



ความหมายภูมิทัศน์วัฒนธรรมเมืองสกลนคร Meanings of Cultural Landscape in Sakon Nakhon City*

Anuwat Kamthak **

Songyot Weerataweemat***


Abstract

Cultural landscapes consist of tangible physical patterns and elements together with intangible values and meanings. They embrace a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and their natural and built environments. The purpose of this paper was to explore the changes in the meanings of cultural landscapes drawn from the historical old town of Sakon Nakhon city through different periods of time, by adopting the conceptual framework concerning the discourse construction for meaning interpretation. The research process was done through an examination of related publications and archaeological evidences and a field survey to analyze the relationships concerning political, administrative, economic, social and cultural contexts in each period. Then, the meanings given to cultural landscape in each period were concluded. Results from the study revealed that human settlement in Sakon Nakhon began around the pre-historical period. A range of meanings of cultural landscape thus overlapped and changed over time. Through stories and legends, some meanings of cultural landscapes become recognizable, but the most

* In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Architecture), Faculty of Architecture, Khon Kaen University.

** Ph.D. Candidate, Faculty of Architecture, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, 40002 Thailand,
E-mail: anuwat.k27@hotmail.com

*** Assistant Professor, Faculty of Architecture, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, 40002 Thailand,
E-mail: sonwee@kku.ac.th



important factor contributing to the survival of meanings was the repetition of such meanings through rituals or traditions, which were important to the existence of meanings and created common memories among local people to remember the original meanings. This would be the important guidelines in conserving and restoring the cultural landscape.

Keywords: Meanings of Cultural Landscape, Sakon Nakhon

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาการเปลี่ยนแปลงความหมายของภูมิทัศน์วัฒนธรรมผ่านช่วงเวลาทางประวัติศาสตร์ของย่านเมืองเก่าสกลนคร โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดเรื่องวาทกรรมการสร้างพื้นที่ในการแปลความหมายกระบวนการวิจัยเริ่มจากการศึกษาจากเอกสารที่เกี่ยวข้อง ตำนาน หลักฐานทางโบราณคดีและการสำรวจภาคสนาม นำมาวิเคราะห์ความสัมพันธ์กับบริบททางการเมือง การปกครอง เศรษฐกิจ สังคมและวัฒนธรรมในแต่ละช่วงเวลา เพื่อค้นหาการให้ความหมายของภูมิทัศน์วัฒนธรรมในยุคสมัยต่าง ๆ ซึ่งผลการศึกษาสรุปว่า เมืองสกลนครมีการตั้งถิ่นฐานต่อเนื่องมาตั้งแต่ยุคก่อนประวัติศาสตร์จนถึงปัจจุบัน มีการซ้อนทับของความหมายของภูมิทัศน์วัฒนธรรมและเปลี่ยนแปลงไปตามยุคสมัย การให้ความหมายพื้นที่ผ่านตำนานและการต่อยอดความหมายพื้นที่ด้วยพิธีกรรมต่าง ๆ เป็นส่วนสำคัญในการดำรงอยู่ เนื่องจากการสร้างความทรงจำร่วมของผู้คนให้จดจำถึงความหมายดั้งเดิม อันเป็นแนวทางสำคัญในการอนุรักษ์และฟื้นฟูภูมิทัศน์วัฒนธรรม

1. Introduction

Sakon Nakhon city is located on Sakon Nakhon basin in the northeast of Thailand. The basin is a plain adjacent to gigantic reservoir and mountain range. Layers of settlement has existed since the Ban Chiang period (Wanlipodom, 2003). It had been developed as an ancient community since

the time of Davaravati, Angkorian culture, and Thai-lao Lan Chang culture to the present day (Documentation and Archives Processing Committee, 1999). Thus, multi layers of archaeological evidences of several cultures have been interpreted in meanings, values and shared memories of local people contributing towards the cultural landscape. Resulting are changes of the environment through cultural signs, such as beliefs, landscape, architecture, arts and literature, etc. In the process of changing, some elements of the cultural landscape have been forgotten or have changed their original meanings. However, some are still important and retain the original significance. Therefore, to investigate the meanings and changes of the cultural landscape of Sakon Nakhon is an important issue that leads to understanding the overlapping of the cultural signs. The study will also further seek ways to manage the suitable process and management of the heritage of cultural landscape of Sakon Nakhon.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Meaning concept

