

The Samchuk Market Rehabilitation, in Suphan Buri

With outside help and local effort, a dilapidated market was reborn as a living museum
by Lim Li Min

Tom, Chai and Manjusha visit Sam Chuk on Friday, March 24, 2006 :

- **Sam Chuk is the name of the rural district**, and also the name of the small town that is the district headquarters, right on the banks of the Taa Jeen River, in Supanburi Province. This market of mostly wooden shop-houses used to be a rest-stop for travelers going to or from Bangkok along the river – there used to be a small inn in the community, where you could stay overnight for 20 Baht. The market used to be oriented towards the river, in the days when rivers were the main channel of transport in Thailand. Nowadays, the parking lot on the side, beside the Sub-District Office, is the entrance, where a beautiful arbor has been built over the walkway running to the river, with sign-boards and greenery.
- **Now this is a famous place!** The Prime Minister visited Sam Chuk recently. Now the "100 year Market" has become a famous place. Even the King and Queen stopped in Sam Chuk Market years ago, on a river tour of the provinces. Nowadays, no need to advertise, lots of "free publicity" for the market in the form of newspaper feature articles in the travel sections, historic thesis, TV films and news stories. Many tourists drive up from Bangkok (In Thailand, there is a long tradition of "food tourism" – where people get into their cars and drive around the country to explore local delicacies. Sam Chuk is now on the list!
- **This market is famous for Thai sweets, but there are also ordinary market amenities for local people:** coffee shops, hardware shops, kitchenware shops, beauty parlors, photo studios, clothing shops and tailors, etc. A lot of interesting things for tourists, but also a lot of ordinary stuff for local people. Very lively, real feeling – not like a museum frozen in time.
- Bangkok Post (Horizons Section) September 15, 2005 – big feature article about Sam Chuk called "Golden Oldie"
- **Community Museum:** The Sam Chuk community has set up a museum in the 3-story wooden merchants house of Khun Chamnong. This beautiful big house had been closed up for years, all the family in Bangkok, but now the community rents the house from the owner (10 year lease) for the museum, which is filled with photos, history panels, maps, models of the community and antiques. We sit on the open ground floor of the museum, at a big wooden table, with cold preserved lemon drink and sweets, talking with a few of the women who are on the Sam Chuk community committee (which comprises 40 persons). A very beautiful place to sit, with the bustle of the market going on out front, and fans turning overhead.
- **There are 300 houses in Sam Chuk Market total, laid out along 4 lanes. Population about 2,000 people total.** 2 of these lanes will now start doing some infrastructure and housing improvements under the Baan Mankong program. (Although this is not actually a poor community, they are Chinese merchant families, but not rich).
- **Almost all the families living here are descendents of the original families** – very few outsiders have come over the decades. Many of the people now involved in the project are older people, and were children of merchants here, who went off for their university and careers in Bangkok or elsewhere, and have returned to Samchuk only after retirement to take an active role in reviving the market.
- **22 houses are now "living museums"** where the owner-merchants still live in the house: Thai traditional herbal medicine shop, coffee shop ("ancient coffee"), Clock shop, antiques, blacksmith (making iron tools), mah-jongg players out front, fishing shops).
- **Land tenure:** The land belongs to the central government, Department of the Mint. The families all have year-by-year land leases, as they have done for 100 years. A few families have 3-year leases, depending on the viability of their business and their financial success. The people are now trying to negotiate a collective lease for 30 years, but so far not possible. Before, no security, so no incentive to upgrade or repair the market or houses.
- **Preventing fire and security systems:** In a community of old wooden shop-houses like this, the danger of fire is very serious – especially since there is so much cooking going on here. So under each of the four lanes, they have laid big special high-pressure water pipes with outlets along the way in case of fire. The water comes from the adjacent river. They test the system twice a month, just to check. **Security:** The community also hires local people to be security guards, six people on each shift, around the clock, to go around and make sure everything is OK, check for possible fire hazards.
- **Economic problems were first, land problems lower on the priority list:** The people's first priority problem was economic. The market was in decline, people didn't shop here much, what with super-stores popping up all around, and the place was run-down and sad. Nobody willing to invest in upgrading the market because they had no tenure security, only year-by-year land leases.
- **Activity 1: Food festival.** 5 years ago, they organized their first food festival to promote the old market: "Arroi Tee Sam Chuk" – which they now hold once a year. Lots of day-trippers from BKK come, and from all over Thailand. This is not just to drum up business, but a chance to tell visitors the story of the market and the project to revitalize it. Spreads out the idea of revitalizing Thailand's traditional markets, rather than demolishing them!

