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Reframing living heritage through dialogical engagement: A critical case study of Ban Chiang, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Living heritage practices have become dynamic responses to the global structures of heritage governance structures, especially in postcolonial Southeast Asia. However, the current studies favor Authorised heritage narratives and dismiss the dialogical community engagements. This study looks at how the Tai Puan community at Ban Chiang negotiates and reinterprets the meanings of heritage in dialogical interaction with global heritage discourses, pointing toward alternative frameworks for understanding living heritage. The research is based on ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews and critical discourse analysis and captures complex processes of local actors producing, resisting and hybridizing heritage narratives. Dialogical practices are found to empower community agency and to encourage interpretations of living heritage that contradict UNESCO's Authorised frameworks. This research adds to critical heritage scholarship by developing a dialogical model of living heritage, and it offers insights into decolonial approaches to heritage governance.

Keywords: Ban Chiang World Heritage Site, Dialogical Heritage Engagement, Living Heritage Practices, Postcolonial and Decolonial Approaches, Community Heritage Negotiation

Introduction

Across the fluid geographic landscapes of international heritage governance, the struggle against Authorised stories and lived experience has become sharper, especially in postcolonial Southeast Asia. Although international bodies such as UNESCO work to stabilize heritage meanings through official inscription and conservation structures, local communities continue to use heritage as a living, negotiated practice – a dialogical process that avoids set interpretative positionings. This sense of friction is nowhere more apparent than in Ban Chiang, Thailand, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where transnational recognition intertwines with the work, memory, and agency of the Tai Puan community. Here in this context, heritage is not just conserved. It is constantly reinterpreted, contested, and revitalized, threatening the very epistemologies that determine what heritage should be.

The above-described way of articulating the designation of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO as a universal tool in the preservation of cultural and historical heritage to the future has long been expressed in the above way. But this is not a value-neutral global project; it is firmly rooted in epistemologies that favour authorised expert-led readings of material culture over the many-sided, emergent meanings that local communities project onto it. Local legacies and indigenous epistemologies in major regional settings like Southeast Asia exist in

a state of marked incompatibility with the implementation of the global heritage frameworks, often producing a frictional, contradictory or creative reinterpretation.

This study uses postcolonial and decolonial analytical frameworks to address issues of heritage contestations at Ban Chiang. Postcolonial approaches question the ways in which colonial knowledge systems continue to structure the governance of heritage today by universalist standards, temporalities and Western-centred notions of authenticity (e.g., Byrne, 1991; Smith, 2006). However, this research is also a form of decolonial perspectives that goes beyond critique to epistemic disobedience - the active construction of alternative ways of knowing and being with heritage (Mignolo, 2011; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). While postcolonial analysis can identify how power is exercised through the regimes of heritage, decolonial praxis helps communities to enact sovereign epistemologies that fundamentally challenge the ontological assumptions of global frameworks for heritage. This distinction is important for understanding the way the Tai Puan community not only resists Authorised heritage discourses, but is actively engaged in the production of alternative heritage paradigms that are based on relational ontologies, spiritual temporalities, and communal practices of meaning-making.

In this regard, Ban Chiang is a major prehistoric archaeological site. Although global heritage discourses focus on the material authenticity of the site and its place in the larger human civilization, local Tai Puan people live in Ban Chiang as a living landscape with memory, ritual, and relational meanings that are dynamic. The conflict between preservation paradigms and lived experience is an inherent problem and it is the complexity of this issue that makes the negotiation of heritage in postcolonial settings especially tedious. It is also critical to recognize the dialogical processes that take place in these disputed heritage spaces, since heritage should be seen as a negotiated field of action rather than a fixed repository of universal values.

Criticizing these tensions, critical heritage scholarship has become more vocal in criticizing Authorised Heritage Discourses (AHD) and promoting the paradigms of living heritage, the defense of dialogical, postcolonial and decolonial approaches. Although this body of work offers a solid theoretical foundation, it still has a number of critical gaps. For example, empirical research on how these critiques operate in practice remains limited, especially within the Southeast Asian context. Moreover, case studies investigating living heritage as an active negotiation of World Heritage Sites are underrepresented. This paper fills these gaps providing important theoretical and empirical understanding of dialogical heritage involvement.

Research Objectives

This paper is an attempt to critically explore how the Tai Puan community of Ban Chiang negotiates, contests, and redefines the heritage meanings through dialogical engagement with global heritage narratives. By highlighting local voices and ordinary practices, the research aims to intervene into an understanding of living heritage as a dynamic, participatory, and contested domain side by side with the Authorised heritage discourses situated within the processes of World Heritage governance.

Research Questions

In accordance, the research raises the following questions:

(RQ1) *How do members of the Tai Puan community participate in dialogical processes to reconstruct the meanings of the heritage designation of Ban Chiang?*

(RQ2) *In what ways do such local engagements challenge, negotiate, or reinterpret the Authorised heritage narratives that are advanced by such global heritage institutions as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)?*

(RQ3) *How can dialogical engagement be theorized as a mode of living heritage-making that can oppose static and dominant heritage translation schemes?*

Ultimately, the study also adds to critical heritage studies by placing dialogical engagement in the foreground as one of the essential living heritage-making processes in postcolonial settings. It provides new theoretical, methodological and practical findings regarding how local communities challenge and redefine global heritage discourses through a case study of Ban Chiang, proposing a more participatory and community-based vision of how heritage is managed.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1. The Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD)

As a critical response to the hegemonic narratives and practices institutionalized through global heritage governance frameworks (most of them based on Western epistemologies), the concept of Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) was born. According to Smith (2006), AHD is a set of assumptions and practices that privileges monumental, material, and visually spectacular heritage, usually interpreted through state-sanctioned, expert-driven, views of cultural significance. In this paradigm, heritage is a static object to be preserved and authenticated, removed from the living, dynamic practices of the communities for whom such sites continue to have meaning.