The study of cultural landscape elements as “*Space*” is the study of the space as a “*verb*” rather than “*noun*”. That is, study space is a subject which creates identity and meaning. The process and details of production of a space, including practicing of this space, mirror Foucault’s concept “technology of space” that is consistent with the concept of Henri Le Fabre (Le’ Fevbre, 1991) the production of the technique of creating space by defining the specific purpose of space. To prevent intrusion, there is a provision to protect that space.

Cultural landscapes can also be interpreted through “Local legend, since it is the story of humans and spaces, the memory that has been

inherited from generation to generation. (Wanlipodom, 2011) However, it might be re-interpreted in order to create some new meanings to relate to environment. Therefore, the study of local legend as discourses to indicate environmental meaning is important for understanding several layers of meaning of cultural landscape. The legend is, therefore, a mean of cultural memory. The meaning of phenomena that happened in past social memories and that were imagined will lead to the reality of social practice (Erll, 2011). Paul Connerton (1989) also points out that memory is constructed and reproduced repetitively and continuously in the form of ritual then to become cultural reality. However, memories are interpreted and might be transformed from their original meaning and inconsistent to the social context that had been changed, often being marginalized (Smith, 2006). This indicate that cultural landscape and social memory are related and change according to social context.

The studies of the meaning of cultural landscape and social memory through various legends in the central Mekong region, showing that legends were created in order to construct social memory. A significant local legend is *“The That Phanom Chronical”* (Department of Fine Arts, 1994), It contains the story of the Buddha’s visit in the Mekong Region at various locations. It indicates the importance of Buddhist beliefs which was narrated through the history of states in the region. It refers to various events in several locations. The That Phanom Chronical is also a literature that provides some meanings to the geographical landscape character of some stone sheds on *“Mount Phu Prabat”*, Udonthani Province. It has been a well-known story to local up until the present (Buddee, 2012). Therefore, constructing social memory through narrative legend is a process of creating meaning to be part of cultural landscape and significant to the existence of the meaning of that landscape.

3. Methodology

Cultural landscape is an interpretation of humans in landscape environments. Human settlement usually has been developed and changed its environment. This research will interpret the evidences of historical fabric overlapping as urban landscape together with social memory, which usually is in the form of narrative myths or local legend. Reading the meaning of cultural landscape clarifies each period of historical evidence of the landscape. Some iconographic or symbolic entities of archeological evidences and local legend are significant to the understanding the meaning of cultural landscape of each period. The meaning of cultural landscape might be changed or transformed from its previous interpretation, since it has been consequently re-interpreted or given new remarkable notions. Thus, there are several layers of meaning of which might be represented temporally or competing in contemporary society. Sacred architecture and landscape are to be focused in this study since they have been created to represent or symbolize those significant major concepts of the city or landscape.

Interpretation of the cultural landscape as “*Discourse*” refers to the system and process of creating or producing identity and meaning for all things in the society that encapsulates us (Foucault, 1970). In addition, the discourse also serves to freeze things that are created to exist and be widely accepted by society. The discourse analysis is trying to search for processes, procedures, sequences of events and details of creating identity for all things, together with an analysis of discursive practice of discourse whether there is a contention related to the person, institution, place and their affects (Charoensinolan, 2011).

