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Resilient heritage: the adaptation of Nantaram Tai Khun lacquerware amidst lifestyle and urban shifts in Chiang Mai province

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งานวิจัยนี้ เป็นการสำรวจการปรับตัวและความยืดหยุ่นของชุมชนเครื่องเงินนันทาราม จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ ท่ามกลางการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคมและการพัฒนาเมือง ด้วยวิธีการลงพื้นที่เพื่อสัมภาษณ์และสังเกตการณ์ในสถานที่จริง ทำให้ค้นพบการปรับตัวเชิงนวัตกรรมของการทำเครื่องเงิน การเก็บรักษากระบวนการดั้งเดิมและการพัฒนาเครือข่ายชุมชน โดยผลการศึกษาเผยถึงการปรับเปลี่ยนการมีอยู่ของ “ชุมชน”¹ สู่การประยุกต์เป็นคู่อบแห่งสมัยใหม่ และบทบาทของเครือข่ายที่ซ่อนตัวอยู่ซึ่งยังคงมีผลต่อการพัฒนาและทำเครื่องเงิน การศึกษายังนำเสนอส่วนของการปรับตัวเพื่อตอบสนองต่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางการตลาดและการใช้งานพื้นที่บ้านเพื่อตอบสนองต่อการตอบรับผู้เยี่ยมชมในเชิงการท่องเที่ยวและการศึกษา โดยเน้นย้ำถึงความสำคัญระหว่างบทบาทของความดั้งเดิมและนวัตกรรมของชาวไทเขินนันทาราม กับความท้าทายของการเปลี่ยนแปลงในยุคสมัยใหม่ ทั้งในด้านวิถีชีวิต ค่านิยม การท่องเที่ยว และการเปลี่ยนแปลงเชิงพื้นที่ ความยืดหยุ่นของชุมชนนี้สามารถเป็นประโยชน์ต่อรูปแบบการอนุรักษ์มรดกภูมิปัญญาทางวัฒนธรรมและความยั่งยืนทางด้านเศรษฐกิจ ที่ช่างฝีมือในพื้นที่อื่น ๆ กำลังเผชิญกับการเปลี่ยนแปลง ทั้งระดับท้องถิ่นและระดับโลก

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Abstract

This study investigates the adaptability of the Nantaram lacquerware community in Chiang Mai, Thailand, amidst life styles and urban shifts. Through data collection via interviews and observational methods, it details innovative adaptations in crafting techniques, skill preservation, and network evolution. The research outlines how traditional ‘khum’ drying methods have evolved into modern techniques and emphasizes the role of hidden social networks in sustaining craftsmanship. It further examines artisans’ responses to market shifts and their strategic engagement with lifestyle trends, tourism, and urban shifts, highlighting a balance between tradition and innovation. This work provides insights into cultural heritage preservation and economic resilience, offering valuable lessons for artisan communities in local navigating and global pressures.

Keywords: local wisdom, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), lacquerware, Tai Khun, Nantaram

¹ ขุม หมายถึง หลุมที่ขุดบริเวณละแวกบ้านเพื่อนำเครื่องเงินไปวางตากให้แห้งจากความชื้น

Introduction

Chiang Mai, a province in Thailand, is renowned for its rich historical tapestry, shaped by diverse national, regional, and local influences. The city was founded by Mangrai in 1296, as indicated by the stela at Chiang Man Temple. Its geographical advantages, including mountains, a river, and a slope ensuring water flow, were vital for settlement (Ongsakul, 2018). Chiang Mai flourished for 200 years before falling to the Burmese in 1558 due to political weaknesses (Penth, 2004). Ruled by the Burmese for two centuries, it was eventually liberated through a rebellion aligned with Siam, leading to the Chiang Mai Restoration (Phanichphant, 2005). Before King Rama I appointed Kawila as the king of Chiang Mai, the city, once deserted and overrun by wilderness, underwent revitalization during the era famously known as “Geb Pak Sai Sa, Geb Kha Sai Mueng”, which translates to “collecting vegetables for the baskets, collecting people for the city” (Ongsakul, 2018). This period saw the integration of diverse ethnic groups, including Tai Khun artisans from Keng Tung, who settled near Wat Nantaram (Ongsakul, 2015).

