

## SILVERWARE GROUP

### Summary

The silver jewelry making industry in Khwao Sinarin District today is thriving. There are a large number of silversmiths and this community continues to grow. Through the support of the provincial government, there are many channels for the transmission of the skills and techniques of silversmithing. This begs the question as to whether the craft needs to be safeguarded. Based on interviews and research conducted in the silversmith villages, this summary analyses the situation today and provides recommendations for the safeguarding of silversmithing.

Currently, silversmiths practice various forms of the craft. The community recognizes several individuals as master silversmiths whose practices are traditional and their designs intricate. Lung Puan Jiewthong is the most well-known master silversmith from the village of Ban Chok, being particularly skilled in making of takao-style jewelry; he has received high provincial recognition for this. A contemporary of his, Lung Panya Butchart is also regarded as a master and has taught many young silversmiths through workshops organized by the provincial government and other foundations. A third individual who continues to practice the traditional methods of working with silver and gold is Lung Somsak Mutasopa. Although his network of apprentices and customers is smaller than the former two, he continues to work on traditional designs passed down through his family. He is the son of the late Sawat Mutasopa, a gold- and silversmith of national prominence. This traditional form of silversmithing is very important for the community, and is one of the defining cultural features of Surin Province. At present, there is significant recognition of the craft, and mass production of silver and brass by other craftsmen indicate the high demand for the products.

In spite of this, there are some problems and issues that arise with traditional silversmith practices in contemporary society. The most challenging element is the labor intensive nature of traditional methods. There is a high level of skill required and the craft therefore requires considerable time spent as an apprentice. Traditionally, apprentices would live in the house of their master, helping out with the daily chores in exchange for the opportunity to learn with the master silversmith. Such demands make the traditional practices less attractive to educated young people, who prefer other occupations. If they wish to work with jewelry, factory produced silver and brassware and the thriving demand for such products provides a more favorable option.

The mechanization and mass production methods in silver and particularly brass making, as well as the encouragement of silversmith training in workshops and not at a master's house,

could also contribute to the traditional methods being threatened. This could also have an impact on the more spiritual and contemplative meanings of silversmithing. Historically, silversmiths invested deeper values and meanings in their work and this spiritual aspect has contributed to more ethical practices among silversmiths. However, such spiritual elements are rarely transmitted at the government sponsored workshops or at other non-traditional venues. We have found that the more intricate forms like takao are in danger of being lost beyond the current generation of practitioners. Not only are they very difficult to learn and perfect, there is a lack of demand for them. As such, younger silversmiths in the future may not feel the need to learn these designs at all, relegating takao designs to obscurity.

Though the situation seems problematic, there are several potential opportunities for safeguarding and transmitting silversmithing. We recommend a re-evaluation of the government sponsored training workshops. Though the intention of these workshops is good, there has been a largely technical focus, at the expense of the more spiritual and ethical dimensions of the craft. There could also perhaps be greater investment and follow up with the newly trained silversmiths by government organizations in order to give greater support to novice craftsmen. More emphasis could also be placed on promoting silversmiths beyond the current methods of OTOP fairs and festivals. What is encouraging is the positive attitude of the silversmiths; to quote the master silversmith Khun Pirun, “as long humans need beauty, silversmithing will live on.”

### **Four Important Sites**

#### **1. The master silversmith’s house (Lung Puan’s house)**

Puan Jiewthong, a master silversmith of Ban Chok village, has been making silver for 62 years. He learned goldsmithing as well as silversmithing from his brother-in-law and learned to make Prakueam and Takao, the original patterns of Khmer jewelry. Lung Puan understands that the old patterns may not be in demand one day. Consequently, he has made 16 models of the old patterns and placed them on display in his house for educational purposes. However, he supports those young silversmiths who prefer to create silver jewelry using contemporary patterns rather than the original ones.

Because he is a very skilled and respected person, he has had more than hundred apprentices. His house is the place where he works and transmits his knowledge to his apprentices, including descendants and other interested people. In September every year, his house is crowded during the annual ritual – San Sanop - which is conducted at the space where he places the twin cylinder bamboo furnace, to worship his master and ancestor spirits.

Lung Puan’s house, therefore, is considered as the school for silversmithing, which is the only

place where traditional knowledge is transmitted in the original way and has spiritual, social, educational and economic values.

### **2. The Home of Lung Panya Butchart**

Lung Panya Butchart is an important master silversmith in the community of Ban Natang (Natang Village). Though he only began his work as a silversmith at the age of 40 following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, he is regarded highly among his silversmith peers. He excels in the art of takao design and taught himself the art of making prakueam silver beads. Through workshops organized by government ministries, foundations and royal patronage, he began to gather a number of apprentices, such as Khun Pirun and Khun Supeab, who today are well known, successful silversmiths and brassware artists in their own right. Throughout his career, he has had over a hundred apprentices. However, only a small group continue to practice today. He imparted not just technical skills and knowledge of the craft, but also taught his apprentices ethical business practices and a sense of spirituality and contemplation related to the silversmith practice. Prior to his retirement, his house was the site of his silversmith workshop, where he would train his apprentices in traditional designs and styles. His house also acted as a place of ritual importance, as he prayed to the spirits of his silversmith ancestors twice a day before he began work.

### **3. OTOP Khwao Sinarin**

The OTOP shop in Khwao Sinarin, opened in 2006, provides a venue for the recognition of local products. The center is divided into a number of shops that offer a space for local artisans to create and sell their produce.

There are a number of workshops located within the complex where locals and visitors can view crafts people practicing their trade. These silversmiths can not only produce contemporary jewelry but also provide a learning environment for transmitting knowledge and skills to apprentices. Siri Muenprasarn and his wife Da Suchanan operate one shop that manufactures and sells contemporary jewelry and provides tuition to many young apprentices; Juan Hermharn sells traditional style prakeuam beads, whereas Somboon Saosiri's shop sells silverware similar to his brother in law, Puan Jiewthong.

The Centre for Development Grass Root Economy is also located in the complex, and this organization and space provide the opportunity for community members to teach each other silversmithing skills so they can use them to make a living in the future.

### **4. The Silver and Brass Handicraft Association**

The Silver and Brass Handicraft Association was established around 10 years ago by villagers in Ban Natang village, Khwao Sinarin district. Before the group was formed, most of them worked as goldsmiths in Ubon Ratchathani province; they came back to their hometown because of the 1997 economic crisis in Thailand. At that time, the Centre for Career Development of Khwao Sinarin district held a silversmithing workshop where they first met as a group and had the opportunity to be trained by Lung Panya, a silversmithing master, on traditional silversmithing, and by Mr. Supeab Promsri on contemporary silversmithing. Nowadays, the group has approximately 40 members and currently focuses on producing and designing brass ornaments to order, such as necklaces, bracelets and rings. The most elaborate designs are mostly used in performances designed for tourists or for other celebrations. Their customers are mostly middlemen from Bangkok, Nakorn Ratchasima and Kanchanaburi as well as from neighbouring countries such as Laos and Cambodia. Although they mostly produce brass products, goldsmithing and silversmithing are not totally abandoned. Members of the groups sometimes produce individual gold and silver products. However, as they receive many wholesale orders for brass ornaments, they have less time to produce individual pieces. The leader of the group is Mr. Chalermchai Pitsora, whose work is to oversee the administration of the group and the quality control of products. The Silver and Brass Handicraft Association has four main production sites which are at houses of 4 of the members.

## Gallery

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