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Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, Deakin University testimony

At the beginning of 2009, the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific (CHCAP) at Deakin University was invited to cooperate with UNESCO Bangkok and Chiang Mai University in the development and delivery of a programme titled UNESCO Museum-to-Museum Partnership Project: Lampang Temples Pilot Training in Collections Management. The Lampang Temples Programme was a six-day museology workshop that took place at Wat Pongsanuk, Lampang in Northern Thailand. After preliminary meetings and workshop preparation at the beginning of the year, CHCAP and Chiang Mai University staff facilitated and delivered a museum training program for 22 Buddhist Monks and 10 Chiang Mai University post graduate students 16–21 June 2009.

The Lampang Temples Project was designed to provide participants with skills to manage and interpret significant collections, a bi-lingual workbook and relevant materials, and a network that participants could access following the workshop. Planning began early in 2009 with Deakin University staff attending preliminary meetings in Bangkok, visiting temples in Lampang with staff from Chiang Mai University, meeting with consulate staff from the United States of America to secure additional funding, and discussing key learning needs and interests with local stakeholders. Information gleaned from this preliminary 'reconnaissance' phase provided contextual background and ensured that the needs of participants and local stakeholders remained central to the project.

Collaboration between Deakin and Chiang Mai university staff also ensured the best possible mix of culturally appropriate training that meet the needs of the participants. This included recognising temples as museum repositories holding significant collections within in a Thai context. Buddha images and artefacts, as well as other community collections, are held within temples and are important to both monks and the broader community. An understanding of how to manage this material in context was crucial to its ongoing conservation and management. As such, while the training was based on museum practices (collections management, significance and interpretation) it was conducted at a temple.

The training programme was designed to provide an understanding of an integrated approach to conservation practice. Participants were encouraged to see the preservation of artefacts as a process that requires addressing a range of associated issues and involves a number of key activities. The programme was designed to help participants understand the implications of the issues and activities and to consider these in an interpretation planning process. This was introduced in presentations and mirrored in exercises. Participants were divided into groups at the beginning of the workshop and completed activities using representative objects from temple collections, including final group presentations. These presentations were lively and engaging, and demonstrated a keen understanding of the issues discussed, and a sensitivity to object significance and meaning. Monks identified group work, and the opportunity to work in a collaborative manner as one of workshops strengths during the post workshop evaluation discussion.

The principle participants were 22 Buddhist Monks of various ranks and ages, representing a number of temples in Northern Thailand, particularly Chiang Mai, Lampang and Lamphun districts. The secondary participants were post-graduate students from Chiang Mai University, who were keen to develop their knowledge of museology. These students were critical to the project and contributed to its success. They were involved in many logistical aspects of the workshop and they worked alongside the Monks providing additional English language skills and some technical assistance. In some cases, these participants also provided specialist knowledge, particularly concerning local approaches to the cataloguing of artefacts and the design of displays. This integration of locals and local knowledge into the programme was invaluable.

In addition to the cross cultural learning for workshop participants, the project also provided the trainers with the opportunity to reflect on and refine their practice. One of the challenges for Deakin staff (Jonathan Sweet, Dr Joanna Wills and Suzanna Collis) working on this project was to apply their learning to a different cultural context. Cross cultural learning opportunities allow professional staff a chance to broaden their understanding of the discipline and enhance their own skills.

The Lampang Temples project forms part of the UNESCO Museums Capacity Building Programme, a broader program being designed with Deakin University to help identify a range of needs and priorities for museums and collecting organizations in the Asia-Pacific Region and to provide guidance for the development of relevant museum programmes. Its success demonstrates the capacity of museum work to both promote the preservation of cultural material and the value of conducting local training in relevant environments so that communities can reconnect and engage with their heritage collections.

UNESCO Museum-to-Museum Partnership Project: Lampang Temples Pilot Training

(Photos from the project by: Angela Srisomwongwathana)



Workshop Preparation with students

Monks presenting group work projects



Participants in project at Wat Ponsonuk



Jonathan Sweet presenting collections management material to Wat Ponsonuk representative



Deakin staff, UNESCO staff and Chiang Mai University reps watching the group presentations