

IIAS reports *continued*

Reading craft in the global ecumene

IIAS Summer School 2014, 18-22 August 2014, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Organised by IIAS in collaboration with the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University and supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (New York).

Bryce Beemer & Chanjittra (Baitong) Chanorn

THIS AUGUST, THE IIAS SUMMER SCHOOL, entitled 'Reading craft: itineraries of culture, knowledge and power in the global ecumene', convened in one of Southeast Asia's most renowned centers of skilled craft production, Chiang Mai, a city of almost one million people located in northern Thailand. The program drew 24 graduate students from American, European and Asian universities whose focus on craft and craft production ranged across numerous disciplines. This is the second time that the IIAS Summer /Winter School has ventured away from the Netherlands, and the decision proved to be an inspired choice. The Chiang Mai location allowed participants to engage in exciting and rewarding field visits to craft sites where they could learn from skilled Thai artisans through participation, observation, and interviews. This hands-on exploration into craft production was the highlight of the 'school', which was five days of intense reading and discussion that primed participants to interact with craft in new and intellectually stimulating ways. The participating graduate students roundly admired the Summer School's innovative field research component and the chance to learn craft from some of Chiang Mai's most skilled and respected artisans.

Presentations and discussions

On Monday, the school began with individual presentations by graduate students on their doctoral research projects and introductions from the programs five co-conveners: Aarti Kawlra (Anthropology, Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi); Chayan Vaddhanaphuti (Anthropology, Chiang Mai University); Françoise Vergès (Political Science, Goldsmiths College, University of London); Michael Herzfeld (Anthropology, Harvard University); and Pamela H. Smith (History, Columbia University).

The second day of the conference was organized around several in-depth lectures on the history of Thailand and the role of craft in economic policy, heritage production and ethnic identity. These lectures were followed by intensive, critical discussion amongst participants. The diversity of the lectures assisted students whose research backgrounds were in countries other than Thailand to develop a more sophisticated and critical perspective on the place of craft and 'traditional' culture in Thailand's currently tumultuous political environment. Michael Herzfeld discussed the way that Thailand's economic development projects that support the production of 'local' and regional products for national consumption can be counterproductive. There is a danger of creating static models of rural culture and they can work to collapse diverse craft industries in favor of a single, nationally approved product that is said to represent the local culture.

A guest lecture by the anthropologist Alexandra Denes (Chiang Mai University) discussed the festivals and ceremonies of Thailand's minority Khmer population. These ceremonies, many supported by the Thai state, promote the cultural practices of these minority communities, but always in ways that frame this ethnic group as a *Thai* minority. State support for non-Thai culture groups can also be read as a tool for taming challenges to Thai identity and pre-empting the formation of unruly non-Thai identities that could provoke challenges for the Thai state. Both days included time for students to meet with the five conveners to receive critical advice and guidance on the subject of their Ph.D. research.

Wednesday, the third day, was given over to group discussions with three of the co-conveners. Discussions were grounded in readings selected and distributed by the conveners that bring out particular methods for analyzing and interpreting craft. Pamela Smith's discussion sessions were devoted to understanding craft as a knowledge system, a knowledge system that is mediated by the teaching relationship that exists between the master and the apprentice. Discussion groups considered the advantages that can accrue to scholars when they devote themselves to learning the very skills that they write about in their scholarship.

Françoise Vergès led students in discussions that framed the production of craft within global capitalism, and within a global system of values that can transform craft producers into anonymous workers producing objects for a global market. Aarti Kawlra asked students to consider the ways that crafts become signifiers within national discourse over authenticity, origins, cultural aesthetics, and ethnic identity. A related question was also asked: if the artisans themselves are subalterns, how might histories of these peoples disrupt national discourses on craft and identity?

Field visits

Armed with these new research perspectives, students and conveners spent the fourth day of the school, Thursday, conducting a field visit to one of seven pre-selected field sites. These field visits required a great deal of pre-planning by organizers. Assistance provided by staff at Chiang Mai University (CMU), particularly from co-convenor Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, who directs two institutions associated with Chiang Mai University, The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development and Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD), was instrumental in the success of these visits. CMU Anthropology grad student Chanjittra (Baitong) Chanorn, who assisted in organizing the Summer School and was also a participant, described the months of work spent locating craft production sites, making preliminary visits, and selecting artisans who

could inform students about craft production from a variety of angles. "We [the CMU organizers] have been amazed by the number of artisans and the variety of crafts," Baitong reports, "I have to confess that even though I am a Thai PhD candidate who is working on craft, I had no idea that there is this great a variety of craft production in Chiang Mai." Moreover, survey trips were a pleasure because the "artisans are amazingly proficient and the crafts are wonderful, and, more importantly, they [the artisans] are very happy in what they are doing."

