

# Modernization of Shophouses on Luang Road, Ubon Ratchathani during the Cold War<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This study investigates the modernization of shophouses on Luang Road, an old trading district of Ubon Ratchathani in northeast Thailand. Using field surveys and in-depth interviews, the study focused on three dimensions of modernization—physical, social, and cultural—during the Cold War (1950-1990). The results show that infrastructure development influenced livelihood changes in all three dimensions. In the physical dimension, wooden and earthen row houses were demolished and replaced by reinforced concrete shophouses, especially when the United States occupied an air force base in Ubon Ratchathani (1963-1974) during the Vietnam War. The social and cultural dimensions included memories of common experiences of changes in livelihood, occupation, beliefs, and rituals. These memories reflect residents' adjustments during periods of prosperity and decline, as the people integrated the things that came with modernization, including conveniences and changes in world views, into their lives. After the Cold War, the physical and social dimensions underwent westernization while cultural dimensions, such as beliefs, were still maintained as the cultural identity of some ethnic groups.

**Keywords:** modernization, cultural memory, Cold War, shophouse, Ubon Ratchathani

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## Introduction

Ubon Ratchathani, referred to in this article by its popular name, Ubon, is a border area in northeast Thailand adjacent to Laos and Cambodia. Its capital has been an important regional city since the reform of government administration during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). With the arrival of Western colonists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a French consulate was opened in 1899. After railway transportation from Bangkok reached Ubon in 1930, a massive influx of Chinese merchants transformed the city into a commercial community. Most were from the Teochew sub-group, followed by Hakka and Hainanese (Nilsakul, 2017: 36). Their influx led to the expansion of certain areas, especially Luang Road, and to the increased construction of shophouses. The Luang Road district<sup>2</sup> became the first trading zone and an important business center that represented the changes in modernization after World War II (1939-1945), through the environment, the people, and their lifestyles. Currently, several earthen shophouses and old-style buildings, some in use and some deserted, remain and reflect the former prosperity of this district.

Even before World War II, external influences brought continuous changes to the shophouses. The construction of the railway line from Bangkok to Ubon<sup>3</sup> brought industrial goods, including construction materials like concrete, iron, iron sheets, and imported decorative materials. As a result, the forms and shapes of buildings changed in parallel with modern technology. The new style, referred to

as Modern Architecture,<sup>4</sup> emphasized a simplicity that revealed the character of the materials used, especially iron and concrete. This factor, coupled with the migration of Vietnamese who had been fleeing war with the French since 1946, resulted in a mixture of art and culture as well as social values demonstrated in the styles and structures of official buildings, religious places, and shophouses, in which Western styles were integrated with Vietnamese workmanship techniques.

After World War II and the change in geopolitics that led to the Cold War, Ubon became a strategic area for development, especially in terms of infrastructure. The presence of a U.S. military base about 1.6 kilometers from Luang Road during the years 1963 to 1974 meant abundant flow of money in the city, with many new businesses and facilities opening to facilitate the new lifestyle. On Luang Road, earthen and wooden shophouses were demolished and replaced by buildings made of concrete. Thus, it is interesting to study the formation and the change of the environment in the area over four periods of time: during the Cold War, before the arrival of the U.S. military base, while the base existed, and after it was closed. These changes have never been explored nor has their connection to changes in the economy, society, culture, or politics.

## Research Objectives and Methodology

The study investigated the modernization of shophouses and surroundings on Luang Road in Ubon during the Cold War (1945-1990), or 45 years in total. It was examined through three dimensions: 1) material 2) social and 3) cultural. Historical documents concerning the changes were compiled, together with the forms of the changes in modernization during the Cold War and during other periods that were related to Luang Road. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 people who were connected with the district. The interviewees were