The Tai Khun’s skills in lacquerware honed in a landscape ecologically similar to Keng Tung, have significantly contributed to the cultural fabric of Nantaram (Leksomboon, 2016; Phanichphant, 2013). Decorations on Nantaram lacquerware are rich in detail, utilizing a variety of techniques suitable for different objects, such as bamboo weaving, hand drawing, and engraving. A unique technique, known locally as “Hai Lai Hai Dok”, involves surface engraving on containers with a sharp-pointed steel pen, as shown in Figure 1 (Khruearaya, 2019). Historically, the decoration of lacquerware symbolized social hierarchy, where color and detail indicated the user’s status (Phanichphant, 2018). However, societal changes, beliefs, trends, fashion, and urban development have profoundly impacted Nantaram’s way of life, altering the role of lacquerware from items signifying social ranking to those not tied to it. Immigration and migration have led to changes in the lacquerware-making process within the community, while urban development has significantly reduced natural resources in Nantaram. Additionally, the shift from mass tourism to smaller groups of tourists, who show a keen interest in lacquerware, reflects changing cultural engagement. Despite these challenges, the community has preserved their knowledge and adapted their lifestyle, ensuring the ongoing production of lacquerware.



Figure 1 Duangkamol's Tai Khun lacquerware.

Source: Author

This research aims to delve into the changes that have affected the Nantaram people's way of life, exploring their methods of adaptation to safeguard their cultural heritage, including the practices of lacquerware making that have been affected by various factors.

Research objectives

This research aims to understand the transformative effects of time and urban development planning on the Nantaram community, particularly regarding their traditional practices of lacquerware making. The focus is on the following aspects:

1. Impact of Urban Shifts: Investigating how urban changes have directly and indirectly influenced the traditional process of lacquerware making, creating challenges for artisans.
2. Survival and Adaptation: Exploring the current survival of lacquerware indicating that adaptive mechanisms based on local knowledge have emerged in response to the evolving urban landscape. The research will delve into how the diminishing water resources, vital for lacquerware production, have led to alternative solutions to maintain these cultural practices.

The objectives of this research are to gain a deeper understanding of the various impacts of urban shifts on the life of the Nantaram community in recent years. Moreover, by analyzing the survival methodologies of the Tai Khun culture amid these changes, we can become more aware of the threats to cultural heritage and the potential for its complete disappearance from our society.

Methodology

1. Study context and location

As illustrated in Figure 2, the selected site is the Nantaram community, located south of the Chiang Mai city wall. This area is renowned for its lacquerware artisans and

is adjacent to another community famous for its silverware craftsmanship. At the heart of Nantaram, Wat Nantaram is not only a physical centerpiece of the village but also serves as a sacred site and a hub for various community activities throughout the year. In the past, on the north side of Nantaram temple, there were two houses of Tai Khun nobles who had also relocated from Keng Tung; one was located on the opposite side of the temple, while the other was a little further north (Pattanawan, 2009). However, the residences of these nobles have now completely disappeared from the Nantaram community.

