



## Living with the ancestors: Spiritual materiality and everyday heritage practices in Ban Chiang

Sitta Kongsasana<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Architectural Heritage Management and Tourism (International Program), Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Architecture, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

### ABSTRACT

Management at living archaeological sites can favor a secular-scientific globalized perspective of heritage at the expense of describing complex and long-term relationships involving local people and their heritage landscapes. This is especially so in places of historical severance where current people have no direct line of descent to the ancient ruins. This research aims to bridge this gap by considering the Ban Chiang World Heritage Site in Thailand as a case study. Employing a qualitative approach rooted in ethnographic observation and Heritage Discourse Analysis (HDA), the study investigates everyday heritage practices and local discourses. The main discovery is that the Tai Puan community engages in “spiritual adoption,” a culturally advanced form of mundane heritage work whereby they reanimate sleeping dead artifacts and develop a metaphoric sense of kinship, making the unknown remains into spiritual ancestors. The study contributes to three key areas: Theoretically, it extends the concept of spiritual materiality beyond overtly sacred places to secular archaeological contexts; Methodologically, it demonstrates the utility of HDA in uncovering silenced local ontologies; and practically, it calls for a paradigm shift in heritage management from object-based preservation to the facilitation of living relationships between people and their layered, spiritual landscapes.

### KEYWORDS

Spiritual materiality; living heritage; spiritual adoption; postcolonial heritage; dialogical heritage experience; place attachment; Ban Chiang

### CORRESPONDANCE

Sitta Kongsasana ([ksitta@kku.ac.th](mailto:ksitta@kku.ac.th))

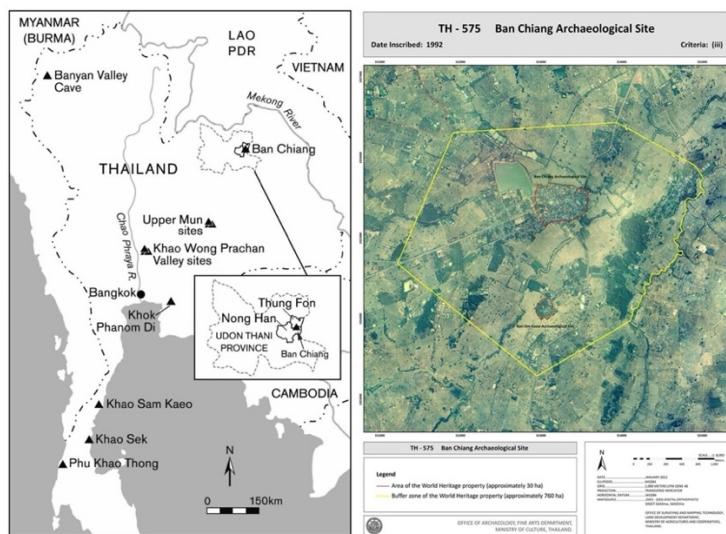
### INTRODUCTION

There is a fundamental conflict in the cultural background of how heritage is managed all over the world. Although the models used in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are becoming ever more community oriented, the paradigm which tends to dominate and be referred to as the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) still and often tends to promulgate an expert driven, scientific account of the past that secures heritage as a finite reservoir of objects requiring protection (Smith, 2006). This is especially seen in living World Heritage sites where the administrative, usually secular-scientific, output about assessing heritage meets with everyday lives of the local population. These artifacts do not only represent history, as one inhabitant of Ban Chiang articulated: to her they belonged to the ghosts, and this essential statement sets heritage itself out of the realm of science inquiry, and moves it

into the actor within a spiritual milieu (INTW12, 2017; INTW14, 2017; Nakamura, 2017). This paper gets into this acute tension, interro-gating the silenced voices that disturb the very premises of what heritage is, and to whom or to what it is theirs.

Currently, this paper is focused on Ban Chiang Archaeological Site in Northeast Thailand, which is one of the World Heritage Sites by UNESCO that is concentrated on a prehistoric pre-bronze age manifestation (Figure 1,2). However, Ban Chiang is not just a dry ruin, it is a thriving, living community with a predominant ethnic group of Tai Puan settlers who have inhabited this mound many centuries ago, long before the rest of the world began perceiving its international discovery (Figure 3). It is a layered terrain, a place of one space, two times in which the state-approved prehistoric past rests on latent slumber directly beneath the feet of a modern community which lacks any direct or expected genealogical connection to it (Byrne, 2014) (Figure 4,5). This peculiar state renders Ban Chiang a singular intellectual laboratory in attempting to explore the mechanisms by which a present-day community constructs a meaningful and intimate relationship with a past that they themselves are not a part of.

Although critical heritage studies have seen a trend toward learning how to think of heritage in terms of a social process, a noteworthy gap still needs to be closed. Most of the existing anthropological literature on the overlap between belief and heritage, at least in Southeast Asia, has concentrated on overtly religious places of interest such as temples or monuments (Karlstrom, 2005). Less research has been done concerning how spiritual-material relationships are established and nurtured in a supposedly secular archaeological context, especially one where the community and the material cultural evidence embody a disjunctive history. The supremacy of the Western centric paradigms of conservation and their notorious atomization of the material and the spiritual does not have the language and a system that can understand the subtle but powerful day to day labor done by communities to connect the gap between the two which is imagined. This paper fills this gap by putting into the foreground another ontology of heritage that is anchored in local Tai Puan epistemology.



