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Palace, Prison, Park or Palimpsest? The Contested Heritage of the Former Palace of Chiang Mai

Worrasit TantiniPankul

Ph.D, Assistant Professor, Landscape Architecture Program, Faculty of Architecture, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

tantini3@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper investigates the contestations between state and local actors over the interpretation of a state prison built in the grounds of the Chiang Mai palace, known as Wiang Kaew. Engaging with postcolonial approaches to heritage interpretation, this paper argues that the local movement calling for the removal of the prison in favor of a public park represents an effort to reclaim local Lan Na history and identity from the national past. Using the critical heritage concept of “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith 2006), I show how central Thai authorities—including the Fine Arts Department and the Buddhist Sangha—have privileged nationalist interpretations of the site over the intangible meanings and values expressed by the local community. The paper concludes by suggesting how newer frameworks of heritage management might be harnessed to resolve the conflict by recognizing the site as a historical palimpsest with multiple layers of value and meaning.

Keywords

Chiang Mai – Lan Na – heritage – postcolonial studies

1 Introduction

The historic town of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand is well-known for its Buddhist temples and distinctive Lan Na-style architecture. While several

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decades of urban development have transformed the city, the square moat and brick ramparts surrounding the old city still evoke the grandeur of Chiang Mai's past as the center of the Lan Na kingdom, which lasted from its founding in the late 13th century by King Mangrai until its incorporation into the nascent nation of Siam beginning in the late 19th century. However, in the north-west quadrant of the old city, the atmosphere is markedly different. This area of the city used to be a zone for various branch offices of the central Thai government but after the Provincial Government Center Complex was built in a northern suburb of Chiang Mai in the late 1990s, these offices moved out, leaving most of the buildings underutilized or empty. One of these is a large, walled compound which recently served as a state correctional facility. Enclosed by metal sheet fencing covered in graffiti, today the former prison stands empty, awaiting an uncertain fate.

The prison was built on the site of the former Lan Na palace in 1899 at the height of the colonial period, when the Siamese government in Bangkok sought to expand its power and assert direct control over Chiang Mai by introducing administrative reforms that cemented the new central government's hegemony (See Figure 1). Erecting a prison on the site of the former palace of the Lan Na kings was a symbolic negation of the power of the Lan Na dynasty and the assertion of a new system of direct rule by the central Bangkok government. Even after the closure of the prison in 2012, the site continued to be a center of conflict, controversy and contestation among local community factions and state agencies, who disagree about who should control its future development and the conservation and interpretation of its past.

Drawing on archival research and in-depth interviews with the various state and local stakeholder groups, this paper investigates the contestations and conflicts between state and local actors over the interpretation of the former prison and palace. Engaging with critical, postcolonial approaches to Thailand's history and heritage interpretation, the first part of the paper will argue that these local movements calling to demolish the prison represent a repudiation of the central government's attempt to "civilize" and thus erase Lan Na identity beginning in the colonial period. The second part of the paper turns to local resistance against another prominent state entity—the Buddhist Sangha—and their attempt to redefine the former palace site as a Buddhist Memorial Park. This section also explores the "authorized heritage discourse" (Smith 2006) of the central Thai state's heritage authorities—specifically the Fine Arts Department—who privilege a nationalist reading of the material heritage of the site over the intangible meanings and values expressed by the local community. The paper concludes by considering how newer frameworks of heritage management—such as those articulated in the Burra Charter and Nara Document on Authenticity—might help the various stakeholders to

transcend the conflict by recognizing the site as a historical palimpsest with multiple layers of value and meaning.

2 History of the Palace and Siam’s Construction of the first modern Prison in Lan Na

The palace of Chiang Mai—called *Wiang Kaew* in the northern dialect—was established after the founding of Chiang Mai as the capital city of the Lan Na Kingdom by King Mangrai in 1296 CE. At its peak in the 15th century, the Lan Na Kingdom was a major power and center of the Buddhist religion in the region on a par with the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya, encompassing not only much of present-day northern Thailand but also parts of present-day Myanmar and Laos. In the mid-16th century, Burmese forces succeeded in conquering Lan Na and occupied the kingdom intermittently for nearly 200 years. In 1775, a northern local prince named Kawila forged an alliance with the Siamese King Taksin and ousted the Burmese rulers, thus reestablishing the Kingdom of Lan Na as a tributary state under Siamese suzerainty. To mark Lan Na’s renewed independence, Kawila reconstructed the original palace following traditional ritual practices and customs. The palace continued to function as the center of Chiang Mai’s political power until the turn of the 20th century, when the central Siamese government based in Bangkok began the process of integrating Lan Na into the modern nation-state. During this period, Siamese

