

The Creation of a “Lanna Sense of Place” Through Fine Art in Northern Thailand: A Case Study of Hotel Lobby Decorations in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.¹

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Abstract

Thailand has struggled to maintain a balance between fast development and traditional values in the modern context. The northern region of Thailand is no exception and was used as a case study in assessing how local culture and belief can survive in the modern world. The Revival Period of Lanna, late-18th to 21st century, during the reign of Chao Kawila (1782-1813) up to the present, was chosen to be evaluated in this research. The scope was five-star hotels in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.

From this research, it was found that people are more attracted to the aesthetic value of the selected fine art. These fine art objects – furniture, sculpture, flower, painting, wood carving panel, human object, animal object and accessories – are the favourite items to be applied by the hotels. Such fine art tends to more function as decorative items as compared to previous practice where such items were applied to the main building structure. From the finding, it can be concluded that any trend or practice can be observed and any weaknesses can be improved in order to deliver accurate information about local style.

Keywords: a case study of hotel lobby decorations, Thai hotel decorations, the creation of sense of place, Lanna, hotel lobby decorations in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai

Introduction

Thailand is well-known as being among the top tourist destinations in the world. In 2014, Thailand was ranked Number 9 (*Table 1*) in the world for international tourism receipts with US\$38.4 billion collected (UNWTO).

Table 1: *Ranking according to International Tourism Receipts*

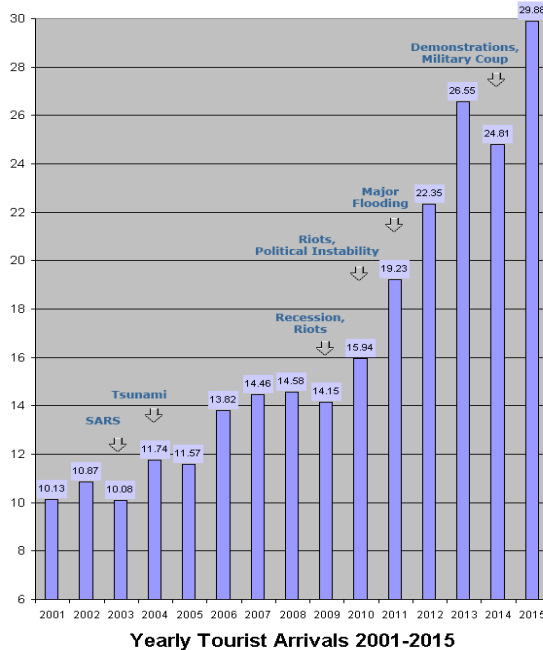
Rank	US\$	
	Billion	
	2013	2014
1. United States	172.9	177.2
2. Spain	62.6	65.2
3. China	51.7	56.9
4. France	56.7	55.4
5. Macao (China)	51.8	50.8
6. Italy	43.9	45.5
7. United Kingdom	41.0	45.3
8. Germany	41.3	43.3
9. Thailand	41.8	38.4
10. Hong Kong (China)	38.9	38.4

Source: UNWTO. “UNWTO Tourism Highlights: 2015 Edition.”

E-UNWTO, 2015, p. 6, www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284416899. Accessed 3 Apr. 2016.

In Thailand, tourism-based industries continue to expand and have generally received positive feedback from international tourists. The number of tourist arrival has steadily increased over the last 15 years (see *Figure 1*), even though Thailand had experienced a series of tumultuous events.

Fig. 1. Yearly Tourist Arrivals between 2001 until 2015 from: Vanhaleweyk, Guido. “Tourism Statistics Thailand 2000-2015.” ThaiWebsite.com, 2013, www.thaiwebsites.com/tourism.asp. Accessed 12 Feb 2016.



This positive energy had contributed to Thailand's economy, representing 10% of the country's overall GDP ("GDP in Thailand"). Tourism in Thailand has been identified as a main sector that generates more income and employment in many other related fields (UNESCAP).

According to the statistics, tourists generally spend more on accommodation as compared to other expenditures. From *Table 2*, it can be seen that tourists generally spend about 31% for accommodation from their overall expenditures.

Table 2: *Expenditures per Day by Category*

Type of Expenditure	Percentage of Expenditure %
Accommodation	31
Shopping	24
Food & Drinks	19
Entertainment	12
Transport	10
Sightseeing	4

Source: Vanhaleweyk, Guido. “Income from Tourism.” *ThaiWebsite.com*, 2013, www.thaiwebsites.com/tourism-income-Thailand.asp.

Accessed: 23 February 2016.

Tourists from Europe, Australia and the United States of America have shown a noticeable trend when they stay in Thailand. They preferred to stay longer as compared to those from other regions, with some staying for more than two weeks. The reason why they stay longer than Asians is because it is not worthwhile for them to stay for just a short period after having taken a long flight. In addition; Asians also have fewer holidays per year than those from Western countries (Vanhaleweyk). It is, therefore, pertinent for this research to explore how the accommodation providers in Thailand have designed their premises to attract tourists into selecting and staying at their hotels. To be more precise, this research is about what and how hotel have applied traditional Thai fine art elements in their space and how people perceive these designs.