- **Activity 2: Old pictures can tell the story.** First they gathered old photos of the market, and of families who have lived and run businesses there for generations. Then, they reproduced these photos into an exhibition and let the old people in the community tell the stories. A kind of oral history of the locality.
- **Activity 3: Joining livable cities project :** After the food festival and old pictures, they joined the "*Livable Cities*" project, with Chumchon Thai and CODI, linking this market revitalization with 12 other pilot cities. People began to realize that if you improve your community, it increases income and also brings other benefits. This project opened up a lot of cross-learning between community networks in the other pilot cities, and between municipal government officials, NGOs, academics and other actors. Many professors and students come to learn about the process. (For example, the old wooden market in Ang Thong recently burned down, and since the fire, the people have visited Sam Chuk to get ideas, exchange experiences. The Ang Thong market people are determined to rebuild their market, despite the tragedy...)
- **Do you feel like you're living in a zoo, with so many visitors and tourists and researchers?** No! We are proud of our market community here! It is a unique place, unlike any other place in Thailand, or in the world! In the evening, old people come out to sit in front of their shop-fronts, talk and watch the goings on. Community people here are very happy when tourists come, and take good care of them, guide them to the museum, show them around, help them answer questions, etc.
- **Now Sam Chuk is officially a "Learning Center"** – kids from local schools and even Bangkok schools come to learn about local history, which is alive in this historic market. In schools, we learn only about national history: the Ayutthaya Period, the Rattanakosin Period, this war, that war, etc. We never learn about our local history. On the weekends, when they have holidays, many of the community kids act as volunteer tour guides to take visitors around the market, showing them the "living museum" houses, telling about the history of the place.
- **Activity 4: Baan Mankong in Samchuk Market :** Now, two of the four lanes in the market are planning to do a Baan Mankong upgrading of infrastructure and houses, with funds from the Baan Mankong program.
- **Activity 5:** Health project, aerobics exercise in the adjacent car-park every day, women's group, health care project, etc.

The following story on the rehabilitation of the historic Samchuk Market in Suphan Buri (Thailand) was published on Nov 24, 2005, in the Thai Day Website. The story can also be found at www.ihthaiday.com.

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The small market town of Sam Chuk, in Suphan Buri, is the kind of place with just 200 timber houses and four main streets. But it was formerly a center of trade in the region, drawing sellers who crossed its surrounding paddy fields and paddled up its khlongs. It became a magnet for fishermen who once caught shrimp in the fast-flowing Suphan Buri River that passes through the town.

Wealthy or poor, they all came to trade their wares in the town's market, run by families who had lived there for generations. But, in 2003, the once-striking market square, with its dark timber walls, was visibly decaying. There were hawkers selling their goods higgledy piggledy, the 100-year-old structure was dilapidated; the number of customers had slowed to a trickle.

With trade declining, many were thinking of packing their bags for Bangkok. And the town's committee was more often talking about demolishing the building, or giving it back to the Crown Property Bureau – an investment arm belonging to HM the King. The townsfolk dreamt of the shiny new building that would take the place of the eyesore.

Cut to Sam Chuk in November 2005, and the town is an entirely different entity. Street traders line its roads, plying wares typical to the region such as dried fish and kiap bau, a sweet, flat bread. Cars with Bangkok plates pull up, disgorging curious tourists. And the market is unrecognizable. Having been given a clean-up by the town's residents, it is bustling, its food stalls attractively arranged, the shiny concrete floors spanking clean. On a street leading off from the market is a handsome two-storey home with wooden louvres, which once belonged to the town's richest person. Converted into a folk museum a year ago, the wooden walls now hang old black-and-white photos of the town's residents.

There is a grainy picture of two old codgers playing draughts in the market-side coffee shop; a yellowing Electrolux fridge occupies a corner. A solid teak staircase leads to the museum's second tiled floor, filled with glass cases bearing old urns gleaned from the houses of the local residents. Opposite the market is a stall, staffed by the town's enthusiastic committee members with booklets and postcards about the local history and restoration projects.