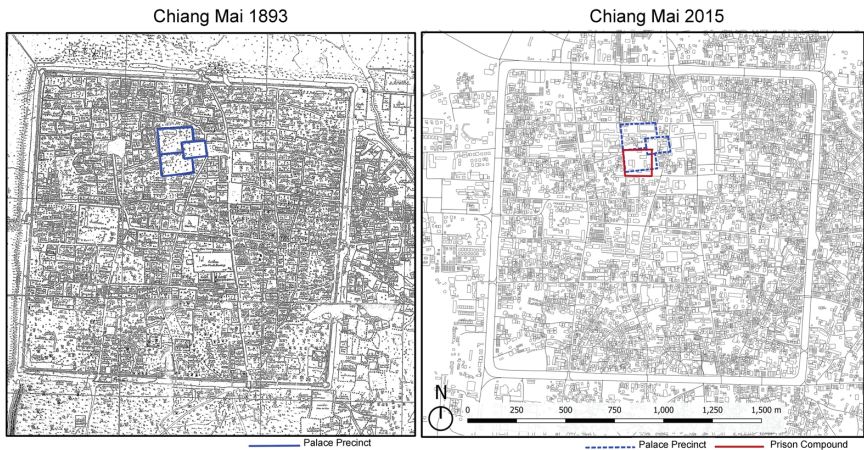


FIGURE 1 Maps of Chiang Mai in 1893 and in 2015 depicting the overlapping area of prison and the palace precincts.

colonial buildings such as the city hall, courthouse, hospitals and schools took over the center of the historical city, becoming symbols of modern state power which overshadowed the old royal residences of the feudal ruling families. The first modern prison was built on the abandoned southwest quarter of the palace, which the Siamese regent had requested from the king of Chiang Mai (Michubot 2013). As the last ruling head of Lan Na relinquished the rest of his royal precinct to the central government and moved to live outside the city wall, the physical remnants of the Lan Na palace became obscure as the central government buildings took over the royal sites (Sukkhata 2018; Ongsakul 2003).

To fully appreciate the implications of building a state prison on the site of the former Lan Na palace, it is necessary to understand how the relationship between the kingdoms of Siam and Lan Na were reconfigured during the colonial period. As Thongchai's (1994) postcolonial history of Thailand (the new name given to Siam after 1939) has shown, the mainstream nationalist narrative of Siam's successful evasion of direct colonization by European powers belies the fact that Siamese ruling elites in Bangkok actively emulated European systems of colonial rule to consolidate their power over multi-ethnic tributary states. Using colonial apparatus such as centralized administration, urban infrastructure, ethnic classification and mapping technology, the central Siamese government tightened its control over tributary states that were once culturally distinct sovereign entities, including the Lan Na Kingdom. Furthermore, Winichakul (2000) demonstrates that Siamese ruling elites appropriated and localized the European civilizational discourse—expressed as “*khwaṃ siwilai*” in Thai—as an instrument to legitimize their direct rule over tributary states, which were often portrayed as backward and steeped in uncivilized practices and traditions, thus requiring modernizing reforms. Building on Winichakul (1994), Herzfeld (2012) argues that the propensity of heritage authorities, planners and architects associated with the central Thai government to subscribe to rigidly nationalistic ideas of monumentalism and urban and architectural order represents a form of “crypto-colonialism” which has historical roots in the civilizing discourse of the colonial period.¹

Returning to the case of Wiang Kaew, when the central Siamese built the new prison on the site of the former palace in 1899, they did so under the civilizing guise of introducing a modern system of law and governance to a

1 In his ethnographic study of the Pom Mahakan citadel community in Bangkok, Herzfeld (2012; 2016) shows how heritage authorities and city planners deployed the civilizational discourse of urban landscape planning and heritage conservation to justify the eviction of a local community living around the site.

remote part of the Siamese empire that they considered backward and inferior. For example, archival records show that Siam's ruling elites viewed the penal system in the Lan Na Kingdom as barbaric and in need of civilizing reforms.² These attitudes were shaped in part by Western visitors such as the Belgian legal advisor to King Chulalongkorn, Pierre Orts, who decried the horrific conditions of the Lan Na prison, which he visited in 1897–1898 (Boussard, Phitsanu and Wanlaya 2012). Another aim of Siam's civilizing mission in Lan Na was to assimilate the ethnically and culturally distinct populace into the emergent nation-state. Historical archives show that the Siamese rulers at the time referred to the populace of Lan Na as “Lao”—an ethnic term which connoted their status as uncivilized peasants who lived far from the modern Bangkok capital (Easum 2015; Renard 1999).³

The assimilation of the Lao of Lan Na became particularly urgent after 1893, when French colonial powers took control of the Lao territories east of the Mekong which Siam had considered part of its empire. Faced with the threat of French extraterritorial claims on its Lao citizens in Lan Na, Siam's ruling elites initiated the process of erasing the local ethnicity, language and culture of Lan Na in order to unify the nation (Streckfuss 1993; Khruathongkhiauw 2012; Streckfuss 2012). Policies promoting cultural homogenization included the destruction of palm leaf manuscripts written in the local script as well as prohibitions of speaking the local language and wearing local dress (Ongsakul 2005; Wyatt 2003; Jarusawat 2017). In symbolic terms, erasing the palace of the Lan Na king was also a part of this ethnic homogenization.

