

Identity and the Wisdom of Vernacular Architecture in Kengtung, Shan State, Myanmar

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This article is part of the research on identity and the Wisdom of Vernacular Architecture in Kengtung, Myanmar, supported by Research and Innovation to solve the problems and strengthen the society, community, stability, and quality of life for the people under the Enhancing Science, Technology and Innovation Policies in the 2019 budget from the National Research Council of Thailand. The objective of this research is to analyse the results from the study to show the identity and wisdom of the vernacular architecture in Kengtung, Shan State, Myanmar. The result from the analysis shows that the identity of the vernacular architecture of Kengtung came from the housing style, which consists of two unique characters: the layout, and the structure and materials. These components further categorise the identity of the housing into two characters: the individual and the social characters. The wisdom can be seen in architectural aspects and the adaptation of utility areas within the houses, which reflect the perspectives and the intelligence of the Kengtung people.

Key words: *Vernacular Architecture, Identity, Wisdom.*

Introduction

The Mekong community is a community that consist of the following six countries: China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. These six countries have their own arts and culture with their own uniqueness. But they are also related through ethnic history. At the same time, some countries have similar arts and culture, even though the countries are further apart and seem unlikely to have any connection (Srisuro, 2001). From the theory of diffusion, similar culture occurs from the diffusion process, and the interconnectedness both by land and ocean (Srisontisuk, 2009). The diffusion that happened across the Mekong plain creates

connectedness both physically and culturally. The architectural form is one of the clearest physical connections. At the same time, cultural connectedness is something that occurs alongside physical connectedness. Amongst the six countries, one country is considered a community that was formed based on the theory of diffusion, especially the Tai ethnic group, that is the Kengtung city in the Republic of the Union of Burma or the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

Kengtung is a city situated in Shan state in Myanmar. It is the city of the Tai Kheun and Tai Yai people. The character of the art and culture are similar to many countries with the Tai ethnic group. Kengtung used to be as civilised as Lanna, Thailand and Xiang Rong of Xishuangbanna. In the past, Tai Yai people called this city Kengtung. It was an important city in terms of trade for the Chinese merchants trading between Xishuangbanna and Lanna.

The housing establishment in Kengtung took into account the weather, the environment, and the changing eras. Some still maintain the traditional form. The style of the housing still goes in line with the way of life or livelihood according to the culture, which has long been the tradition. These houses reflect the integration of the wisdoms. The housing in Tai Kheun and Tai Yai in Kengtung reflects the different aspects of the wisdom, as well as the livelihood which had become the identity of the local culture. The study of the local wisdom revealed the resources of knowledge and people that exist in each area. This can be an individual identity or the international identity that many areas share. This identity occurs from the knowledge that the villagers sought out to overcome the natural or social obstacles in order to maintain their livelihood (Thammawat, 1995). Therefore, the study of the local wisdom that exists in the vernacular architecture is essential in understanding the similarity and the differences in terms of knowledge, ideology, and the methods of the people in different areas. Houses are essential to human beings. Building houses is one of the basic factors in maintaining livelihood, which had evolved to create the most benefit according to the different periods of time. These wisdoms existed since the time of their ancestors. The study of the houses will reveal the contents within the society and the civilisation that is hidden in the houses. These are the evidences that people left behind within the vernacular architecture that is worth studying.

Panin (2008) had provided the following meaning to the vernacular architecture: architecture built by the locals and for the locals. The methods of using local materials was passed down from the previous generation to the current one. Although the vision is not as clear and organised, it slowly helps establish the communities and architecture while tightening the relationship with the ecosystem and the use of local wisdom in adjusting to the way of life and nature to create the balance.

Temiyaphan (1982) stated that the vernacular architecture can reflect the coming together of different ethnic groups with the goal of prevailing throughout all the changes. The outstanding

aspect is that each group has their own uniqueness, freedom of thought and relationship to the environment. Additionally, Charernsupakul & Temiyaphan (1978) stated that the value of the architecture is the cultural value for groups in each area, the forms and value in each area with their own characters, and the values that reflect the status of the people.

