



DOI SUTHEP MOUNTAIN, THE LIVING HERITAGE

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■ Abstract

Doi Suthep is one of Thailand's most significant mountains, due to its rich nature, biodiversity, and long-standing cultural associations with Chiang Mai Old City - included on the World Heritage Tentative List for Thailand as the "Monuments, Sites, and Cultural Landscape of Chiang Mai, Capital of Lanna." This paper argues that Doi Suthep Mountain is an essential component of the Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project, as a sacred place and center of Chiang Mai's soul. There are inseparable linkages between Doi Suthep Mountain, Chiang Mai Old City, and the Chiang Mai people. This paper describes the importance of Doi Suthep Mountain from natural and cultural perspectives. It provides some examples of initiatives related to the protection of the heritage of Doi Suthep based on the local communities' sense of belonging, which can become pillars to support the conservation challenges of this living heritage.

KEY WORDS: Doi Suthep Mountain, Chiang Mai, Living Heritage, Nature-Culture Linkages, Conservation

■ 1. Introduction

The northern region of Thailand was once known as the Kingdom of Lanna, where now Chiang Mai province is located. Chiang Mai Old City, the capital of Chiang Mai province, is at the heart of the "Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project" conceived to nominate the "Monuments, Sites, and Cultural Landscape of Chiang Mai, Capital of Lanna." Chiang Mai Old City was the capital of the Kingdom of Lanna from 1296 to 1768, and later became a tributary state of Thailand from 1774 to 1899 (Penth 2000). Chiang Mai Old City has thrived for 700 years, located in the center of the Chiang Mai province on flat land along the foothills of the Doi Suthep Mountain, located to the northwest. The mountain belongs to a multi-peaks complex system that forms an essential part of the western mountainous ranges in northern Thailand [Fig. 1]. Doi Suthep Mountain reaches approximately 1,658 m above sea level at its highest peak. Vegetation on the mountain

includes evergreen pine mixed with deciduous forests and lower-level dry dipterocarps. The Doi Suthep area became part of the 24th National Park of Thailand as Doi Suthep - Pui National Park in 1981. The area is home to over 300 bird species, many of which are rare and endemic. It is also recognized for its biodiversity and nearly 2000 species of plants and butterflies (Rerkasem and Rerkasem 1995). The biodiversity in the Doi Suthep Mountain ecosystem has been sustainably managed by and has inspired the people who have lived in Chiang Mai Old City. Natural resources have been sustainably used and harmoniously connected to the city and their culture through landscape design (Wonglanka and Han 2018).

The mountain was worshipped by Indigenous peoples long before the establishment of Chiang Mai Old City, as it is considered to be the abode of their ancestors' spirits. Doi Suthep Mountain is recognized as a sacred place in local