Even after the threat of French colonial intervention had subsided, this process of integration and erasure of local Lan Na identity continued. During the hyper-nationalist period of Prime Minister Phibunsongkram (1938–1944, 1948–1957), the name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand, to reflect the ideology of a culturally and linguistically unified Thai nation, and the Phibun government issued cultural decrees enforcing appropriate dress and respect for Buddhism and the nation (Connors 2005). This period also saw the establishment of the central Fine Arts Department, led by the historian and politician Luang Wichit Wattakarn (1898–1962), who modeled the

2 In response to the U.S. Consulate General, Siamese rulers referred to Lan Na customary law as uncivilized and wild. See more in the National Archive, R.5 KT. 7 J.S. 1230–1234, 88–91.

3 Easum (2015) demonstrates that prior to the 20th century, the ethnonym “Lao” was widely used by the central Siamese (both in Ayutthaya and Bangkok) as well as Western missionaries to refer to populations in the northern and northeastern regions of present-day Thailand. The term acquired new meanings in the 19th century, as it came to signify ethno-linguistic difference. “Lao were upcountry, lowland-dwelling speakers of closely related Tai languages but lacked access to civilization and global modernity that favored Siam (8).”

FAD on classical Siamese aesthetics coupled with concepts of cultural refinement, civility and progress (Barme 1993). These assimilationist cultural policies propagating a central Thai language and culture through schools and the government administration served as the blueprint for state cultural policy for subsequent decades, leading to a further loss of local language and culture among younger generations.

3 Recovering Lan Na Identity and the Prison Removal Movement

In the north, there were some early signs of local resistance and pushback against these centralizing administrative reforms and erasures of local cultural identity. One of these movements coalesced in 1967, when a group of local scholars and elites led by Kraisri Nimmanhemindra came together to call for the removal of the state prison from the grounds of the former palace (Khumsap 2013). These demands were amplified during the 80s and 90s, which was a period of revival of Lan Na culture and identity (Kanika 2020). Prompted in part by the growth of cultural tourism in the north, Lan Na scholars and activists began to recover the history, language and culture that had been stigmatized for decades as backwards. This renewed pride in local identity came to the fore in 1996—the year when Chiang Mai celebrated the 700-year anniversary of its foundation with cultural events and academic conferences. As part of this revival, the local movement for the removal of the prison also consolidated. The movement was strengthened by the participation of local organizations which can be categorized into four groups as follows: 1) local state agencies, including the Chiang Mai Municipality; 2) NGOs, private foundations, and prominent academics; 3) the old town communities; and 4) key Buddhist monastic communities. These four major local groups joined forces to push the prison out of the historic town of Chiang Mai.

From 1998 to 2001, the movement continued to gain momentum as local NGOs, government agencies and communities organized periodic events pressuring the government to remove the prison. In response, the Department of Corrections transferred male prisoners out in 1999 but still maintained the site for female correctional and job training facilities (Chiang Mai News 2018). In early 2001, the mayor of Chiang Mai followed this move by announcing a project to turn the prison into a cultural center promoting the history of Chiang Mai and, later that year, he made a request to the government to appropriate the land as a future urban green space. In parallel to the actions of the mayor, a group of local NGOs—including the Chiang Mai Urban Development Institute Foundation, the Lan Na Environmental Fund and the Network for Chiang Mai

Environmental Collaboration—demanded the total demolition of the prison, claiming that it degraded Chiang Mai's dignity. Later in July of that year, twelve NGOs formed a network soliciting the government to create a public park on the site of the prison (Prachatham 2015).

In response to these demands, the Department of Corrections erected a large billboard announcing that following the recommendation of the prime minister, it would soon return the site of the female prison to the people of Chiang Mai for the purposes of creating a public park and a historical museum. On October 6, 2002, the Municipality of Chiang Mai, the State Attorney's Office and a group of Chiang Mai MPs announced that the prison site would be redesigned as a green space and a museum. However, the proposed plan aimed to preserve most of the prison buildings, wall and watch towers as a museum of justice. The network of local communities, NGOs and academics reacted strongly against the proposal by the local state agencies, as it did not meet their previous demand for total demolition of the prison complex. In early 2002, the network of local communities, NGOs, and academics organized a series of public hearings which resulted in a clear demand for open space, either as a park or a multipurpose plaza. They also sent the petition directly to the prime minister at that time, Thaksin Shinawatra, who is also a native of Chiang Mai, calling for the total demolition of the prison facilities, asserting that this would be an auspicious sign of Chiang Mai's prosperity (Prachatham 2015).