4. Results and Discussion

During the 16-18th century, Sakon Nakhon city was established under Angkor civilization. There are archaeological evidences have been discovered: 1) Prasat Phupek 2) Prasat Narai Jengweng 3) Khmer Stone Bridge 4) The old Prasat in Phrathat Cherngchum stupa 5) Prasat Dum and 6) Ancient moat and Baray as shown in Figure 1.

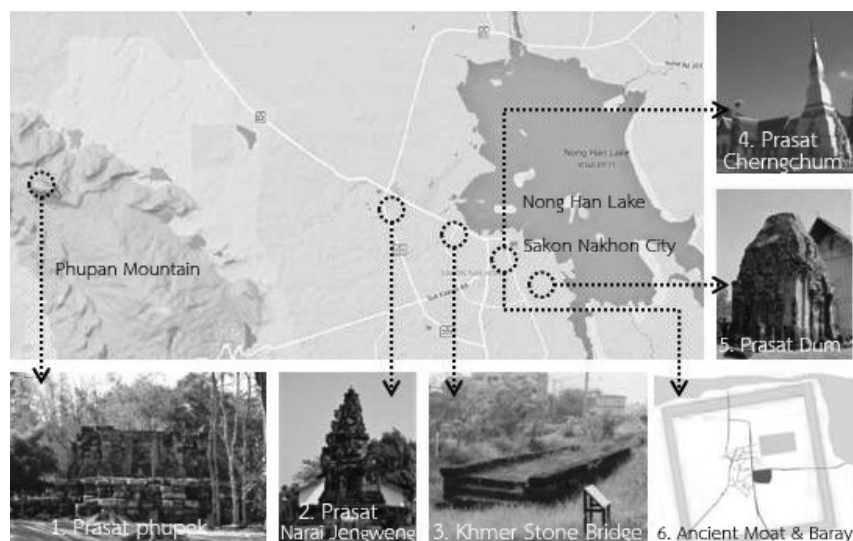


Figure 1: Archaeological Sites in the Khmer Culture Age in Sakon Nakhon city

Considering the arrangement of various elements, the construction of Sakon Nakhon city was intended to be the center of the north of the Khmer Empire (Kingmanee, 1997). As Prasat Phupek which located at the Phu Phan hill represents that it was a cosmological symbol of the region. The modifying of the natural area in the city of Sakon Nakhon of the Khmer

culture was under the concept of the cosmic “*Mandala*” of Hinduism. The Mandala concept leading to planning of the city was design according to “*Vastu Vidaya*” of “*Manasara Silpa Sastra*” which describes the position and size of the architectural space (Iyer, 1980), The establishment of a sacred Mandala or cosmological center is a concept based on the theory of a sacred center to both palaces and Buddhist and Hindu temples (Heine-Geldern, 1942)

There are several elements in the city of Sakon Nakhon that might convey cosmological meaning in multi levels. Prasat Phrathat Choengchum is a temple that implies its important in the community, while Prasat Prathat Narai Jengweng might have been a city temple. Prasat Prathat Phupek might be a mountain temple that was a principal shrine over the region. Apart from creating the area of the city as sacred Mandala according to the notion of Hinduism or Mahayana Buddhism, the transforming of landscape geography to suit the settlements large community resulting in a particular physical landscape. A square moat and Baray were arranged in accordance with Indian Astronomical orientation. The main gate of Prasat Prathat Choengchum faces the true east in which the sun will rise exactly through the main gate on the day “*Vernal Equinox*”. It is the first day of spring and was the new year according to Mahasakarat calendar of Khmer culture (Boonyothayan, 2006).

