

A City in the Colonial Margins

Taylor M. Easum

I am happy to have published my book, *Chiang Mai between Empire and Nation: A City in the Colonial Margins*, with Amsterdam University Press as part of the IIAS Asian Cities series. I can think of no better place for this book, given its focus on the urban and spatial history of Chiang Mai, an Asian city that illuminates broad questions of global colonialism and Thai political history. This project is the result of a longstanding interest in urban history, sacred space, and regional identity that began with my first trip outside my home country, and continued through my dissertation at UW-Madison. Once I returned to the project several years ago, I benefitted greatly from the help and encouragement of several editors and staff at IIAS and AUP, as well as the two anonymous reviewers who provided helpful and encouraging feedback. I am extremely grateful for all their support throughout the process.

The idea for this book began, in a sense, simply by wandering the streets of Chiang Mai as a study abroad student, asking myself questions about the colonial-era architecture, ruined walls and temples, and other remnants of the past that seemed to poke through the modern, trendy, and heavily touristic present of the city. Why were there Christian churches on one side of the river? Why were there so many abandoned *chedi* in the city center? Why was there an abandoned temple, a colonial-style office, and a prison all in the same spot? By the time I was ready to propose my dissertation topic in Southeast Asian history, I returned to this curiosity knowing that it had the potential to answer many of the questions that were important to both scholars and local communities in Chiang Mai. How can we make sense of the historical relationship between Siam and colonialism? Why is urban development in Thailand so Bangkok-centric? What political power does regional or local identity have in heavily centralized Thailand?

Chiang Mai was a perfect example of what drew me to the city as an exchange student – it wasn't the capital, or the largest city, but it wasn't a small town either. Call it what you will – intermediate, secondary, or regional – but cities between the megalopolis and the town were both neglected in much of the scholarship on Asia, and the site of much of the urbanization that was transforming the region. Moreover, as a student of modern Thai history, I began to see Chiang Mai as a fascinating intersection between colonial and national forces, between Siamese kings, British diplomats, and American missionaries. I could detect the outlines of this even during my first visit, with the remnants of the teak trade, Presbyterian churches, and imposing colonial-style buildings located in the sacred center of the city, but the importance of the city as a fulcrum between an early modern *mandala* empire and a modern nation-state became clear as I researched the spatial footprint of power and administration in the city.

The future of the urban past?

During my time in Chiang Mai, I saw this historical heritage become a subject of debate and contestation. Who had the power to determine the meaning of urban space during a time of political upheaval and conflict? This was clear in the efforts to build museums in the city center meant to reinterpret the heart of the city. When I first explored the city center there was the famous Three Kings Monument dedicated to the thirteenth century founders of the city, a new Arts and Culture Center occupying the old Provincial Office, and the ruins of a temple closely connected with the sacred foundations of the city before Bangkok's dominance.¹ The temple, once ignored by the central state, with a road cut through its middle, served merely as an exemplar of local architecture from the main museum, but they soon built their own local museum on the newly revived grounds of the temple [Fig. 1]. Across another street, the imposing courthouse became the Lanna Folklife Museum, showcasing local culture and folk arts.

Perhaps most dramatically, I saw protests engulf the regional archaeology department as they excavated the northern city gate – an auspicious location according to the spatial logic of the city – as pro-Thaksin forces accused the government archaeologists of performing some sort of 'black magic' to curse the exiled former prime minister. Urban space was far from the stage on which politics and history would unfold; in this case, urban space was what brought politics, magic, and archaeology into the light.

The right to the city

The future development of Chiang Mai, and the fate of the remains of the past, remain a critical issue for residents of the city today. Over my years researching in Chiang Mai, this has been a constant. During my initial research, there were protests against schemes to expand and widen roads in and around the city, which would increase traffic, impact safety, and potentially damage local streetscapes. In 2015 Chiang Mai was put on the tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage Status,² partly in response to the challenges of overdevelopment and tourism facing the city. Various groups lay claim to the historical and sacred spaces of the city, including the provincial and central government offices, local scholars and activists, professional archaeologists of the Fine Arts Department, and Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, a Buddhist reliquary and pilgrimage destination that has revived several formerly abandoned sites across the city.