**Figure 1.** The location of the Ban Chiang archaeological site in Udon Thani province, Thailand



**Figure 2.** A drone photo of Ban Chiang Heritage Mound, captured from an East to West perspective in 2019



**Figure 3.** Stephen Young and Siripong, a villager from Ban Chiang who was with Young at the time of the incident, demonstrated how Young tripped, found many unique potsherds on the surface and was helped up by Siripong, to the group of attendees at the 2016 conference commemorating five decades since the discovery of Ban Chiang



**Figure 4.** Artist's conception (by Ardeth Anderson) of the village of Ban Chiang in 1966 showing pot rims emerging from the road



**Figure 5.** Walk-through memories with Ms. Patcharin Rachahodi, a member of Tai Puan descendant at Khum Tai, an old settlement on the mound of Ban Chiang.

This post-ethnographic article suggests that archaeological remains (non-ancestral) becomes a living, spiritual heritage in and through a convoluted ensemble of daily open-

ended embodied activity and spiritual taskwork in the Tai Puan community at Ban Chiang. I argue that such practices can be understood as a kind of “spiritual adoption,” an activity making metaphorical kinship through which the secular-scientific story of the state is challenged and a shared--and deep--feeling of local possession and belonging is asserted. It is not just a belief; it is a kind of heritage work because it reanimates dead objects transforming them into living beings in the modern spiritual and social life of the community. Such a process is a subtle kind of postcolonial re-appropriation in that he does not merely accept global heritage frameworks, rather localized, re-interpreted, and incorporated into the logic of co-existence with the past (Figure 6)



**Figure 6.** A diagram illustrating the process of spiritual adoption.

This paper has provided a sensitive view of living heritage as more than an unchanged inheritance and seen instead as a network of the lifeworld, established on a daily basis. This will be achieved by organizing the article as follows: The following section will look at the theoretical landscape of critical heritage studies in order to ascertain our analytical framework using the concepts of Spiritual Materiality as well as, Postcolonial heritage, Dialogical Heritage Experience and Place Attachment. Afterwards, we describe the methodology of the qualitative case study that we use in order to evaluate the emic viewpoints of the Ban Chiang society. The outcomes of the study are given after that, explaining more about the particular ways of spiritual participation and kinship-forming. These findings are subsequently elaborated as to how it correlates to existing theory in the discussion section, and ultimately, the steps to take in the future are contemplated in the conclusion, regarding the overarching possibility of a more inclusive and relational management of the heritage at living archaeological sites across the world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past few decades, domains of heritage studies have experienced a dramatic intellectual shift, distancing themselves both definitively and emphatically with more traditional, object-oriented modes of conservation to more processual and people-centered conceptualizations of heritage in the present. This change was not made out of the blue, it was a result of long-run and intense unease with the current paradigm. In the core of this critique is the idea of the AHD which is often a system of thought driven by experts that is itself most typically Western-based in epistemology that involves a privileging of the material, monumental and scientifically-validated aspects of heritage (Smith, 2006). This discourse, as Laurajane Smith has so influentially made her argument, serves as a way for many to understand heritage as a thing in and of itself of intrinsic value to be passively consumed by a population directed by experts as opposed to understanding heritage as an activity of a cultural process. Its own intellectuality has a tendency to produce a stern hierarchy of value, by elevating to a pedestal what is professionally judged to be of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), way above the local and day to day values that communities themselves put on the place of their own perception. This way of doing, although efficient when it comes to standardizing preservation strategies, results in implementing a type of epistemic violence most of the time. It is systematic devaluation of non-scientific methods of knowing thus sweeping out the complicated ways of living, perception of the heritage in the non-Western surroundings.

As a direct reaction to this hegemonic discourse, the field has witnessed the emergence of Critical Heritage Studies (CHS), an active interdisciplinary environment in which people have re-framed heritage as a verb, rather than a noun, meaning that heritage never stands still but is an ongoing process of making meaning, negotiation and performance (Harrison, 2013). Scholars like Rodney Harrison have been forefront in pushing this process view and positing that heritage can be best seen to have an ongoing relationship and that human agency has a critical role to play in its development of meanings today to contribute to the future. This paradigm shift has opened the door of crucial conceptualization frameworks such as the notion of an “heritage from below,” a concept intentionally based and focused on the grassroots practices, the oral histories, as well as the alternative explanations of the communities (Robertson, 2012). It contends the unheard voices of local people are not simply secondary data to amass, but are constitutive, co-creative agents in the process of generating heritage meaning as such. Our inquiry is located, therefore, within the context of this critical, process-oriented and decolonizing paradigm.

