

Integration of art and culture to develop the hotel business in North-eastern Thailand

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Abstract – *This qualitative investigation had three research aims: 1) To study the history and background of the hotel industry in Isan; 2) To study the current situation and problems with using art in order to develop the tourism industry in Thailand; 3) To study the integration of art and culture to develop the hotel business in North-eastern Thailand. Nine hotels were selected from four provinces in North-eastern Thailand as the research population and the research sample was composed of 86 individuals. Tools used for data collection were survey, observation, interview, focus group discussion and workshop. Results show that hoteliers in North-eastern Thailand developed their businesses as a reaction to the economic crisis and failing trade. To attract more tourists to the region, hotel managers integrated traditional Thai art to their businesses, especially local Isan art. This investigation of nine hotels in Isan identified nine areas in which art has been integrated into hotel businesses. These are paintings, sculptures, architecture, literature, music and dance, the four Buddhist necessities of life (food, accommodation, clothing and medicine), beliefs, customs and ceremonies. By integrating elements of each of these categories into their hotels, business owners and managers have been able to generate extra trade.*

Keywords – *Art, culture, hotel, Isan, North-eastern Thailand.*

INTRODUCTION

Hotel businesses are one of the major sources of income in the tourist sector. They act as representatives of the nation in welcoming foreign visitors [1]. The hotel business in Thailand is a particularly large and lucrative sector, with over 5,000 independent registered establishments (Table 1).

Development of the hotel industry in North-eastern Thailand (Isan) first started to intensify in 1991, when there were very few international standard hotels in the region. From 1991, almost every province in the region has at least one 4-5 star hotel. The biggest business for hotels in the region was the hosting of conferences and seminars for government offices and

private businesses, as well as state or private business trips. There was very little domestic tourism and even less foreign tourism in Isan, especially when comparing figures to more popular resorts in the South or Central regions of the country. During the global economic crisis of 1997, all hotel trade in Isan suffered drastically from a decrease in conferences and seminars. Hotel owners organised a meeting to find a solution to the lack of business and were in agreement that the tourism sector offered the best hope. This meeting led to the formation of the ‘Isan Hotel Association’, an organization with the objective of promoting tourism in Isan [3].

Table 1. A breakdown of registered hotels in Thailand

Region	Number of Hotels	Percentage	Number of Hotel Rooms	Average number of rooms per hotel
Bangkok	294	5.42	58,586	199
Central	1,467	27.23	87,172	59
North	1,078	19.89	43,789	41
North-east	1,091	20.13	35,573	33
South	1,490	27.49	78,034	52
Total	5,420	100	303,154	56

Source: Economic and Social Statistics Bureau [2]

All hotels must provide a service for their clientele but two of the most important characteristics of a hotel for visiting tourists are tranquillity and beauty, which help put the mind at rest. For this reason, many hotels pay great attention to detail when designing and decorating their properties [4]. The identity of a hotel is often shaped by the art used to decorate it. This art is also a means of promoting and conserving traditional Thai identity [5]. The cost of including significant artwork in hotel decoration is high but aside from this there are few associated problems. Yet, many hotels in Isan do not fully embrace or promote traditional Thai art. For this reason, the research team was interested in analyzing the integration of art and culture to develop the hotel business in North-eastern Thailand.

RESEARCH AIMS

This investigation had three research aims to: study the history and background of the hotel industry in Isan; study the current situation and problems with using art in order to develop the tourism industry in Thailand; study the integration of art and culture to develop the hotel business in North-eastern Thailand.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research used data from document study and field research. The investigation began in August 2010. A sample population of hotels in Isan was purposively chosen based on the following four criteria: 1) The hotel was awarded 3-5 star status; 2) The hotel employees were required to wear traditional Isan dress; 3) The interior and exterior of the hotel were both decorated with traditional Thai art; 4) The hotels organised traditional cultural performances. Nine hotels were selected from four provinces. These were Rim Pao Hotel, Kosa Hotel, Pool Man Khon Kaen Hotel, Charoen Thani Khon Kaen Hotel, Ratchawadee Resort and Hotel, Thaksila Hotel, Ban Chiang Hotel, Charoen Hotel and President Hotel. The 86 research informants were purposively selected and divided into three groups. Group one, key informants, was composed of four hotel directors, four hotel owners, four provincial representatives from the ministry of tourism and sport and four provincial public relations officers. Group two, casual informants, was composed of six hotel managers, six hotel stakeholders, six room-maids, six receptionists, six food and beverage staff, six accounting staff, six maintenance staff and four cleaners. Group three, general informants, was composed of ten hotel guests and ten local residents.

Tools used for data collection were survey, observation, interview, focus group discussion and workshop. The data gathered was validated using a triangulation method [6]. The validated data was organised into categories according to the research aims and analysed following the typological analysis and descriptive analysis principles outlined by [7]. Results are presented here as a descriptive analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hotels in Isan were established to cater for domestic and international visitors to the region. The most popular hotels in the region are those with the greatest number of services and conveniences, which is a general trend for the industry worldwide [8]. For this reason, a number of the hotels studied in this investigation developed their services to try and attract more business, notably Rim Pao Hotel in Kalasin Province, Kosa Hotel in Khon Kaen and Thaksila Hotel in Mahasarakham Province. These hotels, among others, introduced aspects of traditional Thai culture into their decorations and services to raise their own profile, which require their management committees to display an extraordinary sense of vision and planning. This response is an example of culture reacting to the needs of people, a theory proposed by Malinowski [9].

