

Antique Chiangmai

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Planning to visit Chiang Mai, and do some shopping? If you are, there's an antique and handicraft emporium you should visit, and its owner you should meet. The shop is Banyen Place, and the owner is Banyen Aksornsai.

Banyen is a remarkable woman. She is from the northern hill tribes, born in a small village nestled in the mountains along the Thai-Burmese border. She came to Chiang Mai when she was quite young, riding a bicycle, selling souvenirs to tourists arriving by train. "I started selling at the market place in Fang when I was seven," she will tell you, through an interpreter. "After saving enough money," she adds, "I bought a bicycle." That was her humble beginning. Today, she is owner and manager of one of the biggest, and most prosperous, antique emporiums in Thailand.

I first met her more than twenty years ago when she operated to House of Banyen on Wualai Road. It was quite a show place then. At first glance anyone seeing the place for the first time might have thought it was an old royal palace or at least a high-ranking government official's residence. It was neither. The House of Banyen was not actually one house but the collection of houses, all in one compound which could well have served as a repository for historical art and architecture of Thailand.

The only difference was that everything in the compound and the various houses was for sale. Or, I should say, almost everything. Her old bicycle, painted black, hanging on a wall couldn't be bought for any price.

For sheer size, the House of Banyen had to be one of the largest of its kind in Asia, but size wasn't its only attribute. It had items a collector could find nowhere else around the world. Imagine a drum, but no ordinary drum. These were old ceremonial drums, some measuring perhaps five metres long and so heavy half a dozen men couldn't lift them. They were mounted on huge wagon wheels, and were towed from place to place. You could buy the wheels too.

Or what about carved pediments for the angled roof on your house. They might measure six metres or more across. Or maybe you want to buy a temple, an actual temple. It may well be larger than the house you live in. These too were for sale, disassembled and stacked in back courtyards.

They were all there on display at the House of Banyen, and then one dreadful day. A fire destroyed everything. She had no insurance, and gone was an antique collection worth millions in baht.

Most people would have given up, but not Banyen Aksornsai. She regretted most of all the loss of her old bicycle, for it was the symbol of her success, and a constant reminder of the hard road she had travelled. But symbols she could do without. She set to work once again. That was ten years ago. Her head office is still on Wualai Road, but she now has a factory at Tambon Padaed in Chiang Mai, and new antique emporium at Ampure Mai-Tang forty kilometers from Chiang Mai on the road to Fang. But her masterpiece is the establishment on Airport Road near the Chiang Mai International Airport. It's even more grandiose than her earlier House of Banyen. She also has a private museum open to the public on Airport Road.

Visiting any Banyen's places is an education, even if you're not buying. Visitors can spend hours just strolling through the buildings. They are showplaces, and seldom will you find a finer collection of Thai houses open to the public.

Many of the houses are connected by walkways on the upper level. The ceilings are vaulted, some with beams. The windows have no glass or screens. Instead, they have carved openings with shutters that permit a free flow of air and light.

The houses, of course, serve as a repository for the relics of Thailand. All the rooms and the stairways are crammed with every imaginable item. Even the exposed walkways are overflowing with carved eaves, fascias, statues, and Thai mythological figures. She keeps her business open 10 to 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and she's the only person who holds the keys.

She has 70 people collecting for her around the country. She also maintains several dozen wood carvers. She makes up special orders of carvings, and does duplicates of the ancient designs that reach her shops from the collectors in the field.