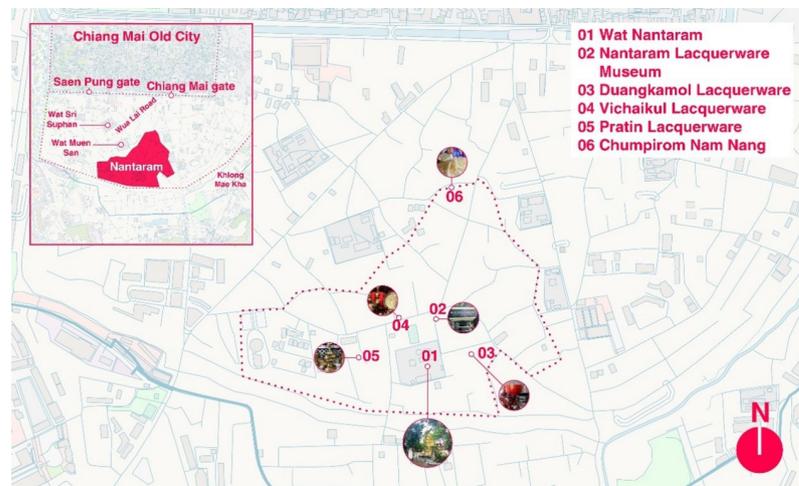


Figure 2 Nantaram community and its boundaries, including the locations of local artisans. Mapping

Source: Author

Historically, the Nantaram area was bustling with lacquerware artisans, and many households utilized their courtyards for making “Nam Nang,” a traditional preserved food, especially during winter. However, in the present day, the number of lacquerware artists who have preserved these ancestral skills has reduced to just three. Similarly, the practice of making Nam Nang in Nantaram has significantly declined, with only one remaining place still engaged in this tradition. This indicates that there have been drastic changes in terms of urban development since the initial settlement. As illustrated in Figure 3, the urban environment of Nantaram in the past, rich in natural resources and full of bogs and water puddles, aided the artisans in the process of lacquerware making. However, with the construction of new roads and walls due to changes in land ownership, the environment that once supported the artisans in Nantaram has disappeared.

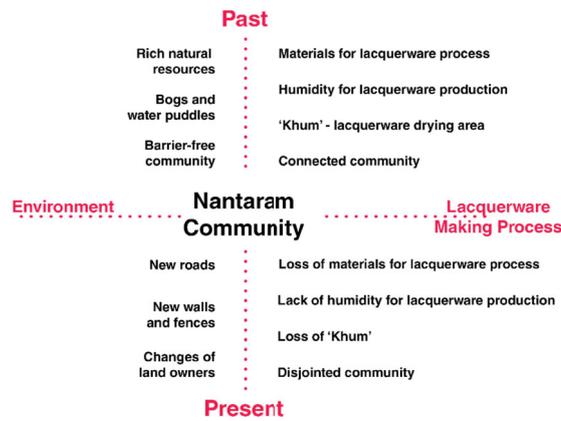


Figure 3 Transformation of the Nantaram community: environmental and lacquerware making process changes from past to present

Source: Author

2. Methods

The choice of observation and investigation was driven by the need to capture the intricate details and lived experiences of the Nantaram community. These methods provided a comprehensive understanding of daily activities, spatial arrangements, and interactions, crucial for documenting lacquerware processes and environmental changes. This research involved four key processes;

2.1 Content and mapping analyses were used to systematically interpret narratives from interviews and historical documents, and to visualize changes in the urban environment and workshop spaces. These methods offered a holistic approach, integrating qualitative insights with spatial analysis to reveal the impacts of urban development and social change.

2.2 The observation and investigation at the Nantaram community site were conducted over 10 months, from March 2023 to December 2023. Site surveys complemented previous literature reviews, aiming to understand the urban environment and its evolution, from the urban scale to workshop space.

2.3 In-depth interviews with the three remaining lacquerware artists (Sirichanchuen, 2023, Sriboonruang, 2023, and Jaikompan, 2023) who play a significant role in inheriting the lacquerware skill, provided insights into the community's history and work evolution. Each of these artists operates their own lacquerware shop and workshop in the Nantaram area. This exploration included historical adaptations, such as those during King Rama VI's era,

when Tai Khun artisans revised their lacquerware to suit Western and Siamese lifestyles, reflecting a long-standing ability to adapt to changing cultural demands (Khruearaya, 2017).

2.4 Combining site surveys and interviews, as illustrated in Figure 4, offers a comprehensive view of the situation, highlighting the Nantaram people’s resilience and adaptability, both historically and in the present. This research underscores the importance of preserving Nantaram’s local wisdom.



