

# Supporting ethnic craftswomen in Chiang Mai through digital media: acknowledging the possibilities and challenges

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# Supporting ethnic craftswomen in Chiang Mai through digital media: acknowledging the possibilities and challenges

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## ABSTRACT

Since becoming a member of the Creative Cities Network (UCCN) in 2017, Chiang Mai has implemented a range of projects aimed at protecting and promoting the city's craft heritage. This article focuses on one project – the Women E-nspire Culture project – which was a pilot initiative launched by UNESCO Bangkok, with the support of Samsung Electronics, aimed at safeguarding traditional crafts by providing digital entrepreneurial skills for ethnic craftswomen, including Hmong, Akha and Karen ethnic groups. The Social Research Institute (SRI) at Chiang Mai University became a partner in the second phase of this project

in July 2020, when a community-based workshop was organised in collaboration with UNESCO Bangkok to further develop and strengthen the digital skills of Hmong craftswomen and youth in Doi Pui village. This article discusses the sociocultural background leading to the project as well as key lessons learned and the challenges of using digital technologies to support craftswomen in Chiang Mai's ethnic communities.

## Keywords

handicrafts, heritage, Chiang Mai, digital technologies, gender

## Introduction

Founded in 1296 CE as the capital of the Lanna Kingdom, Chiang Mai is widely known as a city of rich and diverse cultural heritage. Over the centuries, craft communities living in and around the capital have played an integral role in establishing the city's wealth and status as a trade centre. Crafts such as lacquerware, pottery, silverware and silk textiles have been traded along numerous routes, including the Ping River and overland through present-day Myanmar and Laos. Craftsmanship was also fundamental to creating the distinctive culture of the city, as crafts skills contributed to vernacular and religious architecture, as well as ritual practices, festivals and traditions (Boonyasurat 2020).

In addition to the crafts communities in and around the old city, which are predominantly ethnic Thai,<sup>1</sup> there are also numerous ethnic minority communities living in the mountainous areas surrounding Chiang Mai city who have their own craft traditions. These include groups of Akha, Hmong, Lisu, Karen, Lahu and Palaung. These ethnic minorities speak non-Tai languages (Mon-Khmer and Sino-Tibetan) and have cultures that are distinct from the lowland Tai. Prior to the 20th century, these groups lived autonomously beyond the direct rule of states in the lowland regions. However, with the drawing of political borders and state-building during the 20th century, many of these ethnic minorities faced discrimination due to negative perceptions of their swidden agricultural

practices and the production of opium (Gillogy 2004). Since the 1960s, state development agendas have sought to integrate upland ethnic minorities in various ways – namely, through formal education and infrastructural expansion as well as through initiatives supporting the crafts and cultures of these groups (Cohen 1989). Indeed, the promotion of cultural tourism and crafts has played a significant role in changing the negative perceptions of upland ethnic minorities, and today, they are widely represented as possessing distinctive cultures and unparalleled craft skills.

Despite the more positive representations of upland ethnic minorities as culturally diverse and skilled artisans, these groups still face many significant social and economic challenges due to their long-standing marginal status. For the purposes of this article, the authors will examine some of the issues that ethnic Hmong women have faced in safeguarding and marketing their crafts using digital platforms, which was the focus of the Women E-nspire Culture project, implemented by UNESCO Bangkok and the SRI at Chiang Mai University.

### **Hack culture: defining the challenges to sustainable craft transmission and marketing among ethnic minority women**

In keeping with its broad mission to support the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and the Sustainable Development Goals, in 2019 UNESCO Bangkok undertook a field survey among several of Chiang Mai's Hmong, Karen and Akha communities. The aim of this initial survey was to better understand the issues that craftswomen were facing in terms of the intergenerational transmission of craft skills and knowledge, as well as the challenges they faced in terms of marketing and selling their crafts. The survey was also intended to explore the possibility of using digital media to document and promote their crafts products.

During this preliminary survey, the UNESCO team identified several key issues. Firstly, in terms of the transmission of craft skills and knowledge, most of the older women artisans interviewed said that they had never documented their skills and knowledge related to textiles in anyway. Rather, they relied solely on a person-to-person transfer of their knowledge to younger generations. In recent years, this traditional mode of transmission had been interrupted by various factors, including formal

education and the impetus for younger generations to seek employment opportunities outside their natal communities. While some younger ethnic women were interested in learning craft skills, it was impractical for them to learn directly from their elders. In the absence of any documentation of their craft knowledge, it was likely to disappear with the more senior artisans.

