to the creative businesses. Events such as this are part of a creative economy development plan by the CEA. These public events take place in prominent locations introduced under hard infrastructures, such as the Grand Postal Building (headquarters of the CEA), Warehouse 30 and also in other venues such as the River City Bangkok shopping centre, O.P. Place and O.P. Garden.

Enduring and Sustaining Various Cultural Communities

Charoen Krung has one of the oldest communities in Thailand, based on a solid relationship built over more than 150 years. These enduring communities represent the largest groups of people who live together, take care of each other and share similar beliefs and practices. As noted already, cultural and creative events become important mechanisms to transfer local wisdom from generation to generation. Retaining a strong sense of community is unique in an ever-expanding megacity such as Bangkok, which in turn is vital in regenerating rich social capital. This is expanded upon in the next section.



Mapping soft infrastructures with Charoen Krung's muslim and Talad Noi communities

⁵ Creative Economy Agency. (2020). *Bangkok Design Week 2020*. <https://www.bangkokdesignweek.com/>

Building Social Capital in Charoen Krung

As an urban neighbourhood in Bangkok, there is a large and complex ecosystem with many actors involved. Characteristics that were identified in these actors that enabled the sustainment of this ecosystem includes acting as a connector and introducer, being collaborative, relatable, genuine, local, trustful, sustainable and contributing to the organisation of events. The workshop with its residents identified a complex social network of individuals, communities, businesses, educational institutions, public and private sectors that form Charoen Krung (p. 86, fig.2). From this, two key features of social capital stand out in shaping the ecosystem of the creative district.

Bonding in Communities

Bonding relationships are strongly evident in various older communities in Charoen Krung. Like a family, these bonds and relationships are important in maintaining a sense of trust and belonging. Participants from both the Haroon Mosque and the Talad Noi communities shared how they cherish community knowledge, culture and history. Most members of the Haroon Mosque community are blood-related with extensive kinship ties. The leader of the Haroon Mosque community is considered a father, a senior brother and an uncle to those in the community. He is also a key connector to organisations such as the Bang Rak District Office and universities. His son teaches Arabic calligraphy at the Haroon Mosque as a way to pass on the knowledge and techniques of Islamic art. Similarly, Talad Noi is a close-knit Chinese community with a 200-year history in the area. The majority who live here have Hokkien roots and their bonding relationships also reflect their lineage. The leaders of the Talad Noi

community collaborate with public sectors and organise creative events such as the Awakening Bangkok festival of light, as discussed earlier.

Bonding relationships can be a double-edged sword if they are insular and inward-facing, relying entirely on family networks. This has been identified as a barrier in developing new relationships with others, preventing new information and resources to be exchanged.⁶ Similarly, this study has observed how the bridging relationships between the leaders of the two communities is tenuous, even though there may be informal and serendipitous mingling amongst the rest of the community through markets and festivals. Respective leaders of each community had never met each other until a workshop was conducted by the researchers, revealing how little they knew about one another. They reasoned that they had no formal ways to connect or collaborate. Their communities are located in different districts – the Haroon Mosque community is in the Bang Rak district while the Talad Noi community is in the Samphanthawong district. It appears that such district divisions have not been conducive to working together, even when they are involved in organising festivals. Such siloed structures of bureaucracy are well-known barriers for collaboration and creative innovation.⁷

This lack of bridging relationships may further explain a lack of connection between the old Muslim, Chinese and local communities and the new creative groups who are starting to establish themselves in the area. The workshops revealed how local businesses and communities were not connected well horizontally, indicating a need and opportunity for local government and the CEA to broker such links more effectively in the future.

Top
Characteristics of key actors in the Charoen Krung creative ecosystem

Below
Mapping soft infrastructures with Charoen Krung communities



Bonding relationships are strongly evident in various older communities in Charoen Krung.

⁶ Wenger, G.C. (1995). A comparison of urban with rural support networks: Liverpool and north Wales. *Ageing & Society*, 15(1), 59–81.

⁷ Polaine, A., Lovlie, L., & Reason, B. (2013). *Service design: From insight to implementation*. Rosenfeld Media.



Figure 2. Charoen Krung's creative and cultural ecosystem

Linking Between Organisations

The CEA is arguably the main driver of creative activities, with a mission to boost the creative economy and activities in Charoen Krung. It plays a vertical, linking role in channelling resources and people to encourage collaborations and investments from within and outside the district. This can be observed in the successful renovation of Warehouse 30, noted as a key creative hub earlier, and hosting Bangkok Design Week by working closely with a number of local businesses in the area as well as external organisations to set up events and activities. The CEA does well in bringing groups of artists and design students, freelancers, studios and start-ups from outside Charoen Krung to showcase their work in noted creative spaces such as O.P. Place, River City Bangkok and House No. 1. The CEA's multi-sector links, including private businesses, universities and public sectors such as Thailand Tourism and district offices, make it an important and powerful agent. Such observations allow this study to affirm that policy and central government initiatives through the CEA are largely responsible for Charoen Krung's development as a creative district, in contrast to other districts studied –

where development is attributed to local, existing and emerging cultural and creative assets.

Yet as discussed in the previous section, the CEA may need to play a stronger bridging role to connect horizontally between local businesses and communities by capitalising on their effectiveness in organising events. While businesses are more likely to connect vertically with public sectors such as the CEA, Thailand Tourism and district offices, they will need more assistance to connect with local communities and build on opportunities to work together to avoid potential divisions and inequality in access, wealth and knowledge – as seen in fragmented communities globally.⁸ The Co-create Charoenkrung project, initiated by the TCDC, was a welcome example of bridging constructively. The TCDC organised various listening and co-design sessions with the community to learn what residents wanted to improve in their neighbourhood. This resulted in prototypes and models of some of the ideas that the residents came up with, such as providing signage to allow easier navigation through the neighbourhood, creating green pocket spaces, connecting alleys, rejuvenating and repurposing old buildings and redeveloping the riverfront.⁹



TCDC and CEA at the Grand Postal Building

⁸ Block, P. (2018). *Community: The structure of belonging*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
⁹ Tjahja, C., & Yee, J. (2018). Social hierarchy in design and social innovation: Perspectives from Thailand. In P. Lloyd & E. Bohemia (Eds.), *Proceedings of DRS2018: Catalyst* (pp. 704–716). Design Research Society. <http://www.drs2018limerick.org/participation/proceedings>

Key Characteristics of Charoen Krung's Creative District

Examining Charoen Krung through multiple dynamic layers and assets allows this study to arrive at the following assessment of the role of this particular creative and cultural district.

A Government-Designed Creative District

Investment, resourcing and strategic planning by the Thai government are central to Charoen Krung's public recognition as a creative district. The CEA's mission to model Charoen Krung as its flagship creative district, to learn from and develop other cities around Thailand, provides strong motivation. The CEA is playing a key role in linking public and private sectors such as the district offices, Thailand Tourism Authority, local businesses and communities, so the district can headline major festivals such as Bangkok Design Week to engage with a broader national and international creative network. This is undoubtedly succeeding in boosting creative activities in the district, in turn attracting a diversity of talents, start-ups, business ventures and tourism – and generating further cultural, social and economic capital.

