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## E-Lerng: Preservation through Lens



October 9th 2010: A 92-years-old theater is about to be brought back to life. Built in 1918 right after the Russian Revolution, this theater sits right at the center of the historic Nang Lerng community.

A young woman - Namboon Weawpoyngam - is a filmmaker. She wears a thick horn-rimmed glass; hiding her curious eyes and her attractive face from her subjects. She grew up in this community when it was still a slum; then she went to study art and psychology at the prestigious Chulalongkorn University. She recently did a documentary film on the history of the Nang Lerng Commune. The film is to be shown today at the old theater to celebrate its 92 years anniversary. As the crowd and the food sellers and the backpackers are arriving, Namboon receives a notice from the landlord:

NO SHOW IN THE THEATER TONIGHT;  
IT'S NOT SAFE TO DO SO DUE TO AGED STRUCTURE.

It was a shock. All the preparation and hours spent on the venue were lost. The Nang Lerng community is currently situated on a land belonging to the Crown Property Bureau. Anything that has to do with events and festivals would have to be approved by the Bureau.



"Why not just show it anyway - outside the theater!" shouts a bearded man bare-chested. A few hours later, a large white canvas is being stretched across the old theater; the film will be projected on the canvas right after sunset.

I can hear whispers and rumors in the crowd that there are plans to demolish the old theater and build a parking lot in its place. The developers do not want any kind of festive connection to the theater. If the community should accidentally rejuvenate the old theater, it would be very difficult to tear it down in the eyes of the public.

E-LERNG: A DOCUMENTARY, says a large poster which now hangs in front of the theater. Seeing that the crowd would continue to stay and wait for the film to be shown at dusk, the food sellers anchored their food carts with umbrellas.

E-Lerng is an old word which depicts a large water storage jar. But it has a double meaning: "Nang" means "lady" while "E" suggested a less virtuous lady. In 1950s, General Pibulsongkram, a rather dictatorial Prime Minister at that time was concerned about the promiscuity of the word, so he ordered that the name "E-Lerng" be changed to "Nang-Lerng." As expected, the censorship only popularized what was hidden.



A tall lady in her 50s appears from behind the white canvas with a sly smile. Her hair is ghostly white but her face still retains its youthful unruliness. She walks elegantly and has a stunning figure.

"Hello, I'm Fai," she introduces herself. "We're trying to use media - the film - as a medium to reflect on our community," she lights herself a cigarette.

I told her that I'm from CODI; and I'm just here to observe the event.

"Don't let the developers see you; they do not like CODI," she takes a deep puff on the cigarette. "You guys are always steering up people; they want a more docile community here; one that would accept their cash," she laughs. There's a thin smile on her face behind the smoke.

CODI is currently helping the community set up the Collective Housing program; the community already starts their own saving groups. These saving groups are tools for the residents to get to know one another better in the age of cable TV - a staple feature in every household - and the internet. Like many other slums and informal settlements, kids here have no one to raise them because their parents have to work many jobs to make ends meet. So the younger generation is more alienated; they grew up playing alongside garbage dumps, hiding behind rusting tin sheds, mosquito nets, and afternoon soap operas. The notion of having a "community" is starting to sound more romantic than Don Quixote's vision of the windmills.

Ms. Fai is concerned about the idea of preservation. "I'm over 50 now, but I have yet to see any real attempt to preserve the people in the community. They only try to preserve old buildings. After the preservation work was done on the Nang Lerng Market, I actually felt that market life was dead and buried!" she shakes her head with a big frown on her lips.



"NIDA (National Institute of Development Administration) came to study us during preservation work," says Ms. Fai, "the students don't even want to sit near us; they tried to avoid physical contact; they sat with their shoulders squeezed together."

Ms. Fai also says that she believes that the research was bias from the outset. "They always asked questions like: What's the extent of the drug problem in this slum? What's the crime rate? What about prostitution?"

She tells me that the students have never asked about the positive side of the community - they're not here to learn from the community at all. She believes that the study would eventually be used as a tool to evict the residents and clear the land for the developers.

"Are they planning to build a mall?" I ask.

"No they've drop that idea," says Ms. Fai. "I believe now they're opting for a more practical parking lot."

CODI and the Crown Property Bureau have jointly tried to use "cultural preservation" - as oppose to building preservation - as a means to revive the Nang Lerng community. This event is called: "Walk the Alleyways." It's the first of its kind in Thailand. It is to be held on October 16, 2010 as part of the World Habitat Month.

I glance at the white canvas screen in front of the old theater; a flash of light has just appear on the screen: "1, 2, 3..." They're testing the image; the sun is hovering just above the horizon and now the stage is set for Namboon and her guerilla group of filmmakers to do the magic. All this is being done while the Ministry of Culture is drafting a measure to censor "dangerous film" - a measure aimed at blocking politically sensitive films from being released.