In order to maneuver the delicate connections between communities and their past in the certain domain of Ban Chiang, the author of the article uses “Spiritual Materiality” as its central analytical tool. Not only is this notion founded upon a kind of radical ethnographic inquiry, in locales saturated with indigenous and non-Western conceptions of the world, it is also an effort to radically undermine Cartesian dualism that so conveniently divides a stagnant, unthinking matter and a pro-active spirit. It then assumes that in many cultures, material culture (objects, landscapes, archaeological remains) does not passively await the imposition of human meanings; according to this view, they are assumed to have their own agency, spirit and life force and require a

reciprocating relationship of respect (Karlstrom, 2005). The approach also represents a radical alternative to ideas about archaeology. It can help us to step past treating artifacts and artifacts simply as data points in attempting to reconstruct the past and instead treat them as actors, or stakeholders perhaps, in a network of active social and spiritual interactions. In this sense an old pot shed may become an archaeological fact, at one and the same time and simultaneously, a living spiritual being, and this in no way contradicts itself.

Spiritual materiality has arguably existed in the most fertile sense in the world of Southeast Asia where belief systems are characterized by and represent a convergence of Buddhist, Brahmanic and animist traditions that have been used to cultivate a worldview state that has the spiritual and material closely and inseparably interwoven. Even in this context, archaeological sites in the area are not necessarily experienced as remains of a dead past, but are instead viewed as active and present spaces inhabited by *phi* (spirits) and guardian deities that must be respected, negotiated, appeased, etc. (as has been amply documented by Denis Byrne). This interaction is not a historical remnant left over by a more superstitious past but is here and now a lively, modern practice that builds upon how the land is put to use, social interactions, and community morals. Anna Karlström also makes this illuminated through the lens of Buddhist ideology, in the sharp contradiction between the Western conservationist desire to keep things forever-a struggle with time-and the Buddhist concept of impermanence or *anitchang* (anicca), where corruption and change are natural and welcome elements of a cosmic process. It is this rich regional background that thus adds weight to the fundamental inadequacy of using a singularly secular-scientific approach to heritage sites such as Ban Chiang and, in the need, to employ a methodology that is culturally sensitive to these deeply-rooted alternative ontologies.

It is crucial here to distinguish between three overlapping concepts central to this study. While “Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)” typically refers to the transmission of traditions, knowledge, and skills as defined by global frameworks, it often risks treating practices as static performances separated from their material settings. In contrast, “Spiritual Materiality” serves as the theoretical lens (ontology) for this research, challenging the separation of “spirit” and “matter” by recognizing that physical objects can possess spiritual agency. Finally, “Spiritual Adoption” is the specific empirical phenomenon identified in this study—the active, everyday process through which the community bridges the gap between ICH and materiality, transforming non-ancestral artifacts into kin through ritualized care.

Whereas the explanatory potential of spiritual materiality is becoming apparent in the heritage studies, the research gap stands out, particularly of a systematic nature. Up to now, the application of such notion has relied mostly on the unambiguous or sacred places, including ancient temples, monasteries, or native sacred groves, the spiritual presence at which is made plain and most frequently may be historically unbroken with the contemporary faith of the community. There has by contrast been relatively little scholarly focus on the equally fundamental, but rather less dramatic, problem of how such complicated and precarious spiritual-material bonds are fashioned and sustained in a specific archaeological landscape, especially one in which the modern inhabitants have no direct biological or cultural lineage with the prehistoric people whom they treat as their forebears and whose remains lie underneath their own dwellings. Nor does the

existing literature clearly show how a society can be led to believe that a millennia-old skeleton is, not a scientific object belonging to an unknown person, but a spiritual ancestor to whom one owes respect and merit. This is the uncharted terrain that should be explored in this article by focusing on how this kinship is being forged based on a broad historical rupture.

Hence, the Ban Chiang World Heritage Site is an ideal and critical case study to fill this gap. The special situation of a living village occupying the top of a non-ancestral, but globally significant, archaeological deposit provides a natural laboratory, in which to study the banal processes of heritage work required to preserve the continuity of disjunct histories by engaging the spiritual engagement. This paper therefore goes beyond a mere limitation of merely labeling local beliefs as folklore; it seeks to know the complex process involved in actions of how these beliefs are brought about as they transform non-moving mass to spiritual relatives. In so doing, this article plainly responds to the request to represent a more nuanced, decolonized interpretation of heritage that involves serious considerations of local epistemologies. What practices in Ban Chiang allow local people to turn archaeological remains of non-ancestors into a palpable spiritual legacy that counters a secular-scientific account promoted by the citing state? This brings us to our main research question: What are the everyday actions that enable Ban Chiang inhabitants to enact non-ancestral archaeological remains into a vital heritage of spirituality, and how do these actions challenge the secular-scientific discourse promoted by the state?

## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used will need to have the ability to go beneath a superficial description as the ways born of the specialties in which the heritage is lived and experienced are profound and oftentimes subtlety found. It follows that the research question at the heart of this study--how the Tai Puan community spiritually interacts with non-ancestral archaeological remains is fundamentally an epistemological, emotional, embodied-practices question. It aims at comprehending another ontology of heritage, a world which can neither be quantified nor measured using the conventional ways of positivism. As a result, a qualitative research paradigm was not an option as in other research, but it was a requirement to the investigation. In particular, this research will employ qualitative case study methodology since the latter approach allows examining an individual, bounded phenomenon in detail, holistically, in a specific, bounded setting, which will be the case of the Ban Chiang World Heritage Site in this case. Such a method will enable the so-called thick description, which is necessary to disentangle the dense layers of meaning that the community everyday heritage work entails (Clifford, 1973).