A second set of issues related to marketing and storytelling about crafts. The craftswomen who were interviewed indicated that they all produced crafts for their own use in daily life and rituals, and many also produced crafts to sell in local markets to supplement their income. However, the local textile crafts market was becoming increasingly competitive, particularly with the cheaper, machine-made crafts that were replacing hand-made products. When asked about using digital media to document their textile knowledge and to promote their hand-made crafts to broader markets, many women expressed a keen interest in this possibility.

With the objective of addressing these issues, in August 2019 UNESCO Bangkok, with the support of Samsung Electronics and participation of Samsung volunteers, launched a hackathon to support women artisans through providing training in digital and entrepreneurship skills that would give them the tools to document their own traditional craft knowledge for the purposes of transmission to younger generations and for marketing to wider audiences. This initial pilot phase of the project aimed to generate IT solutions that would be easy and accessible for the craftswomen, taking into consideration concerns about language and limited digital and entrepreneurial literacy. Over the course of a four-day workshop in Chiang Mai, the first phase of the project produced preliminary web resources about the crafts – including documentation of designs and the craft production process – as well as Facebook platforms for marketing the crafts of the participating artisans.<sup>2</sup>

### **Doi Pui village: safeguarding Hmong crafts and culture through digitisation**

In the second phase of the project, the Social Research Institute (SRI) at Chiang Mai University was invited to join UNESCO Bangkok as a partner institution, and the Hmong village of Doi Pui was chosen as the site for the project implementation. Doi Pui was selected because 25 of the participants from the previous hackathon held

in Chiang Mai in 2019 had come from this village, and the UNESCO Samsung team had helped produce some preliminary website content and launch a Hmong Doi Pui Facebook group. The SRI was invited to join as a partner based on its previous experience working with women artisans from Doi Pui under the auspices of the Chiang Mai City of Crafts and Folk Arts UNESCO Creative Cities initiative.

As part of the preparation for the second capacity-building workshop with the Hmong craftswomen, a research team from SRI conducted a survey in Doi Pui in June 2020 to learn more about the history of the village, the role of textiles in everyday life and ritual practice, the threats to continued transmission, and the production, sale and marketing of textiles. The team also consulted with craftswomen about the potential use of digital media to document their traditional knowledge and promote their textile products.

As mentioned in the introduction, upland ethnic minorities in Thailand have historically been the target of state development agendas aimed at the eradication of opium and the elimination of swidden agriculture, and Doi Pui was one of the first ethnic villages where the Thai state introduced commercial crops and tourism as alternative models of economic development. In 1969, following the visit of King Rama IX, Doi Pui was declared a Royal Project village, and by the 1980s, it was generating more income from the sale of goods (including textiles) to tourists than from the sale of agricultural produce (Evrard and Leepreecha 2009). The SRI survey in June 2020 confirmed that Hmong villagers in Doi Pui were heavily reliant on income from tourism and the sale of their handicrafts, which had been severely disrupted by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through interviews with numerous Hmong women and the former headman of the village, the team learned that, despite the commercialisation of Hmong crafts for the tourist market described by Cohen (1989), the indigo-dyed hemp batik textiles and colourful appliqué embroidery called *paj ntaub* were still considered central features of Hmong ethnic identity in Doi Pui. While only the older generation of women in the village wore their hand-made garments daily, men and women of all generations would wear their textiles for community events and rites of passage, including weddings, death rites and the New Year festival. Moreover, hemp textiles were also used by

shamans in rituals to communicate with the spirits of the ancestors.

The SRI team also learned that Hmong batik textile production is an extremely complex and time-consuming process, which involves the planting and harvesting of hemp, the preparation of hemp fibres, the weaving of fibres into lengths of cloth, the application of elaborate wax patterns, the dyeing of the cloth with indigo and the embroidery of textiles with traditional motifs. From a survey with 82 artisans, the team found that less than 10 per cent of the artisans were engaged in the full process of textile production, and those who were involved in all steps were 50 years old or above. Another 20 per cent of the artisans – also 50 years and older – were able to draw the intricate wax patterns and do embroidery, while most younger artisans (15–40 years) were only able to embroider and sew products for daily life and for sale.

All the women surveyed were involved in the production of crafts for their own use and for supplemental income, but only a few had design and digital media marketing skills. Many of the women who were consulted expressed an interest in acquiring these skills to promote their crafts. Digital promotion was considered particularly important in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as tourists had stopped coming to visit Doi Pui, and many women had lost this source of income from selling their crafts at the local market.