4.1 Buddhism and local legend and a new cultural landscape

After the decline of the Khmer Empire after the end of the reign of King Jayavarman 7 (1724-1762) during the period between 1896 - 2371, the culture in Sakon Nakhon basin was part of Lan Chang Kingdom. The city was designated as the main city in the name “*Chiangmai Nonghan*” (Warangrat, 1994). During the transition process of religious and culture in

Sakon Nakhon basin from the Khmer culture to be Lan Chang Buddhism, two important processes of practice occurred:

The first process was to take possession and change the original sacred space of the Khmer, especially the Khmer temples or Prasats. They had been given a new meaning of Lan Chang Theravada Buddhism as the symbol of Mount Meru, the central mountain of Buddhist cosmology. The case of Prasat Prathat Choengchum built a new stupa over the original Khmer temple at the center of Sakon Nakhon City. Apart from the shape of Lao stupa, it was renamed as **“Prathat”** (relic or stupa) instead of **“Prasat”** (multi-stories building or shrine) in Khmer culture. The whole compound of the new Prathat then represented the new sacred space of Theravada Buddhism with a stupa contained the sacred relic of the Buddha. Other Khmer Prasats were also named as Prathat. New ritual to these sacred spaces were adopted resulting in the new meaning of the Sakon Nakhon cultural landscape.

The Second, the process of creating discourse through local legends with the aim of disseminate ideas, beliefs and social memories. The most significant legend and widely known of Lan Chang culture is the That Phanom Chronicle (Tamnan Urangkhatat). It contains the story of local history and the prophecies of Gautama Buddha when he visited the Mekong Region. (Department of Fine Arts, 1994 and Pruess, 1976). Various locations which were visited by the Buddha were mentioned that later on would be important sites of the region. The city of Sakon Nakhon was also a station which the Buddha practiced his mission. He arrived in Nonghan Laung Lake, and Praya Suwannapingkhan invited him to have a meal in a Prasat. After finished the meal, the Buddha left his footprints on a rock and then four crystal balls floating up. The balls referred to the three Buddhas of the

past and Gautama Buddha who had marked their footprints at the same spot in Sakon Nakhon City. The Buddha then preached a religious tale to Praya Suwannapingkhan that where ever the Buddha had visited with whatever mission, the place was named *“Jotika Chetiya”*, which where Buddhism would be prosperous. When Praya Suwannakingkan had heard that he built a tunnel to enclose the footprints and closed it with stone. It has been called *“Prathat Choengchum”* which means the gathering of the footprints, and lasted until the present.

The story of the arrival the four Buddhasⁱ in The That Phanom Chronicle certainly implies that this area has been inhabited for a long time and it has continuously been the land of Buddhism. The coming of the Lord Buddhas means that the area represented *“Jambudipa”*, the only continent which is the origin of Buddhism as mentioned in the Triphumi Text (Three World Cosmology) (Reynolds and Reynolds, 1982). The significance of Jambudipa, a continent which people are happy and moral, the king righteous like the *“Dhammaraja”* (righteous king) and attending to the purity and preservation of the religion. (Aung Thwin, 1976) Prathat Choengchum which was built over the four footprints of the Buddhas is the symbol of the arrival of the four Buddhas. Therefore, Sakon Nakhon City might represent a central city (Majimarajadhani) of Jambudipa. Moreover, it has been the central city of Jambudipa since the time of the Buddhas of the pastⁱⁱ.

ⁱ There are 4 Buddhas that had attained enlightenment in the Bhadrara Eon: Kakusandha, Konaṣamana, Kassapa and Gautama.

ⁱⁱ Pruess (1976:20) suggested that the term *“Jambudipa”* or *Jambudvipa* in the That Phanom Chronicle probably means *“the inhabited world”* rather than *“ancient India”* proper. It seems to imply that the ruler, in former existents, had been a devout Buddhist.

The Triphumi Text has an important influence on the concept of Cakkavatti (the Great Emperor), the king who is greater than all kings though out the universe. He had cumulated merit since his past lives. He practices of the precepts is consistent with the practice according to the principle Dharma Racha of Buddhism. He must glorify and protects the religion from degeneration. The Cakkavatti should restore and maintain Buddhism. Therefore, one important mission of Buddhist ruler in Sakon Nakhon is to build some Buddhist monasteries which affect the cultural landscape of the city.