Ban Chiang Archaeological Site is the venue of such exploration. The reason why it was selected as the case study was deliberate in theory. Ban Chiang is not only a site that has an enormous archaeological value but, more importantly, it is a layered and layered landscape whereby a globally recognized official prehistory is superimposed (physically and socially) on the territory by a living, breathing community with its own distinct history and cultural traditions. This situation of historical gap between the

ancient residents and the current Tai Puan settlers gives it a unique status as the ideal place of the intellectual working lab to address the critical issue: the attachment to non-ancestral heritage. Whereas a historic temple or, as one might find in a community-centered museum, a more obvious or direct line of ownership and identity, Ban Chiang gives us a dissonant heritage space (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), and it is therefore an ideal place where to watch the subtle dynamics of spiritual negotiation, adoption and kinship-making that are central to this research.

This study used a methodology triangulation approach which is the appropriate strategy to employ to promote a level of credibility and richness of findings as a wide array of data was implemented to develop a multi-perspectival and thorough account of heritage experiences at Ban Chiang. This enabled the ability to cross-check the information and this gave a more comprehensive view than what any one technique could do on its own. Data collection was centered on three major streams.

### **Ethnographic observation**

Long-term observation including participant and non-participant were done in the Ban Chiang locality especially on the heritage mound and also during Ban Chiang World Heritage festival in the period between 2015 and 2017. Such an immersive form was also critical to capture the tacit, embodied and much times spoken less aspects of heritage work. It enabled the recording of ritual activities, informal narratives, heritage object usage in the home and the spatial politics that take place in this active landscape.

### **Semi-structured, in-depth interviews**

Twenty-one key informants were involved in in-depth interviews which were semi-structured. The sample was selected purposely to cover the widest possible extent of stakeholders and voices, with elderly members of the local community who experienced the so-called the “Ban Chiang Gold Rush,” leaders of the local (homemade) heritage associations (pottery and weaving groups), local government administrators, and employees of Ban Chiang National Museum. The approach was critical towards attaining the emic orientations, personal recollections, and the in-depth translation which constitute the main evidence of this research paper.

### **Documentary and archival analysis**

In order to supplement the ethnographic and interview data the detailed variety of documentary sources had been studied. These were official publications of the Ban Chiang National Museum, tourism promotional publications, or the local government ordinance, scholarly publications, and publications on the social media platform regarding this site. This critical media analysis was crucial in a sense that enabled the positioning of the official, or authorized, discourse on Ban Chiang to serve as a benchmark against which the local, or unofficial, discourses could be delineated and juxtaposed against.

The use of methodological triangulation was not merely for data accumulation but for critical cross-verification. Findings from these three streams often revealed a

dissonance that was analytically productive. For instance, Documentary Analysis of state brochures often presented Ban Chiang artifacts as inert scientific specimens. This was juxtaposed with In-depth Interviews, where residents verbally expressed fear or reverence for these same objects. Crucially, Ethnographic Observation served as the tie-breaker, confirming that these verbal expressions were not just folklore but were enacted through concrete behaviors—such as the daily placement of food offerings or the wearing of bead amulets.

The driving force of the analysis of this research is HDA which is a special utilization of the critical discourse analysis application to the field of heritage. HDA equips one with the resources to go beyond a mere description of “what was said”, to a critical orientation of “how it was said” and “what the saying does.” In other words, language becomes a social practice that defines identities and constructs meaning as a means of reproduction of power relations, and this is an active process rather than a reflection of something external. In this paper, HDA was deployed in dismantling narratives, metaphors, and lexicons that the various stakeholders applied in discussing the past of Ban Chiang. The transcripts of all the interviews, field notes, and documentary sources were coded systematically, and analyzed through a thorough method of thematic analysis to form a pattern of recurring seeming, underlying assumptions and areas of discourse contention. This enabled the analysis to be at a fine-grained level in the language with which the spiritual ontology of the community is enshrined and how it subtly opposes or re-appropriates the hegemonic secular-scientific discourse.

The researcher's positionality played a pivotal role in data interpretation. As a Thai academic from an external university, I occupied a “liminal” space—neither a complete insider nor a foreign tourist. This outsider status initially presented challenges in accessing intimate spiritual narratives, which are often guarded against state officials. However, by adopting a learner-centered role rather than an expert inspector, I could ask “naive” questions that locals would not ask each other. This position allowed me to bridge the gap between the academic terminology of heritage management and the local vernacular of spiritual kinship, translating the community's “unauthorized” heritage practices into a framework intelligible to the academic field. Furthermore, the study adhered to strict ethical standards regarding the rights of these informants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to engagement, and measures to maintain confidentiality and anonymity were implemented upon request, in full compliance with research ethics. Such an ethical compass was not an afterthought, but a grounding element of the methodology, ensuring the inquiry was as respectful and responsible as the results it aimed to bring about.