<sup>2</sup> This area, formerly known as Tha Talat (ท่าตลาด), was constructed on the bank of the Mun River for ease of transporting goods by steamboat. It was a trading area for various groups of merchants, including the Chinese who traveled to Ubon over 150 years ago (Rotchan, 2007: 1). This was the first stage of houses called earthen shophouses, the first sign of capitalism from people who came and changed the city. Later the earthen shophouses were changed to brick and wooden shophouses with a mixed-Chinese design. After 1930, when the railroad reached Ubon, modernized materials were used, such as stucco and stained glass above the windows. Evidently, western influence on architecture was more apparent in major towns and cities on the left (East) bank of the Mekong river long before that of Ubon, due to French colonial rule (see Onmavong, 2016; Upachitkul, Wongpongkham, Sriuksa, 2021; and Buasaengthong, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The railway from Bangkok to the Northeast reached Nakhon Ratchasima (also known as Korat) in 1896 and created many changes to the city (see Thungsakul and Hiranteeyakul, 2022) and Lower Isan.

<sup>4</sup> The modern style and materials that emerged on Luang Road during the Vietnam War began from the attempts of the United States to assist the Thai government in developing the Isan region and resist the expansion of communism.

selected using the mixed methods of sampling and the snowball technique to collect their personal and collective memories. The informants were persons 60-80 years old, who had lived in the district for at least 30 years, and were able to provide information and relate their memories about the changes on Luang Road. They also revealed their attitudes towards the modernization of the district.

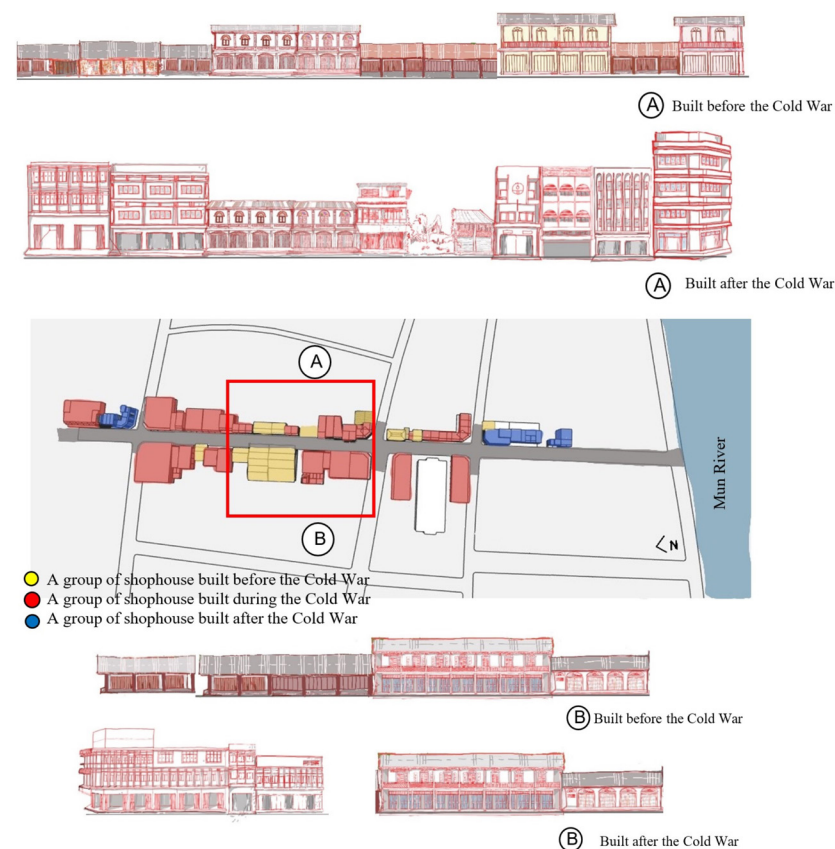
### Study Area and Period of Study

The study covered the buildings on both sides of Luang Road for a distance of 500 meters, starting from the southern bank of the Mun River up to Khuan Thani Road in the north. At present there are 42 shophouses along the route. The buildings in the study include 24 shophouses constructed in the Cold War period as well as those built before World War II (Figures 1 and 2).

The study was divided into three periods: 1) from the end of World War II until the arrival of a U.S. Air Force base in Ubon, 2) the period of U.S. military bases in Ubon, and 3) the period after the withdrawal of U.S. military bases to the end of the Cold War.