Figure 4 Left side - Interview with Prathin Sriboonruang. Right side - Workshop area of Prathin Lacquerware, located behind the shop front area.

Source: Author

Results

According to the research objectives, the results reveal various aspects of adaptation and survival mechanisms that have enabled the lacquerware making process to continue in the Nantaram Community. While some changes are overt, others are intriguingly concealed beneath the surface, as uncovered through investigation and interviews. Therefore, the results can be categorized into the following sections;

1.Khum

Interviews with the remaining lacquerware artists in Nantaram revealed a crucial, although previously hidden, relationship between water resources and the lacquerware-making process. Historically, the abundance of bogs and water puddles in the area contributed significantly to lacquerware production. The high humidity in these environments expedited the drying process of the lacquerware. Locals traditionally utilized a dug-out pit, known as a “Khum,” either in their courtyards or beneath their houses, to facilitate this drying process. These pits were a common feature throughout the Nantaram community (Kampeera, 2015). A “Khum” typically has a depth of about 2.00-2.50 meters, featuring internal shelving for

placing the lacquerware items. Artisans accessed the ‘Khum’ via a ladder, and some were even covered with a roof, designed with gaps to allow wind circulation, as depicted in Figure 5.

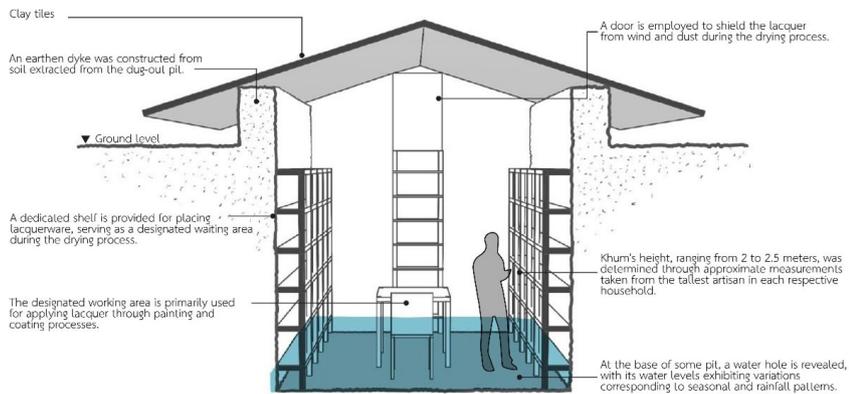


Figure 5 Cross-section of a Khum. Showcases the earthen dyke, lacquerware shelving, and water hole design used to optimize the drying process.

However, in the present day, the “Khum” has completely disappeared from Nantaram due to various reasons. For instance, some original inhabitants migrated to other areas, leaving their properties to newcomers who subsequently removed the existing “Khum.” Additionally, urban development, which failed to account for traditional waterways, has led to significant flooding problems in Chiang Mai. This has directly impacted the functionality of the “Khum” by causing the sources of humidity from bogs and water puddles to vanish from the environment. The traditional waterways that once supported the community have disappeared and will likely never return.

Despite these challenges, the Nantaram community has innovated new methods to expedite the lacquerware drying process without the ‘Khum.’ This adaptation involves the use of specially designed cabinets that incorporate a water area at the bottom and shelving for the products above, as shown in Figure 6. This modern iteration of the “Khum” concept – the lacquerware cabinet – is now widely used by lacquerware artists in the area.



Figure 6 Cabinet Adapted from Khum Concept. This cabinet features shelving with gaps for humidity control and a base layer of wet sand to aid the lacquerware drying process.

Source: Author

2. Hidden Network of Nantaram Community

An important insight from our interviews reveals the essential social connections involved in the lacquerware-making process in Nantaram. This carefully timed and natural condition dependent process, passed down through generations, has community members specializing in various stages to improve efficiency.

Lacquerware production in Nantaram traditionally relies on collaborative efforts, where completed stages of work are passed along for subsequent processes, culminating in a team effort to achieve the final product. Historically, a central location served as the gathering point for these artisans, facilitating a routine that balanced work with personal life, as depicted in Figure 7. These workspaces were well-equipped for various production stages, including cooling and humidity control, and “Khum” for drying.