During the early Bangkok period (1782-1892), Sakon Nakhon was under the rule of the Kingdom of Siam in the name “*Sakon Thawapi City*”. It has a relatively independent rule according to Lan Chang culture. (Nanthajak, 1994). The changes in the urban landscape elements were therefore under the Buddhist concept of Jambudipa. Some more Buddhist monasteries were established in the city during this period. 12 monasteries were built by the governor in the old town of Sakon Nakhon. However, only nine of them have remained to the present day. (Figure 2)

Apart from established Buddhist culture to populace, monasteries were built to be sacred space and social public space for the city. They also represented religious and political power. These monasteries were used as an area for the dissemination of religious practices and directed the social order. (Preeyawanit, 2012) Rituals were a mechanism of the relationship between monastery and community. The 12 months’ ceremony and 14 regulations for governor (Heet Sibsong Kongsibsi) emphasized the meaning of the monasteries as a social sacred space. These monasteries were important cultural landscape of Sakon Nakhon City since the period of Lan Chang until the Bangkok era.

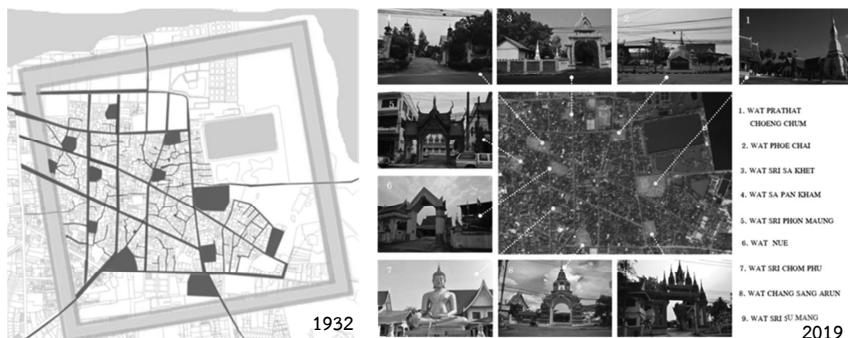


Figure 2: Comparison map of the temples' location between 1932 and the year 2019

4.2 Social contexts and changes in meaning of cultural landscape

In 1888 the French demanded Siam recognize French suzerainty over the whole of the area east of the Mekong River. King Chulalongkorn conducted a major administration reform in 1892, which resulting the change of traditional Lao governance to be Provincial Administration system. The district officers or governors which previously were vassal rulers and local lord came to be replaced by officials appointed directly by Bangkok (Keyes, 1989) The development of this area focused on transportation, military and government under the concept of modernization to cities (Preeyawanit, 2017). Such policy affected the formation of a new cultural landscape in Sakon Nakhon, for example: the establishment of a new central administration buildings, government educational institution and road construction (Nanthajak, 1994).



Figure 3: Development of Sakon Nakhon city before and after the Monthon Thesaphiban System

During the years 1932-1920 after the Siamese state had converted a democratic government, the cultural landscape of the country was rapidly changed. Global development discourse adopted with several development projects were implemented. Infrastructure and urban space were planned and developed following the concept of the modern city. (Pojanalawan, 2015). The physical environment of the old town of Sakon Nakhon city gradually gave way to commercial buildings and new town planning. The most important change was that some Buddhist monasteries were demolished and replaced by new urban elements such as: schools, hospitals and markets. This new policy specified the space of the Buddhist monastery as company in order to be developed as commercial area. (Tantinipankul, 2009). The sacred space of religious compound, which used to be represented as Jambudipa, the continent which flourish with Buddhism, became oblivious. Sacred space was replaced by a new concept of space.

However, Buddhist ritual has been continuously practiced and this heritable ritual has preserved the sacred meaning of the space.

