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A passenger boat passes the Baan Khrua neighbourhood in central Bangkok. Photos: Tibor Krausz

Clinging to the edge

Once a hub of the Thai silk industry, Baan Khrua, in Bangkok, has fallen on hard times and is now a shanty town hunkered in the shadow of glitzy malls and five-star hotels

Tibor Krausz
life@scmp.com

Times have changed for Manasan Benjarongchinda, a Chinese-Thai octogenarian known as Uncle Aood in the shanty town of Baan Khrua, in the heart of Bangkok.

He started making silk textiles when he was 13 and spent nearly seven decades dyeing, weaving and spinning threads. These days, he mostly whiles away the time in his cluttered, low-ceilinged home, which doubles as a showroom for his homespun fabrics.

Manasan has lived all his life in this old house down a little alley in a maze-like warren of winding footpaths and tightly packed homes of wood, plywood, breeze block and cement, alongside a fetid canal that flows from the Chao Phraya River and is plied by long passenger boats with roaring diesel engines.

The elderly man rarely has visitors any more, so he wears only a traditional plaid sarong as he reminisces about the past. "When I was young we bathed in the canal and washed silk in it. The water



When I came here 20 years ago, this site was covered in rubbish ... I built this house by myself

MUEARN RUNGSAWANG

was still clean," he recalls. "There were orchards around here and children filched coconuts and rose apples from trees. But now it's not like that."

His community, in the northern part of a slum-like neighbourhood that sprawls along the waterway, has changed over the years, but the city around it has changed far more. The entire op-

posites are similar slums of jumbled shacks that cling to the edges of canals like barnacles within sight of gleaming skyscrapers and high-end shopping centres. Yet the contrast between old and new, rich and poor, is perhaps nowhere as stark as at Baan Khrua North.

A short walk away lies Siam Square, a trendy haunt with glitzy malls frequented by the city's wealthiest residents, who drive Mercedes-Benz cars, wear Louis Vuitton clothes and dine at gourmet restaurants. "I don't go to these places. They're not for me," says Muearn Rungsawang, a retired construction supervisor who lives in a shack beside a busy four-lane bridge that spans the canal.

Muearn lives a few hundred metres from the malls and sleeps in a deckchair covered in blankets inside his dwelling, fashioned from planks, sheets of corrugated iron and scavenged pieces of cardboard. He shares it with his wife and mentally impaired middle-aged daughter, whom he adopted when she was 12. "She has many blood relatives, but none of them ever visit her," Muearn says.

His shack stands behind a five-star hotel, which opened a few years ago on the site of an old warehouse. A room there costs more for a night than Muearn's family earns in a month from selling fizzy drinks, instant noodles, snacks and cigarettes to passers-by on their way to a small pier.

Yet the retiree sounds content with his lot. "When I came here 20 years ago, this site was covered in rubbish," Muearn says. "I cleaned it up, working all day, all night."

Despite being a squatter, he takes a proprietary view of the premises. He even rents out the small adjoining space to a local woman for her food stall. "I had nothing when I settled here. I built this house by myself," Muearn says proudly.

At the other side of a pedestrian passageway under the bridge, three dozen paces from his shack, stands a royal palace compound that serves as the residence of Princess Sirindhorn, a sister of Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn. The palace is a century old, but Baan Khrua is much older.

It was King Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok, or Rama I, the founder of Thailand's reigning Chakri dynasty, who gifted this plot of land in his new capital to ethnic Cham Muslims from Cambodia as a reward for joining his army to repel Burmese invaders and conquer Khmer territory in the late 18th century.

Descendants of those Cham settlers still live in Baan Khrua, which remains a mostly Muslim community, with small mosques and old Islamic burial grounds with wooden grave markers among tufts of tropical vegetation sprouting above graves.

"My grandmother still spoke Khmer," says Arkom Inpankeaw, 62, who is a head of Baan Khrua North with its 700 households. He lives in a simple two-storey dwelling facing a modern block of flats across the canal and sells noodle soup on a waterside walkway beside the high-rise. "When I was



Arkom Inpankeaw, a Muslim who lives in the shanty town of Baan Khrua, busies himself at his noodle soup stand.

little, she would tell me stories about our history," he adds.

Back then, Baan Khrua was home to well-off silk weavers, many of whom lived in traditional teak houses with airy verandas and vegetable patches. Only a few of those houses remain here and there, in various stages of decay.

The locals owed their fortune to Jim Thompson, an American businessman who revived Thailand's silk industry in the 1950s and set up base across the canal in a leafy compound, now a museum. In 1967 Thompson mysteriously vanished during a visit to Malaysia's Cameron Highlands.

If you take a walk around here, you'll see people getting high all the time ... Drugs are everywhere in communities like this

JAKKARIN SUKUMAPAI, MOTORCYCLE TAXI DRIVER

"Many people here were distraught," recalls Manasan, who knew the American well. "For years he rowed across in a boat every morning to inspect our latest fabrics or give us new orders," he adds. "He often came by my house."

Baan Khrua's silk-making cottage industry soon went into decline. Hanging from a post in Manasan's house is a framed photograph, from around 1960, of Thompson standing on a wooden platform in the canal and inspecting a striped, salmon-pink textile.

Manasan, then a handsome, sinewy young man, sits to his right cutting yarn under newly dyed

fabrics hung out to dry. Peering from an edge of the photograph is a little boy of around two years old. That boy was Arkom. "I doubt Mr Thompson would recognise me now," he says.

The American wouldn't recognise much of Baan Khrua, either. Chronic poverty is a blight on the once prosperous community. Substance abuse has been rife, especially among younger residents, who take cheap methamphetamine pills called *yaba* ("crazy medicine") and other stimulants. Some drug users are still of primary-school age, says Arkom, who organises sporting events for local children to keep them off drugs.

"If you take a walk around here, you'll see people getting high all the time," says Jakkarin Sukumapai, 36, a motorcycle taxi driver whose family has lived here for generations.

"Lots of people do drugs. I used to too – cannabis, yaba, crystal meth," he adds matter-of-factly, sitting on a plastic stool at a street food stall. As if on cue, a shirtless man appears on unsteady feet, staring glassy-eyed. "Drugs are everywhere in communities like this," Jakkarin says. Many people take them recreationally, but plenty of them become addicts, he says.

Another threat to life in Baan Khrua comes from fires that can gut entire blocks of wooden houses in no time. Recently, a short circuit in a hut occupied by a Burmese migrant worker started a fire that burned down a dozen dwellings around it.

Jakkarin's family inheritance, an imposing teak building, perished in a similar inferno years ago. He now lives in a smaller cement and wood structure. With several other locals, the moto-taxi driver volunteers at their community's fire station – a hut with some firefighter gear and a bicycle for nightly patrols.

The biggest threat to the community is posed by officials who would like to redevelop the area. The last time a group of them showed up some years ago, locals chased them away by squirting them with sewage water. "They came looking neat in their uniforms and fled looking like a mess," Arkom says, chuckling. "They haven't been back. This is our home and we don't want to move."



Chinese-Thai silk maker Manasan Benjarongchinda stands in his simple home beside a picture from around 1960 of himself with the late American businessman and silk tycoon Jim Thompson outside the same house in Baan Khrua.