**Figure 1** The boundaries of areas and buildings studied during the Cold War



**Figure 2** Parts of the changes of style and material shophouses on Luang Road before and after the Cold War. Most of the pre-Cold War shophouses were single-story built with adobe, and some are two-story brick buildings with wooden structure to support the roof

### Review of Literature and Theoretical Concepts

Some outstanding studies on changes in architecture during the Cold War in Ubon and other parts of Thailand include a study of Isan ordination halls by Tik Saenboon (2016), noting that the era underwent conservation and development towards contemporary forms. Architects, the products of the professional study system began to have a role in

construction. According to Prakitnontakarn (2018), the Cold War context (particularly the beginning) was significant and influenced the form and function of later Thai contemporary architecture. Kuasombat (2018) explained that even though modern architecture constructed during the period 1967-1987 in Thailand was derived from western influence, some architects felt that this was not a problem for Thai identity in architecture.

Fusinpaiboon (2020), on the other hand, reported that the changes in form and the concept of modern architecture in the country at the beginning of the Cold War were influenced not only by the United States. They were also related to the decision to modify both the new and old forms and concepts from the West to match the concept and form of Thai architecture, following social and political transformations both in the country and abroad. A retrospective study of shophouse architecture on Tha Phae Road in Chiang Mai (1927-1977) by Suwatcharapinan (2016) attributed the transformation period to the modern age of the capitalism and the economic growth of Chiangmai. It describes the characteristics of architecture in Chiang Mai and how they reflect social changes, the adoption of capitalism, and people's way of life through the form, construction, techniques, and materials that were state of the art during that time.

Connerton (1989) pointed out that memory is constructed, reproduced, and continuously transferred in society through commemorative ceremonies and behaviors until it becomes a habit. Narasaj (2010: 30-31) divided memory into three dimensions: 1) material, such as symbols, places, and architecture; 2) social, consisting of people who have experience in the use of both public space and areas in buildings; and 3) mental and feelings, such as attitudes, values, and social value (Erll, 2011: 103). The present study, however, applies the mental and feeling dimension to more tangible descriptions as cultural dimensions, such as norms, rituals, values and beliefs. Memories are reproduced, defined, and assembled for reproduction to understand the past, which is referred to as cultural memory. Memory of the past is an important basis for both an individual and a society in order to understand

the world and oneself, while production and definition demonstrate the multiplicity of the types and sets of memories, depending on which group of people the memory belongs to. Each group also reflects the relationships among society, economics, and politics. Therefore, memory of the past expressed through cultural heritage often correlates with representation and identity, which form the concept that must be understood.

