

A Study on the History of the Bangkok National Museum Collection Focusing on the Ministry of the Interior

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Fieldwork location: Thailand

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Research background

The Bangkok National Museum is the oldest public museum in Thailand. It was founded in 1874 by King Rama V (reign: 1868-1910). It was initially located in the assembly hall of the palace guards, and was later moved to the former palace of the Second King in 1887. The museum possesses one of the largest collections of antiques and art pieces in Thailand.

Antiquities and artifacts became the main exhibits in 1926, when Prince Damrong Rachanuphap reorganized the museum as the 'Bangkok Museum.' He was the first Minister of the Interior, serving from 1892-1915, and is also known as the 'father of Thai history.' According to G. Cœdès, an eminent archaeologist of Southeast Asia, and M. C. Phunphitsamai Ditsakun, a daughter of Prince Damrong, many antiquities were transferred to the museum from the Ministry of the Interior and the private residence of Prince Damrong.



The entrance of the Bangkok National Museum (taken on Nov 17, 2012 by the author)

Sandbags were temporarily placed due to major floods in Thailand beginning in July 2012.

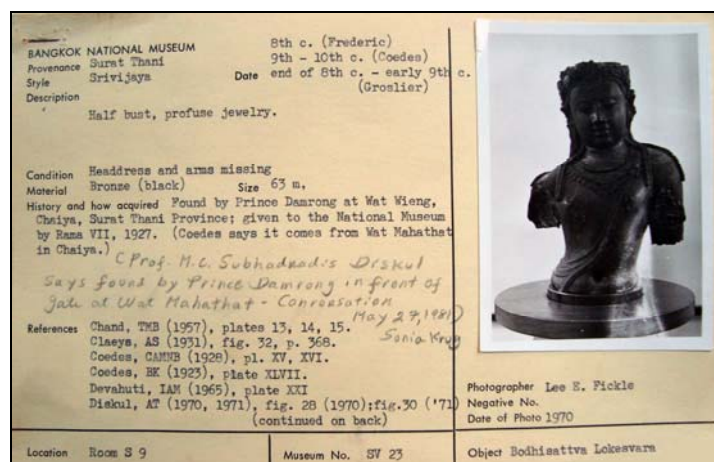
Research purpose and aim

The purpose of this study was to clarify the history of the Bangkok National Museum collections, focusing on the role of the Ministry of Interior before 1934. By examining the dates, locations, and details pertaining to the Ministry network involved in collecting artifacts, I aim to depict the Thai ruling class' conceptions of their

territory and history in relation to the construction of national identity during the period of modern state formation.

Fieldwork results

The most important findings of the survey are the registration cards for museum objects that were created by Bangkok National Museum Volunteers (NWM) during the 1970s and are now preserved at the NWM Library. These cards contain the details of more than 3000 objects in the museum collection. The academic section of the museum administration office also has comprehensive lists and databases but these are not accessible by the public or available for copying at the present time. Thus, the NWM registration cards are a very useful source for details pertaining to major objects in the museum collection.



A registration card example

Bodhisattva Lokesvara statue, one of the most famous objects in museum collection, found by Prince Damrong in Chiya, a city in southern Thailand.

Other significant findings of the survey include two important documents found at the National Archives of Thailand. One is a list of antiquities transferred from the Ministry of the Interior to the Bangkok Museum in 1928, objects thought to be those that Coedès mentioned in his edited catalogue of the museum collection. The other is an inventory of archaeological objects and sites in Thailand compiled by the Ministry of Education during the period of 1919-1920 with the assistance of high commissioners belonging to the Ministry of the Interior. This inventory gives insight into the types of objects and locations that Thai bureaucrats considered valuable at the time.

Implications and impact on future research

Findings from this survey will enable researchers to comprehend the outline of the museum collection and specific objects collected by the Ministry of the Interior. This knowledge can be used to reveal the relationship between 'cultural properties' and modern state formation in Thailand, but additional research on documents belonging to the Ministry of the Interior is required.



Bangkok National Museum Volunteer Library

(Special thanks to head librarian Françoise Vincent (left) for helping in this survey.)

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