

High culture goes high tech

The Culture Ministry's new m-culture website preserves national wisdom for future generations

STORY: **SASIWIMON BOONRUANG**

What is *sama-ngat*? What is *ja-ping*? What is *nern-pitsawong*?" a little girl asks her mother and others while trying to complete her homework assignment. But all the replies are along the lines of: "Hmm, that sounds familiar." The girl happens to notice the tagline "Everything about Thai culture on one website". So she looks up the website, finds the answers she's looking for and in the process is inspired to design T-shirts to sell.

You may have caught this TV spot last weekend, and now you too can generate data for the Culture Ministry. The m-culture.in.th website has been introduced to allow public access to local art and culture in a bid to conserve and develop Thailand's cultural capital.

A collaboration between the ministry and the National Electronics and Computer Technology Centre (Nectec), the m-culture website has been designed to serve as a cultural information centre under the theme of "Everything about Thai culture on one website".

It is a hub for gathering cultural content from each province for presentation in a digital format. Content includes pictures, video and animation.

There are four main categories. The first is People/Cultural Organisations, where you can learn about artists, village elders, followers of religious faith, writers, composers, associations, foundations, clubs, cultural networks and cultural agencies.

Under Cultural Inventions can be found information on antiques, artefacts, visual arts, books, audiovisual media, instruments and costumes.

The Lifestyle section houses information on ethnic religions and beliefs, traditions and rites, languages and literature, local wisdom, performance arts and music.

Cultural Venues is where you can experience archaeological sites, historical parks, historic sites, important architecture, religious places, museums, libraries, archives, monuments, cultural performance venues and tourist attractions.

The website allows visitors to share their experience of the enchanting places they have visited in Thailand or post information on local dishes that may be almost forgotten nowadays — anything related to "Thainess". All content is verified by the Provincial Cultures Committee before it is uploaded.

Somchai Sianglai, the culture permanent secretary, told *Life* that this cultural information centre is aimed at conserving Thai culture for future generations and to make the public more aware of its value.

The information on the website can add value by inspiring people to develop their skills further and enhance cultural products such as One Tambon One Product (Otop) goods through, for example, adopting "storytelling" in designs and on packaging.

The website will soon feature a Creative Economy section that provides an outlet free of charge for artists in any field, including folk and disabled artists, a virtual marketplace for their work.

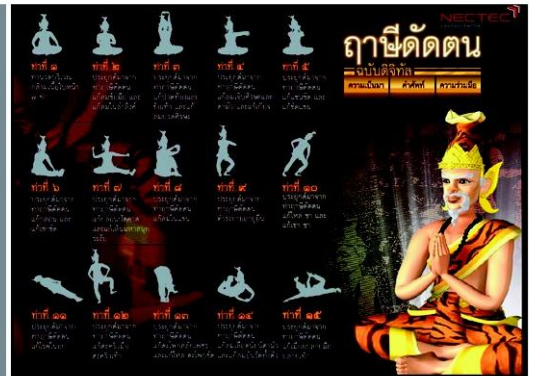
Along with cyberspace, physical space will be available at fairs where these artists are welcome to participate for free. Artists are now being approached about joining the website, and the section will be up and running soon.

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The Chao Sam Phraya National Museum displays 2,400 pieces in three separate buildings. Building 1 houses a large collection of artefacts arranged chronologically.

'Rue see dad ton', a Thai exercise for health. Nectec has combined 3D, motion-capture and video-editing technologies to enable the general public to learn the moves over the internet.



The Culture Ministry and Nectec have been working with Mahasarakham University to digitise Thai boxing.



A treasure-trove from Wat Rajaburana including an astonishing array of gold and gem-studded artefacts such as golden flasks, headgear, bracelets and an opulent gold sword sheath.

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It will also serve as a cultural incubation centre for new generations. Somchai said that since art and culture are part of the national heritage, the content can be used by schools and universities.

The Culture and Education ministries will work together to enable students to benefit more from culture. For example, after visiting a virtual museum, teachers can test their students on the knowledge they gained.

The M-culture site will also soon allow people to map out their travel routes, with the entire journey planned from start to finish based on information gleaned from the website.

Nectec has developed a pilot project featuring two cultural tourism sites in different provinces in a panorama format — Phimai Historical Park in Nakhon Ratchasima and Phu Phrabat Historical Park in Udon Thani. Visitors can view information on the M-culture website as well as by mobile using the M-culture app available at the iPhone App Store and the Android Market.

“The Culture Ministry wants to respond to each group of people. This digital offering is aimed at capturing the hearts of a new generation and facilitating tourism,” said Somchai.

M-culture is part of Nectec’s “Digitised Thailand” initiative for developing Thailand’s national archives by gathering together all physical data scattered around the nation and converting it into a digital format. People at all levels of

society can access an enormous wealth of knowledge at any time and from anywhere over the internet.

“Digitised Thailand” represents an integration of different technologies that Nectec has been working on for more than a decade to create the country’s largest digital archive.

Nectec is also working with the Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna to digitise cultural information and wisdom from the former Lanna Kingdom for the “Digitised Lanna” project.

This includes data on Lanna dance, with motion-capture technology used to create digital versions of this art form. It will serve as a community library for villagers and as an e-learning resource.

Virach Sornlertlamvanich, a senior Nectec researcher, said apart from digitisation technology to develop a virtual 3D museum, natural language processing technology — including a web crawler, which is used to collect data and act as a smart search engine — are key elements used to gather information. Knowledge-engineering technology also plays an important role.

Large database management systems and data-mining technology are also significant for managing the overall database, while networking and security programs along with application program interfaces are used to facilitate access, searches and information delivery.

Virach said the first phase of “Digitised Thailand” is almost complete.

“It’s all about content utilisation, and the next phase will be an extension for commercial purposes. For example, M-culture will see an increase in Otop product sales over the next year,” he said.