## RESULTS

The data gathered from ethnographic immersion and in-depth interviews reveal a complex and deeply embedded local ontology that operates in parallel to, and often in direct tension with, the official, secular-scientific narrative of Ban Chiang. This localized worldview does not regard the archaeological remains as an inert data on historical facts, but as an agentive proximate living being in the community. The findings show that this

spiritual-material interface could not be construed as a passive system of belief, but is dynamically produced and sustained through three interrelated types of everyday heritage work: the ongoing process of re-animating the past through ritual interaction, the intentional generation of spiritual kinship over time in order to overcome historical discontinuity, and the daily, day to day negotiation of co-inhabiting a landscape that is at once sacred and profane.

### **Re-animating the past: The everyday work of spiritual engagement**

The common denominator of the archetypal action of the Tai Puan community converting inert objects into living beings is uniform and diverse activity of spiritual interaction. It is not a one-time event that takes place but an ongoing process of interaction, communication and reciprocity in which the agency and personhood of the ancient inhabitants of the site is given consideration. A three-fold central practice reveals the most through this process: the ritual of asking permission as a kind of central acknowledgment of practice, the dream and omen as a kind of communication, and the material practice of merit-making as a technology of relationships.

Firstly, the most fundamental and consistently observed practice is the ritual of seeking permission. This performance must predate almost any important contact with the land, whether archaeological digging in the past or in the present, individual activities. It is a much deeper ethical and ontological position: land and its contents are not a free resource to be used, but a realm of other, non-human people whose permission must be sought. During the official excavations of the 1970s, archaeologists were advised by villagers to perform rituals of sacrifice and worship to appease the spirits believed to inhabit the land before any digging could commence, a practice documented in photographs at the Ban Chiang National Museum (Figure 7). This was not seen as mere superstition, but as a necessary diplomatic protocol. A female who participated in the original local digs recalled the process:

Before we start digging, we always pay our respects and ask for permission from the spirits of the place. We almost always have ancient bones, probably those of the owners of the bronze bracelets and beads with which we carry off the old jars. We leave the bones to be cremated and once we are done with the dig, we offer them and have a service to them (INTW08, 2017).

This simple act of “telling” is the first step in re-animation, as it acknowledges the ancient remains not as objects, but as subjects capable of hearing and responding. This requirement for permission operates on parallel tracks: the spiritual and the secular. Just as the original excavators had to adhere to the community’s spiritual protocols, modern-day owners must navigate a dual process of official, legal authorization alongside personal, ritualistic integration. The testimony of one family highlights this dual responsibility:

My family also owns two registered Ban Chiang pots. We obtained official permission from the district chief and the Fine Arts Department to legally possess them. Before bringing them home, we performed a proper ritual, akin to inviting

a Buddha statue into our home. At first, we made many prayers to the pots. Later, we had them as common religious items in our room (INTW03, 2017).

Secondly, this perception of the past as a responsive subject is further solidified through a rich local discourse on dreams, omens, and supernatural encounters. People do not write these experiences off as fantasy but explain it as a direct language of connection, or a way of communication left by the ancient inhabitants. There are a lot of rumors among the community of people who found luck after a discovery that is spiritually acceptable or, more often, who met ill luck after treating the artifacts disrespectfully. One interviewee recounted a widely known tale of a man from another province who purchased a Ban Chiang pot and was plagued by nightmares until he was compelled to return the artifact to the community (INTW03, 2017). A former artisan, who had produced imitation pottery, gave a vivid personal testimony of how he was crushed during his siesta by what he felt were hundreds of ancient skulls after failing to seek permission to use their designs to make money (INTW11, 2017).

These narratives have been very strong social mechanisms. They are neither mere ghost stories, but pedagogical devices and moral case studies that verify the ontology of the community. They teach the younger generation the “rules of engagement” with the heritage landscape, defining what constitutes respectful interaction and delineating the consequences of transgression. By virtue of this current interpretative work, the spirit agency of the artifacts can be seen as a prominent and powerful force in the day-to-day living of the community.

Interestingly, even when individuals attempt to follow these “rules of engagement”—such as asking for permission—the feeling of transgression is not easily erased. This ambivalence of action and underlying belief is quite eloquently brought out in an account provided by one resident:

We didn't think of keeping them... we feared (the ghosts) would come and haunt us... we did not want to keep them; they were the property of the dead. We thought we were taking their things, even though we told them we were taking them... deep down, we didn't feel comfortable because we considered them to be old things, belongings of the dead... our parents usually told us not to take their things, so they never went out to dig for antiques (INTW12, 2017).

Lastly, the relationship with these ancient spirits is sustained through the material practice of *tham bun* (merit-making), a central tenet of Thai Buddhism adapted here as a form of “spiritual technology.” This is most visible during the annual Ban Chiang World Heritage Festival, where a formal community-wide ritual is held to dedicate merit to the “ancestor spirits of Ban Chiang” at the Wat Pho Sri Nai excavation site (Figure 8). However, the work extends far beyond this single event. As one retired teacher explained,

When we took away their pots... we would cremate their bones and make merit on their behalf. Even today, we continue to make offerings and remember them... When I go to the temple in the morning, I pour the water and call them to come and receive the food, so they will not be hungry, suffer, or not to have grudges against each other (INTW13, 2017).