In a country where traditional communities are often razed in the name of progress, Sam Chuk is a rare example of how historic locales in Thailand can gain new life with an injection of fresh ideas, building plans and a small sum of cash. However, success stories such as Sam Chuk's are extremely rare – only around 10 other traditional areas in the country have been revitalized in such a manner, according to Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) director Somsook Boonyabancha. "The local people have got to be the main actors," she says.

Sam Chuk has worked only because the community itself has taken hold of the reins, say activists. They hope this may pave the way for a new kind of community-level development in Thailand.

Backing the townspeople were two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with 1 million baht from the government, Chumchonchai Foundation and Community Architects for Shelter and Environment (CASE). Chumchonchai first ventured into Sam Chuk two years ago. CASE came a little later. "We try design together with the people and make recommendations. Depending on their situation, we try to look at the good and bad and let them decide on their needs," says Wachara Sonchaeng, a CASE member.

Sam Chuk committee member Somchai Hongsupan, 53, who owns a fishing tackle shop, marvels at the change. "It's like a miracle. The market was dying but is now alive," he says, as he watches cars pull in at the carpark. The town receives over a thousand visitors per week. He says a noodle seller he knows makes 30,000 baht at weekends; a coffee shop brings in 10,000 baht in a day.

"The locals thought that the old market was not attractive, and it had no value. So they were just going to let it go to seed," says Pongwin Chaivirat, the energetic leader of the town committee, sitting in the same marble-topped coffee shop shown in a photo in the museum. Today, Pongwin, 52, is a changed man. A property developer by trade, Pongwin had served for several years with the town committee, a local-level group that oversaw the municipality's goings-on.

When the NGOs first came knocking, he was skeptical. But he got together the villagers to listen. And when they did, they got excited about the proposed project. "When the NGOs said, 'It's a good market,' [the community] started to find out its history, digging up old pictures and local wisdom. They were inspired by all the old stories," he says.

Chumchonchai Foundation and CASE conducted feasibility studies on the town before beginning. Convinced that this was an area that could be revitalized, they then called for a meeting with the locals. But the groups' emphasis is strictly on community input – the NGOs regarded themselves as facilitators, a prism through which the people's ideas are channelled. CASE provided the architectural consulting when Sam Chuk residents decided that they didn't want to hand their market back to the Crown Property Bureau; they wanted to refurbish it. And the people asked for a museum that would showcase their town's history.

The project worked because it was democratic. Having invited the entire town to its meetings, everyone who showed up was asked to contribute ideas. Crucially, this fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility, something that activists say is lacking in government-built projects, in which every apartment dweller just looks after his or her own unit.

All of Sam Chuk's residents turned out on market-cleaning day with mops, scrubs and brushes. It became a new place in just one day. Because every opinion mattered, there was a renewed sense of togetherness. Trust and transparency between the residents grew. Matters are now settled by consensus: for example, if an outsider wants to buy a property with a mind to convert it, the residents have to reach a decision collectively.

Wana Pek Wong, who owns a massage shop, half of which has been saved for One Tambon, One Product shampoos and teas, says she, too went along and spoke up. "I felt proud to contribute," she says. Hotel owner Arunrak Onmeemon converted her old boarding house in Sam Chuk into an attractive bar when her husband died. Lit by glowing red lamps, her property, called Baan Khun Jumnong, is part gallery, part coffee shop. Many weekend visitors drop by her bar, says the silver-haired widow, dressed in beads and a batik blouse. Arunrak takes the time to talk to them, explaining how the lane in front of her bar was once the main thoroughfare to the riverside pier. She feels her town is a living museum and wants visitors to know its history. "I feel I have to talk to everybody so they will understand. The story of this place is in the unseen things, in the people," she says. "People from Bangkok come and learn about what they used to be."

The project in Sam Chuk has fanned out into the surrounding areas. One government agency that works with Chumchonchai, CODI, says that hundreds of impoverished urban areas have also received help. In the last two years, CODI says it has improved 400 slums around the country. But the success of places such as Sam Chuk, along with other old communities in Rayong, Mae Hong Son, Si Prachan that have been revitalized, is especially dependent on the willpower of locals and their strength as a community. It is not merely the physical infrastructure that needs to be looked after.

Says CODI's Somsook: "We can't let old areas run down, be replaced by new constructions, and forget our roots. Such projects are our link with the life of the people."