Figure 7 Historical Nantaram Artisan Community. This scene illustrates the traditional community setup, with a workstation for lacquerware processes and a ‘Khum’ for humidity control. The layout reflects the community’s lifestyle, where artisans could easily bike to their communal workplace.

Source: Author

By interviews, particularly with figures like Sirichanchuen and Prathin Sriboonruang, reveal the persistence of hidden social networks within the community. Despite migrations, former Nantaram residents maintain their collaborative spirit in lacquerware production, supported by modern means of transportation and communication. This ‘hidden network’ includes not only former residents but also those who worked with original Tai Khun lacquerware artists in Nantaram.

These networks enhance the flow of the making process, allowing lacquerware artists to select specific individuals to collaborate with at various stages of production to maintain workflow efficiency. Furthermore, collaborators located in different parts of Chiang Mai can provide specific resources necessary based on the lacquerware artist’s requirements.

For instance, collaborations extend to former workers of Viculkul lacquerware, highlighting a deep-rooted community connection (Sirichanchuen, 2023; Sriboonruang, 2023). Without the ability to communicate over distances, the survival of lacquerware production would be challenging, as many skilled individuals have relocated. The ability to maintain these connections ensures that the expertise and resources needed for lacquerware production remain accessible, even when artisans are dispersed.

These hidden networks contribute to the community by ensuring the continuous availability of skills and resources essential for lacquerware production. They facilitate efficient collaboration and resource-sharing, which is crucial for maintaining the quality and tradition of the craft in Nantaram.

These findings, as illustrated in Figure 8, demonstrate intricate and expansive network connections within the Nantaram community and beyond. They encompass both original residents and those historically associated with local artisans. The enduring practice of communal lacquerware production, supported by advances in communication and transportation, highlights the craft’s vibrant adaptability and resilience in the modern era.

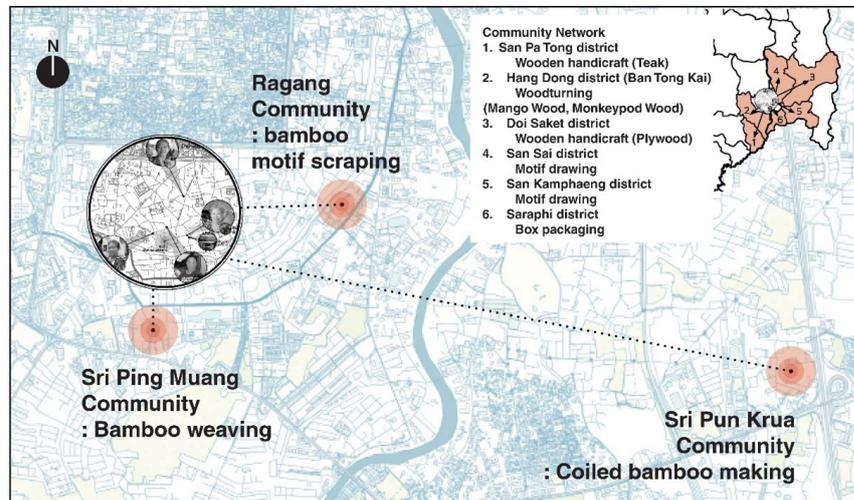


Figure 8 The hidden network of Nantaram lacquerware artists remains active even though many original community members have migrated elsewhere. They maintain their connections and continue to produce lacquerware, either in part or through the entire process.

3. Evolution of Domestic and Commercial Spaces in Nantaram

The urbanization of Nantaram has dramatically transformed its landscape from rice fields and natural resources to buildings and concrete roads. This shift has significantly impacted the community of artisans. Once thriving with lacquerware producers serving their rulers, now only three households continue this ancestral craft, amidst decreasing water resources and urban gentrification. The adaptation has been notable; the traditional ‘khum’ has been replaced by cabinets that can be placed anywhere, no longer confined to the ground level or fields.