This research explored how two main elements – culture and belief – influence space and what people’s impressions are towards such space. Culture and belief, as independent variables, can influence the designs of adaptive architecture. Adaptive architecture is specifically designed to adapt with the environment, the inhabitants and the objects within them. Specifically, this research explored how successful adaptive architecture has been in creating a sense of place in northern Thailand. To be successful in creating a sense of place in it is important to give the right experience to the visitors.

This is because each individual tends to have a different kind of experience when engaged in certain places. Each experience covers sensation, perception and conception. Hotel guests will perceive a lot of information from the lobby space and will respond by forming different impressions from the lobby area.

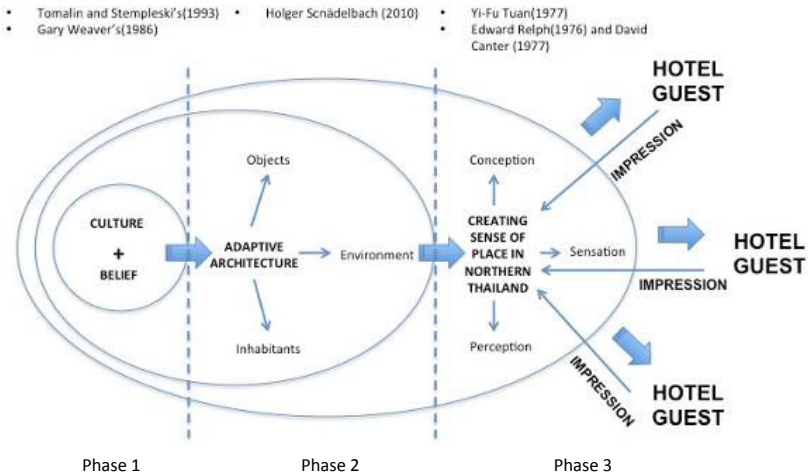


Fig. 2. *Conceptual Framework*

In order to address this issue, this research attempted to formulate an overview of the general practices in the use of local culture and beliefs in creating a “Lanna sense of place” in the decorations of seven lobbies in five-star hotels in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces. In addition, how modern design approaches – the introduction of modern design elements into a space in order to support a modern lifestyle – in the aspect of form and space that can blend religious beliefs and traditions in the interior decorations of hotel lobbies in creating a “Lanna sense of place” were identified. Finally, the impressions perceived by hotel guests regarding local identity from the studied hotel lobbies were gathered.

The hotel lobby area was selected to be observed for the research purpose. Apart from issues relating to a hotel guest’s privacy, safety and comfort, the lobby has been chosen because “the lobby plays a crucial role in branding and creating the hotel’s desired atmosphere”

(Rutkin). In addition, the hotel lobby is also the first place that creates an impression for the guest, and the beauty and attractiveness of the lobby design can likely influence many hotel guests in their decision-making; of whether they would want to stay or otherwise (Countryman and Jang). In-depth interviews were applied with various hotel representatives, such as Human Resource managers, general managers and directors. The main purpose of these interviews was to obtain information on the hotels in terms of the history and background of the hotels, and the overall design scheme of the hotels and lobby areas.

To evaluate the hotel lobby area, the researcher applied a hotel checklist (See *Table 3*) during a direct observation process. The hotel checklist was used to examine the interior architectural space of the hotel lobbies, which is “delimited by three planes: a floor, a wall, and a ceiling” (Ashihara). At each plane, the traditional Thai art and culture elements were documented either by photographs or sketches. These traditional Thai art and culture elements were categorized into two main groups: (a) building structure; and (b) building non-structure. For building structure, the items include roof structure, columns, beams, support structure, walls and flooring. For building non-structure, these can be classified into doors, windows, ventilation, ceilings and decorative components (lighting, furniture, human objects, animal objects, religious objects, sculptures, plants, ceramics, lacquers, mural paintings, paintings, basketry, silverworks, wood carving panels, textiles, stuccos, accessories).

