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BY **TOBY TO**
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Festivals and Communities in Thailand | The case of Chet Samien





Riverside Stage in Chet Samien

Despite the **lack of government support towards performing arts in Thailand**, various artists and organizers are striving to create arts festivals for and with their respective communities. While limited in technical and financial resources, some of these events thrive with successes. They have created **unique festival models** with excellent audience turnout, an immense sense of festivity, and a rewarding performance and exchange experience for international artists.

In this second part we will outline the case of **Chet Samien, a village of Ratchaburi province**, which since the past four years has emerged as a vibrant hub for arts festivals.

Chet Samien and its Festivals

[caption id="attachment_16582" align="aligncenter" width="448" caption="Chet Samien market"]



[/caption]

Chet Samien, a farming village by the idyllic Mae Klong River in Ratchaburi province, has now gained reputation nationwide for its vibrant arts scene that has positively affected the local community terms of heritage preservation, sustainable development, community empowerment and economic improvement.

The brainchild behind this is a Chet Samien local **Manop Meejamrat**. Manop is director/choreographer with Bangkok's Patravadi Theatre, and a Silapathorn Award-winning artist (a national award from Thailand's Office of Contemporary Arts and Culture). Upon the success of his career he decided to work to contribute to the development of his home town Chet Samien.

Arts and community

[caption id="attachment_16584" align="aligncenter" width="640" caption="Curious audiences in Chet Samien"]



[/caption]

Manop built his arts centre and home stay facility Suan Silp Baandin (Art Garden of Earth Huts) in 2007, where he provides free classes for local young people to learn various forms of arts – music, dance and painting. With the young performers he created the Chet Samien Band. The versatility and discipline of the young performers has captured the attention of an audience beyond Chet Samien in their appearance in “Eclipse”, a Patravadi Theatre production also directed by Manop Meejamrat.

“I believe that art contribute to the development of young people, by instilling discipline and a sense of achievement through perfecting something by learning, repetition and hard work,” Manop explained, “And by hosting art festivals, locals also learn different aspects of organization, from publicity to back stage management.”

In 2008 Manop started the **monthly arts festival “All About Arts”** on the last Saturday and Sunday of every month. The small open-air festival takes place at an over-a-hundred-year-old market place, where rows of wooden

shop houses embrace the cacophony of aromas from various food stalls. Opening music and dance gigs by local villagers started under the shade of a bodi tree, whereas a riverside space provides not only the stage for the monthly highlights, but also the backdrop of the enchanting sunset on the Mae Klong River.

Transcending boundaries

The event is characteristically eclectic. A typical evening of “All About Arts” features the folk dance performance by octogenarian Aunt Laong, performing her Burmese Axe Dance, accompanied by musicians from the village. **Special performances by Thai or international artists will be staged by the riverside stage**, where hundreds of local people will gather. Performances of various genres are staged to an inquisitive audience. Once, a site-specific multimedia butoh performance by Tetsuro Fukuhara guided the spectators from to the foundation structure below the community hall nearby, before leading them to a performance inside a super-elastic tube structure in the community nearby, and finished by the riverside stage. Manop himself has once staged a performance ending in his fleeing image on a boat, with huge lanterns flying into the night sky from the other side of the river.

“The festival has improved the life of the locals in a lot of ways. Firstly, food-sellers at the market, instead of making 300 baht a day, now make ten times more on a good day. Secondly, regular meetings and preparations of the festival have encouraged the normally shy villagers to discuss village matters in an open and civilized manner. Recently we have stopped the monthly event to protest the district government bringing in a franchised chained convenience store. Finally, the festival has made the village well-known nationwide and has become the model for cultural development. Tourism Authority of Thailand has also promoted our village as a cultural destination now. That boosts a certain sense of pride and identity among the people,” Manop recounted the achievements of the arts festival.

Growing big

[caption id="attachment_16585" align="aligncenter" width="480"
caption="Space Tube by Tetsuro Fukuhara"]



[/caption]

With the success of the monthly “All About Arts”, the event has involved into larger editions with bigger programs. In 2009, **Patravadi Theatre’s Fringe Festival was held in Chet Samien**, and was honored with the presence of HRH Srirasmi and Prince Dipankorn Rasmijoti. In the winter of 2010, Chet Samien Arts Festival, an event spanning 7 weekends from November to January, was launched.

Another version of the festival will happen on the Saturdays and Sundays between **November 27th 2011 and January 31st 2012**. The festival will

feature traditional performing art forms on one night and contemporary performances on the other.

Conclusion

[caption id="attachment_16586" align="aligncenter" width="398" caption="Patumthani-Wai Kru Ceremony"]



[/caption]

Whereas the situation in public arts funding probably will not be optimistic in the near future in Thailand, **it was refreshing to meet Ju and Manop to talk about their small but beautiful festivals.** For a worrisome arts manager like myself, who always concern the resources of making a festival, a few inspiring words from Ju still ringed in my mind:

"If you have the desire to do something, go ahead and do it whatever way you can, then learn from it. If you are always waiting for funding and all the right conditions, nothing will get done."

Resources itself doesn't promise a successful festival, imagination and perseverance does.

Based in Bangkok, Toby To is a full-time lecturer at Srinakharinwirot University International College for Sustainability Studies, and an independent arts management consultant. He co-founded Hong Kong's On & On Theatre Workshop, and was International Programme Director with Patravadi Theatre from 2008 to 2011, during which he curated the Fringe Festivals in Bangkok, Ratchaburi and Hua Hin.

Contacts:

"Pathum Thani International Theatre Festival"
Organization: Moradokmai Theatre Community
Webpage: www.patumthani-itf.org

"All About Arts", "Chet Samien Arts Festival"
Organization: Suansilp Baandin
Facebook: Search for "Suansilp Baandin"

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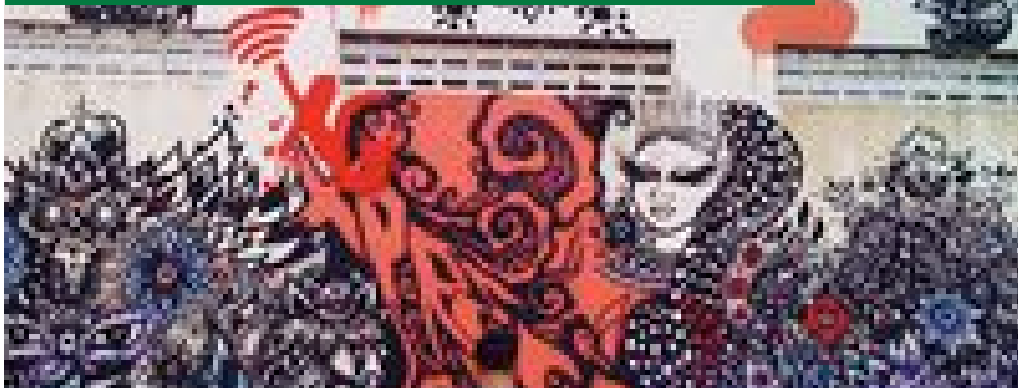
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