Urban changes, such as the construction of new roads and buildings, have led to the loss of natural resources and traditional waterways that were essential for lacquerware production. Additionally, the influx of new residents and businesses has resulted in land use changes that prioritize commercial and residential developments over traditional artisanal practices.

These changes have also affected the way lacquerware artists engage with tourism, a vital source of income due to tourists’ appreciation for the value and luxury of Nantaram lacquerware. According to interviews and on-site observations, the last three remaining artists have redesigned their living spaces to accommodate economic activities, attracting tourists to observe and purchase their work.

This adaptation has been driven by the economic and tourism challenges faced by the community. Previous local governance initiatives aimed to create cultural streets away from the actual community, which resulted in buses no longer bringing large groups of affluent tourists. Consequently, only smaller groups of budget-conscious tourists, who are interested in cultural tourism and exploring the actual community, continue to visit (Sirichanchuen, 2023). Thus, the lacquerware artists have tried to attract these tourists by using the front area of their houses as showcase and workshop space. This strategy aims to maximize tourist engagement by making the production process visible and interactive.

For example, Duangkamol has transformed the area in front of her house into a combined workshop and showroom, showcasing lacquerware in various stages of production (Jaikompan, 2023). This space serves dual purposes: a site for craftwork and an educational zone for tourists, as displayed in Figure 9.



Figure 9 The area at Duangkamol's house, a lacquerware artist, which is regularly used as a workshop (left) but has been transformed into an educational space to welcome audiences for educational purposes (right).

Source: Author

Furthermore, the broader urban changes influencing these transformations can be analyzed through the lenses of social change, cultural heritage conservation, and urban development frameworks. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage highlight the need to integrate intangible heritage conservation within urban development, recognizing the deep-rooted interdependence between intangible cultural practices and their tangible surroundings (UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2011).

Patchara of Vichaikul lacquerware has integrated a shopfront into her home, displaying a wide range of lacquerware products. Beyond the display area, a space is set aside for video promotions, offering insights into the development of Nantaram lacquerware.

Prathin has uniquely adapted her living and working areas. The front part of her house serves as a display area, akin to Vichaikul, featuring an office space for customer consultations and a workspace for crafting small objects. A separate building hosts the main workshop, which includes an indoor area with a ‘khum’ inspired drying cabinet and an open-air workshop on a floating platform. This clever design facilitates cooling and drying, exemplifying the Tai Khun tradition of utilizing natural resources. Furthermore, the entire workshop area doubles as a learning space for students, tourists, and interested visitors, showcasing the adaptive use of space for commercial and educational purposes.

Overall, each lacquerware artist’s home incorporates areas dedicated to tourism and education, catering to their primary guests, as displayed in Table 1. These spaces are equipped to demonstrate the lacquerware-making process, underscoring the artists’ adaptability to urban changes while preserving their cultural heritage.

Table 1 Flexible space utilization in Nantaram artisan homes.

Space type		Artisans	Vichaikul lacquerware	Duangkamol lacquerware	Prathin lacquerware
1 st Floor	Front space		Shop front - Educational space	- Working space Educational space	Shop front Working space Educational space
	Inner space/ Interior space		Living space - Educational space	Living space Working space -	Living space Working space -
2 nd Floor	Interior space		Living space	Living space	Living space

Source: Author

4. The Evolution of Lacquerware in Nantaram

Historically, Nantaram lacquerware illustrated the resilience of these objects, with ownership status identifiable through decoration and object type, designated for various purposes. Red and gold patterns signified items for higher society levels, including royal or

religious ceremonies. Red-patterned lacquerware was for the affluent, while plain black was for peasants and commoners.