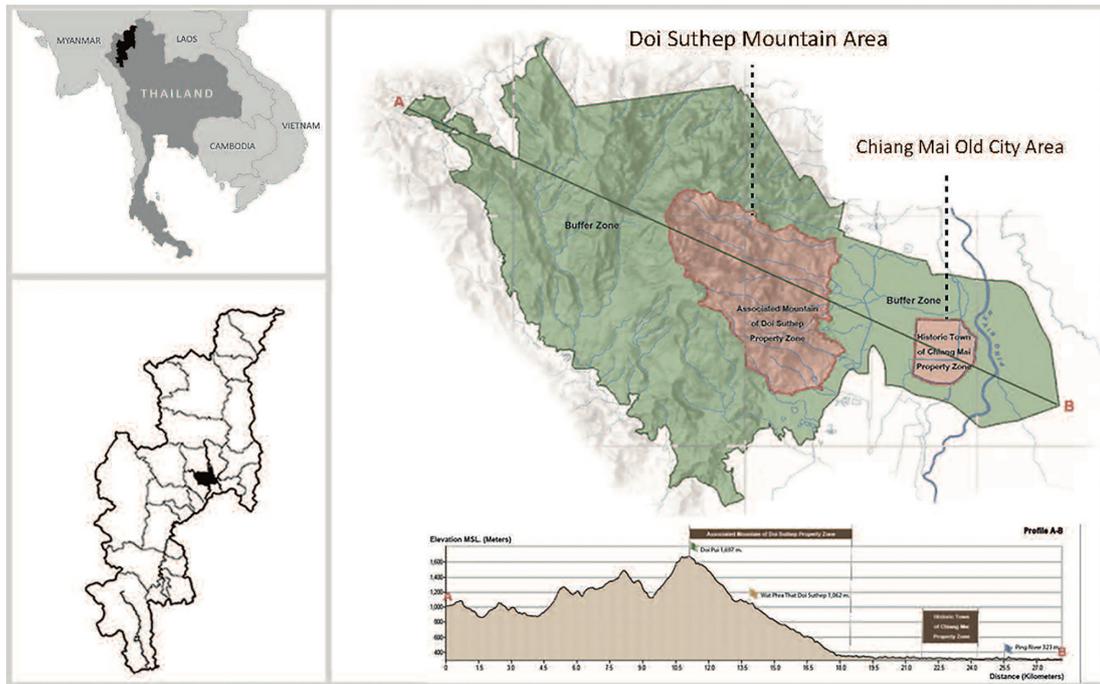


Figure 1: Location of Doi Suthep Mountain and the protected area of Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project (Source: Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project 2018)

beliefs. According to the Chiang Mai Chronicle (Wichienkeo and Wyatt 1998), King Meng Rai often traveled through the vast valleys, accompanied by his troops and advisors, searching for the perfect location to build his permanent capital. He searched for a peaceful site, with resources like crystal-clear waterfalls. The waters flowing from Doi Suthep Mountain into streams surrounding the present Chang Mai area attracted him. He then awaited auspicious signs, which were sent by the legendary hermit named Sudeva. Sudeva ensured spiritual stability and physical protection in the establishment of the city (Muangyai and Lieorungruang 2008).

Even though Doi Suthep holds these important cultural values and meanings for the local people, the National Park law legislates its protection and management as a natural site only, following top-down management from government agencies. However, the “Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project” has included Doi Suthep as an essential element of the living heritage of Chiang Mai Old City, based on its cultural values. This paper describes the interplay between nature and culture in Doi Suthep, its meaning for Chiang Mai people, and its significant role in the historical development of the sacred landscape of Chang Mai. According to Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project, Chiang Mai is recognized as the “capital city” of cultural heritage in the northern region of Thailand, reflecting Outstanding Universal Value Doi Suthep is also being considered as part of the nominated property as a Landscape the

Old City. This paper describes the natural values of Doi Suthep. It demonstrates how natural values and cultural values correlate as well as how Doi Suthep and Chiang Mai Old City are interconnected. Furthermore, it examines the current situation of Doi Suthep. The paper aims to indicate nature-culture linkages in order to extend the dimensions of Doi Suthep conservation to be appropriately included in the nomination being prepared by the Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project.

2. Significance

2.1 Natural Values

Doi Suthep Mountain has more than 679 species of vascular plants, consisting of 526 dicotyledonous plants, 113 monocotyledonous plants, 34 species of ferns, and six types of gymnosperm. An abundance of common and unique fungi and mushrooms can also be found there. Doi Suthep Mountain is an important area for plant conservation in Thailand and has a number of IUCN classifications, including: A1¹ in the threatened plant list, A3 in the threatened endemic plants at a national level, and category C for threatened habitat areas and threatened plants. Doi Suthep is also the habitat for over 439 wildlife species, including 31 mammals, 360 birds, 31 reptiles, and 18 amphibians. Doi Suthep Mountain is an important place for botanists to be able to study these unique specimens. Approximately 40 plants were first discovered in this region and have the term “suthep” in the scientific name (Rerkasem



Figure 2: Some endemic species of Doi Suthep Mountain ending with the word that revealed with “suthep” in the scientific name: a) *Cyrtodactylus doisuthep*; b) *Sebastonyma suthepianna*; c) *Doimon doisutep*; d) *Erythrophyllporus suthepensis*; e) *Gardenia sootepensis*; f) *Aspidistra sutepensis*; g) *Bulbophyllum sutepense*; h) *Rothmannia sootepensis*; i) *Eria sutepensis* (Source: Author 2018)

and Rerkasem 1995) [Fig. 2]. The significance of the natural habitat of Doi Suthep could relate to World heritage criteria (x), to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of science or conservation.