Building on Deep and Diverse Cultural Roots

Charoen Krung has one of the oldest communities, having multigenerational settlements for more than 200 years. Family-like bonds within communities are further anchored by established educational, religious and cultural institutions, housed within heritage buildings that have etched various architectural and ethnic influences over the decades. These places maintain the community

fabric by continuing to be spaces for gathering, learning, sharing and celebrating traditions, identity and knowledge that enable creative practices such as Islamic art, calligraphy and dragon dance to be passed on. These cultural assets are inspiring a new generation of creatives to set up events and businesses in restored heritage buildings, allowing them to enjoy the markets, participate in festivals, attend exhibitions or socialise in cafes, bars and restaurants. Peppered along narrow streets, these cultural pockets are a rare find in contrast to the congested and densely developed urban environment.

Sustaining Trade Centres

Charoen Krung Road continues its 19th century heritage as a centre of international trading. The area is adjacent to major business centres served by vital arteries such as the Chao Phraya River, Silom Road and Sathorn Road, where time-honoured establishments can be found – such as the Siam Commercial Bank, the Bangkok Bank, the Jewellery Trade Centre and new business districts containing law firms, insurance companies, banks, fine dining restaurants, luxury hotels, spas and healthcare centres. While some businesses may have moved their headquarters elsewhere due to lack of space and parking issues, many still see importance in maintaining a presence in the area. With excellent transportation links and proximity to many different types of businesses alongside its growing creative credentials, Charoen Krung is an attractive place for start-ups and design studios to operate from.



Clockwise from top
Warehouse for House No.1 during the 2020 Bangkok Design Week
Cafe in Charoen Krung
Street art on Talad Noi neighbourhood

Links to Mentioned Sources

Bangkok Design Week
www.bangkokdesignweek.com

สำนักงานส่งเสริมเศรษฐกิจสร้างสรรค์
Creative Economy Agency
www.cea.or.th

ชุมชนมัสยิดฮารูน
Haroon Mosque Community
www.tiny.cc/uwyakz

บ้านเลขที่ 1
House No. 1
www.house-numberone.com

Lebua
www.lebua.com

Mandarin Oriental Bangkok
www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok/chao-phraya-river/luxury-hotel

O.P. Place
www.opthai.com/opplace/home-3

O.P. Garden
www.opthai.com/opgarden/en/about-us

P. Tendercool
www.ptendercool.com/en

River City Bangkok Shopping Centre
www.rivercitybangkok.com

Royal Orchid Sheraton
www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/bkksi-royal-orchid-sheraton-hotel-and-towers

Shangri-La Bangkok
www.shangri-la.com/en/bangkok/shangrila

Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC)
www.web.tcdc.or.th/en

Warehouse 30
www.warehouse30.com



Clockwise from top
 House No. 1, O.P. Place, River City Bangkok, Grand Postal Building

Executive Summary Sakon Nakhon

Located in Isan (อีสาน), Thailand's largest region, and surrounded by lakes, rivers, wetlands, mountains and extensive farmland, the province of Sakon Nakhon (สกลนคร) is famous for its indigo-dyeing and textile-weaving production. Its capital city, also called Sakon Nakhon, was awarded the title of Craft City from the World Craft Council in 2017, and is gaining international recognition for its naturally dyed textiles.

This age-old craft, developed in close relationship with the land, was transmitted through the generations until modern production technologies of industrialisation overshadowed traditional practices. Thanks to a small number of pioneers, however, the craft was revived during the 1990s and has evolved since into a vibrant creative scene combining local wisdom with modern design influences. The renewed interest in traditional techniques, indigenous knowledge and environmental sustainability has instilled new energy into other sectors, such as agricultural production and sustainable farming.

In the past ten years, Sakon Nakhon has been developed on the basis of its agricultural resources. There has been a continuous increase in creative activities and businesses developed by citizens who moved back after working in other cities and regions. Since 2016, there has been rapid growth in creative networking and

businesses around Sakon Nakhon and surrounding areas. Sakon Hed started out as a network of creative entrepreneurs involved in developing locally branded products that are modern, natural and sustainable. The network hosts the annual Sakon Hed festival (เทศกาลสกลเฮ็ด), which has now become the biggest creative event in Sakon Nakhon. The festival aims to promote local wisdom, products, services and brands as well as raise awareness of the growing creative activities in this region.

The uniqueness of Sakon Nakhon's creative scene is in the somewhat disperse nature of its members. Traditional weaving communities are distributed across the province, while a growing base of returning talent gathers every year at the Sakon Hed festival, driven by an interest in crafts as well as a commitment to Sakon Nakhon and its traditions. Close relationships such as familial bonds and friendships are the drivers of fruitful collaborations: families and community groups can rely on shared resources to sustain their businesses, while a network of friends and volunteers can mobilise enough resources to create a yearly gathering during which ideas are exchanged and collaborations are arranged. As Sakon Nakhon gains prominence as a creative district in Thailand, the focus is on balancing environmental, economic and social sustainability.



Traditional weaving communities are distributed across the province, while a growing base of returning talent gathers every year at the Sakon Hed festival, driven by an interest in crafts as well as a commitment to Sakon Nakhon and its traditions.



The annual Sakon Hed festival in 2019, the biggest creative event in Sakon Nakhon, showcasing local products, services and brands

Background



Sakon Nakhon is famous for indigo dyeing and textile weaving.

Sakon Nakhon is one of the largest provinces in northeast Thailand, at 9,600 square kilometres. Its history can be traced back more than 2,000 years through fossil and archaeological records. During the tenth century, Sakon Nakhon was called Muang Nonghan Luang (เมืองหนองหารหลวง) and was a major city of the Khmer Empire, until a long drought led to its depopulation. It then became part of the Lan Xang Kingdom (อาณาจักรล้านช้าง) from the 14th century and had a close relationship with the city of Vientiane in Laos. During the time, Sakon Nakhon was known as Chiang Mai Nonghan (เชียงใหม่หนองหาร) and was influenced by Lao cultures and traditions. During the Rattanakosin period, King Rama I (who ruled from 1782 to 1809) renamed the city Sakon Tawapi (สกลทวาปี), which later changed to Sakon Nakhon (สกลนคร), meaning the City of Sakon.

The current population of Sakon Nakhon Province is around 1.1 million, and there are approximately 113,000 residents in the city centre. People here speak Isan, which is a Thai-Lao mixed language used around northeast Thailand. There are six different tribes in Sakon Nakhon – Saiyoi (ไทรย้อย), Taiyoy (ไทโยย), Taiso (ไทโส), Taikaleang (ไทกะเลียง), Tai-Loa Isan (ไทลาวอีสาน) and Phutai (ภูไท), the last one being the largest and oldest tribe in the area. These tribes have their own dialects of Isan language and have been engaged in traditional weaving practices of both silk and cotton for generations. These traditions have very much shaped the creative and cultural fabric of the region.

Sakon Nakhon is known as a cultural and religious city. There are more than 400 Buddhist temples. Many of them are Dhammayuttika Nikaya (นิกายธรรมยุต) or Buddhist forest monasteries (วัดป่า), which focus only on scriptural study of the earliest existing Buddhist texts and meditation practices. Famous Buddhist forest monasteries include Wat Pa Sutthawas (วัดป่าสุทธาวาส), the temple of Buddhist master Mon (หลวงปู่มัน), and Wat Pa Udomsompone (วัดป่าอุดมสมพร), where the relic of Fun (หลวงปู่ฟัน) is kept. There are well-known annual Buddhist events supported by local government, such as the Wax Castle Festival (ประเพณีปราสาทผึ้ง) and the Boat Race (ประเพณีแข่งเรือ) at the end of Buddhist Lent Day (วันออกพรรษา). All of these events involve local artisans – for example, to create the beeswax castles and decorations on boats, and perform traditional dance and parades.