The seven selected craft sites included the following: Indigo dyeing and weaving at the village Bang Tung Hua Chang; traditional wood carving in Ban Tawai; commercial wood carving also in Ban Tawai; silver/metal embossing in the Ban Wua Lai neighborhood of Chiang Mai; lacquerware in Ban Wua Lai; bronze ware, gold engraving, and tiered umbrella manufacture in Chiang Mai; and Buddha image molding also in Chiang Mai.

Chiang Mai, craft city

The northern Thai city of Chiang Mai was founded at the end of the 13th century and quickly became a center for commerce and religious pilgrimage. Its power ebbed and flowed, in some periods Chiang Mai's power extended throughout northern Thailand, in others it was colonized by neighboring Burma, but in all of these periods it was an important intercultural crossroads that facilitated interactions with the artistic practices from Sri Lanka, India, China, Burma, Laos, and Central and Southern Thailand. The kings of Chiang Mai, like monarchs through much of this region, organized artisans into urban districts and villages. These communities have certainly been transformed by Thailand's rapid economic development over the last four decades and by Chiang Mai's global position as a premiere tourist destination, but they have not been displaced. Buddha molding, woodcarving, silver working, and many other arts are still being practiced in the zones established by Chiang Mai's past monarchs. Many in these communities see themselves as carrying on artistic traditions that are many hundreds (if not thousands) of years old.

The site visits encouraged deeper interaction with the themes of the Summer School. Chiang Mai's craft production centers are grounded in artisanal traditions and modes of training and rituals that are many, many hundreds of years old. Yet, they are almost entirely broken away from old economic systems of patronage and sacred and royal production. Chiang Mai woodcarvers, for example, continue to take commissions from Buddhist temples, but the bulk of their production is for the global market, particularly for sale to tourists in the many night markets and bazaars that are prevalent in northern Thailand. However, the relationships between master and apprentices, the modes of training, and the community-building rituals that woodcarvers engage in, simultaneously situate wood carving in the social and cultural world that existed long before the global commodification of Thai woodcarving. Participants at each of the seven site visits encountered similarly complex examples of the way that craft production is at the intersection of multiple, often contradictory, global and local forces.

Participants who visited the silver embossing community at Ban Wua Lai encountered a community of silver workers, who in coordination with their community temple, were able to tap into state and local resources to help promote and strengthen the craft of silver work. Thai state discourses in support of local cultural practices, the preservation of traditional arts, and economic development became tools through which this community could garner governmental support and elite patronage for its activities. Through these channels a new silver working training center was organized in the community and study modules on silver work, including hands-on training, were incorporated into the nearby rural school system. More impressive still, the community received the financial support necessary to begin the construction of the world's first silver temple, an impressive building that when completed will be completely covered, inside and out, with embossed decoration in silver, aluminum and zinc. The Ban Wua Lai artisan community, like the others, is complexly situated within the processes of revival, tradition, reinvention, state discourse, identity, the global, and the local.

Diversity

Students benefited from the extreme diversity of the participants' and co-conveners' disciplines. The fields of history, anthropology, sociology, political science, archaeology, design studies, art history, philosophy, performing arts and religion were all represented. This diversity strengthened field visits, in which participants approached the study of craft from very different disciplinary vantage points. This diversity may also have contributed to the spirited and somewhat fractious debates that dominated the last day of the Summer School as students struggled with the most appropriate or most valid way to represent and describe the field research of the previous day. The debate itself spoke to the deeply felt experiences that were generated by the IIAS Summer School 'Reading craft: itineraries of culture, knowledge and power in the global ecumene' and to the vibrant interactions that can develop in this kind of valuable multidisciplinary setting.

Below: Hands-on woodcarving experience at Baan Tipmanee, Thailand (Photo by Henrik Møller).