Between 2002 and 2006, local scholars and activists published numerous articles describing the historical transformation of the former palace site into a prison and urged the government to make the next move to create a public park and plaza. One influential article published by Charoenmuang (2002) described the traditional belief system which regards the city as a living entity with a head, torso, arms and legs. These anthropomorphic beliefs are reflected in the town's spatial arrangement; for instance, the northern part of the city is considered auspicious as it is the symbolic "head" of the town, while the city's navel is situated at the center. The royal palace site in the northwest symbolizes the longevity of the city, while the north gate is the main access to the town for royal processions. In light of these beliefs, Charoenmuang (2002) argued that the Siamese government's decision to place the prison on the former palace site was considered an inauspicious omen for Chiang Mai and it should be removed. Furthermore, during this period, a petition letter was sent to the prime minister seeking to prevent any new development projects around the historic old town by Chiang Mai City Municipality and the Provincial Administrative Organization. The petition questioned the intention of the Chiang Mai City Municipality and state agencies to keep the prison buildings which were regarded as inauspicious for the city and asked why they were not

instead reviving the glory of the palace. Political turmoil in 2005 and the coup d'état in 2006 which overthrew the elected government of the Chiang Mai-born premier halted the proposed plan to remove the prison and restore the palace (Prachatham 2015).

Two years under the military-led provisional government ended with a new election that brought the same party to power, led by the first female premier, Yingluck Shinawatra, who is also a native of Chiang Mai and the younger sister of Thaksin. In April of 2008, another mass mobilization comprised of various sectors of society in Chiang Mai—including academic groups, monastic residents, local advocacy groups, urban communities, local businesses, state cultural agencies and the descendants of the former ruling house of Chiang Mai—renewed the campaign for the removal of the prison. Local state agencies responded to the public outcry with a sense of urgency. The Chiang Mai Office of Corrections started the preparation process by surveying the site. The Chiang Mai Municipality also set up two committees to deal with the case. The first committee was assigned to explore the best solution for the development of the site, and the second was responsible for gathering the public opinion of Chiang Mai people. At the end of the year, Chiang Mai locals participated in a public forum debating the future of the prison site, followed by two public hearings to decide on three possible solutions: 1) conserving most of the existing prison buildings; 2) keeping only the crucial structures; or 3) demolishing all the structures. Approximately half of the public audience were undecided, but there were many more votes for the total removal than for the conservation of the existing structures (Prachatai 2008; Prachatham 2015).

On January 17, 2009, a public conference titled “In Search of the Origin of the Old Town Chiang Mai” was organized for local academics to share their knowledge about the development and characteristics of the former palace of the Lan Na Kingdom. From 2009 to 2011, several articles were published in journals and newspapers about the site, featuring previously unseen historical documents of the former palace, and once again demanding the total removal of the prison in favor of a new open space (Wiriychaiwong 2008; Ongsakul 2003; Charoenmuang 2009). For instance, Michubot (2012) rediscovered the actual site of Lan Na palace by investigating historic maps of Chiang Mai and historical records of the prison. Wiriychaiwong (2008) described the placement of the prison building on the palace site as a part of the Siamese effort to desecrate Chiang Mai's auspicious potency by linking it to a similar incident during the Lan Na-Ayutthaya War in the 16th century. Sukhata (2011) indicated that prisons were also built on auspicious locations of other major cities of

the Lan Na Kingdom, such as in Lampang and Lamphun, and therefore it was clearly the Siamese government's intent to erase the symbol of old Lan Na royal power to demonstrate Siamese domination. A public forum titled "Chiang Mai 2016: 720-year anniversary" was organized on April 12, 2011, calling for the total removal of the prison buildings and a proposal to transform the site into a public open space based on the traditional concept of a "Khuang" or plaza in the Lan Na language.

In January 2012, the Chiang Mai Urban Development Institute Foundation (CMUDIF) and a network of local advocacy groups made a proposal at a Cabinet Ministry meeting for the removal of the prison and the development of a new public cultural venue as a part of the city development strategy in Chiang Mai. In August of the same year, the CMUDIF sent the petition for the removal of the prison to Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. By September 4, the Permanent Secretary Office responded that the request had been forwarded to the Department of Corrections. Finally, by the end of 2012, the prison inmates were transferred to the new prison site in the northern district of Mae Rim, but the question of the future of the site and the prison buildings remained.