Based on these findings and the consultations with artisans, the SRI team and UNESCO Bangkok organised the Community-based Workshop to Strengthen ICH Safeguarding and Digital Entrepreneurship Skills for Hmong Women. Held on 11–12 July 2020, the workshop aimed to address the dual concerns of transmission of skills and knowledge about Hmong batik textiles to the next generation and the design and marketing of textile craft products.

On the first day of the workshop, the team from UNESCO Bangkok began by reviewing the objectives and lessons learned from the first Samsung hackathon in 2019. They pointed out that one of the objectives of the first hackathon had been to explore how digital platforms could be used to safeguard intangible culture by creating a digital archive of the skills, techniques and meanings of textiles, which could then be accessed by younger generations seeking to learn about their heritage. A



**Figure 1**  
Photos from the July field visit to Doi Pui by the Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University.

second objective had been to develop digital platforms for the marketing of craft products, where artisans could also share stories about their lives and their textile craft practices. The UNESCO team explained that the current workshop aimed to build on the knowledge and resources that had already been developed with Doi Pui artisans as part of the hackathon as follows: 1) by further strengthening the IT and marketing skills of women artisans, 2) by raising awareness about how documentation and digital platforms can contribute to the safeguarding of ICH, and 3) by facilitating the transfer of the administration of the IT resources to local groups or institutions (i.e. the Chao Pho Luang Uppatham Primary School).

The authors of this article, Woratun Boonyasurat and Alexandra Denes, led a session on the first day of the workshop focusing on the importance of safeguarding the meanings and values associated with Hmong craft textiles, as these are the aspects which contribute to the sense of

history and continuity for the Hmong community. As the survey and field research had shown, textiles were not only a marker of Hmong identity, but they were also part of Hmong rituals from birth to death. Boonyasurat discussed how digital platforms – including the development of the Hmong Doi Pui website<sup>3</sup> – could support the transmission of this traditional knowledge by showcasing textile craft traditions and the stories of individual craftswomen. This was followed by Alexandra Denes’s presentation about how digital resources could contribute to safeguarding with a case study from the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) of Laos – a cultural centre which promotes awareness and learning about Laos’s crafts and supports the livelihoods of ethnic communities through the sale of craft products. One unique aspect of TAEC’s approach is the training of ethnic youth in ICH research, documentation and curatorial skills to create a young generation of Indigenous leaders and advocates for the protection of intangible culture. The example of TAEC demonstrates that it is possible to balance the safeguarding of traditional

meanings and uses of crafts with the promotion and marketing of crafts as products, and that income from crafts can also contribute to their sustainability.<sup>4</sup>

For the following session, the workshop facilitator presented a range of design ideas from craft-based brands in Thailand which had established niche markets, like the brand Thorr.<sup>5</sup> This session offered tips to participants about how to innovate and create new products using their traditional textiles, such as the technique of resizing motifs and patterns to create new products.

The workshop then shifted to a presentation and discussion of the Hmong Doi Pui website. The aim of the session was to gather feedback from participants about the existing content and what they wanted to add. The Hmong Doi Pui website had incorporated content that was developed in the previous hackathon in 2019 and covered a range of topics. Under the 'Identity and Culture' tab, there were links to pages on history, religion, animism and

shamanism, Hmong housing and Hmong clothing. This section provided an overview of the historical, religious and architectural context of the village and images of the different textile patterns and costumes worn for everyday and ritual purposes. The 'Artisans and Handicrafts' tab provided links to the individual artisans, the process of hemp fabric production and online craft classes, which were intended to be a step-by-step guide to produce a Hmong batik hemp textile. The last tab, 'Seek Doi Pui', included a link to the Facebook page of the project, as well as a map of the Doi Pui community indicating important sites in the village, such as the location of the school, the waterfall and the museum.

The workshop participants were divided into three groups to review and discuss the accuracy of the content and identify additional areas of content that should be added. The craftswomen had many suggestions on how they would like to improve the site. For instance, one group recommended that the website should include



**Figure 2**  
Discussing textile design in the July workshop organised by UNESCO Bangkok and the Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University.



**Figure 3**  
Learning how to post images of products to social media in the July workshop.

the house locations of the artisans, as well as links to handicraft products on online marketing channels. The second group suggested adding more information about the traditional clothing and handicrafts, while the third group recommended adding a cultural events calendar.

The second day of the workshop was dedicated to strengthening digital technology and business marketing skills for social media. Presented by experts from the Lanna Digital Innovation Center at SRI, this session covered a range of topics, including how to take photos of handicrafts using a mobile phone, how to use props and lighting to create an interesting composition and how to create and edit videos.