For the local community, the main struggle has been to preserve, define, and make accessible the urban heritage of the city. But there are tensions inherent in this. In 2017, while attending the 10th International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 10) and the 13th International Conference on Thai Studies (ICTS 13), both in Chiang Mai, I presented the research this book is based on, and also attended several panels having to do with the city's recent application for World Heritage status. Some panels advocated this new status as a way to protect overdeveloped sites from rampant tourism; still others advocated for UNESCO status as a way to promote tourism in the province. In other words, should we protect historic sites from tourists, or use them to draw tourists in? At that same conference, I joined a large group of scholars to support a declaration calling for the return of academic freedom, rights and civil liberties

in the wake of the 2014 coup;³ the power of Bangkok continues to loom large in provincial Thailand.

As the book explores the complex relationship between the central state and the local urbanism of Chiang Mai, recent events have shown how this dynamic continues to shape urban life and politics in the city. For example, in 2018, protests erupted in downtown Chiang Mai over a housing development for judges that cut into the foothills of Doi Suthep, the mountain west of the city that figures so prominently into the sacred landscape of the city.⁴ It was a rare expression of discontent aimed at the military government, but crucially one that was grounded in a sense of the meaning and power of urban and sacred space in Chiang Mai.



Fig. 1: Three Kings Monument with 'Chiang Mai Arts and Culture Center' to the right, and a 'Local Museum' behind, located across the street in a once abandoned monastery. (Photo by Taylor M. Easum, 2013)

Now that my book is complete, I am working on several new projects. First, I am developing a collaborative project on the history of games, gaming, and play in Asia. Second, I am also pursuing a translation of this book into Thai, with the hope of making it more available to local readers. Finally, I am continuing my research into Thai urban history by examining the post-World War II legacy of the late 19th- to early 20th-century urban transformation of cities like Chiang Mai. I plan to return to Thailand for further research in 2024, this time to explore the very different trajectories of provincial cities versus Bangkok, and the challenges of what I call an "over-developed city in an under-developed democracy," which continue in Chiang Mai today. Studying these challenges through the lens of urban history will, I believe, offer lessons for smaller, secondary, and intermediate cities across Asia dealing with similar challenges.

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Notes

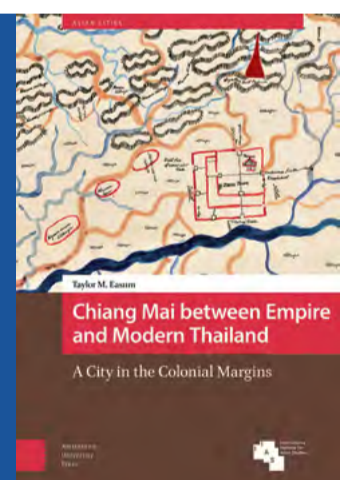
- <https://cmocity.com/chiang-mai-art-cultural-centre/>
- <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6003/>
- <https://prachataienglish.com/node/7276>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43940796>

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Urban histories tend to be dominated by large, global cities. But what does the history of the modern, colonial era look like from the perspective of smaller cities? By shifting the focus from the metropolis to the secondary city of Chiang Mai, *Chiang Mai between Empire and Modern Thailand* provides an alternative narrative of the formation of the modern Thai state that highlights the overlap between European, American, and Siamese interests.

Through a detailed analysis of Chiang Mai's urban space, the power dynamics that shaped the city come into focus as an urban-scale manifestation of colonial forces—albeit an incomplete one that allowed sacred space to

become a source of conflict that was only resolved in the years before WWII. Today, as the city confronts the challenge of overdevelopment, the legacy of the colonial era, and the opportunity of heritage preservation, this deep, multi-layered history of the power of (and over) urban space is vital.

Taylor M. Easum is Associate Professor of History at Indiana State University with research interests in Southeast Asian, urban, and colonial history. Recent publications include articles on contested urban networks, the construction of Thai and Lao ethnic identity, monuments and historical memory, and ongoing questions of urban heritage in Southeast Asia.