This act of *krūatnam* (pouring water) is a tangible technology for transferring merit and sustenance into the spiritual realm. In these regular material contributions, the community actively plays the role of being a caretaker, providing well-being of the ancient inhabitants. This is a mutualistic bond, taking care of the spirits of the past this way the community strives to prosper and live peacefully today. Such continual work helps make out of the obligation of preservation not only a scientific mandate but also a substantial spiritual and ethical obligation.



**Figure 7.** An archaeologist together with villagers performs a ritual to worship the holy things before excavation



**Figure 8.** Formal communal ceremony to appease the spirits of the ancestors is organized annually at Wat Pho Sri Nai's excavation site during the Ban Chiang World Heritage Festival

### From artifacts to ancestors: The creation of spiritual kinship

The most profound finding of this study is possibly that which is brought forth by the process by which the Tai Puan community, in this particular case, accomplishes the historical and biological divide between them and their prehistoric predecessors who lived within the mound. Faced with a past that is not their own by blood, they engage in a remarkable act of social and spiritual creativity: they make it their own through a process of “spiritual adoption,” transforming anonymous archaeological skeletons into revered ancestors and forging a powerful sense of metaphorical kinship.

This process is most powerfully articulated in the community's own lexicon and ritual repertoire. As noted in local accounts and museum records (Ban Chiang National Museum, 2009), despite the absence of *sāilūrat* (biological lineage), villagers explicitly employ familial kinship terms such as *pū yā tā yāi* (grandparents/ancestors) to refer to the prehistoric remains. This kinship is operationalized through what can be termed “spiritual technologies”—tangible practices designed to facilitate communication across the ontological divide. For instance, interviewees described offering food to the spirits as one would to living parents (INTW13, 2017). Key among these practices is the act of *krūatnam* (pouring water to transfer merit), which functions as a mechanism to transmit sustenance to the “unseen neighbors.” Furthermore, the annual *būang sūang* (worship ceremony) dedicated to the community guardian *Khun Chīang Sawat* and the Ban Chiang ancestors serves as a collective maintenance of this relationship. Historically, elders recount that linguistic protocols of *khō khamā* (asking for forgiveness/permission) were strictly deemed necessary before early excavations, framing the act not as extraction but as a negotiation with the *phī* (spirits) who held prior claim to the soil. Such an act of adoption is a forceful declaration of local agency transforming the impersonal, objective differentiation of the state, into a warm, familial engagement. One resident vividly expresses this close, family link, as well as the tremendous feeling of loss when it is broken:

We mourn for the Ban Chiang artifacts, because we know the most beautiful pieces are missing. They are a part of us, and we as a community can connect to our past. To have them gone is like having our ancestors and our very roots torn away from home (INTW08, 2017).

This ancestral kinship is not just an abstract idea but are achieved through making it concrete, making it personal: dipping ancestry right into the flesh. Connection is embodied in discursive structure which effectively obliterates the line between ancient past and the living present. Fieldwork revealed numerous instances of this practice, most notably the wearing of ancient carnelian and glass beads, passed down through families, which are strung into necklaces and worn, particularly with traditional Tai Puan clothing during ceremonies (Figure 9, 10). As one teacher proudly explained,

With my Tai Puan dress, I sometimes wear a necklace featuring a coin of the late King (Rama 9) on one side and the late King's Mother on the other. It reminds people of the historic visit of the King here. I see it as a treasured piece that is intrinsically part of the Tai Puan outfit (INTW08, 2017).

By wearing these ancient beads, individuals physically incorporate the materiality of the non-ancestral past into their contemporary cultural identity. The beads stop being archaeological objects in a museum display case, and start to move into a realm of personal amulet, familial heirloom, and dynamic element of an existing cultural expression. This practice is a profound act of re-contextualization, simultaneously erasing the lines between public heritage and private property, and between the prehistoric “other” and the Tai Puan “self.”



**Figure 9.** Bead necklaces and amulets worn or present publicly



**Figure 10.** Repurposed as decorative wall hangings, ancient Ban Chiang potsherds create a bridge between the distant past and contemporary life

### Everyday co-habitation: Negotiating the sacred and the profane

The spiritual re-animation of the landscape and the creation of kinship ties result in a complex everyday reality for the residents of the Ban Chiang mound. They share an environment which is both a banal residential neighborhood and a holy parentage place. This ambivalence necessitates an on-going, in many cases subconscious negotiation

between materialistic needs of every-day existence and spiritual meaning due to their spiritual forefathers. This bargaining is observed either in the sensitivity of their knowledge of landscape or in the implied conflicts of different tenures of ownership.