2.2 Cultural Values

Doi Suthep is considered to be Chiang Mai’s soul, as it can be seen from everywhere within Chiang Mai city. It is revered as a sacred place, and there are many living local traditions on Doi Suthep Mountain [Fig. 3]. For instance, offerings to the ancestor’s spirits and the tradition of walking up on foot to pay homage to the Buddha’s Relic are annually performed. Fai Hin Temple, Sri Soda Temple, Pha Lad Temple, and Phra That Doi Suthep Temple are located along the trail to the top of the mountain. The locations of these Lanna-style buildings,

with their viharas and distinctive ornaments, are considered to represent the four stages of Enlightenment, according to the Buddhist scripture of Lanna. On the top of the mountain, at around 1,060 m, is Phra That Doi Suthep Temple, which is a Buddhist place of worship where visitors pay homage to the Lord Buddha’s relic. This temple is of deep spiritual significance and is regarded as one of the most important nationally and internationally. San Ku, the abandoned pagoda from the 8th century, located on the peak of Doi Suthep Mountain, is regarded as the highest archaeological site in Thailand. All of Doi Suthep’s temples are sacred places to both Indigenous and local Chiang Mai people.

2.3 Interdependencies between Doi Suthep Mountain and Chiang Mai people

The Chiang Mai people refer to themselves as the Khon Muang and are of mixed origin. The first inhabitants were known as the Lawa and Mon, who

¹ The IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria: version 3.1 (2001)

A1: Reduction (Critically Endangered = $\geq 90\%$, Endangered = $\geq 70\%$, Vulnerable = $\geq 50\%$) over past 10 yrs or 3 generations where causes of reduction are understood AND have ceased AND are reversible

A2: Reduction (Critically Endangered = $\geq 80\%$, Endangered = $\geq 50\%$, Vulnerable = $\geq 30\%$) over past 10 yrs or 3 generations where causes of reduction may not be understood OR may not have ceased OR may not be reversible

C: Population size (Critically Endangered <250, Endangered <2,500, Vulnerable <10,000)



Figure 3: Some cultural properties on Doi Suthep Mountain: a) Phra That Doi Suthep Temple; b) the Annual Tradition of walking up on foot to pay homage to the Buddha's Relic; c) Pha Lad Temple; d) Sri Soda Temple; e) Fai Hin Temple (Source: Author 2017)



Figure 4: Reflections of plants from Doi Suthep Mountain as cultural assets in Chiang Mai Old City: a) Plants as offerings; b) Plants in decorative patterns; c) Plants in murals (Source: Author 2018)

originated from the south of Myanmar, Second group is Tai, who had migrated from the northern area to Chiang Mai from the 10th century, as well as Hill tribe, and the Haw Chinese coming overland from Yunnan. In the mid-19th century, Westerners started arriving with Christian missionaries and increased in numbers with the growth of the teak industry. The teak industry also attracted large numbers of Shan who worked all over the north for the logging companies. Thus, Chiang Mai has a very culturally diverse population.

Since the establishment of Chiang Mai, this culturally diverse community has continued to revere the natural and cultural aspects of Doi Suthep Mountain. Various species of plants from Doi Suthep have tangible and intangible significance for the local communities, including those with spiritual meaning (481 species), used as offering materials (55 species), found in local literature (116 species), a part of beliefs and customs (38 species), and those available for mural painting and decorative patterns (20 species) [Fig.4]. In choosing the Doi Suthep Mountain area as the site for the capital, King Meng Rai considered the proximity of major streams, which supplied water for drinking and agriculture. At the same time, the city was prepared for water running from the west of the city, which could be blocked by Doi Suthep, preventing flooding of the city. Such strong interdependencies can also be found in Hmong villages on the mountain.

Furthermore, Doi Suthep Mountain has provided many organizations with educational opportunities, such as the Observatory of Chiang Mai University, and Research Stations by Kasetsart University, including the Seismological Research Station.