4 From Prison to Buddhist Memorial Park: The Monastic Contestation Over the Former Palace Site

After the local community stakeholders achieved their mission of removing the prisoners from the former palace, they agreed to invite respected monks to exorcise evil spirits from the site. This marked the beginning of the involvement of the Buddhist Monastic Order (Sangha) with the management and interpretation of the site. On January 14, 2013, the Chiang Mai local radio station FM 92.5 announced that the prison was open to the public and broadcast the event live. From January 19 to 27, elaborate Buddhist rituals to remove the curse associated with the prison were organized and attended by a group of highly influential Buddhist patriarchs in the region. Invitations had been extended to all the former ruling families of the Lan Na Kingdom and five other key Tai principalities, including three cities outside Thailand. In an unexpected turn of events, after the exorcism ceremony, the key to the main gateway of the prison complex was handed over to the foundation supporting the royal temple of the regional patriarch instead of the responsible state agency—the Chiang Mai Office of the Treasury. This transfer of responsibility for the prison

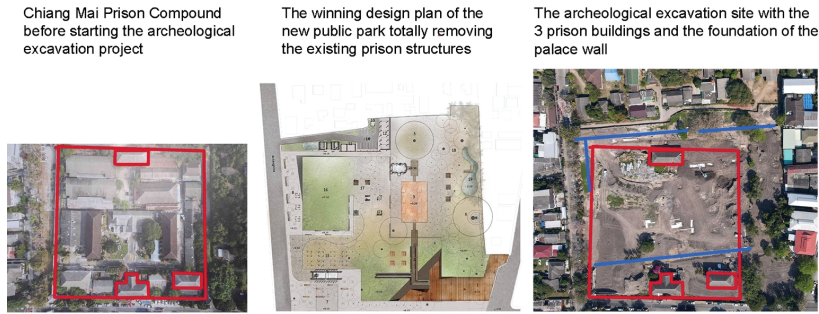
key was a sign of what was to come—the involvement of the Buddhist Sangha in the interpretation of the site.⁴

On January 20, 2013, a seminar entitled “From Palace to Prison, from Prison to...” was organized at the Creative Urban Solution Center of Chiang Mai. At the meeting, the advisor to the Minister of Social Development and Human Security unexpectedly announced that the Cabinet Ministry had approved a 150-million-baht budget proposal to develop the site into a Buddhist Memorial Park or “Phutthamonthon,” to celebrate the 2600th year of the Buddhist Era, which was more than 30 years in the future (2057) (Chiang Mai News 2018). This announcement caused chaos and alarm in the Chiang Mai public sphere. Reacting swiftly to the news, the local network of Chiang Mai’s Old Town Communities sent a request urging the governor to host a public hearing on February 5, 2013. The group demanded that all involved parties should have a voice in determining the future of the site, not just one institution, thus hinting at their concern about the Buddhist Sangha’s intervention. The group also helped to organize at least three citywide public events, such as the Chiang Mai Citizen Juries on February 17 and March 9, to discuss this issue with the public, and they organized walking tours around the palace site at the end of the year in 2013. In spite of this, the central budget of 150 million baht was allocated to the Chiang Mai Office of National Buddhism in August (Prachatham 2015).

Under significant pressure from communities, prominent scholars and local activists, the Provincial Office of Chiang Mai asked the University Academic Service Center of Chiang Mai University (UNISERV) to hold another public hearing on June 12, 2013, at Chiang Mai City Art and Cultural Center. After the public hearing came out in favor of a public park, the Provincial Office went ahead with the plan to develop the prison site and launched the design competition for the park in April 2014. The Provincial Office announced the winner of the design competition on July 15, 2014. The winning design proposed the total demolition of the prison and the creation of a public park with an underground memorial hall.⁵ After the competition, no immediate action was taken on this plan (See Figure 2).

4 Interview on June 17th, 2021 with Suebpong Chansuebsri, an appointed member of the committee to consider historic and architectural significance of the prison structures. More details in Prachatham, “So No Changwat Chor Mor Tob Kham Tham Khwam Khueb Na Phor Thor Satharana Klang Mueang Pat Khao Lue Ploy Tok- Ekachon Hub” [Chiang Mai Provincial Office answering questions about public space in the city center denying missing budget deadline-private takeover], <https://prachatham.com/th/node/11332>. (accessed October 5th, 2021).

5 Interview on August 28, 2021 with Isara Guntang, a lecturer in architecture at RMUTL and a committee member for the design competition.



Source : Aerial Photo of the existing prison compound from Chiang Mai news (2018); the winning design plan from Assistant Professor Kawin Wongwigkarn; the present aerial photo from Google Earth

FIGURE 2 Aerial photos of the prison compound with all structures before and after the demolition for the archeological excavation project compared to the original winning design proposal for the new public park.

A few months later, on October 15, 2014, the Director of the National Tourism Department and the high-ranking deputy regional Buddhist patriarch held a conference at the Provincial Office with the Chiang Mai Office of the Fine Arts Department, announcing yet another plan to turn the site into a Buddhist Memorial Park (Phutthamonthon), showing a digital simulation of the site with several Lan Na structures including a stupa, traditional throne hall and pavilions. The senior patriarch described the project plan as removing all prison structures to make way for the museum which would house statues of all of Lan Na's former rulers and for Buddhist temple buildings along the border of the site.⁶ From July 2014 to April 2015, local advocacy groups, including the Network of Old Town Communities, sent several requests to different state agencies for more information about developments on the project and its budget of 150 million baht.