Sakon Nakhon is famous for indigo dyeing and textile weaving. Due to the abundance of the indigo plant along the Songkhram River (แม่น้ำสงคราม), which flows through the province, villagers have developed local wisdom and know-how to produce indigo-dyed textiles in a variety of patterns and styles. Indigo-dyed textile production declined in the Isan region during the mid-19th century due to synthetic dyes and industrialisation.¹ Farmers switched from growing indigo to more economically viable plantations such as rice, rubber, tapioca, cotton or sugar cane. Villagers, including women, started migrating to cities,

¹ Chanorn, C. (2016). Self-transformation strategies of development: The emergence of indigo-dyed textile entrepreneurs in Sakon Nakhon, Thailand. *Thammasat Review*, 19(2), 1–21.



Indigo-dyeing products on display at Mann Craft



Without women to transmit or inherit the skills of dyeing and weaving, traditional indigo textile production gradually disappeared.

reducing the number of agricultural labourers and weavers while swelling the ranks of factory workers. Without women to transmit or inherit the skills of dyeing and weaving, traditional indigo textile production gradually disappeared.²

However, since the 1990s the indigo industry has experienced a revival. During and after the economic crisis of 1997, various initiatives were introduced by the government to stimulate job creation in the rural sector and incentivise workers to return to their hometowns. In this period, the idea of 'local wisdom' emerged as a central concept for the revitalisation of many artisan sectors, including agriculture, food, traditional medicine and crafts. Many of the pioneers of the indigo craft revival discussed in the case study started operating in this decade, initiating a new era of indigo production that brings together tradition and innovation. Owing to this revival, the processes of planting, harvesting, fermenting, dyeing and weaving have been passed on over the centuries, and indigo has become the key cultural identity of Sakon Nakhon. Indigo products embody traditional craft knowledge and practices, enabling relationships between different groups to be sustained – local community weavers and designers educated outside of the province, producers with a wealth of traditional knowledge and new consumers.

The communities' close relationship with rich, fertile land and natural resources, and the valuing of local wisdom and indigenous knowledge, extend to sustainable agricultural practices in rice and beef. Small, family-run organic farms, such as Farm Hug, have increased in number in recent years, where traditional crafts and organic food production are brought together. This confluence of craft, culture and food makes Sakon Nakhon a unique creative district in Thailand.

² Chathiphot, P., & Phuraya, N. (2019). Indigo dyed community: A study on Phu Tai women's wisdom to strengthening the community. *Phranakhon Rajabhat Research Journal (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 14(2), 1–19.

Typology of Sakon Nakhon's Creative and Cultural District



Top A public talk during the 2019 Sakon Hed festival opening night

Bottom left Sakon Hed festival stalls

Bottom right Sakon Nakhon's famous indigo fabric

Hard Infrastructures

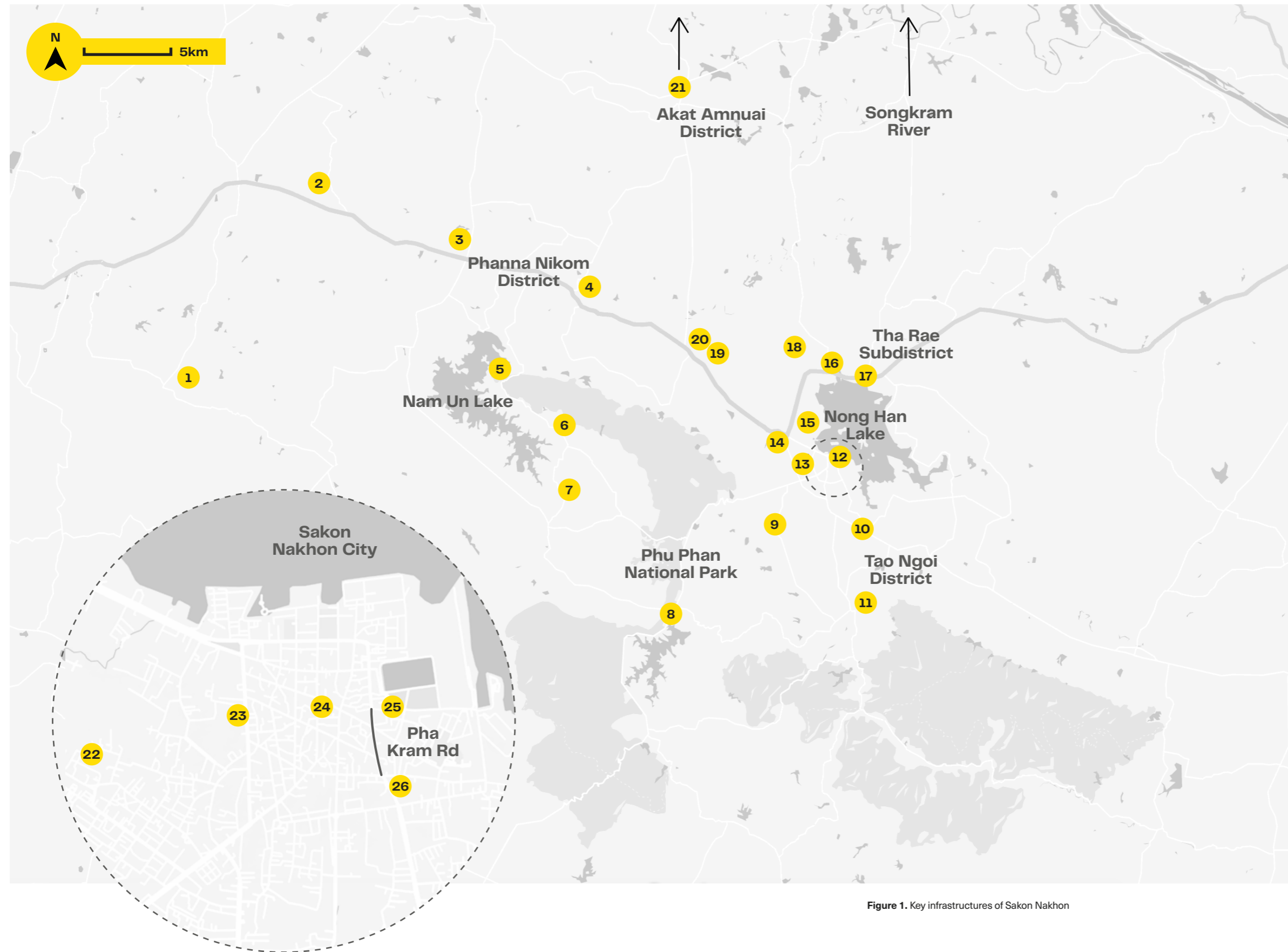


Lying on a flat plain on the bank of Nong Han Lake, the city is surrounded by extensive farmland and national parks.

