

U Thong: Concept and Approaches to Cultural Hub in the Digital World

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1. Introduction

U Thong ancient city, one of the most important ancient cities in Thailand, situates at Suphanburi province in central Thailand. The city plan is oval in shape surrounded with moats and two clay ramparts. The dimension of the city is 750 meters width and 1,650 meters length, covering an area of 1.56 square kilometers.

Archaeological study resulted that this area was the inhabitancy of man from the late prehistoric to the historic period. Evidences discovered in this area indicated the connectivity with the outsiders such as India, Roman and Arab. While the influences of foreign culture bloomed in this area around 1,400 years ago, the ancient city of U Thong stepped forward to urban society. Architectures related to the religions both Buddhism and Hinduism were constructed and spread through the whole area. Nowadays the discovery of those

remained buildings proved the flourish of U Thong city in ancient time.

Through archaeological excavation, more than twenty of the ruin archaeological sites were found scattering either inside or outside of the ancient city of U Thong. Definitely, during the excavation, many valuable artifacts were recovered from the sites.

At the present, those entire cultural heritages, not only the archaeological sites but also the valuable artifacts recovered from U Thong ancient city were preserved and conserved by the Fine Arts Department attempted to generate the knowledge and the awareness of the people in the field of archaeology and history in the form of museum as the role of educational center for all.

2. U Thong National Museum

2.1 Background

The ancient city of U Thong was surveyed by historians and archaeologists since 1933. According to the survey many artifacts telling the history of U Thong city were found, in 1959 a rough building was built as a temporary museum aiming for collecting ancient objects from ancient city of U Thong. Later in 1961 the Fine Arts Department additionally investigated and renovated archaeological sites in the ancient U Thong city; as a result, large amount of ancient artifacts in Dvaravati Period (7th – 11th century CE) were recovered. The Fine Arts Department, with an emphasis on the significance of the cultural heritage of the nation, launched the project to establish a permanent museum to collect, conserve, identify and exhibit the story of U Thong ancient city through the artifacts and the remaining of the ancient monuments from U Thong ancient city.

The museum named as the same as the city- 'U Thong National Museum', is a kind of historical and archaeological museum, notably as the third regional national museum in Thailand. The remarkable location of this museum which is in the area of ancient monument empowered the close

relation of the story behind the artifacts display in the museum and the original place of artifacts at the archaeological sites.

U Thong National Museum was opened in 1966; His Majesty the Late King Bhumibol Adulyadej accompanied by Her Majesty, Queen Sirikit presided over the opening ceremony on May 13, 1966. Since then U Thong National Museum has played an important role as the learning center of Dvaravati in central Thailand.

2.2 Collection and Exhibition

The primary mission of U Thong National Museum is to preserve cultural objects related to the ancient city of U Thong; consequently, a large number of ancient objects from any archaeological sites in U Thong city were collected. Current numbers of archaeological evidences entry in the museum are more than 3,000 pieces. Artifacts related to archaeological history of U Thong ancient city were selected and presented through a permanent exhibition.

Almost all of artifacts related to religions; Buddhism and Hinduism, such as Buddha images, Dharmacakra (Wheel of the Law), votive tablets, Shivalinga and components of religious architectures. Moreover, there also found some objects for the

daily life of local people; such as attires, accessories, bead necklace, incense burner and coins.

3. U Thong Concept and Approaches to Cultural Hub

3.1 Concept

Major concept of U Thong National Museum is not only to preserve and maintain antiquities and art objects found in U Thong ancient city, but also to be a cultural hub for local community.

To achieve above mentioned missions, the museum provides the appropriate activities for any target group of the museum in order to deliver the knowledge and experience of long lasting conservation of Thai cultural heritage. Those relevant activities would strengthen the museum network among local communities, government offices as well as private organizations. Finally, the main goal of U Thong national Museum is to become the unique cultural hub of community.

3.2 Approaches

For each fiscal year, U Thong National Museum operates one to two projects for students focusing on hands-on learning activities with actual historical objects. These potential

programs are aiming to develop critical thinking skills and deeper interest in history through enjoyable activities. The most successful project has been the “campaign/activity for promoting the National Museum as a learning center”.

Apart from the students, to become a cultural hub of community, U-Thong National Museum also places importance on nearby communities by regularly conducting the activities such as local cultural heritage talks, aiming to encourage people in the communities to learn, understand, and cherish their cultures. Furthermore, the museum usually offers its spaces to other institutes for various types of activities such as knowledge sharing.

4. Social Unities in the digital world

U-Thong National Museum is also currently trying to reach more people by accessing online media, which is easily accessible online. According to the statistical indicator of mobile phone users in Thailand, in 2020, the forecast shows the number of smartphone users in Thailand is estimated to reach 28.29 million. Particularly, mobile subscribers in Thailand are ranked the most regarding social media usage in the world. Hence, U-Thong National Museum has setup a policy to build up the channels for digital accessibility, such as creating website, Facebook or importing e-books for easy access.

5. Conclusion

Currently, museums cannot move on without the association with the communities, and so as U-Thong National Museum. To reach the mission of being the cultural hub, relevant parties such as people in the community, government, and private organizations have to collaborate to establish the power of local culture conservation toward sustainable national security.