Finally, the Office of National Buddhism backed off from their plan for a Buddhist Memorial Park and authorized the Chiang Mai Provincial Office to start the process for the winning public park design in the last quarter of 2015. With this approval from the Office of National Buddhism, the Governor authorized the Chiang Mai Office of the Fine Arts Department (FAD) to conduct an archeological survey, as required prior to demolition. The Provincial Office consulted with the Chiang Mai Office of the FAD, suggesting that since some of the prison structures were at least 100 years old, they might be structures with

6 See more detail (in Thai) at MGR Online, "Triam Doen Na Tub Khuk Ying Kao Chiang Mai Khad D Day Phor Yor Ni"[Going ahead for demolishing old female prison of Chiang Mai: expecting this Nov], last modified October 15th 2017, <https://mgronline.com/local/detail/9570000118647>. (accessed October 25th, 2021).

national historic significance. They agreed that the demolition of the prison and construction of the public park could start only after the assessment of the existing structures was completed. The Chiang Mai Office of the FAD formed a committee consisting of archeologists and architects from the FAD Bangkok Office, local community leaders and scholars in the field of architecture to evaluate the buildings.

Reflecting the crypto-colonial aspect of the modern Thai state, the Fine Arts Department representatives suggested that six of the prison buildings should be classified as national heritage sites for their historic colonial architecture and their representation of the history of the modern justice system in Thailand. However, the committee members from academia and the old town communities disagreed and stood firmly for the total demolition of the prison structures.⁷ Local advocacy groups also pressured the Provincial Office and Fine Arts Department to proceed with the winning design proposal for the public park.

Meanwhile, the archeological excavation of the site had started uncovered convincing evidence of the ancient palace wall. The Fine Arts Department then revised their criteria for conservation, noting that if any structures with historic significance dating to the colonial era were overlapping with the palace, they should be removed to enable further excavation of the Lan Na era structures. With these new criteria in place, the prison buildings were reduced from six to three structures.⁸ Nevertheless, the local advocacy leaders continued to appeal for the full removal of the prison buildings. The struggle within the committee over their divergent evaluations of the historic structures delayed the process by two years. The archeological excavation project went into full gear in 2017 and more evidence dating back to Lan Na's Golden Era was uncovered, definitively confirming the existence of the palace and its former importance as the center of the Lan Na Kingdom.

7 From an interview on August 28, 2021 with Isara Guntang, a committee member considering historic and architectural significance of the prison structures and an interview on October 3rd, 2021 with an archeologist responsible for the archeological excavation of the palace site.

8 The Fine Arts Department issued the result of the investigation of Wiang Kaew area on July 22nd, 2019 (document No. Wo Tho 0417/2902 ๖๕ ๐๔๑๗/๒๕๐๒) to certify that Wiang Kaew is the site of the palace dating back to the 13th century but insisted on keeping colonial buildings, three out of the original proposed six.

5 Authorized Heritage Discourse of the Nation versus the Spirit of Place of Lan Na

The contestation between the different state agencies and Chiang Mai local advocacy groups over the site of the former palace can be analyzed in terms of the conceptual divide between “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith 2006) and local heritage values. As Smith further argues, authorized heritage discourse gives state heritage authorities the power to determine which cultural artifacts and sites should be selected for conservation, and how they should be interpreted, often at the expense of local meanings. In this case, after the campaign to relocate the prisoners was approved by the central government in 2012, the first state agency to deploy the authorized heritage discourse was the Chiang Mai City Municipality, which expressed its intent to appropriate the site and keep most of the historic prison buildings, claiming that they represented Thailand’s national heritage of modern justice.

Their proposal was contested by several local scholars who questioned why they would want to keep prison structures which represented such a painful period of history for the Lan Na populace. Local stakeholders calling for the prison’s demolition felt that these negative connotations cast a dark shadow on the living historic townscape, which was defined by its elaborate Buddhist temples signifying the northern Lan Na civilization. In keeping with the movement to restore Lan Na’s cultural heritage and identity, these local stakeholders sought to restore the site of the former palace and its connotation as the political and spiritual center of the Lan Na Kingdom. Moreover, as stated previously, in the local belief system about the city as a living entity, the site of the palace in the northwestern part of the symbolic urban “body” connotes the city’s spiritual continuity. Considering these beliefs about the embodiment of the town, having a prison at the site of the palace was akin to the imprisonment of the spirit of the city and its people.

After the transfer of the female prisoners at the end of 2012, the second state agency that attempted to appropriate the palace site surprisingly was the Office of National Buddhism—the legal administrative body of the Thai Buddhist monastic government. At an early stage, the monastic community supported the local movement to remove the prison by acknowledging that the prison was a violation of the sacred space of the former Lan Na palace. Senior patriarchs expressed their recognition for these local beliefs by performing religious rites to exorcise the bad spirits associated with the prison. On the other hand, when the high-ranking senior patriarchs in the national ecclesiastical order collaborated with the central government to secure the budget to create the public park, they proposed that the primary theme and function of the park

should be as a Buddhist memorial field of merit, thus shifting the symbolic focus away from the former Lan Na Kingdom.