The vernacular architecture, or the local housing in Kengtung developed according to the eras. The developments were in line with each ethnic group that had control over this land until the identities of different eras can be seen. Kengtung consists of many different ethnic groups. It used to be a majestic kingdom that passed on its arts and culture through the wars between different ethnic groups fighting over the land and has been ruling over the land until now. The people in Kengtung are Tai Yai and Tai Kheun, and most people in the city are Tai Kheun. Therefore, the study will focus on the houses of the Tia Kheun people. It can also be said that the study of the vernacular architecture of Kengtung can clearly reflect the identity and the wisdom of the Kengtung people. This research is therefore a study and analysis of the identity and wisdom that exist in the houses of Kengtung people today.

This research is the analysis study of the identity in the form and wisdom currently seen in vernacular architecture in Kengtung, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. The presentation of the information analysis can be categorised into two major topics. The first topic is the summary of the houses' identity analysis from the unique features such as the layout, the structure, and the materials. The second topic is the summary of the local wisdom analysis on the architectural problem solving and the adjustment of the utility area within the house. The result from the data analysis can be laid out as follows.

The Results from the Analysis of the Identity in the form of Vernacular Architecture in Kengtung City

From the study of the four sample houses, it can be concluded that the houses consist of both traditional houses and the houses that were developed. Currently, the four houses are still being used. Rearranging the status of the four houses can clearly reveal the progress of the Kengtung vernacular architecture in four different eras: 1) The traditional form. 2) the next development in the second stage. 3) The development in the third stage. 4) The current stage. From studying the forms of the four houses on the layout, the structure, and the materials, the conclusions are as follows.

The layout for the vernacular architecture in Kengtung consists of only two parts: the first floor and the second floor. The house is in a rectangle shape, which is the original shape. The first floor is normally an open area while the second floor consists of the main living spaces. This main space determines the shape of the house. The second floor also has clear defined spaces.

The layout for each of the houses is different depending on the size of the family. The pillars mark the boundaries for different parts of the area. Both the first and second-floor layout depends on the same pillar to mark the different areas. The layouts also reveal the unique characteristics that can lead to the analysis of the identity of the vernacular architecture of the Kengtung people.

The identity of the structure of vernacular architecture in Kengtung can be analysed based on three parts: the structures of the pillars, the structure of the floors and the walls, and the structure of the roof. The pillar structure receives all the weight and creates stability for the houses. Therefore, this is the main structure of the house, which can further be categorised into three parts: the basement, the body of the house, and the roof. Most traditional pillars are trimmed pillars. The pillars are mostly put on top of stones or concrete, which is another identity. The pillars are made from hardwood. The tradition of building a house consists of installing both main and secondary pillars. The floors and the walls are made from real wood. Most floors are constructed using hardwood. However, floors made from bamboo can also be seen. The roofs are also built using real woods. There are no ceilings, so the structure of the roof is clearly visible. The roofs are built with the shape of triangle gables. The gables are also one of the identities since every house will need to have a gable. The shape of the roof correlates directly with the walls and the pillars. The houses of the people in Kengtung consist of only one gable. Once the family gains more members, the houses will then be expanded. This fact contributes to different styles of roof. The roofs would have many styles and different structures.

The materials that are used for building the house are mostly traditional materials using real wood. Hardwoods are used to make pillars. The preparation of the materials consists of trimming, lathing, and smoothing. As for the first floor, different types of wood are used such as bamboo, blanched wood, or small wood planks to make fences for raising animals. Another important material is bricks. Bricks started to play a role in the community not very long ago. Currently, for people who are wealthier, the walls of the houses are mostly made with bricks in order to strengthen the house. Apart from this, there are also other materials such as stone or concrete as the base of the pillars, due to the fact that most people in Kengtung build houses on stilts. There are no ceremonies in putting main pillars into the ground, but it is normal to put stones or concrete in first to support the pillar and prevent termites by laying the ground with concrete. Used clay tiles are used for the roofs. Most materials are connected using nails.

The study of the four types of houses focusses on the layout, the structure, and the materials. It can be concluded that the layout for the houses in Kengtung consists of two types; the rectangle shape, which is the traditional shape, and the square shape that is added to the side of an existing structure. The houses have a ground floor and second floor. The structure of the house consists of the pillar structure, the floor and wall structure, and the roof structure. Wood is used as the

main material. Clay bricks are used with hidden meanings. These structures are the identity of the houses of the Kengtung people.