Sakon Nakhon is characterised by the relative remoteness of the region, its natural resources and its close proximity with other national borders and cultures. Lying on a flat plain on the bank of Nong Han Lake, the city is surrounded by extensive farmland and national parks. North of Sakon Nakhon are the provinces of Bueng Kan (บึงกาฬ) and Nong Khai (หนองคาย), while Udon Thani (อุดรธานี), the prominent city of the Isan region and Isan Buddhism, is to the west. The south of Sakon Nakhon is connected to the provinces of Kalasin (กาฬสินธุ์) and Mukdahan (มุกดาหาร), and the nearest province is Nakhon Phanom (นครพนม), which is only 93km away. The region is close to the Laos border, where Vientiane is only 236km over the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (สะพานมิตรภาพไทยลาว).



Nong Han Lake



- 1 Baan Pan Na Weaving Community
- 2 Prasat Ku Phanna Historical Landmark
- 3 Weaving Community
- 4 Ban Kamkha Indigo Weavers Group
- 5 Kor Fai
- 6 Ban Oondong Nong Chaiyawal Indigo Community Enterprise
- 7 Ban Cherng Doi Cotton Community Enterprise Group
- 8 Weaving and Dyeing Communities
- 9 KramSakon
- 10 Farm Hug
- 11 Doi Kham Royal Project Processing Plant
- 12 Suan Somdet Phrasinakar in Park
- 13 URANFARM
- 14 Rajabhat University
- 15 Airport
- 16 Lotus Park
- 17 The Archangel Michael Cathedral
- 18 Kasetsart University
- 19 Gypsy Coffee Drip
- 20 Mae Teeta
- 21 Nakhon Tumtao Agricultural Housewives Group
- 22 Kram Hug
- 23 Na Come Home
- 24 Mann Craft
- 25 Wat Phra That Choeng Chum
- 26 Sakda Kramsakon

Figure 1. Key infrastructures of Sakon Nakhon

Natural Resources

The abundance of water sources is an important natural infrastructure for the province because other surrounding provinces in northeast Thailand (such as Udon Thani) are dry regions. Sakon Nakhon Province is dominated by large bodies of water and mountains. **Nong Han Lake** (ทะเลสาบหนองหาร) is Thailand's largest freshwater lake and the surrounding wetlands are important conservation areas. Nong Han Lake is fed by the Nam Pung River (ลำน้ำพุง) originating from the Phu Phan mountain region (เทือกเขาภูพาน), and draining through the Huai Nam Kan River (ห้วยน้ำก่ำ) into the Mekong River (แม่น้ำโขง). Other sources of water come from the Himalayas, where the Mekong River springs and flows through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam before flowing into the South China Sea. During its course, the Mekong River feeds the **Songkhram River** (แม่น้ำสงคราม) flowing through the northeast of Thailand, causing it to flood an area of more than 100 square kilometres every rainy season. This phenomenon sustains an aquatic and terrestrial ecology of countless wetlands; their biodiversity has high cultural and economic value in sustaining the communities for centuries.

Phu Phan National Park (อุทยานแห่งชาติภูพาน) is one of the important natural resources in Sakon Nakhon. Located in the Phu Phan mountains, a range of hills dividing the Isan region into two basins, the park was established in 1972 to protect the flora and fauna of the area,³ including the prized Siamese rosewood (ต้นพะยูง). The indigofera tinctoria, known as the indigo plant or kram (คราม) in Thai, originates from the Phu Phan mountains. Indigo plants are widely grown in the area surrounding the Songkhram River, the very name of the river meaning 'indigo forest'. The locals have found many uses for indigo over the centuries, calling it the 'king of dyes'. It is most famous as a natural pigment yielding a distinctive, deep blue colour. However, other uses are common, such as a repellent for rice pests and a culture starter for edible mushrooms.

Public Spaces

Public spaces are often a rare commodity in Thailand,⁴ and can act as important hubs to enable civic, cultural and creative activities to happen. Lotus Park and the surrounding two parks located next to Nong Han Lake are considered the heart of Sakon Nakhon culture, supporting the recreational and cultural life of the residents. **Nong Han Chaloe Phrakiat Lotus Park** (อุทยานบัวเฉลิมพระเกียรติ) was created in 2009 by Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat Sakon Nakhon Province Campus as part of a research project looking into the benefits of the royal lotus plant. Opened to the public in 2010, the park now features more than 100 varieties of lotuses and water flowers from around the world, with indoor and outdoor exhibition areas.

Suan Somdet Phrasinakarini and **Suan Somdet Galyani Vadhana Parks** (สวนสมเด็จพระศรีนครินทร์และสวนสมเด็จพระเจ้าฟ้ากัลยาณิวัฒนา กรมหลวงสงขลานครินทร์ หรือ สวนแม่สวนลูก) are located next to Nong Han Lake. Often described as the 'lungs of the city', they are the only large pedestrianised areas in Sakon Nakhon, kept cool by the large lake and the tall trees at the edge of the parks. They are prominent meeting points, hubs for recreational activities and places to gather for many public events.

Religious Structures

Given the fact that there are more than 400 Buddhist temples, only the most significant have been noted here. Built around the first century, **Wat Phra That Choeng Chum** (วัดพระธาตุเชิงชุม) is one of the most important city temples of Sakon Nakhon. It was known as Phra That Nong Han (พระธาตุหนองหาร) during the time of the Lan Xang Kingdom. Wat Phra That Choeng Chum represents Lan Xang influences in Sakon Nakhon culture and traditions. Located next to Nong Han Lake, it is a popular destination among locals and tourists, who often visit to pay respect. Taking advantage of its popularity, local entrepreneurs have set up stalls

selling indigo products around the entrance of the temple grounds. In front of Wat Phra That Choeng Chum is a walking street, hosting a creative weekend market called Thanon Pha Kram (ถนนผ้าคราม).

The Archangel Michael Cathedral, located in the subdistrict of Tha Rae (ท่าแร่), serves the largest Catholic community in Thailand. Its original structure was built by a community of Vietnamese descendants who settled in this province more than 130 years ago after fleeing persecution. The cathedral serves as a reminder of the rich cultural influences of the province.



Wat Phra That Choeng Chum

³ Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (2015). *National parks in Thailand*. http://park.dnp.go.th/file/NATIONALPARKS_Eng.pdf

⁴ Tjahja, C. (2020). *Reorienting and sustaining design and social innovation: Insights from Asia-Pacific practices* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Northumbria University.



Traditional weaving loom used in Sakon Nakhon

Weaving and Dyeing Industries

Many indigenous groups live in Sakon Nakhon Province. These communities have an enduring tradition of weaving and dyeing cloth, and each group has devised specific techniques, patterns and styles that are regarded as a form of indigenous art and taught through the generations.⁵ Mud mee (มัดหมี่), or ikat, is a technique of resist-dyeing to pattern textiles, such as tying or stitching. Weaving is traditionally considered a duty for Phu Tai women in the community.⁶ In the past, textiles were woven for household products, such as clothes and bedding, as well as for important events and ceremonies such as weddings or Buddhist festivities. Dyeing and weaving industries rely on proximity to natural resources, so they are distributed throughout Sakon Nakhon Province. The map (pp. 98-99, fig. 1) shows traditional communities and pioneer revivalist groups located outside of Sakon Nakhon city.

More recently, shops selling indigo textiles and products have started opening closer to the city centre. Every afternoon on weekends and public holidays, Rop Mueang Road (ถนนรอบเมือง) in front of Wat Phra That Choeng Chum is transformed into **Thanon Pha Kram market** (ถนนผ้าคราม), taking advantage of a new commercial space that opened in 2016. Vendors sell raw indigo materials and end products such as clothes or accessories, so all generations of indigo enthusiasts can sell, buy and network. The market was an initiative of Kasetsart University, with support from local government, the Department of Creative Industry Development and the Department of Industry Promotion. Named as a 'northeastern style flea market', indigo-dyeing workshops are also held here. Others have opened permanent shops next to the market, such as Thainiyom Kramsuay (ไทยนิยมครามสวย), which occupies a 70-year-old, two-storey wooden house.

