

Silk mavens still weaving their spell

Sericulture alive and kicking in Surin's Phayaram village despite climate challenges.

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Thai sericulture is trying to adapt to the growth of technology and the impact of global warming, with support from authorities and overseas experts.

Phayaram, a small village in tambon Phearam of Muang district in the northeastern province of Surin, is home to 122 households and a population of 523 people.

The village was established in 1761 during King Ekkathat's reign of the Ayutthaya Kingdom.

Agricultural wisdom, including rice farming, livestock farming, sericulture and silk weaving, has been passed down in this community for centuries.

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"Local folks continue to preserve their old livelihoods, traditions and customs as well as supernatural beliefs, especially the intellectual heritage of growing mulberries, and raising silkworms and weaving silk, which is used from birth until the end of life," said Yothaka Bunmak, head of the Sericultural Women's Group's Phayaram Community Enterprise.

Every woman in the village must learn and master these skills before getting married, she added.

Until very recently, mulberry cultivation and silk production in Surin province depended on the mercy of Mother Nature.

Unless mulberry leaves were abundant, only scant numbers of silkworms could be raised, yielding insufficient silk harvests.

The impacts of global warming also put sericulture at high risk as silkworms are highly susceptible to rapid changes in the weather.

Such a condition can cause the silkworms to die, resulting in the silk producers losing their income for the entire year.

Ms Yothaka said other natural disasters, such as inundation and drought, also threaten the province.

Last year, the province developed the so-called Surin Province Development Strategy (2023–2042), which focuses on adapting agricultural production through modern knowledge and technology to upgrade products' quality and value.

In April 2022, a development project called the Climate Smart Farmer Model for Mulberry Silk Cultivation in Surin was initiated by the Foundation for Community-Soul (FCS), a local organisation.

The project received financial support from the Adaptation Fund Climate Innovation Accelerator (Afcia) under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and is running for 16 months, from August 2023 to December 2024.

Orawan Yafa, the project manager, said the focus is on promoting innovation to help farmers combat the possible impact of climate change while protecting their long-preserved authenticity.

Organic mulberry leaf cultivation, traditional silk reeling and native silk patterns are used in the training process.

Phayaram village has been envisioned as a future learning centre for traditional mulberry silk cultivation.

The idea was inspired by Thailand's Jim Thompson Farm in Nakhon Ratchasima and Japan's Tomioka Silk Mill in Gunma Prefecture.

Tomioka City is recognised by Unesco as a World Heritage Site for its traditional mulberry silk cultivation and silk weaving.

Its silk mill is Japan's first modern silk factory for processing silkworms.

Miyake Setuko, 72, the mill's representative, told a delegation of Thai silk farmers and media during their visit to Tomioka last month that the 152-year-old factory once had as many as 556 women workers operating 300 looms using silk weaving techniques from France.

The factory also houses Arafune Cold Storage, a natural ancient-style depository that provides a perfect nursery for silkworm eggs and enables the mass production of cocoons.

The storage chamber was created by piles of fallen rocks and retained perfect air ventilation and cool temperatures, which are best for the cocoons, regardless of the outside weather.

The Arafune storage was closed 70 years ago and replaced by new technology.

Aside from the silk mill, the group also visited the Tajima Yahei Sericulture Farm, also in Gunma Prefecture.

The farm was once a residence of Yahei Tajima who developed Japan's modern silk cultivation techniques called "seiryō iku".

The farm is also registered as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

"We could see from the visit that Japanese sericulture knowledge is well-organised and carefully preserved," Ms Yothaka said.

"The tour gave us the inspiration to be open to opportunity and learn to adapt," she added.

Ms Yothaka said Phayaram village developed its own silk variety using organically raised indigenous silkworms, which yield shiny silk threads with a soft and durable texture.

Phayaram's silk, she said, is among the most expensive on offer, priced at 3,000–4,000 baht per kilogramme.

The strong point of Phayaram silk is the traditional reeling method. This involves using clay pots to maintain an optimal temperature, resulting in consistently sized threads.

The community's silk production is chemical-free and conservation-oriented in every step from the silkworm to the store shelf.

The community also uses natural dyes to produce naturally beautiful colours that do not harm the environment for its treasured iconic patterns, called Hoh, Saku and Amprom.

The weaving process also emphasises traditional weaving techniques, which are crucial for the fabrics to be certified by Queen Sirikit Sericulture Centre and granted royal insignias.

"Every piece of silk fabric we produce represents pride in continuing our traditional profession and heritage.

"Now we must learn how to cope with global warming, to preserve our livelihoods and identities as long as possible," Ms Yothaka said.

Jittiporn Jindakaew, director of the Queen Sirikit Sericulture Centre Regional Office 4 in Nakhon Ratchasima, said the centre has supported community silk production, including skill development and mulberry cultivation to enhance the value of the products in line with the policy of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives for many years.