AHD has been claimed to perpetuate hegemonic power systems by privileging some stories over others that silence the voices of local people whose connections to heritage spaces are relational, dynamic, and context-specific (Harrison, 2013; Smith, 2006; Waterton & Smith, 2010). Such critique has had particular resonance in postcolonial contexts, where Western-based models of heritage are introduced into contexts of cultural marginalization that have been longstanding historical processes of colonial domination. In addition, Bennett (2010) refutes the object- centered assumptions of AHD by showing how heritage sites operate as vibrant materialities, assemblages of human and nonhuman actors, in which agency is produced relationally rather than through preservation frameworks. In materialist perspective, the emphasis of the AHD on material authenticity is ironically the disregard of the generative and active potential of heritage landscapes.

The application of AHD through World Heritage Site designations has generated tensions between global expectations of conservation and local practices of living heritage in Southeast Asia. In contrast, UNESCO listings often foreground material emphasis, which stands in sharp contrast to the ways in which communities rework heritage meanings through ritual, memory, and everyday engagement. Therefore, understanding the dynamics and limitations of AHD is essential for locating the contemporary challenges of sites such as Ban Chiang, where global narratives meet and sometimes clash with local experiences and interpretations.

2. Living heritage paradigms

The appearance of the living heritage paradigms signifies a fundamental move away from the static, object-oriented frameworks that have prevailed in global heritage discourse. In contrast to static and unchanging as a heritage is an artifact of the past, living heritage approaches view them as dynamic and relational and grounded in everyday practices, ongoing practices of communities social, cultural and ritual practices (Bortolotto 2011; Smith & Akagawa 2009). This view of heritage significance is not fixed in the material authenticity or monumental grandeur, but it is continuously negotiated and redefined in everyday engagement, performance, and intergenerational transmission.

These paradigms were formally recognised by the 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the UNESCO, which highlighted the importance of intangible practises, oral traditions, performing arts, social practises, rituals and knowledge systems (UNESCO, 2003).

However, despite the growing scholarly interest in these intangible heritage frameworks, critics believe that institutional applications tend to reproduce fixed categories, thus making dynamic practices a fixed list and bureaucratic taxonomy (Hafstein, 2008; Logan, 2012). The resulting paradox is the effort to transform the spirit of living heritage into administrative practices based on preservationist logics.

Against the idea of living heritage as a passive custodianship, communities are active producers and negotiators of heritage (Labadi & Long, 2010). Instead of arresting cultural practices in time, such practices promote dialogical and iterative interactions with the dynamic nature of cultural practices. This point of view is relevant due to its ability to make living heritage resistant to imposed narratives and impose local worldviews in postcolonial situations. Appadurai (2013) has analyzed temporal disjunctures that global cultural flows generate, which result in non-synchronous temporalities that challenge the linear, modernist conception of time. This presents itself as tension between preservationist temporalities that aim to 'freeze' the past and community temporalities that see heritage as always present and future oriented. His notion of the 'future as cultural fact' shows how communities such as the Tai Puan actively make heritage meanings that reject the past/present separation that is central to Authorised heritage discourse and instead create temporalities in which ancestral knowledge is present in contemporary practice and future aspirations at the same time. Heritage is a live, contested field of recognition, challenging approved systems and opening up more inclusive, pluralistic cultural importance.

Living heritage paradigms provide critical insights into how local communities interact with globally inscribed heritage beyond the role of passive recipients, but as active participants who continuously reframe and recontextualize heritage within their own social and cultural contexts, as with Ban Chiang.

3. Dialogical models in heritage studies

In contrast to monologic, top-down models, dialogical models in heritage studies are a critical departure from top-down frameworks of heritage meaning-making, towards relational, participatory, and co-constructed approaches. According to Bakhtinian ideas of dialogism, heritage has been understood as a site of ongoing negotiation between multiple voices, perspectives, and interests (Harrison, 2013; Waterton & Smith, 2010). The meaning in dialogical models is not moved in one way in a direction of the expert to the communities, but the meaning emerges in the form of iterative and reciprocal interactions where the validity and dynamism of different cultural interpretations are recognised.

This methodology questions the epistemological assumptions of Academic Heritage Discourses (AHD) by disavowing the belief that heritage has one, objectively definable value. Rather, it prefigures heritage as a continuous communicative process through which meanings are socially produced, argued and re-defined contextually in ways that are context-specific (Waterton & Smith, 2010). Silverman and Ruggles (2007), for example, provide examples of community-based storytelling, ritual practice, and memory work that generate counter-narratives to homogenizing heritage discourses. As a result, the dialogical models are consistent with larger critical heritage studies that focus on participation, plurality, and reflexivity.

However, dialogical models have yet to overcome their challenges. Even under the rhetoric of participation, institutional frameworks can still privilege some voices over others (Harrison, 2013; Schofield, 2014), and power asymmetries tend to determine 'who is heard'

in 'dialogue.' To realize genuinely dialogical heritage practices, tensions need to be recognized and critically addressed.

Through the use of a dialogical model, Ban Chiang is explored as a case study of how the Tai Puan community interacts with global heritage narratives as active interlocutors who negotiate, reframe, and reinterpret the meanings of their heritage in ways that reflect local worldviews and aspirations.

4. Postcolonial and decolonial approaches

Heritage studies have taken critical postcolonial and decolonial approaches that employ the critical interrogation of the epistemological foundations and power structures that have historically had power in the shape of global heritage governance. Drawing from other critiques of coloniality in knowledge production (Harrison, 2013; Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 2006), these approaches challenge the Eurocentric assumptions that underpin heritage frameworks (that focus on material authenticity, monumentalism, or universalist brochures). Instead, they demand a recognition of various, situated ways of knowing, remembering, and being with the past.

Heritage practices perpetuate colonial hierarchies by validating some histories while disavowing indigenous and subaltern voices (Byrne, 1991; Jacobs, 2010). However, critiques of even inclusive initiatives such as world heritage designations lay the charge of inscribing colonial logics by standardizing the criteria of authenticity and significance that the criteria may not map to the local ontologies of culture. Deeper epistemic structures that determine what counts as heritage and whose memories and identities are remembered need to be unsettled too for what decolonial scholars call genuine decolonization of heritage, meaning unsettling not only institutional practices but also their deep epistemic structures (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012).