⁵ Kamolrat, K. (2009). Development of the database system of Sakon Nakhon's indigenous fabric stripes. *Warasan Samnakngan Khana Kammakan Wichai Haeng Chat (Witthayasat)*, 41(1), 91-114.

⁶ Chathiphot, P., & Phuraya, N. (2019). Indigo dyed community: A study on Phu Tai women's wisdom to strengthening the community. *Phranakhon Rajabhat Research Journal (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 14(2), 1-19.

Educational Institutions

Two universities in the city – **Kasetsart University** (มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์) and **Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University** (มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏ สกลนคร) – have been instrumental in reviving indigo-dyeing practices, bridging indigenous wisdom with modern science and technology.⁷ Local schools provide indigo workshops for students, while the Indigo Centre at the Research and Development Institute of Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University was set up to support people from the surrounding communities in developing their craft practices. Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University was commissioned by the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA) - (สำนักงานพัฒนาวิทยาศาสตร์และเทคโนโลยีแห่งชาติ), owing to government policy introduced in 2000, to assist a community initiative in indigo craft revival. Researchers worked closely with villagers to understand and catalogue the traditional practices – traditions surrounding the craft include the belief that dye vats are inhabited by spirits that can favour the dyeing process⁸ – and chemical processes of dyeing. What was once small scale and labour intensive with varying quality has transformed to meet an increasing demand for indigo textiles on the national and international market.⁹ This new knowledge supported some of the indigo revival pioneers, such as the development of a database system of Sakon Nakhon's indigenous fabric stripes and patterns, which in turn contributed to the expansion of local craft knowledge.¹⁰

Transportation Hubs

Sakon Nakhon has a domestic airport with a daily bus service to Bangkok. A planned upgrade by Airports of Thailand (AOT) to create an international airport hub in the coming years will undoubtedly improve connectivity to the district. There are also two bus stations servicing routes to nearby cities such as Udon Thani and Nakhon Phanom.

Indigo shop in Sakon Nakhon



⁷ Tinnaluck, Y. (2005, June 21-24). *Improving indigo dyed textile: A community-oriented communication to success* [Conference presentation]. International Symposium on Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST), Beijing, China.

⁸ Chanorn, C. (2019). Dialectics of cultural production: Branding indigo-dyed textiles in Sakon Nakhon, Thailand. *Textile*, 17(3), 312-326.

⁹ Tinnaluck, Y. (2005, June 21-24). *Improving indigo dyed textile: A community-oriented communication to success* [Conference presentation]. International Symposium on Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST), Beijing, China.

¹⁰ Kamolrat, K. (2009). Development of the database system of Sakon Nakhon's indigenous fabric stripes. *Warasan Samnakngan Khana Kammakan Wichai Haeng Chat (Witthayasat)*. 41(1), 91-114.

Soft Infrastructures

Indigo Communities and Traditions

The recipes for indigo dye and the patterns and motifs created through weaving can vary from one community to the other. Weaving communities grow indigo plants using traditional methods¹¹ and make use of locally grown and spun cotton and silk yarns. A system of shared facilities keeps costs down, promotes collaboration and the circulation of resources and knowledge between communities. The weaving process is equally demanding and heavily reliant on the labour of women. Girls are socialised from a very young age, starting with cotton spinning and picking. Women learn to work together, where the younger and less experienced weavers can observe the proficient ones, learn their patterns and practise under supervision, with knowledge passed on from older women to younger girls.¹² This practice means the indigo-dyeing and weaving industry is managed 90 per cent by women. For example, in the Ban Cherg Doi cotton community enterprise group (วิสาหกิจชุมชนทอผ้าฝ้ายย้อมครามธรรมชาติบ้านเชิงตอย), men are in charge of growing indigo and making dye, while women weave cotton into traditional patterns and invent new ones. Men may also deal with matters outside the home, or even occupy positions of power in the public sector that enable them to support the dyeing and weaving industry through policy decisions.¹³

Pioneers of Indigo Production and Community Enterprise Groups

To an untrained eye, indigo products may all look the same, but the expertise is embodied in the production process, the history of the practice, different techniques and additives used, and the quality of the woven materials. Some long established groups are distinct in the way they make, manage and develop their products.

Nakhon Tumtao Agricultural Housewives Group (บ้านนครท่าเต่า) was established in 2008 as a community-managed production network consisting of 372 indigo weavers from different villages, each member taking care of a specific part of the production process. The group is led by Ms Somkid Promchak (คุณสมคิด พรหมจักร) (known as Mae Soom: แม่สู่ม), who left to be educated elsewhere and returned in 1998. The group has collaborated with Kasetsart University and other agencies to research natural dyes and has developed its own recipe using lotus plants as an additive to the indigo dye.¹⁴

Ban Kamkha Indigo Weavers Group (บ้านคำข่า) has been running since 1994 as a community enterprise producing hand-printed cotton. Ms Pira Prasertkantong (คุณพิระ ประเสริฐก้านตง) is the local craft expert and instructor in a government-initiated project for local craft promotion (SUPPORT Arts and Crafts International Centre of Thailand – SACICT) and continues to innovate by introducing new patterns. The group's goal is to grow its own cotton and create special recipe dyes incorporating mud and husks. Taking a different route to market, the **Ban Oondong Nong Chaiyawal Indigo Community Enterprise** (กลุ่มวิสาหกิจชุมชนทอผ้าฝ้ายย้อมครามบ้านอุนตง-หนองไขวาลย์) distributes its unique weaved patterns from indigo-dyed, hand-spun cotton threads through an online channel. Led by indigo expert Ms Sunee

¹¹ The preparation of indigo paste and dye baths is lengthy, starting with the cultivation of indigo, planted in April. Whole stems and leaves are harvested in August and steeped over a few days to create a paste that can last one to two years. To make the dye bath, indigo paste is mixed with a homemade lye solution and left to ferment for 10 to 15 days, during which the pigment develops its distinctive blue colour. Additives such as tamarind paste or lime are sometimes added to make the dye more durable and balance its chemical composition. The yarn can then be dyed in this mixture, with repeated baths yielding a darker colour. The process is labour intensive and requires care and know-how: the dyeing mixture has to be stirred several times for days and its texture, colour and smell must be monitored to make sure the fermentation process is under control.

¹² Chathiphot, P., & Phuraya, N. (2019). Indigo dyed community: A study on Phu Tai women's wisdom to strengthening the community. *Phranakhon Rajabhat Research Journal (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 14(2), 1–19.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Department of Industrial Promotion. (2017). *Unseen shopping districts 2017*. Bangkok Sakon Nakhon. <http://nec.dip.go.th/ebook/book8/book8.pdf>

Promkomol (คุณสุนีย์ พร้อมโกมล), it is supported by the Biodiversity-Based Economy Development Office (BEDO) under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to develop sustainable natural products.