■ 3. Designations

The Doi Suthep Mountain was designated at the national level as the 24th National Park of Thailand in 1981. At the local level, the Doi Suthep Mountain is claimed to be a spiritual place for local people in Chiang Mai and those in the north. Doi Suthep reflects the ancient wisdom of the city's design and planning, which was based on auspicious and spiritual elements called "Chai Mongkol" or the auspicious elements for victory. Built over 700 years ago by King Meng Rai, the city planning shows a distinctive selection and use of Chai Mongkol landscapes, involving the plains land, water, and forest on Doi Suthep, which were annexed and connected from East to West. Having Doi Suthep to the West of the city presents a good fortress

against the city's enemies. Additionally, it has long generated and provided water sources for the city to the east below, while the city was built in response to the landscape morphology. Ancient canals and reservoirs at the foot of the mountain are still vividly evident nowadays. The top of Doi Suthep is, very importantly, where another King had invited and placed the auspicious Buddha's bones in the stupa inside Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, signifying the most sacred place in the city. For years, the entire mountain of Doi Suthep was taken as a deeply spiritual location tightly embraced by the Chiang Mai residents and local people nearby.

The Thai Government revised its World Heritage Tentative List on the 9th of February, 2015, and included the "Monuments, Sites, and Cultural Landscape of Chiang Mai, Capital of Lanna" under criteria (i), (ii), (iii) and (vi), with Doi Suthep as a component (UNESCO 2016). This new entry was noted by the World Heritage Committee that met in Bonn, Germany, in July 2015. The interconnections between the natural and cultural values of Chang Mai are particularly highlighted in the proposed justification of criterion (i): Chiang Mai Old City was designed to serve a multiple set of specific purposes, such as defense, which included connectivity with nature and benefit from the surrounding natural landscape. Furthermore, city planning was directed towards prosperity through wet rice cultivation and production. However, no natural criteria are being used in the Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project for the inclusion of Doi Suthep. Yet, the natural values of Doi Suthep are not only essential to Chiang Mai Old City but also globally remarkable as they can be linked with its outstanding cultural values – which result in the unique way of life in Chiang Mai. This paper expects that the consideration of these nature-culture linkages will create awareness about the natural values of Doi Suthep and support the development of a more comprehensive framework for the Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project, encouraging the Chiang Mai local people to cherish and preserve Doi Suthep accordingly.

■ 4. Management

Doi Suthep Mountain has been studied, conserved, and recognized as nationally important, and is protected by several laws. On the one hand, the Suthep Pui National Park is registered and protected under the Thailand National Park Act B.E. 2504 (1961 enforced by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment). In this framework, the protected area has been categorized as a Special Utilization

Area, Recreation Area, Service Area, Forest Area, and Reforestation Area. Nevertheless, some groups of people still live in the protected area, including many hill tribe people such as the Lawa and Hmong, who migrated from remote areas in Chiang Mai and Lamphun to Doi Suthep Mountain and settled down there before the area became a National Park. On the other hand, the archaeological monuments and sites are protected as archaeological property under The National Act for The Protection of Ancient Monuments, Ancient Objects, Art Objects, and National Museums B.E. 2504 (1961).

Furthermore, animism is important in Chiang Mai culture (Wonglangka 2013) and plays an important role in conserving the Doi Suthep Mountain. Tree ordination, prolonging the forest destiny, and sacred trekking for all groups of people on Visaka Buja's Day, enable the Chiang Mai people to maintain a strong sense of belonging at Doi Suthep Mountain and personally develop at a higher spiritual level. Such practices also keep natural resources, environment, and ecosystems balanced and coordinated perfectly with the lifestyle of the Chiang Mai people. These cultural practices on Doi Suthep are relevant to nature conservation and imply that the natural resources on Doi Suthep are considered as holy objects of Chiang Mai Old City. The continuation of these practices is, therefore, essential for the conservation of Doi Suthep natural values.

Visiting hours for most areas within Doi Suthep-Pui National Park are generally, 8 am – 6 pm. However, under special circumstances, such as religious ceremonies, special regulations are in place to enable people to walk on the trail overnight, to carry lit candles, and to walk up the mountain – all of which are long-standing Buddhist traditions. Normally, regulations do not allow fire in the National Park. Allowing for traditional use fosters the deep sense of ownership and belonging in the local communities, and this results in the ongoing participation in natural resource conservation. In May 2019, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment launched a policy to ban plastic on Doi Suthep Mountain. The campaign started during the sacred trekking on Visaka Buja's Day. The Provincial Electricity Authority subsequently also managed to maintain a neat appearance to improve the visual quality of the Doi Suthep Mountain area.