The Office of National Buddhism's actions can be understood to represent another vector of the authorized heritage discourse in Thailand, insofar as the Buddhist religion is one of the three key symbols of Thai nationhood, as expressed in the national motto "Nation, Religion, Monarchy."⁹ In this case, we can see that the Buddhist institution endeavored to use this opportunity to create a new Buddhist space by first ritually eradicating the bad spirits associated with the prison. However, this was met with local opposition. Although the plan for the Buddhist Memorial Park promised to remove all prison structures and erect a throne hall and museum for commemoration of the past Lan Na rulers,¹⁰ the local scholars and communities still questioned the condition of being under the control of the central Buddhist institution on a site symbolizing local political and spiritual power. Even though Buddhist monks have historically been known to serve as mediators between the populace and state power, the present ecclesiastical organization was legalized and formulated by central Siamese, and thus it represents another form of the central regime.

The last authorized heritage discourse associated with the site is the one produced by the Department of Fine Arts. In fact, the local office of the FAD remained relatively neutral throughout the movement until the Provincial Office requested an official evaluation of the historic significance of the prison structures.¹¹ Based on the colonial architecture of the prisons and the views of some conservative scholars (Bang Or 2018), the FAD officials proposed to conserve the structures of six historic prison buildings. They argued that the structures were a symbol of the nation's sovereignty and modern justice, regardless of the fact that they were situated on the former palace of the Lan Na Kingdom.

9 Officially, this motto is supposed to include all religions found in Thailand but, in reality, Buddhism is the de facto national religion of the country.

10 From MGR Online (in Thai), "Triam Doen Na Tub Khuk Ying Kao Chiang Mai Khad D Day Phor Yor Ni" [Going ahead for demolishing old female prison of Chiang Mai: expecting this Nov]. last modified October 15th, 2014. <https://mgronline.com/local/detail/957000018647>. (accessed October 5th, 2021).

11 Prior to the investigation, the key official of Chiang Mai Office of FAD was interviewed by Prachatai Newspaper on January 29th, 2013, and he did not unequivocally contest the removal of prison structures but did mention that the modern justice system was important and should be displayed as a part of Lan Na history along with the history of the palace. See more detail (in Thai), "Khum Khok Khued Khuang Phuttha Utthayan Roi Pri bon Thang Lueak Phueng Thi Satharana Chiang Mai (2)," [Palace, Prison, Prohibition, and Plaza for Buddha Memorial Park: Split Selection for Chiang Mai's Public Space (1)]. Last modified January 29th, 2013. <https://prachatai.com/journal/2013/01/44983>. (accessed September 14th, 2021).

The FAD's position changed only after much older artifacts associated with the palace were unearthed, thus providing much more persuasive evidence of the site's antiquity and its place within northern Lan Na civilization. The FAD then ruled that the structures of colonial heritage overlapping with the area of Lan Na heritage could be removed. In 2017, the FAD allowed three historic prison structures located inside the boundary of the palace to be dismantled, making way for further excavation of the site. The excavation proceeded, and the team of archeologists uncovered the foundation of the palace wall with a substantial number of Chinese, Vietnamese and local ceramics dating to the Mongol, Ming, and Qing periods (13th-20th centuries). The site became even more contested as the FAD prohibited any further interventions in the area beyond the excavated palace wall as it was being considered as a potential site of national heritage. Once again, in keeping with authorized heritage discourse, the FAD stated that the excavation site must be protected from any further developments, and that the history and material fabric and artifacts of both the palace and the colonial prison should be professionally preserved and displayed within the remaining three colonial prison structures.¹² The FAD move can be viewed as an effort to appropriate the historical artifacts of the Lan Na palace into the narrative of national heritage.

Several local scholars were also inclined to support the FAD's mandate of protecting the excavation site since future studies on the site and ruins in the vicinity could contribute to a clearer picture of the former palace and the heritage of the Lan Na Kingdom. Other local groups and some scholars, however, still pushed the new winning design of the park forward. Those who have continued to advocate for the park have a different perspective from the other groups who focused on the newly discovered material heritage. For them, they look at the site in terms of the contemporary experience of Chiang Mai old town residents who would regain their sense of local ownership of the place and thus revive the intangible meaning of the site as the town's original center (Charoenmuang 2009,4).

6 Conclusion

The prison built on the former Lan Na palace has been a site of contestation between various state agencies and local stakeholder groups for several decades. For the local advocacy groups comprised of academics and town

12 Interview on October 14th, 2021 with an archeologist responsible for the archeological excavation of the palace site.

residents, the movement to demolish the prison was born out of critical revisionist histories which revealed how Lan Na culture and identity had been suppressed by Siamese expansion into the region in the 19th century. For these groups, the prison's existence and its colonial structures symbolize the injustice and demeaning treatment suffered by the local populace of Chiang Mai at the hands of Siam's internal colonial administration during the period of modernization (Sukkhata 2012). Therefore, the removal of the prison and reopening of the site to the public would represent a reclaiming of Lan Na history and identity for the local people.