“Identity helps inform others and ourselves of who we are.” (Feungfusakul, 2003). The form of the houses of the ethnic groups can inform other people, other ethnic groups, as well as people in the same ethnic groups, that include future generations, of who we are. Therefore, the houses directly relate to the identity of the community. Additionally, identity can also reflect the relationship of one ethnic group to other ethnic groups in the surrounding context. When an ethnic group comes together as a community, they will want to tell the society how they fit in society. However, in order to tell other people who we are, we need to understand the relationships in different dimensions within society until each individual can connect and relate to society. Society will define the roles and values, such as the value system, social capital, and the most important thing is power and the conflict that is constantly moving. These things are always moving and constantly changing to create justice through struggles and adjustments in order to bring about new regulations and move in line with the changing context of society. Therefore, the identity of the vernacular architecture of the Kengtung people means the effort in creating justice for the basic community rights of equal human beings, no matter which ethnic group they are from.

The Result from the Analysis of the Local Wisdom in the Vernacular Architecture In Kengtung

The conclusion from the analysis of the local wisdom on the architectural problems and the adjustment in the housing area can be listed as follows. The local wisdom in solving the architectural problem for the Kengtung people, whether they be the construction with the wood or connecting the wood, Kengtung people have similar methods based on simple local wisdom. The local builders have the knowledge that has been passed down from the ancestors and is still being used today. For the readjustment of the housing area, many things have changed according to values and social status. However, the changes happen slowly. Adjusting the area depends mostly on how the areas area being used. This means the use of local wisdom in managing and fixing the problems and making sure the role for each of the areas changes according to the work and the needs of the family members. The local wisdom of the Kengtung people is the knowledge of skills and the experience in solving the problems with the skills that have been passed down from the ancestors. There are also the both tangible and non-tangible social capitals. From the analysis of the characters of the local wisdom, there are two main characters. The architectural problem which is based on the abstract approach. The use of local wisdom to solve the world view and life view problems, as well as being a philosophy in living a life which involves being born, aging, being sick, and dying – the values and the meaning of everything in the daily lives of Kengtung people. The second character is the readjustment of the area which is a local wisdom based on the concrete form. This is the use of local wisdom

concerning how each area within the house is being used. This consists of the basement, the stairs, the veranda, the living room, the bedroom, the kitchen, and the back porch with no roof. Additionally, there are also rice storage, well, and toilet, which are the areas that are constantly being used in the outside space.

The utility for each of the areas relates to the livelihood, agriculture, crafts, arts and others. The local wisdom in readjusting these areas is reflected into three characteristics that are closely interconnected. The first character is the relationship between human beings and the world, or the environment. The second character is the relationship between people living in the society or the community. The last character is the relationship with the sacred beings, supernatural beings, or things that cannot be touched. Both the tangible and intangible local wisdoms reflect who they are, which is the identity of the Kengtung people in creating the knowledge and finding ways to solve the problems in living together between people and the environment.

Discussion of the Result from the Analysis of the Identity and the Local Knowledge that Exist in the Vernacular Architecture in Kengtung, Republic of the Union of Myanmar.
The Identities That Exist in the Vernacular Architecture In Kengtung