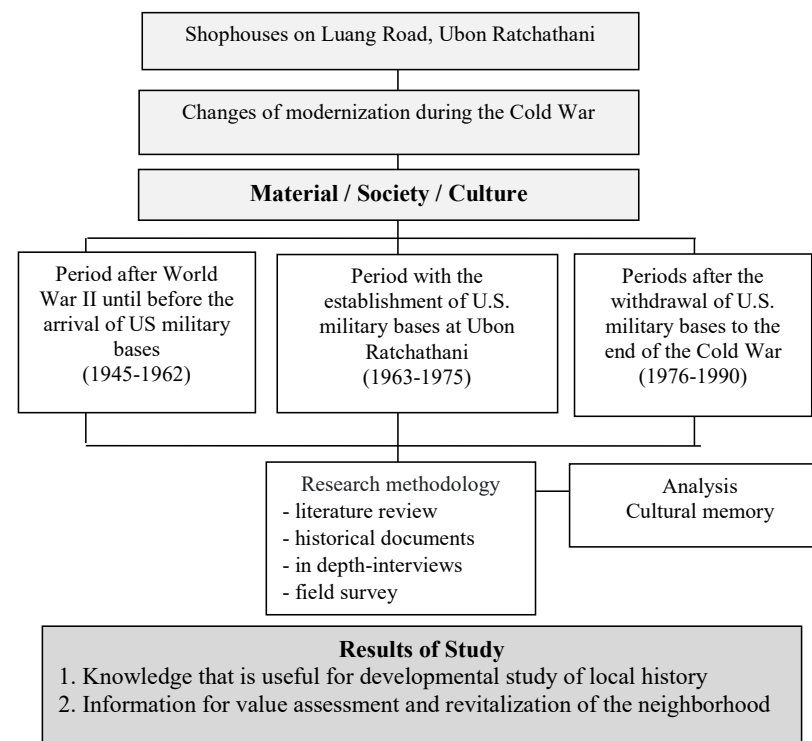


Figure 3 Conceptual framework

## Research Findings

### Before the Arrival of the U.S. at the Military Base (1947-1962)

Ubon has always been a land of trade, as was mentioned by Etienne



Aymonier in his records on his travel to Isan in 1883-1884 (Aymonier, 2000). Aymonier wrote about Chinese people who established shops in many towns. In Ubon's market, there were more than 50 (Teerasasawat, 2008: 92). At this time, Chinese merchants accumulated capital and became financially stable, thus resulting in the emergence of various businesses, such as a power plant, cinemas, a printing house, and a shipping business, which reflected rising economic prosperity.

Boon [Pseudonym] (2017), a senior resident, commented on the commercial zone of Ubon during this period: "There were three movie theaters—Tai Cinema, Klang Cinema, and Nue Cinema. Later, around 1958, King Cinema and Chalerm Sin Cinema (around the fountain) were built."

In 1950, the first commercial bank was established on Promrat Road. This highlighted the importance of the city's commercial zone, which was inundated with people purchasing goods and services. During that period, the fresh market was located on Luang Road and was the hub of distribution of goods. The shophouses at Luang Road at the time were of two types: one-story earthen buildings and two-story, load-bearing brick wall buildings with wooden columns to support the roof structure (Figure 4). Iron sheets were normally used as roofing material.



**Figure 4** (1) Shophouses on Luang Road, built after the railway arrived in Ubon in 1930  
(2) Markets, shophouses in the city of Ubon around a half decade before the 1932 regime change  
Source: Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Interior (2016)

Shophouses<sup>5</sup> had limited living space as the selling area was more important; thus, the family members all slept under the same mosquito net or on the floor. In most shophouses, the toilet was a separate building with a cesspool latrine. For cooking, people relied on charcoal stoves at the beginning, with gas stoves introduced later. Some people carried water in buckets from outside sources, such as consumption water from Luang Monastery and drinking water from Sri Thong Monastery (Sri Ubonrat Monastery). There were people who earned a living by making rain gutters for sale. Rainwater was stored in large jars in a space next to the shophouse. For lighting, some people still used kerosene lamps, fence lamps, and for some wealthy people, paraffin lamps. As Wantha, age 85, a resident of Luang Road recalled,

Before 1957, we had to carry water for bathing and use from the post office intersection and drinking water from Wat Suthat. Some people carried water on pushcarts to sell. Some houses had a groundwater well in their backyards (Wantha [Pseudonym], (2019).

Similarly, a retired teacher recalled the traditional way of energy supplies and consumption:

There was a generator (at Tai Wat beach), which operated only at nighttime until midnight. Although we had radio, it was one with 80 batteries. There was no television, no refrigerator. My father and mother were tailors, and they used charcoal irons. We lit a charcoal stove in the morning, for there was no power during the daytime (Ajan Sanit [Pseudonym], 2020).

During this 20-year period, four concrete shophouses with flat slab roofs and wooden frame openings<sup>6</sup> were built in the space where old earthen and wooden shophouses had been. Many factors, including durability of materials, climatic factors that led to the deterioration of

<sup>5</sup> For more perspectives on life in shophouses of Sino-Thais in provincial towns, people's adaptation, and identities, see Thungsakul and Hiranteeyakul (2022).

<sup>6</sup> A cement factory and the first steel factory of Thai Cement Company were opened in 1957 in Tha Luang district, Saraburi province. Goods were distributed through railways and wagons.

earthen shophouses, and the development of advanced construction technology of reinforced concrete eased construction. Notably, no earthen or wooden shophouses were constructed during this period (Nilsakul, 2003: 135), following large fires downtown.<sup>7</sup>

On Luang Road, Chinese identity was displayed in shophouse building elements, ranging from simple patterns to complex auspicious motifs, depending on the owner's economic status. Chinese identity could also be seen the Phut Gong Chinese Shrine, located on the bank of the Mun River. It was established when the Chinese merchants first arrived in Ubon over 160 years earlier. It served as a spiritual anchor, offering peace of mind. Moreover, numerous traditions and cultural practices inherited from earlier generations, such as Lunar New Year, were performed at the shrine.