In this framework, heritage is seen as a contested terrain on which struggles over memory, identity, and meaning are political by nature. Decolonial approaches advocate for epistemic disobedience, the active refusal to accept dominant frameworks, and the creation of pluriversal spaces where there can be many ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2011). Yet this perspective also allows for the recognition of living, relational, and performative practices as valid forms of heritage in a break with the fixity and hierarchy of Authorised heritage discourses. Tuck and Yang's (2012) critical intervention in the metaphorization of decolonization offers the heritage studies field much-needed analytical precision. Insisting that 'decolonization is not a metaphor,' heritage scholarship is challenged to go beyond the mere critique of colonial legacies to substantive engagement with the ongoing settler colonial structures. This framework requires an assessment of how heritage negotiations at Ban Chiang either reproduce or actually contest the epistemic foundations of global heritage governance.

These critiques are especially important in the Southeast Asian context and in sites like Ban Chiang. This paper argues that the inscription of Ban Chiang as a World Heritage Site highlighted the archaeological significance of the site within a universalist narrative of human progress, while the local Tai Puan community's association with the site is embedded in living practices, spiritual engagements, and communal memory, which do not conform to a static categorization. As such, postcolonial and decolonial frameworks offer invaluable critical tools for understanding how local communities make sense of and negotiate, resist and reframe global heritage narratives in ways that affirm their own epistemologies and worldviews.

5. Southeast Asian contexts

Southeast Asia is particularly marked by negotiation between global heritage frameworks and local cultural practices, which include multiple colonial histories, indigenous epistemologies, and postcolonial transformations. In general, global discourses and local meanings are intertwined with heritage practices and embedded in the spiritual engagements

and community memory (Byrne, 1991; Winter, 2014). Global heritage status affords international recognition and great economic benefits. However, these advantages are usually imposed through standard agreement requirements, which lead to conflict between standard requirements and the value systems of local communities. Global narratives are reinterpreted, resisted or selectively adapted in local practices (Askew, 2010; Winter, 2014), as is the case with the religious practices in Luang Prabang and the ritual landscapes in Bali.

The most evident example of this dynamic is Ban Chiang, where the relations within the Tai Puan community are a dialogical negotiation, re-archaeologising the meaning of archaeology into the local embodied meaning. The current paper analyses the ways in which rites, shared memory, and modern practices enact the process of negotiation and opposition to global narratives. These negotiations are crucial for grasping the diverse and dynamic nature of heritage practices across Southeast Asia. They also challenge the fundamental assumptions underlying universalist approaches to heritage.

Methodology

1. Research design

This study employed a critical ethnographic case study methodology, focusing on the dialogical and decolonial aspects of heritage negotiation at Ban Chiang. The research design was centered on capturing the *emic* perspectives (local voices and interpretations) of the Tai Puan community, exploring how they experience and negotiate heritage meanings in relation to global governance structures.

2. Research site and context

The study was conducted at Ban Chiang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in northeastern Thailand (Figure 1, 2). While globally recognized for its prehistoric archaeological significance, Ban Chiang is also a living cultural landscape for the Tai Puan community, who maintain ongoing ceremonial, spiritual, and social connections to the site. This context provides a critical site of ‘dialogical friction’ between Authorised conservation narratives and local living heritage practices

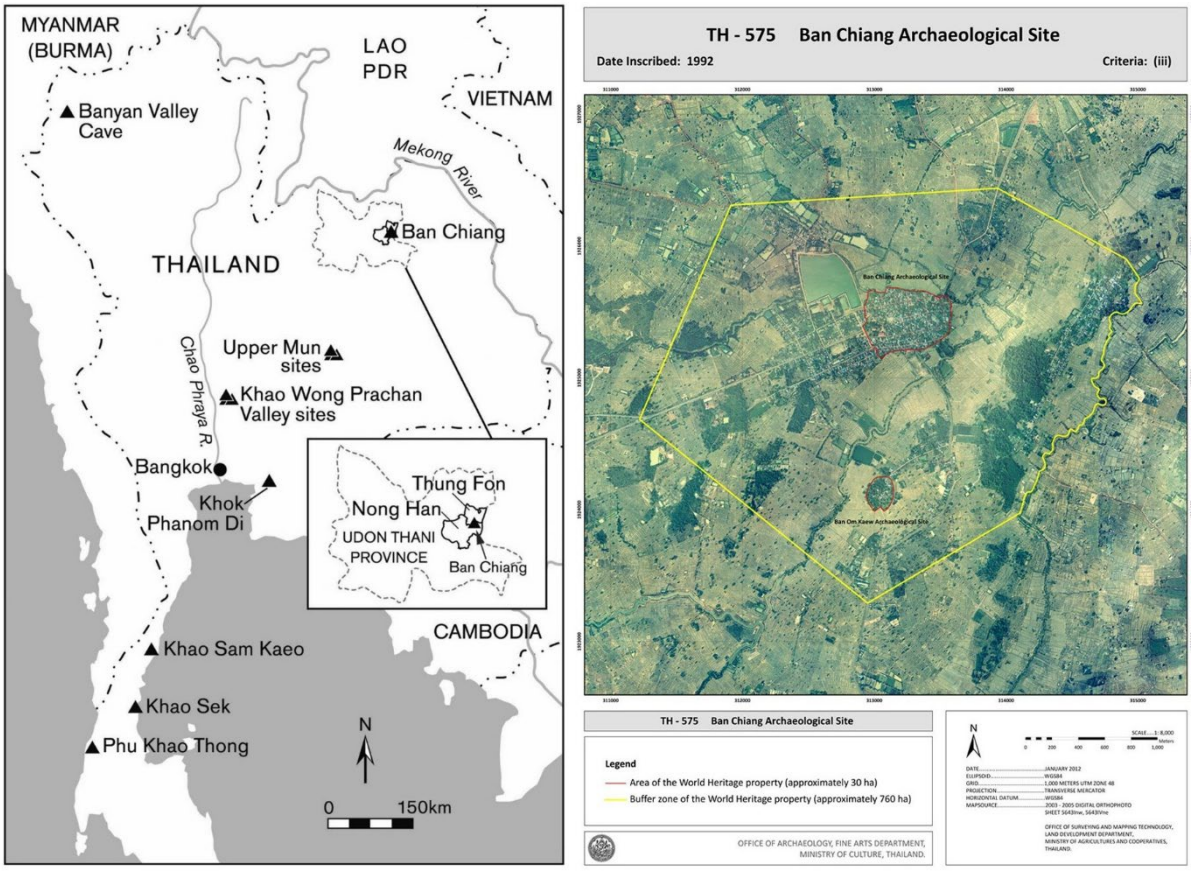

Figure 1. The location of the Ban Chiang archaeological site in Udon Thani province, Thailand
Source: (Left) White, C., Toro, & White, J., (2019), (Right) UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (2012)