The result of constructing a grid system of roads in the old town of Sakon Nakhon, the Buddhist communities which were grouped according to the monasteries they supported as centers had been altered. Some of them were separated to be parts. The natural drainage system which originally was arranged to be part of the passage ways was then malfunctioned. The roads which were constructed without considering the terrain level caused flooding problem in Sakon Nakhon old town. Finally, the problem was later solved by digging the drainage canal to drain out of the city.

Although some physical features of the city were altered according to social context, some kinds of sacred space in the past had been interpreted in different meanings. The ancient moat and Baray lake which were the elements of sacred mandala in the Khmer culture were occupied without any oppose by people since they had no significant meaning to contemporary living. These kinds of element of cultural landscape have been invaded and gradually lost their physical character in a wider area. (Figure 4)



Figure 4: Aerial photos of Sakon Nakhon in the year 1954 - 2016 showed the invasion of the ancient moat.

Source: Institute of Language Arts and Culture, Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University

Table 1: Changes in Meanings of the Elements of Cultural Landscape in each Period

Khmer Culture Period		LanChang – Early Rattanakosin Period		Monthon Thesaphiban System Period		Democracy Period
Cultural Landscape	Meaning	Cultural landscape	Meaning	Cultural Landscape	Meaning	Meaning
Nong Han Lake	- Source of resources for a living - Transportation route to Mekong river	.....>	- Source of resources for a living - Area in a legend	.....>	- Source of resources for a living	- Reservoir for irrigation purpose - Tourist attraction
Stone Castle	- Mountain of gods	.....>	- Holy relics	.....>	.....>	- Archaeological site
Phra That ChoengChum	- Mountain of gods at community level	.....>	- Center of universe (Mount Meru)	.....>	.....>	- Royal monastery
Moat	- Border of mandala	.....>	- Source of water for consumption	.....>	- Royal Land - Expansion area of the government	- Area trespassed by the public and private sectors
Baray	- Holy body of water - Source of water for drinking	.....>	- Source of water for drinking	.....>	- Royal land	- Public park
		Temple	- Sacred space under the concept of Jampudipa	.....>	- Temple is a company with certain space adjusted for commercial purpose	- Area designed for practicing religious rites
		Residence of the city ruler	- Center of administrative power	.....>	- Residential space	- Trading area in the old town
		Town plan	- Roads travelled by carts	.....>	- Improvement of road system and public utilities	- Possession of personal area by the government
				Government complex	- Representing government's power	
				New districts	- New social groups	- Old residential area

5. Conclusion

The cultural landscape of Sakon Nakhon city indicates that various elements were created to represent particular meaning. The existence, transformation or loss of their significance depending on how they were able to connect to social values in many aspects. Table 1 shows the meanings of Sakon Nakhon city cultural landscape which have been changed in the course of time. Previous values are usually preserved in the form of narrative myth, social memory and the remainder of archeological sites. However, it is possible to investigate the collection of meanings hidden in landscape. Social and economic change together with political policy are the major factors that resulting in new interpretation to landscape. The construction of the meaning of cultural landscape comprises narrative stories, rituals and social memory. In addition, the text of That Phanom Chronicle plays a very important role to the meaning of the cultural landscape of Sakon Nakhon. The power of Buddhism belief, ritual and legend creates the network of the sacred space as an essential meaning to the city. The repetitive of the ritual and narrative legend are the mechanism to preserve the fundamental value of the landscape.

In the case that the elements of cultural landscape resemble natural landscape existence without narrative legend. There would be also no ritual activity to be repeated. The original meaning of this landscape might be lost, since new interpretation has occurred. The moat of the city since Angkorian civilization, which used to be a boundary of sacred mandala, has been destroyed and invaded. The Baray, which has a natural character without any architecture or sacred entity has been recently regarded as a lake in a public park.