Mae Teeta (แม่ทีตา) was the first indigo-dyed product brand in Sakon Nakhon, set up in 1992 by Ms Praphaiphon Deangchai. The brand paved the way for the resurgence of indigo craft in the province. 'Mae' is a respectful term meaning 'mother', named after the founder's mother, Ms Teeta Janpengpen (จีตา จันทร์เพ็งเพ็ญ). Mae Teeta is a family-run business involving the founder, her sister, her daughter and her nephew in the

production of indigo-dyed textiles and clothes. Ms Teeta and her daughter were pioneers in reviving indigo farming in Sakon Nakhon, by introducing indigo seeds harvested from the surrounding forests into cultivation. A family-like relationship extends to the producers who plant and spin cotton with traditional spinners. Clients are also included in this extended family. Mae Teeta has a loyal base of returning customers that trust the brand and recommend its products to others. The younger generations of Mae Teeta's family are fashion graduates who are developing clothing lines for younger customers and introducing the brand to an international market.



Traditional hand-dyeing and weaving practices on display in the Mann Craft shop

Contemporary Indigo-Related Products and Shops

A new generation of makers and producers are evolving indigo craft through a combination of experimental techniques, new marketing strategies and the creation of contemporary designs, as demonstrated by Mae Teeta's example. Branding has become a key practice in the transformation of indigo-dyed textiles from objects of everyday, personal use to commodities available for local, national and international trade.¹⁵

KramSakon is an umbrella brand for all the indigo merchandise produced by the indigo-dyed textile industry cluster. It is made up of 20 community enterprises and four SMEs. Members of KramSakon were among the first to establish the Phra Kram street market to sell their products through a dedicated store. One of the stores, **Kram Hug**, was started by a long established clothing producer, taking advantage of renewed interest in indigo products. It creates contemporary clothes, household items and accessories designed to appeal to a younger audience. Dominating a busy crossroads with large windows and outdoor plants, **Kram Thong** (ครามทอง) and **Mann Craft** are owned by the same family and share premises. The stores

are a key stopping point for important visitors such as the Thai fashion designer Princess Sirivannavari. The store displays traditional looms, books and signs explaining the process of indigo production. The two distinct brands target different audiences. While Kram Thong is the original brand that sells home decor items and textiles with vintage patterns, Mann Craft – the newer brand, developed by the next generation of the family, Prach 'Mann' Niyomkar – is all about innovation.¹⁶ Lots of research and experimentation go into the discovery and adoption of different dyeing techniques that yield pastel-coloured textiles with intricate patterns, original tie-dye garments, and freehand-painted scarves, clothes and tapestries. This talent has been recognised internationally and has led the two brands to open shops in Sakon Nakhon Airport and Bangkok.

Social and Sustainable Creative Endeavours

Alongside the indigo craft communities, there are new groups of returning creative entrepreneurs that are heavily influenced by sustainable living, and are actively contributing to the creative and cultural buzz of Sakon Nakhon. Many of these businesses are reconnecting with their strong cultural roots and illustrate the increasing diversity of Sakon Nakhon's creative life.

URANFARM (อุฬารฟาร์ม) produces organic cacao, orchids, salad and palm oil. It is owned by Mr Narongdech Urankun (ณรงค์เดช อุฬารกุล), a local politician and farmer who is considered a pioneer of modern organic farming, introducing new crops and utilising different marketing and sales strategies by exporting to other regions. Mr Narongdech is a key member of the Sakon Hed

network, which hosts the annual Sakon Hed festival. **Gypsy Coffee Drip** and **Gypsy Camp** are owned by Mr Gypsy Janpengpen (ยีปซี จันทร์เพ็งเพ็ญ), another key member of the Sakon Hed network. Recognising an opportunity to service tourists interested in indigo products, he opened his cafe in 2014 next to the Mae Teeta shop. It is akin to a creative hub where local art and craft practitioners meet, including the Sakon Hed network. Like many others featured in this case study, Mr Gypsy returned after working as a researcher at Kasetsart University in Bangkok and witnessing the devastating 2011 floods.¹⁷

Na Come Home (นาค้าหอม) is a brand of organic food including rice, fruit, vegetables and herbs. It is owned by Ms Ratikorn Tongsiri (รัตกร ตงศิริ), another returnee who left behind a job in Bangkok's media industry in 2011. Concerned with environmental issues and aiming to promote healthy living, she became an organic rice and vegetable farmer. Ms Ratikorn expanded her farm and opened an organic cafe, Come Home Sakon, at the end of 2011. The cafe sells desserts, drinks and locally sourced goods as well as showcasing local indigo products. Come Home Sakon is popular with locals, visitors and a network of young entrepreneurs that gather here. Profits from Na Come Home and the cafe are donated to local childcare centres and schools, reflecting other initiatives that are giving back to the community.

Kor Fai (กีฬาย) produces natural cotton products and promotes community tourism in Baan Na Chok. Community tourism enables local residents to share resources with visitors for the sustainable benefit of both the community and the natural environment. As a plateau and drought area of Sakon Nakhon Province, Baan Na Chok is used for

buffalo grazing – Ms Saisunee Chiyahongsa (คุณสุนี ไชยหงษา) and Mr Sakai Chiyahongsa (คุณสะไก ไชยหงษา), leaders of the Baan Na Chuk Organic Dyeing Group, have used locally available resources such as buffalo manure creatively, to experiment with organic dyeing processes. They have developed both agricultural and community tourism, creating a successful complementary experience alongside their Kor Fai cotton products.

Hoop Thame (ฮูปแต้ม) specialises in Isan graphic design, prints, craft and book-making. Mr Aumnart Sunaprom (คุณอำนาจ สุนาพรหม), a graphic design lecturer at Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University, experiments with natural materials such as indigo dyeing on banana leaves, and offers hand-dyed textiles and hand-bound book-making workshops.

Cha Ya Ta is an experimental studio that combines eco-printmaking with local hand dyeing and weaving. Cha Ya Ta Incha (คุณชญุตว์ อินทร์ชา) is an art educator at the School of Education, Roi Et Rajabhat University, and an expert in eco-printing. Her gelatin-printing techniques, which are sustainable and ecological, are taught through regular workshops at her studio.

Phukarm (ภูคราม) is known for working with communities in the Phu Phan mountains to create hand-made textiles and embroidered floral patterns. Ms Pilan Thaisuang (คุณปีลันธน ไทยสว่าง) is a returning resident who worked as a community historian in Bangkok. Since 2016, she has trained and worked with ageing local women weavers to enable their traditional designs to become contemporary products for different markets.

¹⁵ Chanorn, C. (2019). Dialectics of cultural production: Branding indigo-dyed textiles in Sakon Nakhon, Thailand. *Textile*, 17(3), 312–326.

¹⁶ At his farm and dyeing workshop, Mr Niyomkha experiments with different types of plants besides indigo: bellyache bush, siamese ebony berries, oak tree (to produce iron gall ink), and cochineal insects (used to make red dye) are all part of ongoing research to identify traditional plants used worldwide to make natural dyes. He practices a sustainable form of dyeing by not cutting down trees and plants to extract the dye. He has also developed new weaving techniques, with visionary products such as scarves woven with perfume-infused threads testifying to his commitment to creativity.

¹⁷ The 2011 disaster flooded huge swathes of the country and more than 13.6 million citizens were affected.

Institutional Collaborations and Policy Instruments

Thai central government has supported the indigo-dyeing sector through various entrepreneurial-based development strategies since 2001, during Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's first period in office. The Ministry of Industry established 'entrepreneur development units' to activate business, while the project One Tambon One Product (OTOP) aimed to stimulate entrepreneurial development in rural areas. In 2004, the Sakon Nakhon provincial governor designated indigo-dyed textiles as the official symbol of the province.