The community navigates their home through a “spiritual map” that is superimposed upon the physical geography of the village. This landscape is ethereal in the sense that it depends on oral history, the collective memory to define how some spaces can be perceived and utilized. This intimate, everyday negotiation between the living and the dead is perfectly captured in the words of one resident, who describes living directly atop a burial site:

This area around my house used to be a hill covered in a banana grove. People were digging all over the place, looking for Ban Chiang pottery. Officials once dug two pits in the road in front of my house, unearthing a skeleton. They later filled the hole and paved it over. Watching the excavations frequently helped me understand that this is just a normal thing, not something to be feared. I never wanted the ghost artifacts they found and I always dedicate merit to the ancestral spirits here. As a result, I've never been scared or haunted by ghosts. It's as if we have been coexisting peacefully, familiar with each other for a long time (INTW14, 2017).

This account demonstrates a form of vernacular zoning, an informal land-use planning guided by spiritual respect rather than municipal ordinance. The resident's attitude also reveals a clear tension in ownership: while outsiders might seek to physically possess the artifacts, she claims a form of spiritual stewardship defined by respect rather than monetary value. It is a constant, lived negotiation that acknowledges the ancient inhabitants not as a subterranean layer of history, but as unseen neighbors and co-residents (Figure 11).

This co-habitation creates a fascinating tension between what can be termed “symbolic ownership” and “legal ownership.” Whereas the archaeological heritage is legally and scientifically under the control of the state, as a result of the Fine Arts Department and the UNESCO designation, the community insists on an effective symbolic and spiritual ownership right. This stress can be felt when discussing the management of the site. The Head of the Ban Chiang National Museum acknowledged the challenge:

Much of the mound is privately owned, and the Department of Fine Arts is only the caretaker, not the owner. Management is challenging (INTW07, 2017).

The villagers support this caretaking responsibility via their spiritual labor, rather than legislation. This leaves a silent non-stop bargaining of power. Whereas people living in villages will report about the illegal digging to the authorities, thus enforcing the law and order of the state, they will know that they are securing their spiritual relatives and ensuring the good spirits of their homeland. It represents a kind of shared stewardship in which the state controls the material and the community the spiritual, resulting in a complex but workable system of everyday heritage work that is largely unseen to the official discourse.



**Figure 11.** A local resident of Ban Chiang indicates the location of a burial, referred to as an “unseen neighbor,” situated beneath a public alleyway in front of her house

## DISCUSSION

The findings presented in the preceding section offer a profound glimpse into an alternative heritage ontology, one that operates quietly yet persistently beneath the official, state-sanctioned discourse at Ban Chiang. It is a way of seeing the world in which the past is not a place of which one is an observer, a foreign country to be looked at across the distance, but the agentive living contemporary itself. This study has demonstrated that the Tai Puan community, faced with a prehistoric past to which they hold no direct ancestral claim, does not remain a passive custodian. Instead, people become active connectors, engaged in a sophisticated form of daily heritage work that “re-animates” inert archaeological relics. This study discovered that “spiritual adoption” transforms nameless objects into cherished spiritual forebears, creating a powerful symbolic bond. Against this backdrop, this concluding discussion will now place these empirical observations within a broader theory debate, arguing that the Ban Chiang case has important extensions to contemporary debates over spiritual materiality and postcolonial heritage, as well as highly practical implications for future living heritage management.

While Smith (2006) argues that the AHD privileges monumental and expert-driven values, the findings at Ban Chiang reveal a subtle subversion of this hierarchy. The locals do not reject the AHD entirely; rather, they “re-enchant” the scientific artifacts designated by the state. Unlike the passive consumption of heritage criticized by Smith, the Tai Puan practice of spiritual adoption represents an active “heritage from below” (Robertson, 2012), where local ontology overwrites the secular script of the museum.

Furthermore, this study extends the theoretical application of Spiritual Materiality. While foundational scholarship has primarily contextualized this notion within active religious sites or indigenous ceremonial grounds (Byrne, 2014; Karlström, 2005), our findings demonstrate that spiritual materiality is resilient enough to emerge even in secularized, scientific landscapes. The Ban Chiang case proves that the community’s

engagement is not limited to continuity of faith, but involves the creative construction of spiritual connections across a historical rupture.

Beyond these ontological dimensions, this exploration is also able to provide a crucial aspect to the theory of Place Attachment. Much of the literature on place attachment focuses on connections forged through personal memory, long-term habitation, or shared social histories (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). While these factors are certainly present in Ban Chiang, the findings reveal another powerful, and perhaps more foundational, source of attachment: “spiritual labor.” The connection that the Tai Puan community have to the mound is not simply a result of a long history being on the land, it is produced and is even strengthened through the ongoing process of their taking care of their spiritual ancestors. The gestures of offering, dedicating merit and respecting sacred spaces are not just manifestation of a prior attachment, but them-selves the practices that form that attachment. It is an “earned” belonging, forged through ethical commitment and reciprocal care. It implies that place attachment is not necessarily a psychological process to most communities but an active ethical project. It is less about “sense of place” and more about “responsibility to place.” These implications are deeply significant to heritage management; they also imply that community engagement programs which are not mindful to acknowledge and give room to such spiritual caretaking practices may not in fact help to strengthen the community-place attachments which such programs are aimed at reinforcing.