The urban areas having been highly modified in accordance with socio-economic modern development have rapidly changed both physical feature and historical implications. Apart from the expansion of a government administrative center, local houses in Sakon Nakhon city have been gradually demolished and substituted by shops. Most of Buddhist monasteries are also hidden behind new buildings in the city. However, the relationship between community and monastery through Buddhist rituals and other communal activities still maintains relevant memory of such space.

The unequal intensity of perception of the meaning overlapping in cultural landscape of a long historical settlement of a city, therefore, needs to be investigated in terms of the complexity of multi layers of meaning. This process is necessary for the planning development of a city to seek for an appropriate guideline to maintain the values of diversity meaning of the cultural landscape. The preservation of important physical environment, related rituals and traditions, would be a cultural resource for lively new interpretation. Finally, the participation of local people in preserving valuable social memory is to be respected.

6. References

- Aung Thwin, M. (1976). Jampudipa: Classical Burma's Camelot. *Journal of Asean Studies*, 16, pp 51-56.
- Boonyothayan, S. (2006). *1000-Years Solar Calendar of Phu Phek Castle of Sakon Nakhon Province*. Nakhon Pathom: Naiyanaprapai Printing House.
- Buddee, C. (2012). Usa Barose Legend in Wat Phra Phutthabat Buaboke version: The Development of the Character and the Interpretation of the Geographic Area. *Journal of Mekong Societies*, 8(3), pp 167-190.

- Charoensinolan, C. (2011). *Developmental Discourse*. 5th Ed. Bangkok: Wipasa Publishing.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How Societies Remember*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University.
- Documentation and Archives Processing Committee. (1999). *Historical Developments, Identities and Wisdoms of Sakon Nakhon Province*. Bangkok: Kurusapa Printing.
- Erll, A. (2011). *Memory in Culture*. Translated by Sara B Young. United Kingdom: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Science*. New York: Vintage Book.
- Heine-Geldern. (1942). Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Asean Studies*, 2 (01), pp 15-30.
- Iyer, T. (1980). *Indian Architecture*. Delhi: Mehra Offset Press.
- Keyes, F, C. (1989). Buddhist Politics and Their Revolutionary Origins in Thailand. *Sage Journals*, 10, pp 121-142.
- Kingmanee, A. (1997). *Stone Castles and Khmer Arts in Sakon Nakhon Province*. Bangkok: Fine Arts Department.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford Blackwell.
- Nanthajak, A. (1994). *Isan Case Study: A Material for the Instructions of Political History and Thai Society*. School of Political Sciences, Sukhothai Thammathirat University.
- Pojanalawan, P. (2015). *Birth of "Thailand" under Dictatorship*. Bangkok: Matichon.
- Preeyawanit, N. (2017). *Economic and Politic Aspects of Road Construction in Bangkok Metropolitan Region during the reigns of King Rama I – V*. Bangkok: E T Publishing.

- Pruess, B. (1976). *The That Phanom Chronicle: A Shrine History and Its Interpretation*. Data Paper No. 104. New York: Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University.
- Reynolds, F., and Reynolds, M. (1982). *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*. The Institute of Buddhist Studies, University of California: Asian Humanities Press.
- Smith, L. (2006). *Use of Heritage*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Tantinipankul, W. (2009). Changes in the concept of building and restoration of the royal temple in the reign of King Rama V up to the present: conflicts in the preservation of ancient sites and nationalist culture. In Kiangkraipetch, S. (Ed), *History in cultural education dimensions Overhaul of cultural studies*, pp 208-296. Bangkok: Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre.
- The Fine Arts Department. (1994). *Breast-Bone Relic (Legend of Phra That Phanom)*. 3rd Ed. Bangkok: Rueankaew Publishing House.
- Warangrat, S. (1994). *History of Sakon Nakhon*. Sakon Nakhon: Sakon Printing.
- Wanlipodom, S. (2003). *Isan Civilization Site*. 4th Ed. Bangkok: Matichon Publishing.
- _____. (2011). *Thailand's Sociocultural Progress*. Bangkok: Muang Boran Publishing House.