These developments can be categorized into five areas of art – paintings, sculptures, architecture, literature and music and dance – and four areas of culture – the four Buddhist necessities of life (food, accommodation, clothing and medicine), beliefs, customs and ceremonies. By integrating elements of each of these categories into their hotels, business owners and managers have been able to generate extra trade. Some examples of developments in each of the categories are as follows:

- Paintings – The Pool Man Khon Kaen Hotel has installed paintings depicting traditional Isan culture, including images of Mon cloth design and weaving equipment, so that visitors can learn about the everyday life of local Isan people.
- Sculptures – The hotels in the Northern part of Isan, such as the Ban Chiang hotel, have decorated their properties with replicas of Ban Chiang heritage pottery to showcase the long and important history of the region.
- Architecture – All of the hotels have bedrooms designed according to traditional Isan structural patterns and with traditional materials.

- Literature – The Rim Pao Hotel has mounted a copy of Phra Vesandorn Chadok in its conference hall.
- Music and dance – All hotels organise traditional music performances at special events to showcase the local musical culture.
- The four Buddhist necessities of life – All hotels offer traditional Isan cuisine in their restaurants, decorate their rooms with traditional fabrics, provide traditional Isan-style uniforms for staff and run spas offering traditional Isan treatments.
- Beliefs – The hotels organise events related to local beliefs, particularly animist beliefs about spirits, such as the Charoen Hotel, which hosts a special ceremony to pay respects to its Chinese founders during the Chinese New Year celebrations.
- Customs – All of the hotels are active proponents of traditional Isan customs and promote inheritance by arranging special events during important festivals, such as Songkran.
- Ceremonies – Each hotel has its own identity and holds special ceremonies for its employees, such as the annual respect to elders during the Songkran festival when younger generations will bless their senior family and community members with water.

All of these developments have been made to ensure hotels in Isan have closer links to local culture and thus address consumer demand and interests [10]. The activities and changes also serve as an important means of preserving Isan culture, promoting local traditions and educating tourists in local customs.

The integration of traditional art in Isan hotels affects all hotel employees as they are representatives of Isan culture. They are expected to dress and behave as traditional Isan culture instructs: politely and with a warm smile. The staff, especially the front office staff, is expected to wear traditional Isan clothing, including traditional cotton, silk, mud mee silk, phraewa silk and khid silk clothes. These fabrics have been inherited over the generations from traditional indigenous knowledge. Currently, hotels expect staff to wear traditional Isan clothing at least once or twice a week (depending on the establishment).

Paintings and sculptures installed in the hotels depict traditional lifestyle in Isan and are designed to both educate and appeal to the aesthetic senses of their guests. These are perhaps the first aspects of Isan culture that will be seen by the guests due to their prominent position in the foyer and lobby areas. The hoteliers are attempting to create a unique identity for

their premises that reflects and represents the local community. This identity is made apparent to guests from the moment they enter the building. Importantly, each hotel adopts a different theme or style, which means that each is able to add their own unique value to the market.

Although room style, furniture and decorations are partly determined by initial construction and design, much of the room identity is determined by staff members responsible for maintenance and upkeep of the facilities [11]. For this reason, it is important for hoteliers to carefully select room-maids and other service personnel to uphold the image of their establishment. Additionally, maintenance staff should be aware and skilled at traditional repair techniques and using traditional materials to carry out hotel renovations. Literature can also be integrated into room identity by assigning names to the hotel rooms that derive from traditional local tales.

In addition to bedroom decoration, restaurant decoration is another method of integrating traditional art into Isan hotels. By using traditional fabrics as tablecloths and serviettes and by using local flowers and handcrafted ornaments to decorate the tables, hoteliers can continue to promote the hotel identity at all times [12]. Another handicraft that can be used in the dining halls is fruit and vegetable carving. This is an intricate local art-form that can brighten restaurant displays or be used in plate garnishes. Traditional Isan music and performances can be held to entertain guest while they are dining, in addition to the regular events hosted by the hotels. If background music is to be played in the restaurants, it could be local folk music rather than mainstream Western or Thai popular music. The clearest way hotels include local art in the dining experience is the Isan menu, including such local favourites as somtam, kaeng om, grilled chicken and sticky rice.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Hoteliers in Northeastern Thailand developed their businesses as a reaction to the economic crisis and failing trade. To attract more tourists to the region, hotel managers integrated traditional Thai art to their businesses, especially local Isan art. This investigation of nine hotels in Isan identified nine areas in which art has been integrated into hotel businesses. These are paintings, sculptures, architecture, literature, music and dance, the four Buddhist necessities of life (food, accommodation, clothing and medicine), beliefs, customs and ceremonies. By integrating elements of each of these categories into their hotels, business

owners and managers have been able to generate extra trade.

The research team would like to make the following three suggestions for areas of future research as a result of the outcomes of this investigation: a comparative study of art integration in Isan hotels of different sizes; integration of traditional art in registered home-stays in Isan; customer preferences regarding traditional art in hotels in Isan. Further research in these areas will add to the body of knowledge contributed to by this investigation and aid hoteliers in optimizing art integration in their establishments in North-eastern Thailand.

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