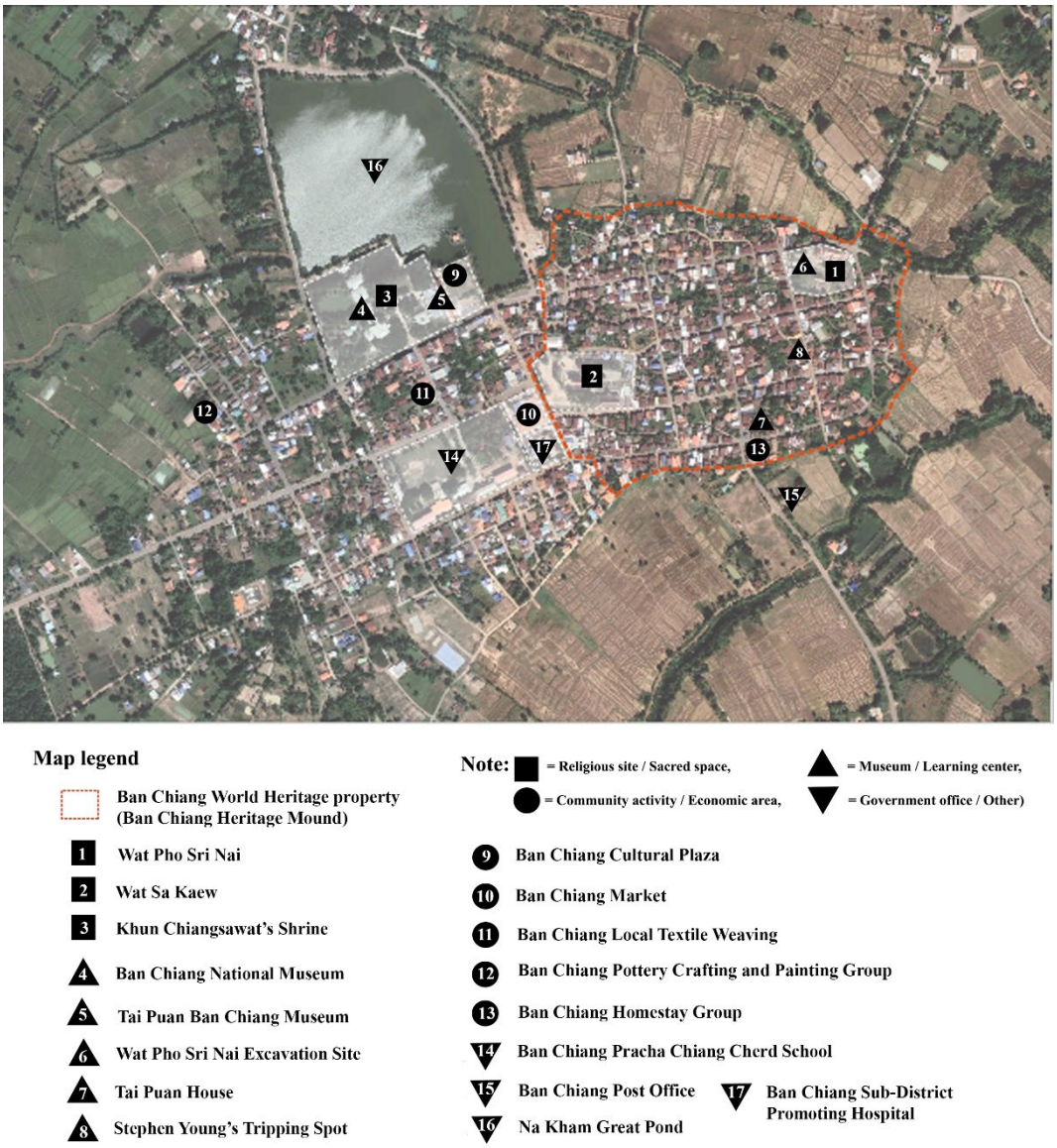

Figure 2. The aerial map of Ban Chiang World Heritage property and its adjacent area in the Buffer zone
Source: Adapted by the author from Google Earth (2022)

3. Sample selection and participants

This study utilized a three-phase, non-probability sampling approach to gain a holistic view of heritage experiences. The process began with *accidental sampling* (impromptu interviews with willing villagers), followed by *snowball sampling* (using initial participants to refer others), and concluded with *purposeful sampling* (targeting specific stakeholders).

A total of 20 key informants provided semi-structured interviews, and 16 returned open-ended *questionnaires* (focused on the World Heritage Festival) were collected. Participants were strategically selected and categorized into three main stakeholder groups:

3.1 Local community members: Including Tai Puan elders, ritual experts, and cultural practitioners.

3.2 Heritage organizations and community groups: Representatives from the Ban Chiang Homestay Group, Pottery Crafting Group, and Local Textile Weaving Group.

3.3 Local government and institutional officials: Including representatives from the Ban Chiang Subdistrict Municipality and the Ban Chiang National Museum.

4. Data collection methods

Field research was conducted between 2015-2017 using a qualitative mix of methods:

4.1 Semi-structured interviews with the 20 key informants.

4.2 Participant observation: This included a four-day/three-night stay with a local family in February 2016, participating in preparations for the Ban Chiang World Heritage Festival.