This hands-on session was followed by a session led by experts from the College of Arts, Media and Technology at Chiang Mai University that focused on brand creation and marketing promotion using online media. This session highlighted the importance of showcasing Hmong local identity, landmarks and attractions together with Hmong batik and how to incorporate storytelling about the history, meanings and production process behind handicrafts. Lastly, the team discussed branding using local symbols and motifs for logo creation.

## Challenges and future steps

In the final session of the workshop, participants were invited to share some of their concerns about the challenges of using digital platforms for safeguarding



**Figure 4**  
Learning to take photos of craft design products in the July workshop.

and marketing their traditional Hmong crafts. Many of the participants had shown interest and enthusiasm about gaining new digital skills for marketing, but it was clear that these platforms were not as accessible to older generations of Hmong women (40 years and older) who were not fluent in the Thai language. For these women, language was still a significant barrier to accessing web-based platforms, whether to document their heritage or promote their crafts. The participants acknowledged that this meant that it was mostly the younger generation of Hmong artisans who were able to use social media to promote their crafts, although some of the younger women also helped promote the crafts made by their elder family members. This discussion also led to the question of how social media or the web platform could support the collective interests of artisans, when most of the artisans sold their crafts individually, either in shops in the village or online. Three younger Hmong artisans agreed to manage the administration of the Doi Pui Facebook page, but no clear decision was made about the purpose of the page, and as a result, there has been limited activity and few posts since it was originally launched.

A second discussion focused on the role of the website. Participants agreed that the website should serve as a living archive of Hmong handicraft knowledge, which could also be used to engage and educate younger generations of Hmong and promote sustainable cultural tourism to the village. There was some uncertainty, however, about who would be able to manage the administration of the website once it was turned over to the community. One of the teachers at Chao Pho Luang Uppatham Primary School had been involved in the previous hackathon in 2019 and had organised Hmong batik activities in the school, and he had nominally agreed that the school could take over the website administration. However, the teacher had not been able to attend the workshop, and therefore there was still no firm commitment about the future administration of the website to ensure that it would continue to be updated.

In terms of next steps, the team from SRI and UNESCO Bangkok proposed several activities to follow up the research and workshop findings. Firstly, they recommended organising activities involving youth as a means of supporting continued transmission of Hmong batik knowledge and skills, such as handicraft workshops with youth in Doi Pui, a crafts-based curriculum and youth visual media training for ICH documentation. The SRI

also recommended the development of cultural tourism focused on Doi Pui's crafts and its rituals and traditions, organised in collaboration with tourism agencies.

## Conclusion

This article discusses how digital platforms can transform the representation and marketing of ethnic crafts, which can generate income for artisans and support the transmission of craft knowledge across generations. The Women E-nspire project was presented as an example of how upland ethnic women acquired digital skills to design and market their crafts, and how these skills can raise the visibility of crafts and enhance the livelihoods of ethnic women. The project also aimed to document the history, meanings, production process, and cultural functions of textiles in Hmong rituals and belief systems, and to create a digital archive of craft knowledge.

The article also highlights two significant challenges associated with using digital platforms to promote and safeguard ethnic crafts. Firstly, there is the linguistic barrier, as the older generation of ethnic craftswomen are not fully literate in Thai, which makes it challenging to produce digital media about Hmong textiles in Thai. Secondly, there is the issue of transfer of ownership to community stakeholders, which requires long-term community engagement, institutional support, and capacity building. The Hmong Doi Pui project stalled because there were no concrete plans or resources allocated to ensure the younger generation of Hmong artisans would participate actively in documenting and translating the stories and skills of senior women textile artisans. Furthermore, not enough time and resources were dedicated to ensuring that primary school staff could take over the maintenance of the web project. In conclusion, the article emphasizes the importance of establishing understanding and rapport with the community about the objectives of a community-based digital media project and earmarking resources to address the challenges that may arise. 🇹🇭

## ENDNOTES

1. Thai speakers are the dominant ethnic group of Thailand. The Thai of northern Thailand speak a dialect of Thai known as *kam muang*.
2. Background about the Hack Culture project can be found at the following links: [https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/HackCulture%20info\\_EN\\_2July2019.pdf](https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/HackCulture%20info_EN_2July2019.pdf); <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/digital-solutions-empower-women-and-safeguard-traditional-crafts>
3. The website developed during the project can be found at the following link: <https://hmongdoipui.com/>
4. Located in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre is a social enterprise committed to the preservation of cultural diversity and ethnic heritage. Further information about TAEC can be found at the following link: <https://www.taeclaos.org/>
5. *Thorr* is a Thai craft brand dedicated to design innovation and sustainable livelihoods for artisans. Information can be found at the following link: <https://www.thorrliving.com/>

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