While there are many different regulations considered and disciplines involved in managing Chiang Mai, such as an overlapping of authorities in the Urban Planning Law and the Land-use Law,

the aim of "Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project" is to bring all of the sectors together to collaborate and to learn from each other for heritage conservation. The Project has been organized by the Chiang Mai University, with the participation of representatives from various conservation groups from the community of Chiang Mai, provincial agencies, and the abbots of all the temples in Chiang Mai Old City.

■ 5. State of Conservation, Challenges, and Opportunities

The urban sprawl of Chiang Mai city spreads right up to the foot of Doi Suthep, increasing the amount of population living in or near Doi Suthep. Many development projects which encroach into Doi Suthep mountains have been constructed to profit from the tourism boom. Urbanization, which has caused great damage to the Doi Suthep mountains, has had three main effects (Elliott 1994):

- 1) Construction activities have damaged the vegetation, degrading the forest and increasing soil erosion, causing the siltation of watercourses.
- 2) The improvement of access has facilitated activities which damage the forest, e.g., hunting, collecting butterflies and orchids for sale, rubbish dumping, tree felling, etc., and increased the risk of forest fire.
- 3) The sense of wilderness, sought by many people who visit the tourism place in the mountains, has been destroyed.

To counteract these effects, cultural identities associated with heritage could help in enhancing a sense of belonging for a group or clan of people (Shinbira 2012). The "sense of belonging" shapes the relation between human and place by introducing the connectedness of space. Therefore, enhancing the sense of belonging through cultural practice can encourage the awareness of places (Hall 2014), and can be applied to the conservation practice. The sense of belonging and ownership the Chiang Mai people have over Doi Suthep Mountain were evidenced in June 2014 when there was a public backlash in relation to a proposal to build a large golden dome in the temple on the top of the mountain. The people had concerns that the structure would be an eyesore and obstruct the views to and from the mountaintop temple and the Phra That Doi Suthep Temple, therefore, scrapped those construction

plans. In June 2018, the Chiang Mai people also protested a government housing project proposed in the foothills of Doi Suthep, which resulted in the government agreeing to end the controversial housing project and return the area to the forest park.

■ 6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The cultural landscape of Doi Suthep mountains is a living heritage that has survived for many centuries. It continues to maintain its spatial definition and arrangement, despite the changing circumstances at the local, national, and international levels. A framework for the management of Doi Suthep should consider both its natural and cultural values. The mountain, sacred as a hidden land both to Animism and Buddhism, represents a unique space for the co-existence and exchange between different religious traditions and ethnicities, constituting the base for Lanna identity (sometimes referred to as Neo-Lanna or Modern Lanna), and unity. The ensemble of myths, stories, and notable events, as well as the sacred texts themselves, convey and manifest the cultural meanings projected onto these natural resources and the Indigenous and specific Buddhist cosmogony that developed in the Lanna region. The interplay between nature and culture in Doi Suthep can be seen explicitly.

The case study of Doi Suthep also illustrates the multiple values of the mountain with various stakeholders. Taking a values-based approach can present a challenge for the management of Doi Suthep Mountain as a National Park. Natural heritage protection laws can be in essential disagreement when trying to recognize and involve the whole range of the different stakeholder groups and their differing values equally in the conservation and management of heritage. One of the discrepancies of heritage management on the Doi Suthep Mountain is the difference in natural and cultural heritage. The use of only nature conservation protocols may not suit the cultural properties and cultural practices of local people.

At the moment, the Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project is striving to push Chiang Mai Old City to be recognized as a World Cultural Heritage site. Doi Suthep, considered a part of Chiang Mai Old City, would be part of the cultural property as it is the sacred mountain of the city. However, the preliminary information points out that Doi Suthep could fulfill the criteria of Outstanding Universal Value in terms of Natural

Heritage, which are in urgent need of protection from what has been stated above. Therefore, the proposal of the Chiang Mai World Heritage Initiative Project should further extend its framework and add the natural dimension of Doi Suthep to preserve its natural values, from Cultural heritage to Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage, before there is a further decline.

Doi Suthep still provides spiritual significance to the city and its people and is the fundamental reference of Chiang Mai Old City planning. Further study on the nature-culture linkages in Doi Suthep may inform a new conservation framework, re-thinking the category of this heritage site. Applying a nature-culture linkage approach may mitigate threats and support a sustainable heritage conservation strategy.

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