4.3 Non-participant observation: This involved attending community rituals, festivals (such as the 2015 World Heritage Festival), and academic conferences related to Ban Chiang during the 2015-2017 period.

4.4 Archival research: This included analysis of UNESCO nomination documents, national heritage policies, local administrative records, and museum exhibition data.

5. Data analysis approach

The study used a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and thematic analysis. CDA was used to examine how language and discursive practices in interviews and official documents reproduce or contest heritage power relations. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, was used to identify recurring patterns and themes from the interview and observational data to understand the community's lived experiences and interpretations.

6. Ethical considerations and reflexivity

Ethical protocols included informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality. The research structure prioritized respectful collaboration, viewing the Tai Puan community as primary knowledge holders rather than subjects. The researcher maintained critical reflexivity regarding their positionality as an academic interpreter of local knowledge, using reflexive field notes to mitigate potential biases. To ensure ethical representation of community narratives, findings are often presented as thematic paraphrasing rather than direct verbatim quotations.

Finding Community Voices: Dialogical Heritage Negotiations at Ban Chiang

1. Community reframing of global heritage narratives (Addressing RQ1)

Recurrent and consistent statements from participants in the Tai Puan community expressed the existence of a gap between the global narratives of the UNESCO designation of Ban Chiang and their own local understandings of the site's significance. Although the World Heritage inscription focused on Ban Chiang's prehistoric archaeological value, community members frequently contextualized the site as a living entity, intimately linked to ancestral memory, spiritual beliefs, and contemporary communal practice (Figure 3).

Participants across the data indicated that they understood the global prestige that comes with UNESCO recognition, but that the official narrative was external and somewhat removed from their lived realities. Many community members saw the archaeological framing — based on material artifacts and ancient metallurgical achievements — as one that stressed 'objects of the past' over 'the spirit that continues today'.

Instead of outrightly rejecting the global discourse, the community was actively reinterpreting it. Global symbols and terminologies linked with Ban Chiang's official narrative were often incorporated into heritage festivals, local storytelling traditions, and community rituals but were reinterpreted within the framework of Tai Puan cosmology. For example, depicting Ban Chiang's ceramic themes in community festivities was not just an acknowledgment

of archaeological legacy but also a reaffirmation of ancestral bloodline and spiritual continuity (Figure 4).

It is a dialogical process, in which the members of the Tai Puan community do not simply accept or deny global heritage discourses; they instead strategically integrate localised meanings that strengthen communal identity, spiritual beliefs and social cohesion.

These reframing practices reveal that the Tai Puan community is able to suggest new ways of knowing, challenging the official heritage narrative by seeing heritage as something that grows and changes.

2. Living heritage practices as embodied resistance (Addressing RQ2)

Living heritage practices of the Tai Puan community are powerful, embodied forms of resistance to the static, object-centred forms of narrative of global heritage discourses. Ban Chiang's World Heritage inscription based on archaeological artifacts as symbols of historic significance is repeatedly reaffirmed by local practices that continually reaffirm the site's contemporary spiritual, relational, and communal meanings.

Participants throughout the field data stressed that rituals, festivals, and communal gatherings at Ban Chiang were not only commemorative of the past but were also living engagements with the presence of ancestors. Ancestral veneration ceremonies, spiritually infused storytelling, and communal care of sacred spaces were crucial to Ban Chiang's ongoing status as a living site integrated into Tai Puan cosmology.

Although these living practices often subtly challenged the conservationist frameworks that global heritage protocols imposed, they were nonetheless recognized as heritage. For example, official narratives that restricted certain areas of Ban Chiang for archaeological preservation were in contrast to community members who continued to perform rituals near or around these spaces as they asserted their ongoing relational claims to the land and its sacred energies (Figure 5).

Such practices were seen to represent cultural continuity, and participants engaged with Ban Chiang as part of a living cycle rather than frozen temporality. Importantly, participants described these practices consistently in terms of temporal frameworks that differed from linear preservation models. Community members did not speak about heritage as something that is maintained from 'the past', but rather as something that is temporally expansive, both honouring the past, addressing current community needs, and ensuring future cultural continuity. As an example, this temporal multiplicity is a case of what Appadurai (2013) calls the 'future as cultural fact', in which heritage practices are not only about the preservation of completed pasts but also the active construction of anticipated futures.

The Tai Puan community opposed the reification of tradition into a static, monumentalized past by embodying and implementing alternative ways of connecting with Ban Chiang. Their practices were dialogical, performative reworkings of tradition that challenged prevailing temporalities and embraced heritage as a continuous, collaborative process.

Figure 3. Tai Puan hospitality: The signature of tourism in Ban Chiang
Source: Naewna (2022)

Figure 4. Ban Chiang motifs in festivities: A symbol of inherited heritage and ancestral spirit
Source: Author (2016)

Figure 5. Excavation-pit offerings—community claims challenging official preservation narratives.
Source: Author (2017)

3. Dialogical strategies in negotiating heritage meaning (Addressing RQ1 & RQ2)

In addition to resisting Authorised heritage narratives, the Tai Puan community participates in dialogical strategies that reframe, reinterpret, and selectively appropriate global heritage discourses in order to maintain localized meanings. Instead of just disapproving the international structures, actors showed subtle tactics of negotiation, hybridization, and strategic adaptation.

The selective incorporation became an appropriate approach in participant narratives. Global symbols, including the Ban Chiang pottery motifs, were often used by community-led festivals, educational programs, and heritage celebrations but were recontextualized within Tai Puan spiritual and historical frameworks. Through this incorporation, the community was able to simultaneously recognize global narratives and to affirm localized cosmologies and communal identities.

Semantic reworking was another observed strategy. The subjects in the research were keen to rephrase ideas that have always been associated with global heritage, including terms like preservation and authenticity, in a way that would bring these notions into the context of relational, dynamic practises, and thus redirect the focus of the concept of conservation. For preservation, local discourses often meant the protection of material remains, but also the maintenance of active spiritual relationships with the land and ancestors.