 A group of shophouse built in the Cold War era before the US military base.



**Figure 5** A group of shophouses built before the Vietnam War (1950-1962)

<sup>7</sup> Fires on Luang Road in 1946 and 1960 destroyed 21 earthen and wooden buildings and shophouses (Thusriwan, 2002: 80).

### During the Years of the U.S. Military at the Thai Air Force Base (1963-1974)

In 1954, the Seri Prachathipatai (Liberal Democracy) Bridge was opened, making transportation from the Warin Chamrap district train station to downtown Ubon faster and more convenient. At the same time, a once-bustling ferry boat business stagnated. From a time when people relied on boats and trains, the situation changed to one of transportation by buses that ran from villages to various districts, enabling people to have more convenient access to goods and services.

When the Cold War period started, the United States, in agreement with the Thai government, established a presence at the Ubon Royal Thai Military base, bringing with it prosperity until the area was known for its “American Style.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, the economy boomed with many job opportunities. One elderly local resident commented on the presence of the American military and the impact on people's livelihoods and local economic growth:

The economy here was good because the arrival of American military. Wealthy people started building new houses and commercial buildings. They had money to send children to school. There were three-wheel tuk-tuks, cars, and taxis available for American military personnel to travel. Many houses opened tricycle business for rent (Tinakorn [Pseudonym], 2020).

In 1964 the fresh market on Luang Road moved to Tha Juan, and that area was, in turn, transformed into a cloth market. Luang Road, however, was still a center for the distribution of goods both internally and externally.

During this 10-year period, 16 concrete shophouses were built (Figure 6). Three-story concrete shophouses with sunshades, both vertical and horizontal, and mezzanines represented modernization on

<sup>8</sup> A study of the expansion of communities in Ubon municipality in 1935-1999 by Thusriwan (2002) indicated that during the year 1969, the city of Ubon nearly resembled “an American state.” Shops, bungalows, and houses for rent emerged, all using English. The Isan region and the city of Ubon proceeded with the modern way of life. Concrete buildings emerged everywhere, even 9 to 10 stories high. Ubon City benefited from the ways in which the United States facilitated the lives of American military, and ordered consumer goods directly from America. Many activities emerged to respond to the lifestyle needs of the Americans, such as bakery shops, tailors, hotels, bars, nightclubs, entertainment venues, rental houses, bungalows, military officers' clubs, and even tricycle taxis.



Luang Road. The buildings were built with both double and single opening windows, and wooden and glass materials. Iron bars were installed bearing Thai letters as well as geometric patterns. Nearly all houses had ventilating concrete blocks<sup>9</sup> and roof decks. As the number of floors increased, the usable area of the room was divided into portions and provided additional privacy for the growing number of family members.

During the early part of this period, the new shophouses on Luang Road area were still a combination of reinforced concrete and wooden structures (Figure 7). These materials were cheap and abundant, as timber was supplied from a sawmill located on the bank of the Mun River and from Cambodia. However, when the price of timber began to rise, a full system of iron and concrete was used (Sorayut, [Pseudonym], 2019).



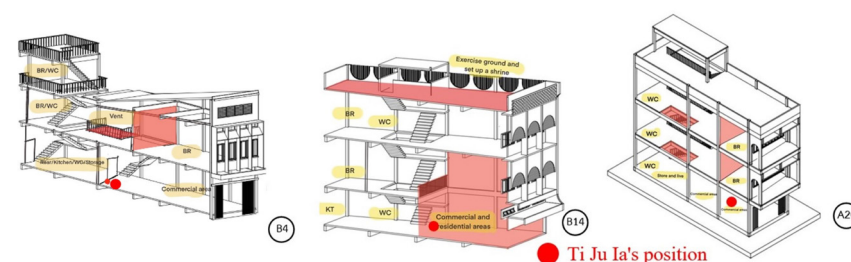
**Figure 6** A group of shophouses built during the Vietnam War (1963-1975)

<sup>9</sup> These vent blocks are an essential element of modern architecture designed to respond to the hot and humid climate in Isan. The blocks help solve the problem of ventilation in shophouses with narrow street fronts and lengthy internal space. They reflect the fact that the use of air conditioners was not yet widespread. At the same time, wrought iron bars in various patterns appeared because of the increasing demand for security.