These theoretical discussions converge into a critical implication as far as practice in managing heritage is concerned. The case of Ban Chiang compels us to shift the primary goal of living heritage management away from a singular focus on the preservation of objects and towards a more holistic goal of the facilitation of relationships—the relationships between present communities and their complex, layered landscapes. What would this shift look like in practice? It would mean that a heritage management plan would not only detail the conservation needs of pottery and soil strata, but would also formally recognize the community's spiritual map, identifying and respecting the informal “sacred zones” that are meaningful to them. It would mean that the design of new visitor infrastructure, such as pathways or interpretive centers, would be developed through a collaborative process that asks not just “how can we best display the past?” but “how can we do so in a way that respects and sustains the community's living relationship with that past?” This approach demands a new skill set from heritage professionals, moving them from the role of expert-curator to that of facilitator, translator, and diplomatic negotiator between different ontologies. It demands to have architects and space planners going beyond the physical fabric and to design with the invisible landscape of belief and meaning. It is not the voices of Ban Chiang which are demanding that science be abandoned, but a more modest and spacious heritage practice, a practice which does not ignore the human interactions through which that heritage continues to make an effective presence in the world.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research answers the inquiry into how a community bonds with a non-ancestral past by identifying the mechanism of “spiritual adoption.” This everyday heritage work allows the Tai Puan to bridge the historical gap and coexist with the “ancient owners” of the land. The study offers three distinct contributions: Theoretically, it validates Spiritual Materiality as a dynamic force capable of reclaiming secular spaces. Methodologically, it confirms the efficacy of Heritage Discourse Analysis in decoding silenced local narratives. Practically, it urges a shift in Heritage Management—from preserving objects to sustaining the living relationships that give those objects meaning. Ultimately, Ban Chiang serves as a testament that heritage is not just what is found in the ground, but what is felt in the heart of the living.

The findings presented in this paper cannot be generalized, and are not of a universal sense, as this is a qualitative, single case study. The unique spiritual and cultural environment of Northeast Thailand (where the environment can be characterized as a syncretic combination of Buddhism and animism) forms a particularly fertile environment in the formation of the practices under observation. The above specificity is not imagined as a restrictive, limiting criterion but rather a well-contextualized revelation. Still, it may also represent a clear path to a follow-up comparative investigation. The current research hence challenges other researchers to conduct comparative research in other living archaeological sites in Southeast Asia and the world at large. Of interest to such endeavors are questions such as: How do communities in Latin America who live amidst pre-Columbian ruins or villages in Europe who live and are invested with the remains of Romans negotiate their own relationships with an an-ancestral past? This kind of comparative work would be invaluable in the development of a prospect of a worldwide complex and culturally sensitive theory of living heritage.

Ultimately, the experience and the story of Ban Chiang can be treated not only as a local story but as an important parable of the heritage management of the future globalized world. It requires us to answer one of our basic questions: What do we seek to conserve? Unless heritage is to mean anything of any durability beyond the museum case or the academic journal, it must touch current lives of the contemporary populations. The lesson that can be learned based on this experience at the Ban Chiang Tai Puan community is that the most important heritage work is not so much concerned with projecting the past into the present as the skill and integrity with which past and present are interwoven. It entails creation of a legacy that does not only stop with being preserved to future generations but one that is truly lived by those individuals today. This, by far, is the strongest universal value that has come out of the bioarcheological laboratory of Ban Chiang.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this paper

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## ILLUSTRATION SOURCES

All illustrations by the authors unless otherwise specified.

**Figure 1** (Left) White, Chantel, Fabian Toro, and Joyce White. Rice Carbonization and the Archaeobotanical Record: Experimental Results from the Ban Chiang Ethnobotanical Collection, Thailand. *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 11 (12/01 2019). Available from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12520-019-00797-5>. (Right) <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/575/maps/>

**Figure 2** Barrow, Richard. *Ban Chiang from drone in 2019*. Accessed August 2, 2025, Available from <https://thailandfromabove.com/udon-thani/ban-chiang-world-heritage-site/>

**Figure 3** Photographed by the author in 2016.

**Figure 4** Institute for Southeast Asian Archeology. *Ban Chiang discovery*. Accessed August 4, 2025, Available from <https://iseaarchaeology.org/ban-chiang-project/background/>

**Figure 5** Photographed by the author in 2017.

**Figure 6** Graphic by the author in 2025. The images of Ban Chiang's ancient pot and a lady in Ban Chiang costume accordingly adapted from [https://img.tarad.com/shop/1/lungkitti/img-lib/spd\\_20111009180734\\_b.jpg](https://img.tarad.com/shop/1/lungkitti/img-lib/spd_20111009180734_b.jpg) and <https://picpost.postjung.com/381851.html>

**Figure 7** Photographed from the exhibition gallery of Ban Chiang National Museum by the author in 2017.

**Figure 8** Photographed by the author in 2016.

**Figure 9** Photographed by the author in 2017.

**Figure 10** Photographed by the author in 2017.

**Figure 11** Photographed by the author in 2017.

## BIODATA

*Sitta Kongsasana* (ID 0009-0002-5017-7165) is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Architecture, Khon Kaen University. He focuses on Critical Heritage Study, Architectural Anthropology and Human Behavior in the Built Environment.

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