Through local performance, storytelling, and ritual enactment focused on continuity, relationality, and spiritual engagement, the community also engaged in dialogical counter-narration by creating alternative heritage narratives. These alternative narratives were not conceived as oppositional to the Authorised heritage discourse but as coexisting epistemologies that complemented, complicated, and sometimes contested the Authorised heritage discourse (Figure 6).

The dialogical strategies reveal how community agency works not outside but inside structural constraints and how they transform global heritage frameworks from within rather than opposing them from without. The practices of the Tai Puan community illustrate how marginalized groups can navigate asymmetrical heritage terrains through culturally grounded, epistemically assertive strategies of meaning reconstitution through active engagement rather than reactive resistance.

4. Recognizing and contesting power asymmetries (Addressing RQ3)

The Tai Puan community is engaged in a critical awareness of the structural asymmetries that are inherent in global heritage governance systems as demonstrated in the heritage of Ban Chiang. The participants were also able to show a subtle awareness of how approved heritage discourses privilege external knowledge, institutional authority and homogenised storeys to the detriment of localised knowledge systems and lived experiences.

The community members often described Ban Chiang as a place of marginalisation in the official decision-making procedures concerning the management and interpretation of the site. Although the UNESCO designation had material gains, including increased tourism and infrastructural growth, those involved raised the question that the spiritual attachments of the community, ritual demands, and relational knowledge were sidelined in the quest to preserve archaeological objects to an international audience.

Formalised heritage management procedures, such as limited access to some sacred spaces and the primacy of conservation measures, reflected a more generalised epistemic hierarchy. The perceived validity of the scientific expertise and global heritage standards over the indigenous epistemologies, based on the ancestral memory, spiritual practise and relational worldviews, was depicted (Figure 7).

To counter such asymmetries, the Tai Puan community strategized delicate but aggressive contestation measures by informal negotiation with heritage officials, in order to reclaim spatial suitability to the local use. Such practises highlighted how the community did not want to be depicted as passive custodians of a monumentalised past.

When exercising power these asymmetries are manifested in the mediation of the state on matters pertaining to persons heritage. Participants always recounted on how the Fine Arts Department as the heritage authority of Thailand and the equivalent of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) play a trustworthy and also restrictive role. The Department's archaeological focus on conservation has resulted in both competing claims of what heritage means to whom and resources for its protection while conversely opening the door to international recognition and conservation on its own. The FAD is viewed as the caretaker rather than the owner of much of the mound land, resulting in unclear legal authority. Local people have to deal with this ambiguity by maintaining their cultural practices while also abiding with the most visible regulations.

The connections between the FAD with local forms of government are also a good example of such asymmetries. This brings up competing ideas of the archaeological as both tangible and intangible between the Department and the Ban Chiang Subdistrict Municipality: preservation or tourism development. These inter-institutional conflicts result in overlapping authorities that residents have to deal with, including the 2015 allocation of ordinance in the municipality adding on layers of bureaucracy to the discussion without posing fundamental questions about community rights over heritage. Overcoming structural constraints Although participants endorsed structuralized absurdity in talk chosen to downplay and dismiss women's role in everyday cultures, they have gone way forward to creating alternatives as expressions of the new narrative possibilities in informal channels, albeit limited in their initiatives by institutional frameworks perpetuating epistemic levels of hierarchy stifling community agency for defining their own heritage.

The Tai Puan community's recognition and contestation of these power asymmetries enabled the articulation of alternative heritage paradigms that valorized living relationships, plural temporalities, and localized epistemic authority and that contested the universalizing tendencies of global heritage regimes and the political nature of heritage-making.

In this discussion, the theoretical foundations discussed in the literature review section are primarily used. A few additional references have been selectively added to further the critical analysis and to participate more dynamically in current debates in critical heritage and decolonial studies. These expansions are strategically located within the original research focus and findings and offer continuity as well as critical enrichment.

Figure 6. Integrating local rituals into the museum: A dialogical strategy for a living spiritual heritage
Source: Ban Chiang Subdistrict Municipality (2023)

Figure 7. Global conservation clashes with local sacred space at the Wat Pho Sri Nai exhibition.
Source: Author (2017)

Discussion: Rethinking Heritage Through Dialogical Practice

1. Reframing heritage narratives: Negotiated meanings beyond Authorised discourse

The Tai Puan community's engagements with Ban Chiang do not oppose dominant global heritage narratives but rather, through subtle acts of reframing and negotiation. Instead of being subjected to the archaeological importance of the site as defined by UNESCO, the community actively redefines the global discourses by incorporating localised meanings to assert the continuity of ancestors, spiritual cosmology, and community identity.

This pattern of dialogical negotiation resonates with wider critiques in critical heritage studies. In the literature review, Waterton and Smith (2010) develop upon the foundational perspectives and argue that heritage is not just a collection of objects from the past but a performative, meaning-making process that is influenced by contemporary communities. Robertson (2016) also expands on this by discussing heritage from below, by which marginalized communities do heritage making through grassroots processes that challenge institutionalized heritage definitions. This perspective is reflected in the practices of the Tai Puan community, which shows how Authorised discourses (even when dominant institutionally) are continually reworked, contested, and repurposed through localized epistemic frameworks.

The Tai Puan experience stands in contrast to conventional heritage management paradigms that attempt to 'freeze' heritage as universal, immutable artifacts (Harrison, 2013), as heritage is an ongoing, relational phenomenon. The selective incorporation of global symbols into local rituals, festivals, and narratives is evidence of a creative agency that resists the homogenization of cultural meanings under the banner of global heritage regimes.

Moreover, the processes of reframing performed by the Tai Puan community are not only the methods of cultural conservation but also the aggressive demands to the epistemic sovereignty. They challenge the epistemological monopoly often practised by state and international heritage institutions, and incorporate their own ontological and spiritual models into the wider discourse of global heritage. This repositioning of heritage shows how there is still a struggle to determine the power to define, value and represent heritage meanings.