**Figure 7** The combination of wooden floors and stair railings with concrete beams was found in shophouses of this period

While the U.S. military was in town, the fabric market or sewing business on Luang Road grew significantly.<sup>10</sup> Chinese families residing around Luang Road still adhered to the culture, traditions, and rituals inherited from their ancestors. Even if the shophouses were rebuilt in concrete, the Chinese house spirit known in Teochew as Ti Ju Ia (土地神), the god of the earth and the foundation, was usually placed on the floor of the ground floor or close to the trading area, facing the front. The altar for paying homage to ancestors and gods could be either on the ground floor or the second floor (Figure 8).



**Figure 8** Spatial relationship of the concrete shophouses built during the Vietnam War on Luang Road

<sup>10</sup> According to Napaporn [Pseudonym] (2020), who was born in 1944, her mother has been here since 1963 and made a living by sewing. This was the period when most of the foreigners arrived. She recalled, "At that time bedsheets were not for sale and finished sets were rarely available. The fabric had to be sewn according to size. After American troops were withdrawn, however, the shop was still in business because children needed to go to school and school uniforms required a lot of sewing. For a family with four children, we had to make at least eight sets."

Rituals were retained as annual practices, such as the Chinese New Year, the Ghost Festival, and the Cheng Meng or Ancestor Festival, when people went to make merit. However, a mixture of Chinese and Thai traditions was found, partly because cross-cultural marriages with Thais have resulted in some modifications or integrations of culture. Some houses had a spirit house (Thai style) at the back of the building or on the roof deck.

Somjai (Pseudonym) (2022), who was born in 1945 and married in 1973, held a Chinese tea ceremony at home. There was a party at a Chinese school. A seamstress, Somjai made her own wedding dress. She learned how to cut and sew clothing in Bangkok. Her parents said that girls did not have to study much and that learning to sew was enough to become a career. Her wedding ceremony reflected a change in the family's values and economic conditions that began with hosting a banquet. This was done in conjunction with religious rituals such as the tea ceremony in Chinese culture. The banquets that originated in the years 1947-1956 as part of the Thai wedding tradition began with a Chinese "table feast" (Chitchinakul and Poolcharoen, 2018: 113). The Chinese school, located about 200 meters from the main road, is a social area within the district.

### From the Withdrawal of the U.S. until the End of the Cold War (1974-1991)

Electric power lines reached every house in 1974, making living more convenient. At the same time, it affected the use of space; for example, toilets started to be built inside the building or built on every floor. Electrical appliances were also available, bringing convenience and forms of entertainment such as radios, televisions, refrigerators for conserving foods, etc. One local resident recalled the arrival and use of electricity:

Electricity first came in 1962 from a power plant located one kilometer away on the east side of Luang Road. Later in 1974, it was changed to a transmission system in which electricity was

purchased from the Sirindhorn Dam.<sup>11</sup> A transformer was installed in the street, then divided to provide electricity to each house (Kanokwan [Pseudonym], 2020).

In the past, food was kept fresh with ice from an ice factory on Luang Road, a single-story earthen building. After having electrical appliances, people reduced their dependence on buying ice and became familiar with putting drinking water in the refrigerator. At the same time, dam construction led to the emergence of sawmills and lumber shops and a boom in the construction business in Ubon, while at the same time contributing to major depletion of forest resources.

After the years 1977-1990, only four shophouses were constructed; most were four-story. The front sunshades started to vary and protrude outwards. Ventilating concrete blocks gradually disappeared as a ventilation function.