In contrast, conservative scholars and state agencies have argued to keep the prison as a part of the national history, as it represents Siam's cunning in fending off Western colonial powers by improving the justice system, including the condition of the prisons. Furthermore, these groups maintain that the use of colonial architecture by Siam's ruling elite contributed to the modern and civilized image of Siam, thus further legitimizing Siam's independence from European colonial rule. This narrative constitutes an authorized heritage discourse since conserving the prison structures undoubtedly promotes the national narrative of Siam's skillful evasion of direct rule by European colonial powers. Paradoxically, and in keeping with the concept of "crypto-colonialism" (Herzfeld 2002),¹³ this narrative obscures the reality of Siam's own internal colonialism in Lan Na.

Even though the state conservation agency finally allowed for the demolition of three of the historic colonial prison structures, it was not really for the sake of respecting the wishes of the local communities. Rather, the FAD was concerned with the conservation and exhibition of much older and more precious archeological artifacts discovered underneath the prison structures. This emphasis on the material fabric of heritage over the intangible significance of the site is yet another example of authorized heritage discourse, as it privileges historical, material evidence that can be incorporated into national heritage. Even though this material record is technically part of Lan Na civilization, the Thai 1961 Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiquities, Objects of Art and National Museums give the FAD the right to claim material heritage as national heritage on the basis of its assessed value and antiquity. This is yet another legacy of Thailand's emulation of European colonial archeological practice, insofar as European powers appropriated the artifacts of other civilizations that they had conquered into their own imperial collections.

13 Crypto-colonialism refers to those nation-states that appear to be culturally independent but in reality they are politically and economically dependent upon the decisions of major Western colonial powers.

The conflict between the local stakeholders and the state authorities was further complicated by the intervention of the Office of National Buddhism which had a plan to turn the site into a Buddhist Memorial Park. This agenda basically derailed the local movement from reviving the palace site as a new civic space for the town. Although this proposal planned to eradicate all the prison structures and create a new throne hall with a museum space dedicated to all the previous kings and heroes of Chiang Mai, the name of the park would have negated the original intention of the movement as it would have connoted a field of Buddhist merit instead of the former Lan Na palace. In this sense, the Buddhist Memorial Park scheme can also be viewed as another authorized heritage discourse which sidelined local heritage values by promoting the de facto national religion of Buddhism in lieu of local identity. Indeed, as Bowie (2014) has shown in her research about the revered northern monk, Khuba Srivichai, the national agencies of the ecclesiastical Buddhist government have long been viewed as an apparatus of the central Siamese government for subduing the religious independence of the northern Thai Buddhist communities, including the Lan Na kingdom. Therefore, Buddhist memorial space inevitably would connote the central authorized heritage discourse.

As of October 2021, the Fine Arts Department has called for the preservation of colonial style structures as national heritage and has prohibited the building of any new structures beyond the palace walls, as it is now being considered for official registration as a nationally recognized historic place. Furthermore, state authorities have determined that the site should not be altered significantly, to ensure the possibility of future archeological study but, at the same time, the creation of a public open space for locals to connect with their past is also being encouraged. The contestation over the meaning of the site is likely to continue as some local advocacy groups are still arguing for the total demolition of the historic prison buildings. Local scholars, historians and heritage advocates will continue debating how to interpret the site and certainly they will be at odds about whether the nationalist narrative of Siam's modern justice reforms or the local history of Lan Na should be the main theme.

To conclude, perhaps the state heritage authorities should consider recent efforts within the field of heritage conservation towards a more inclusive, community-based approach to heritage interpretation and management. As proposed in the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS, 1979, 1981, 1999), site conservation must recognize the social and spiritual values of past, present and future generations and consider these values in the planning and management process. Similarly, the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (ICOMOS, 1994) states that responsibility for the management of cultural heritage belongs to the community that has generated it and that the authenticity of heritage properties must

be judged within their internal cultural contexts while spiritual and emotional aspects are also included in the criteria.

These principles are further echoed in the *Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practices in Asia* (2009) which have called for a reconceptualization of heritage which recognizes the spiritual values and lived meanings inscribed in a heritage site by multiple generations. As these protocols indicate, cultural heritage is not fixed and immutable—rather it is a fluid, negotiated process which can result in a “palimpsest of knowledge.” Certainly, there are lessons to be learned about the fluidity of heritage by revealing the palimpsest of meanings found at the former Lan Na palace and prison. Indeed, the case of Wiang Kaew attests to the need for broader awareness of and engagement with the emerging field of critical heritage studies—a field which interrogates how heritage is used to reinforce state power structures and nationalist ideologies. It is hoped that this case study can contribute to much-needed debates about the meanings and uses of heritage in Thailand and beyond.

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