This negotiation deserves particular analytical attention with respect to its temporal dimensions. Appadurai (2013) describes 'temporal disjunctures' as moments when global temporal frameworks collide with locally situated temporalities that operate on different rhythms and causal logics, and it is through such temporal disjunctures that community heritage practices operate. Global heritage discourse locates Ban Chiang within evolutionary archaeological time (prehistoric→historic→modern), but Tai Puan temporal practices enact cyclical, relational time in which ancestral agency is still very much active. The competing

temporalities of these frameworks are productive tensions that allow for dialogical reworking of heritage meanings through communities' strategic deployment of both temporal frameworks in context and for purpose.

2. Living heritage as dialogical and political practice

Rather than cultural preservation, the living heritage practices of the Tai Puan community, such as rituals, ceremonies, and communal engagements, are enacted as dialogical and political acts. Such practises undermine the object-based, static framing of heritage advocated within global governance structures, and prefer relational, dynamic, and embodied forms of heritage sense-making.

The living heritage, as Logan (2007) and Hafstein (2008), reads, is not about artefacts and texts, but rather preservation of living cultural practises evolving as a part of social relations and daily life. Rituals in the Tai Puan context at Ban Chiang actively reaffirm community relationships with ancestors, land, and spiritual entities.

Importantly, these living practices are subtle but potent forms of resistance to Authorised conservation protocols. Although sacred areas are restricted to protect archaeological resources, community members still carry out ceremonies that make Ban Chiang a living landscape. Robertson (2016) builds on this by stressing heritage from below, whereby communities claim ownership and control of their cultural practices against external heritage governance structures.

Instead of challenging heritage authorities head-on, the Tai Puan community performs everyday acts of epistemic insurgency by maintaining relational ties to spaces that are 'archaeological' and imbuing them with contemporary spiritual significance. These acts are examples of how to quiet but persistent forms of decolonial resistance to normative global heritage regimes of universalizing logics can be found in living heritage practices.

In addition, the Tai Puan community maintains heritage in relational and ritualistic ways that challenge the temporal frameworks that underlie Authorised heritage discourse. Tai Puan heritage practices directly enact temporal frameworks that directly challenge the 'temporal disjunctures' of global heritage governance as identified by Appadurai (2013). UNESCO frameworks work through preservationist temporality, treating Ban Chiang as a discrete archaeological moment to be maintained unchanged, while community practices enact what might be called 'spiraling temporality', in which past, present, and future are in continuous dialogue. Ritual practices are not about commemorating a fixed past but are about ongoing relationships with ancestral presence, and in so doing they create what Appadurai calls 'alternative temporal frames' that resist linear progression narratives. As a temporal resistance, this temporal resistance poses a fundamental epistemological challenge to heritage governance insofar as it refuses the very temporal logic upon which preservation-based authenticity depends.

In this way, the community not only keeps its cultural vitality but also promotes an alternative heritage paradigm that is based on dialogical relationality, spiritual continuity, and epistemic resilience.

3. Epistemic contestations and power asymmetries

The findings show that the Tai Puan's engagement with Ban Chiang is only one instance of a much larger and more complex structure of epistemic inequality and heritage governance. Throughout the narratives, interviewees expressed a strong consciousness of how the dominant heritage discourse favoured scientific, archaeological and institutional forms of epistemology over local cosmologies, relational practises and spiritual worldviews.

This is consistent with the critical views of Byrne (1991, 2014) and Mignolo (2011) on heritage regimes that claim that global heritage practices are often a form of epistemic

domination and thus normalise Eurocentric conceptions of history, authenticity and value at the expense of other knowledge systems.

The epistemological hierarchy of local epistemic practises below globalised heritage standards is evident in the limitations on the ritual use of sacred spaces, an emphasis on archaeological conservation rather than on living cultural performance, and the framing of Ban Chiang as a universal human accomplishment.

Instead of being made epistemically peripheral, the Tai Puan community practised epistemic disobedience, as Mignolo (2011) defines it, by performing rituals, localised reinterpretations of historic symbols, and informal negotiations with heritage authorities. These practises undermined the monopoly of approved knowledge systems and represent one example of heritage-making as a bottom-up practise (Harrison 2013; Robertson 2016). The practises of the community used other knowledge frameworks to challenge hegemonic heritage practises and at the same time selectively interacted with global heritage structures.

The contestation acts were not blatant political protest; rather they were placed in the cultural, spiritual and relational spheres. This form of resistance is consistent with the idea of heritage-making at the bottom up proposed by Smith (2006), in which practises break down the hierarchical order of authorised heritage discourse without the need to engage in official political opposition.

By challenging the epistemic hierarchies, the Tai Puan community not only asserted the cultural sovereignty but also revealed the political character of heritage. Their activities show that heritage is not a neutral space but a conflict area where histories, memories and worldviews are justified, appreciated and considered worthy of preservation.

4. Theoretical contributions: Rethinking heritage from below

The negotiation of heritage meanings by the Tai Puan community at Ban Chiang presents critical insights that transcend the particular case study to speak to broader theoretical debates in heritage studies, decolonial theory, and critical epistemology.

The findings also first question the persistent dichotomy between ‘Authorised’ and ‘alternative’ heritage. Instead of just resisting Authorised narratives, the Tai Puan community strategically reframes, selectively incorporates, and adapts dialogically. The above discussion implies that heritage construction is not a dialectic of domination and resistance, but a co-construction and epistemic negotiation. This, in turn, demands a more subtle understanding of how marginalised communities have utilised the strategies of appropriation of global heritage discourses, as well as transformed them in rather subtle ways.

Moreover, heritage is prefigured as a relational ontology of life as opposed to object-based, static conceptions of cultural value. The activities experienced in the Tai Puan community show that heritage is not preserved by the simple act of preserving material remains but by enacting relational, ritualistic and communal life-worlds. This questions existing conservationist paradigms that emphasise material authenticity over relational continuity, and recommends heritage paradigms that put living epistemologies at the heart of their approach. The paper demonstrates how heritage sites are dynamic collections of human and non-human objects that constantly engage with each other to create new possibilities of meaning-making, thus, relating to Bennett (2010) essential materialism. Practices of the Tai Puan community show heritage to be more than inert matter to be preserved, but vibrant materiality that takes an active part in cultural regeneration.