**Figure 9** A group of shophouses built after the Vietnam War (1976-1990)

During this time, the economy in this area stagnated due to a number of factors, such as the emergence of department stores in a new shopping district that replaced the traditional retail stores. The size of families changed from the extended family to more nuclear families. In 1966, the first university in the northeast was established in

<sup>11</sup> A multi-purpose dam built in 1968-1971 with three power plants installed with generators of 12,000 kilowatts each.



Khon Kaen. Before this time people in this region had to send their children to study in Bangkok and few of them returned to work or inherit the family business. Some even settled abroad.

In terms of cultural practices, some traditions still remained, especially the celebration of Chinese New Year, and worshipping Ti Ju Ia. However, some traditions were lost, such as the Christian Christmas star procession. French missionaries had arrived Ubon in 1881 (Cathedral of Our Lady of Niramon, Ubon Ratchathani, 2011) and the star procession tradition in Ubon grew out of the French missionaries' influence on the Vietnamese community that was located in Tha Juan area (the old governor's residence, currently the market area). The ceremony was held on the night of December 24 of each year. Adults and children held star-shaped kites made from rice paper and walked in procession to the church, which is now located in the Ave Maria School. This tradition disappeared after the Vietnam War, around 1975, together with the relocation of Vietnam immigrants by the government, making cultural activities in the area less diverse (Suraphon [Pseudonym], 2022).

### **Modernization or Westernization Reached Luang Road long before the Beginning of World War II**

The process of development could be counted from the arrival of French missionaries in 1881, the presence of the French consulate in 1899 during colonization, the architectural style that came with the administrative reform from Siam during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), and the arrival of the railway in 1930. Moreover, at beginning of the Cold War era when a long steel bridge across the Mun River was built to connect the train station to the city of Ubon, the opening of single-story wooden movie theaters in town gradually influenced the way people lived in various ways, including attitudes towards modernization as a way to improve their living standards.

The arrival of American military personnel resulted in rapid and sudden changes, compared to previous developments. As a result of scientific and technological development during World War II, the

products for the convenience of the American lifestyle, such as televisions, radios, refrigerators, and automobiles, were distributed through improvement of infrastructure and road conditions. Both American military and local merchants benefitted as the latter provided living and entertainment facilities in exchange for economic returns. This exchange resulted in the development of the construction industry and architectural styles with new functions intended to pursue the American style of that period in downtown Ubon.

The inhabitants of the Luang Road area, who were of many nationalities and most of whom were immigrants, adapted to Thai society and became more localized. Therefore, the social and cultural dimensions of modernization, such as cross-cultural marriage and the popularity of Western styles and materials, resulted in ethnic identity being reflected not only through the physical dimension of shophouses. It also appeared as a sacred space within the building such as Ti Ju Ia, or through activities related to ethnic beliefs.

However, the trade activity in the area stagnated before the end of the Cold War, when resources were shifted to create a new economic zone on the north end of Luang Road. This is a shophouses, built in different periods with different construction technology and materials, remain as evidence of what had been there before.

### **Conclusion**

The memories appearing in this study reflect life during the most prosperous period of Luang Road, that is, when U.S. military personnel were situated at the Thai Royal Air Force base in Ubon. This presence led to obvious physical, social, and cultural changes. The development of Luang Road and vicinity reflects the changes not only of building styles and space usage, but also of livelihoods and relationships of people at the family and community levels. However, some social and cultural identities were still nurtured, such as the sacred zone of Ti Ju Ia and the social zone of Phut Gong Shrine. The details of memories of people in the district have changed, which is natural for individual and

collective memories. The beliefs are dynamic, with differences appearing in each group, ready to change and be reconstructed (Halbwachs, 1992; Russell, 2006: 792-804).

At the present time, the Luang Road district is defined as an old district, and its role is now reduced as there is less trade. New values have emerged and been defined in architecture. This definition is the district where collective existence can be found in the shophouses that represent modernization of each period, where buildings were removed and new ones constructed on the same land. However, the district's historical identity is used to build new memories from the possibility of the present and present-day living for visitors to enliven the district through tourism activities.

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