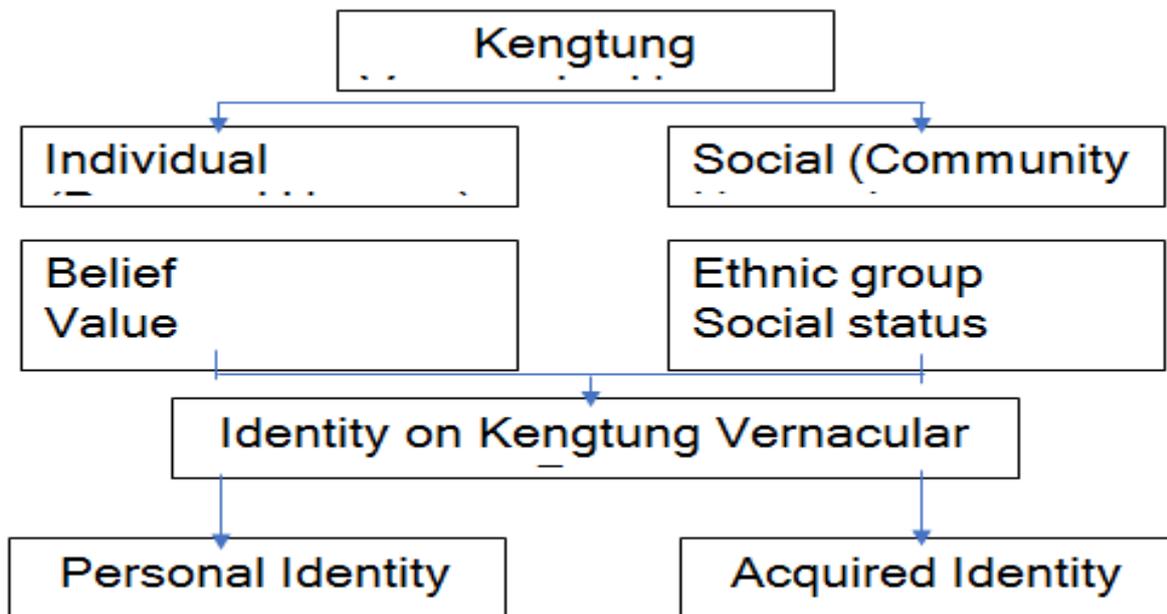
The form of the vernacular architecture of Kengtung can provide the meaning of the identity according to modern ideology, focussing on individualism and living together within society. Importance can be placed on the relationship within the social structure. The study on the houses creates the understanding towards the relationship between the individuals and the society, or community, where the houses are situated. This includes other factors that form the identity from the vernacular architectures of the houses. The identity of the vernacular architecture of Kengtung shows the relationship between the beliefs and the values of the individuals and society. The relationship the people in Kengtung have to their houses and the overall picture of the similarity of the houses within the community provides the following explanations. The identity of the form of vernacular architecture of the houses that exist for each individual is a single identity. At the same time, the similarity of the houses within the community can also reflect the identities that are constantly entwined and relate to the ethnic and social status. However, this does not lead to conflict of the identities, whether it is the conflict within an individual or the conflict between people in the society with different identities. The identity of the houses in Kengtung can be seen from the exchanging and the sharing. This shows that even though the identity of the houses in Kengtung is constantly flowing, the changes happens in a slow pace. This shows the simple livelihood of the Kengtung people, which goes in line with the ideology of Erving Goffman on the topic of individual identity and the individual in society. This occurs from the form of the houses of Kengtung people with their own uniqueness called 'personal identity'. Each house consists of the distribution and the identification of the different identities of the houses.



As for the social identity, the form of the vernacular architecture of the house can reflect the character of the Kengtung society, especially in identifying themselves as one group. This is a very good reflection of society based on ethnicity—for example, the similar forms of all the houses. Additionally, the materials can also be used as a piece of evidence that reflects the creating of the social image of the Kengtung people. For instance, the use of bricks to build houses or the walls reflects the financial status of the family, as well as the community. Bricks require an amount of money to buy, as well as time to prepare. This is different from the woods, which can be acquired over time and use less budget than bricks. Therefore, bricks can also reflect the financial status within society.

From the ideology of Erving Goffman, the analysis of the form of vernacular architecture of the houses in Kengtung can be explained in the following framework.

Figure 1.



Vernacular architecture in Kengtung provides the meaning of identity according to the modern era that focusses on individualism and society. Importance was put on the relationships under the social structure. The study provides an understanding of the relationship between individuals and society, or the community, where the houses are situated; as well as other factors that help create the identity of the vernacular architecture.

The analysis of the identity of the vernacular architecture in Kengtung is in line with the research by Srisuro, who studied the arts and culture of the Tai-Lao people. The results found that the settlement of the Tai-Lao ethnic group who share the same culture of Tai, use Tai language, and mostly chose their settlements along the Mekong River in the southern part of China, Yunan Province, Xishuangbanna, all the way to Shan state in Myanmar. The settlement spread down to the Isaan region in Thailand, as well as to some areas in Lao PDR. The Mekong region is the birthplace of civilisation for centuries. There have been many migrations in the area. The study shows the similarities in the culture, the beliefs, the language, and especially the forms of the houses with high roofs and built on stilts.

The Local Wisdom that Exists in the Vernacular Architecture in Kengtung

The local wisdom of the Kengtung consists of the knowledge, the skills, and the experience in solving problems. It has been passed down from the ancestors and is now a social capital that

is both tangible and intangible. From the analysis of the characteristics of the local wisdom of the Kengtung people, there are two main characters: the architectural problem, which is based on the abstract approach. The use of local wisdom solves the world view and life view problems, as well as being a philosophy in living a life that involves being born, aging, being sick, and dying – the values and the meanings of everything in the daily lives of Kengtung people. The readjustment of the area using the local wisdom in the abstract form is the use of the local wisdom concerning the utility of each area within the house. This is in relationship to the livelihood, agriculture, crafts, arts, and others.