At last, the results indicate that it is the everyday practices that are the sites of epistemic disobedience. The Tai Puan community performs sovereignty instead by locating resistance in ritual practice, spiritual assertion, and the relational engagement with the land, rather than in the formal political arenas. It builds on the idea of 'heritage from below' (Robertson,

2016; Smith, 2006) beyond simple assertions of other narratives to actually rethink the ontological basis of what heritage is and who has the power to decide.

Lastly, the study contributes methodologically to how complex community narratives can be ethically and reflexively captured in thematic paraphrase rather than direct verbatim citation. This approach recognizes partial, situated production of knowledge without the dangers of exoticization, misrepresentation, and extractive research.

These contributions situate heritage as a living, dialogical, and politically contested domain, requiring from scholars, practitioners, and policymakers' epistemic humility, relational accountability, and critical reflexivity.

5. Methodological reflections: Knowledge production without verbatim

The use of thematic paraphrase rather than direct quotes in this study demonstrates a commitment to ethical representation that recognizes the mediated aspect of knowledge creation while avoiding the exoticization of community voices (Smith, 2012; Spivak, 1988).

Conclusion

1. Summary of findings

This study showed how the Tai Puan community engages with and contests global heritage narratives. Four main themes were identified: community reframing of global heritage, living heritage as embodied resistance, dialogical negotiation strategies, and recognition of power asymmetries. The findings show heritage as a contested domain in which communities assert knowledge through everyday practices and how the Tai Puan community engages in heritage conservation in the process of asserting local epistemologies.

2. Opposing heritage frameworks: From static preservation to dialogical negotiation

The results show fundamental differences between the authorised framework of heritage and the living, dialogical framework enacted by the Tai Puan community. These two opposing frameworks, summarized in *Table 1*, are not in a simple binary but exist in a state of continual dialogical negotiation.

Table 1. Comparison of Authorised vs. Dialogical Heritage Frameworks at Ban Chiang

Feature	Authorised Heritage Framework (Global/State)	Tai Puan's Dialogical Framework (Local)
Core Value	Material authenticity; physical preservation	Relational & spiritual continuity
Temporality	Linear (Heritage is 'in the past')	Cyclical / Spiraling (Past is 'in the present')
Knowledge Base	Scientific, archaeological, expert-led	Experiential, spiritual, ritual practice, oral tradition
Governance	Top-down, institutional, standardized	Bottom-up, community-based, fluid
Outcome	Preservation of static objects/sites	Enactment of living relationships & identity

The authorised framework, promoted by global bodies like UNESCO and enacted by state agencies, emphasizes material authenticity, physical preservation, and linear time (viewing heritage as a finite object from the past). It favors scientific expertise and top-down governance. In contrast, the Tai Puan community's dialogical framework values relational continuity, spiritual engagement, and cyclical time, where ancestors and the past are simultaneously

active in the present. This framework is embedded in experiential knowledge, ritual practice, and bottom-up meaning-making.

The Tai Puan community's experience illustrates a sophisticated level of agency by navigating *between* these frameworks—selectively appropriating global symbols (like pottery motifs) while retaining epistemic sovereignty through everyday practices. This re-casting of heritage from the preservation of an object to the performance of a *lived relation* fundamentally challenges the ontological assumptions of international heritage governance.

3. Theoretical contributions

It adds a number of new theories to the study of heritage. First, this study accepts that heritage is formed through discussion and negotiation, not simply by confronting the differences between things being Authorised and alternative. The report highlights that heritage is experienced through relationships and uses both Hafstein's (2008) theory of intangible cultural heritage and Harrison's (2013) heritage as process theory. In addition, the research highlights the use of 'epistemic disobedience' as a key factor in creating heritage. By establishing alternative views, the Tai Puan group refuses to accept the main ideas promoted in global heritage studies and tries to challenge such structures. This research builds on decolonial framework of Tuck and Yang (2012) by illustrating the impact of 'epistemic disobedience' through practices of everyday heritage therein rather than through formal political resistance. The study also contributes to new materialist heritage scholarship by applying Bennett's (2010) assemblage thinking to show how heritage emerges through dynamic human-non-human configurations that exceed the bounded objects privileged by Authorised heritage discourse. Envisioning heritage from below is introduced as a fruitful conceptual framework which sheds light on how weaker nations and community organizations manage global heritage institutions and challenge the power of heritage regimes.

4. Practical implications

The findings of the current research have significant practical implications on the area of heritage management, especially regarding community-based heritage practises. This study also indicates that local epistemologies, spiritual practices and relational knowledge systems should be recognised and incorporated into heritage governance systems. As a result, the dynamic nature of heritage and the involvement of the community in its constant reconfiguration should be of higher priority among heritage authorities and policymakers than conservation and material preservation. The study also points out that heritage management practices need to be inclusive by nature and respectful of local sovereign power. This research provides a model for how communities can define their own heritage through everyday practices and, spiritual engagements and in doing so, support cultural sustainability that is in line with local needs and values.

5. Research limitations

This study has important implications for understanding the Tai Puan community's interaction with Ban Chiang, but it has several limitations. This research was carried out in a single community, which may constrain the ability to generalize the findings to other heritage situations. Due to the used methodology, the empirical results are mostly based on the interpretations that the interviewees provoked and might not be representative of the overall societal picture.

Although the study evaluated the resistance of the community towards global heritage paradigms, it did not fully take into account the view of the heritage authorities and other external stakeholders whose views might have provided a more detailed account.

Future research must then include the views of heritage practitioners and policymakers in order to better clarify the interaction between local and global heritage practises.

Future Research Directions

Following the findings of this study, future researchers could investigate how heritage negotiation and epistemic disobedience affect other marginalized communities. Looking at the ways that local or Indigenous communities relate to UNESCO World Heritage sites can show the many methods used to challenge and change global heritage discourses. Furthermore, research may examine the policies that support local communities in managing their own heritage within local culture. Lastly, more research could look at how communities deal with and manage their heritage with the help of new technologies and discuss the many ways community members can take part in heritage decision-making.

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