The SUPPORT Arts and Crafts International Centre of Thailand (SACICT) was established by royal decree in 2003 to 'promote and support the integration of vocations leading to the creation of folk arts and crafts'.¹⁸ It has introduced quality standards and supports local craftspeople and entrepreneurs with training, branding, marketing, internationalisation, intellectual property and blending technological development with traditional practices. These measures were put in place at a time when the market for indigo products was saturated and many entrepreneurs were pushed out of business by competition.¹⁹ As a

result indigo entrepreneurs began developing distinct brands that communicated authenticity and the careful design of their products.²⁰

In 2008, Kenan Institute Asia (K.I.Asia) introduced community capability development programmes to resource indigo textile production in Sakon Nakhon, supported by BEDO. Since 2011, the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in the textile industry – grouped under the name of Cloth Industry Cluster of Sakon Nakhon (CIC-Sakon, โครงการพัฒนาคลัสเตอร์สิ่งทอผ้าอ้อมครามจังหวัดสกลนคร) – has been supported by the Department of Industrial Promotion. The project is hosted by Kasetsart University. Since 2012, BEDO and K.I.Asia have collaborated with CIC- Sakon enterprises, implementing the Developing Indigo-Dyed Textile Industry Corporation Project within the indigo-dyed textile industry cluster, covering the full supply chain from indigo and cotton farming to marketing.²¹ In 2017, with the support of Sakon Nakhon's Chamber of Commerce, the local campuses of Rajabhat and Rajamangala universities, Silpakorn University and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Handicraft Promotion and Development Association (AHPADA), Sakon Nakhon successfully applied to be nominated as a Craft City by the World Craft Council.

¹⁸ Support Arts and Crafts International Centre of Thailand. (2016). *Annual report 2015-2016*. https://www.sacict.or.th/uploads/items/attachments/b9141aff1412dc76340b3822d9ea6c72/_c6a552c251ad7b0afd8913de68a44921.pdf

¹⁹ Chanorn, C. (2019). Dialectics of cultural production: Branding indigo-dyed textiles in Sakon Nakhon, Thailand. *Textile* 17(3), 312–326

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Networks

As a geographically dispersed creative district, networks and community groups play an important role in Sakon Nakhon. The **Sakon Hed network** consists of locally born creative producers and innovators that come together once a year. The 18 founding members grew up locally but moved away to other cities. They reconnected four years ago with the idea of creating a platform for local creatives and craftspeople to come together, and this resulted in the Sakon Hed festival, held annually since 2016. In recent years, the Sakon Hed network has increased awareness of arts, craft and creative enterprises to showcase their work. Their independent status, without affiliation with the government or corporations, allows them autonomy and freedom in curating the festival.

The **Young Entrepreneur Chamber of Commerce (YEC)** is a nationwide network with a local office in Sakon Nakhon that supports businesses participating in the Sakon Hed festival. YEC is a network of second generation business people who run mostly small businesses in the area. One notable initiative by YEC is an annual fundraising run in December to build and develop children's centres in Sakon Nakhon.

Annual Festivals

Festivals have become important temporary hubs to draw dispersed creatives and artisans to Sakon Nakhon to meet, share and network. Many people featured in this case study are young, returning talents, having studied or worked outside Sakon Nakhon city. The main **Sakon Hed festival** brings together a unique mix of indigo-dyeing and sustainable farming products across the province. 'Sakon Hed' (สกลเฮ็ด) means 'Sakon Nakhon made' in the Isan language. The festival has been held every year in December since 2016, to champion community-made, locally sourced products and services. The event offers workshops, talks and networking opportunities for artisans and visitors, attracting exhibitors and tourists from all around the province and the country. The festival is grassroots and volunteer-led, without significant funding support from one entity. Contributions come in different forms, from in-kind support by musicians to sourcing bamboo needed for stall structures. The festival has grown in popularity, attesting to the dedication of the organisers, and moved to a larger location for 2019. It coincides with Christmas to take advantage of the festive seasonal holiday, when many people are travelling back home.

Throughout the year, other cultural and religious festivities take place. Communities from around Sakon Nakhon Province construct large models of Buddhist temples out of beeswax. These impressive constructions are loaded onto trailers and driven through the city during the annual **Wax Castle parade** that concludes the Wax Castle Festival (เทศกาลแห่เทียนพรรษา), taking place every year in October at the end of Buddhist lent. The Wax Castle parade is the biggest event of the year and it is supported by the local government, temples and other organisations.



The annual Sakon Hed festival in 2019 at Farm Hug

Building Social Capital in Sakon Nakhon

Sakon Nakhon's social capital owes much to the family-like bonds between groups and friends, underpinned by a strong sense of community. While geographically dispersed, the creative and cultural ecosystem of Sakon Nakhon is held together by shared values of respect for traditional wisdom, nature and sustainable development. Key actors such as the Sakon Hed network, creative indigo producers and sustainable farmers were identified with characteristics such as being dedicated, generous, collaborative, innovative, experimental, heartfelt, flexible, a good listener, team worker, open minded, kind, good advisor, good at problem solving, hardworking and able to say sorry.

Strong Bonds for Bridging

Close relationships and collaborations are key drivers of creative activity in Sakon Nakhon and are evident within the various communities in the province. Stemming from strong, intimate bonds, the indigo craft bridges different age groups and social identities. Skills are passed on between family members, and specific weaving patterns and dye recipes are developed within villages, which have an intimate relationship with the surrounding land, rivers, wetlands and mountains. Age-old bonds are seen in contemporary indigo brands such as Mae Teeta, Kram Thong and Mann Craft, discussed earlier. These family businesses have transformed indigo textiles from everyday, traditional products, bridging an emerging class of creatives looking to develop business in their hometown to reach a global market.

The Sakon Hed network offers the strongest example of family-like bonds that build bridging links. Sharing the same passion for returning home to reconnect, the founding members described their team as brothers, sisters and friends. The festival is an opportunity to expand the network and 'make more friends', turning strong bonds into bridging opportunities with other creative communities outside the province (see p. 111). Collaboration is based on respecting differences

in taste and expertise, while carefully mediating and reaching consensus. Since Sakon Hed organisers do not conduct business together, there are no conflicts of interest or competition between them. Instead the focus is on creating a welcoming environment for the growing number of visitors. The network has not relied on government funds or external influential partners to enable its growth. The success of the network and festival lies in this focus on collaborations and friendships, rather than just economic revenue. The organisers described the latter as a 'social lubricant', but not the main goal of Sakon Hed. What started as a family-like gathering has now become the largest independent festival in the province, where dispersed creative communities that live and work in bigger cities such as Chiang Mai or Bangkok come to meet, eat, drink and enjoy sustainable and creative activities.