These two characters for the local wisdom concerning the vernacular architecture of the houses of Kengtung people go in line with the ideology on local wisdom of Samart Chansoon, who stated that the readjustment of the area for human beings could be reflected through three characters. The first character is the relationship between human beings and the world or the environment. The second character is the relationship between other people within society. The last character is the relationship to the sacred beings, supernatural beings, or the things that cannot be touched. Both the concrete and the abstract wisdom can reflect their own being or the identity of Kengtung people in creating knowledge and finding ways to solve the problems for the co-existence between people and people, and between people and the environment.

Additionally, the local wisdom that exists in the vernacular architecture in Kengtung goes in line with the research by a group of academics. For example, research by Panin et al under a research project on “Wisdom, Development, and the Relationship between the Thai-Tai Vernacular Houses: The Environmental Architectural Character of the Vernacular Houses”, which looked at the vernacular architecture and the cultural ecology of the people who speak the Tai-Thai language such as Tai Dum, Tai Yai, Tai Leu, and Tai Kheun. For the issue related to Tai Kheun people, which are the majority group in Kengtung, Panin had studied and come up with two researches on the vernacular architecture of the Tai Kheun; “Field Work for Vernacular Architecture in Mao Village, Kengtung”, and “The Ecological System and the Local Village Layout of Tai Kheun, Kengtung”. Similar results were in terms of the landscape environmental context and the climate that affect other factors such as materials, construction, and technology. Furthermore, the factors on social and cultural changes directly affect the wisdom adjustment for the dwellers both in the architectural aspects and the utility of the area. In addition, the result on the local wisdom goes in line with the research result from Kriengkrai Kirdsiri on the cultural landscape of Kengtung as a historical town, focussing on the characters of the village landscape, vernacular architecture of Kengtung as a historical town, and the surrounding area. According to the result, the issue of the cultural landscape affects the use of local wisdom. The result on the wisdom is consistent with the research by Thapanee Kruaraya and Amos Rapoport on the detail of the housing architecture of Tai Kheun people in Kengtung which relate to the climate, the materials, the construction, and technology. All these factors affect the houses of the people in Kengtung. The research result by Rapoport suggest

similarities in the relationship between architecture and cultural society, which is the context for the people and the community.

The result is also in line with the issue of the readjustment of the area, which is another important wisdom for the people of Kengtung. This has to do with the utility of the area and the development of the outside area, starting from the stairs that connect to the second area, the front porch, or veranda. Verandas are built on stilts to be the same height as the floor of the house. Verandas have no surrounding walls to prevent people from falling off or climbing in. They are semi-personal and public areas since they connect the house to the outside. The area is used for relaxing and work during the day. Verandas connect to the third part of the house, which is the living area, through the main door. This is a common area for the family, so it is usually wide. Some families also use this area as a bedroom for guests since there might not be enough bedrooms. This area is also a connection to the fourth area, the bedroom. The fifth area is the kitchen. The kitchen is connected to the back porch with no roof. Furthermore, the research also emphasises the layout of the house that also relates to the different directions of the sun. This affects the placement of the stairs and the direction of the beds. The beds are normally placed with the head towards the northeast. The placement of the beds was not determined by the correct measurements but through the estimation of sunrise and the natural environment.

From the discussion of the research result, the identity of the houses and the wisdom that relates to the solving of the architectural problems and the readjustment of the area of the house is unique and reflects the perspective, the existence, and the intelligence of the people of Kengtung.

Conclusion

From the study and the analysis of identity and wisdom that exist in the vernacular houses of Kengtung, Shan state, Myanmar, the conclusion from the analysis can be categorised into two main topics. The big topic is the analysis of the identity of the house forms from unique characters such as the layout, the structure, and the materials. The conclusion from the analysis is the wisdom on the architectural problem solving and the readjustment of the house area of Kengtung can provide the meaning of the identity according to modern ideology. The ideology focusses on individualism and society by giving importance to a relationship under a social structure. As for the wisdom, the architectural problem-solving and the readjustment of the area is an outstanding feature that reflects the perspective and the intelligence of the people of Kengtung. Furthermore, the characters of the cultural landscape of the community also affect the adaptation of the wisdom for the people in the area.

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