Initially, Nantaram lacquerware served daily life needs, from food containers to war equipment like helmets and scabbards. The arrival of the train from Bangkok to Chiang Mai marked a pivotal moment, diversifying the lacquerware market (Phanichphant, 2018). This expansion introduced products tailored to the central Thai lifestyle, such as ashtrays, cups, and decanters, alongside a shift towards mass production that impacted quality and decorative styles. This adaptation to Bangkok's market demands showcases the production's flexibility in targeting new customers amidst societal changes.

Today, lacquerware continues to evolve, adapting to shifts in travel, electronics, and lifestyle, thus finding new relevance. For example, as shown in Figure 10, Vichaikul Lacquerware has innovated with products like phone stand chargers, reflecting modern needs. Additionally, items like keychains and luggage tags represent lacquerware's ongoing challenge to remain pertinent in the contemporary era.

Figure 10 Innovative lacquerware products at Vichaikul Lacquerware.

Source: Author



Discussion

The findings from this research underscore the adaptability and perseverance of lacquerware making in Nantaram, showcasing methods such as re-creating the 'khum' as a cabinet and utilizing the expanded network of the Nantaram community to sustain the lacquerware-making process. The transformation of the 'khum' into a more compact cabinet form addresses the loss of natural water resources and land to urban development. Migration patterns have had mixed effects: they introduced new commercial opportunities

and tourist markets, yet urban gentrification also led to the displacement of original community members, affecting traditional lacquerware practices. Nonetheless, modern communication and transportation have kept the community's connections alive, albeit in less visible forms. The societal relevance of lacquerware, adapting to contemporary lifestyles with innovative products, demonstrates the sector's enduring resilience.

These adaptive strategies not only reflect the community's resourcefulness but also emphasize the importance of safeguarding Nantaram's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). As defined by UNESCO (2003), ICH encompasses practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage. In the context of Nantaram, the preservation of traditional lacquerware techniques and the communal networks that support them exemplify ICH. The resilience of Nantaram's artisans amid urban and societal changes highlights the crucial role that ICH plays in maintaining cultural identity and continuity in the face of external pressures.

Several critical aspects emerge from the findings, vital for the continued existence of Nantaram's lacquerware;

1. Innovation and Tradition: The balance between preserving quality and embracing innovation has been central. Artisans have maintained high product standards while integrating new technologies and designs, highlighting the importance of passing down traditional knowledge alongside embracing modernity. This synergy between the old and the new expands customer reach, potentially securing the craft's future. The transformation from traditional 'khum' to modern cabinets exemplifies this balance, allowing artisans to adapt to the loss of natural resources without sacrificing the quality of their products.

2. Cultural and Economic Resilience: The adaptation of workshops and the introduction of online platforms have opened new economic channels, from local students to global tourists. The readiness to share traditional making processes enhances product promotion and underscores the innovative adaptation of lacquerware to modern needs. This adaptability is evident in how artisans have restructured their homes and workshops to serve as interactive spaces for tourists, ensuring economic viability despite changing tourism dynamics. The shift from large tour groups to smaller, more culturally focused tourists highlights the artisans' ability to pivot their strategies to meet new market demands.

3. Future Directions: The resilience observed in Nantaram stems from grassroots strategies by individuals dedicated to preserving their heritage amidst urban and societal shifts. However, discrepancies in information from government and private entities point to

the need for cohesive support structures. This highlights the community's self-reliance in the absence of adequate institutional support. The findings suggest that while the artisans have been successful in creating sustainable practices on their own, there is a significant need for more structured support from both governmental and private sectors to ensure the long-term sustainability of the craft. This includes better integration of cultural heritage within urban development plans and more consistent support for traditional artisans.

In conclusion, the Tai Khun community in Nantaram has demonstrated significant resilience, navigating urban and societal changes. This research not only records the adaptability of Nantaram's artisans but also offers insights into supporting cultural heritage in changing environments. It lays a foundation for understanding and aiding Nantaram's artisans in future endeavors, emphasizing the critical role of comprehensive support for preserving cultural practices. The continued innovation and adaptability of the artisans, combined with more cohesive support structures, can ensure the preservation and flourishing of Nantaram's rich cultural heritage.

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