The power of the Sakon Hed network to connect with a diversity of creative groups is remarkable. The festival draws talents to Sakon Nakhon temporarily to reconnect with fellow creatives, while also inviting friends from other provinces such as Surin (จังหวัดสุรินทร์) and Phrae (จังหวัดแพร่) to share and potentially collaborate. This maintains bridging relationships among mobile groups of creatives from different provinces and regions. Siaw Sakon (เสี้ยวสกล), also known as the Friends of Sakon, is an extended network of friends involved in the organisation of the Sakon Hed festival. They travel from other regions in Thailand to join the festival as exhibitors and organisers. For example, Phrae Craft (แพร่คราฟท์), a creative network from Phrae province in the north of Thailand, are also members of Sial Sakon and exhibit traditional craft products at the event. This is an exchange, as the Sakon Hed network also joined Phrae Craft's creative festival from 6 to 8 December 2019. Many other groups, such as Folkcharm from Loei Province (จังหวัดเลย), and Charm-Learn Studio (ชาวมเรียนรู้ สตูดิโอ) and Ruenrom Organic Living (บ้านรื่นรมย์) from Surin Province, participate at these events to share organic products, new soil-dyed cotton, ceramics and award-winning bento designs.



Top
Characteristics of key actors in Sakon Nakhon's creative ecosystem

Right
Mapping of soft infrastructures with Sakon Nakhon's creatives





Figure 2. Sakon Nakhon's creative and cultural ecosystem

Linking to Resources and National and International Markets

Linking social capital can introduce the region's indigo products to national and international markets. This provides new avenues for marketing and lowers the risk of failure for the dyeing and weaving entrepreneurs when local markets are saturated. Historically, the creative community in Sakon Nakhon had minimal access to local and central government resources. However, indigo craft revival in the early 2000s heralded a change in investment from Thai central government to help communities build greater business capacities and link to national and international actors. These contributions have been perceived as top-down and less flexible than local, self-organised efforts to nurture the creative community. A study by Chanorn identified OTOP as successful in stimulating local entrepreneurship, but also reported how local artisans felt it introduced divisiveness and promoted business models that were antagonistic to the cooperative nature of many community groups.²²

Educational institutions provide considerable links to resources and opportunities outside Sakon Nakhon. Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat Sakon Nakhon Province Campus and Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University have supported many projects that connect to public and private sectors, such as the example provided earlier where NSTDA commissioned Rajabhat University to develop the local dyeing and weaving industry. Other examples include talks provided by experts during the Sakon Hed festival, such as Assistant Professor Tips Srisakunchaiyaruk (ผศ.ธิป ศิริสกุลไชยรักษ์) from Arsom Silp Institute of the Arts, on community development, and Ms Sirikun Lolpaikun (ดร.ศิริกุล เลากัยกุล) from Brand Being, who shared her vision on branding community products. Sakon Hed talks were supported by the British Council Thailand, which also provided funding for online media production during the festival.



Mapping Sakon Nakhon's creative and cultural ecosystem

²² Chanorn, C. (2019). Dialectics of cultural production: Branding indigo-dyed textiles in Sakon Nakhon, Thailand. *Textile*, 17(3), 312–326.

Key Characteristics of Sakon Nakhon as a Creative District

Nature as a Driver of Creative Endeavours

Sakon Nakhon's creativity draws upon the abundance of natural resources, attested by the indigo-dyeing and textile handweaving industry. Villages spread out in the Isan region cultivate this traditional craft. Many have made significant efforts to preserve the ancient craft, such as Mae Teeta, which rescued the seeds of two different varieties of indigo and grows them both to ensure their continuation. The revival of this craft in the 1990s, driven by renewed interest in organic and sustainable products worldwide, has also expanded the creative community to engage with agriculture and farming practices. The festival and network have given a platform for these industries in Sakon Nakhon to contribute to the creative and cultural richness of the area. This has expanded the scope of the cultural assets of the province to the forefront of contemporary life.

Sustaining and Developing the Dyeing and Weaving Craft

Indigo-dyed products have recently started to make their way into Sakon Nakhon city centre, where shops are catering directly to collectors and consumers. Support from local universities with technical know-how has been crucial in introducing innovation to this labour intensive craft. Opportunities to sell indigo-dyed textile products on a national and international scale is also emerging, sustained by efforts to establish quality standards and develop new modes of production, aided by branding, manufacturing and marketing

support by various government initiatives. Newer indigo brands may communicate the indigo craft as a traditional practice as part of their message, but some, such as Mann Craft, focus on (re) discovering ways to extract pigments from different plants, creating new textile patterns produced artistically by weaving communities. However, natural dyes and textile weaving are labour intensive, which justifies the high price of the more elaborate items. As the market becomes increasingly competitive, the sector must find ways to preserve its authenticity without impacting on product prices and, therefore, labour retribution.

A Dispersed Creative Network

The Sakon Hed festival illustrates how a dispersed network of creatives can come together and build creative capital through active collaborations and connections. This network is unique, in that it is still very much grounded by a commitment to the place and its tradition, and shows that the creative life of a place doesn't necessarily need to be permanently situated to bring about a rich creative milieu. While there is an increasing number of creatives – particularly fashion designers – returning to open new indigo-related businesses in the city, there are also many more returning creatives who use the Sakon Hed festival as an opportunity to draw inspiration and bring new ideas back into the creative life of Sakon Nakhon. The festival is an example of a collaborative creative endeavour sustained by Sakon Nakhon's creative diaspora.

Importance of Family Bonds and Networks

Family bonds and family-like networks have been key to the revival of indigo-dyed products, and continue to sustain the creative ecosystem of Sakon Nakhon. Generational businesses such as Mae Teeta or Kram Thong and Mann Craft highlight the importance of not just drawing on traditional craft knowledge, but also joint family resources to support the development of new ideas. The Sakon Hed network is very much established and reliant on blood ties and family-like bonds. For example, Teeta Janpengpen (of Mae Teeta) is the grandmother of Gypsy Janpengpen, a key member of the network. Gypsy Coffee Drip is located next to the Mae Teeta shop in Dong Mafai village. Other members of Sakon Hed may not be related to each other but have nonetheless developed family-like bonds through years of childhood friendship. External visitors such as Chamroen Studio from Bangkok are connected through Mr Gypsy, who consider him as a 'brother'. These family-like bonds explain the ability of the network to attract many external organisations to participate, calling on goodwill that only family-like relationships can rely on.

Diversifying a Creative Ecosystem

The indigo dyeing and weaving industry have been the dominant driver of Sakon Nakhon's creative ecosystem. Prolonged investment and support from various government initiatives has undoubtedly helped revive it and contributed to its success. However, we have seen evidence of other creative activities emerging in the past few years that have diversified and strengthened Sakon Nakhon's creative ecosystem. New creative businesses ranging from indigo-related products to sustainable agriculture and farm produce have illustrated how a creative district can continue to grow and evolve even without significant government support. Sakon Nakhon's example shows how a creative district can build and extend on existing resources to achieve a more diversified and self-sustaining creative ecosystem.



Stalls selling indigo-dyed clothing near Wat Phra That Choeng Chum

Links to Mentioned Sources

สกลเฮ็ด

Sakon Hed festival

www.bit.ly/2xyftBO

YEC Sakon Nakhon

www.facebook.com/yecsakon

แม่ทีตา

Mae Teeta

www.maeteeta.net

Kram Sakon

www.facebook.com/KhramSkIKramsakon

Kram Hug

www.facebook.com/kramhug

Mann Craft

www.facebook.com/Mann-craft-shop-571786736234888

มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์

Kasetsart University

www.ku.ac.th

มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏ สกลนคร

Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University

www.snru.ac.th

Next page, clockwise from left

Artisans displaying their products at the 2019 Sakon Hed festival, Na Come Home cafe, various types of hand-woven fabric on display in Kram Thong/Mann Craft shop



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