No.	Hotel's name	Building Structure			Building Non-Structure																						
		Roof structure	Columns	Beams	Support structure	Walls	Flooring	Doors	Windows	Ventilation	Ceilings	Decorative Components															
												Lighting	Furniture	Human objects	Animal objects	Religious objects	Scriptures	Plants	Ceramics	Lacquer	Mural painting	Painting	Balcony	Silverwork	Wood carving panels	Textiles	Silicone
1	Dhara Dhevi Chiang Mai										✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓						✓		✓	✓
2	Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort, Chiang Rai		✓					✓	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓					✓	✓		✓
3	Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai	✓										✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓							✓
4	Dusit Island Resort, Chiang Rai	✓											✓		✓	✓	✓	✓						✓			✓
5	Ratilanna Riverside Spa Resort Chiang Mai	✓			✓			✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		✓			✓	✓	
6	Shangri-La Hotel Chiang Mai			✓	✓			✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓						✓	✓	✓
7	The Anantara Chiang Mai Resort											✓				✓	✓	✓			✓	✓				✓	

Table 3: Hotel checklist which is applied during direct observation

Results and Discussion

As can be seen in *Figure 3*, it was found that the hotels in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai use fine art in many parts of the buildings such as at the main structure of the building. However, the application of traditional fine art in the main part of the building has become less when compared to the previous practice. In the past, the beauty of a certain design or building could be seen at the main part of the building, such as at the doors, windows, walls, flooring, ceilings, columns, beams and the roof.

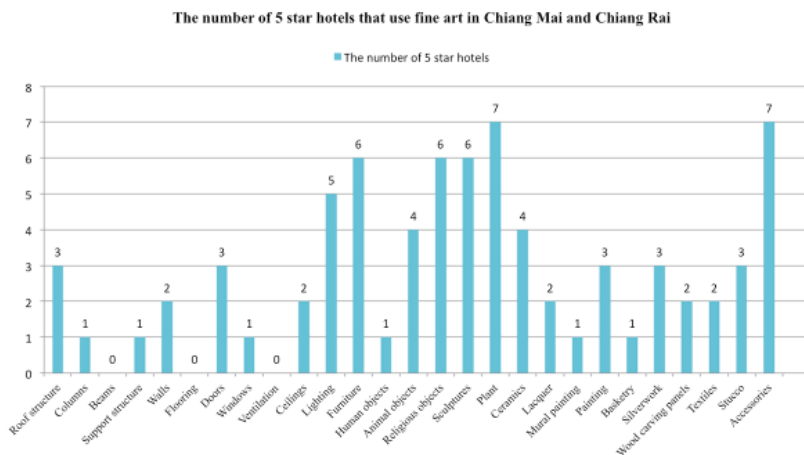


Fig. 3. Hotel checklist which is applied during direct observation

Flowers, accessories and furniture are the most widely-used item in the majority of the hotels. However, interestingly, Thailand's national flower, known as the Golden Shower Tree (*Cassia fistula*) (Figure 4), was not a popular item in the hotel decorations. Instead, orchids were the most used flower among these hotels. The main reason why these hotels use orchids in their space is because of practical reasons that orchids are more long-lasting compared to the Golden Shower Tree. Orchids also have more varieties of colour and shape, in addition to being much easier to obtain from suppliers.



Fig. 4. *Cassia fistula*, Golden Shower Tree from: Author, 2017.



Fig. 5. *Varieties of orchids were applied with different kinds of presentation from: Author, 2016*

For the accessories (*Figure 6*), the hotels normally use something that is typically used in daily life, such as small vases, candles with holders, plates, food and rice containers, offerings bowl. In addition, traditional items, such as Thai traditional headgear, Thai music instruments, miniatures, mirror frames and *Hsun Ok* offerings boxes, which is often used to carry gifts of food and other offerings for monasteries, were used.



(a)



(b)

Fig. 6. (a) *Traditional Thai Headgear, Anantara Chiang Mai Resort*
 (b) *Candle with holder, Ratilanna Riverside Spa Resort*
 from: Author 2016.

The furniture applied in the hotel lobby space reflects some elements of style present in the Lanna region from the past until the present. Some types of furniture have represented a certain social class found during the Lanna period. This upper social class style tends towards using furniture with the modern Western style (*Figure 7*).



Fig. 7. *This Victorian style (1837-1901) furniture was popular among the upper social class community.*
The application of this style of furniture indicates that Lanna people during late 19th century and 20th century were exposed to Western culture and art, Dhara Dhevi Chiang Mai from Author, 2016.

In the Lanna region, many Western people came as missionaries, merchants, doctors, teachers, engineers and others. These foreigners brought in and introduced Colonial Style furniture into the Lanna region. Furthermore, at the end of the 19th century, British Colonial Style furniture was possibly introduced in the northern region of Thailand through British people, mostly during the timber trade era in northern Thailand (*Figure 8*).



(a)



(b)

Fig. 8. *This Colonial Style, or more specifically known as British Colonial Style, was widely introduced in northern Thailand by the British, and other Westerners, a) Anantara Resort and Spa Golden Triangle Chiang Rai (b) Dhara Dhevi Chiang Mai.*
from: Author, 2016.

Some hotels try to interpret the Lanna social community character by having some custom-made furniture in order to show an element of the Lanna people who live in the surrounding hotel area. The Lanna social communities are mostly from the working class or those regarded by some as belonging to the lower class (*Figure 9*).



(a)



(b)

Fig. 9. (a) This hotel located at the Mae Rim area, which is where many elephants can be found. Howdah, or locally known as a “Koob-Chang”, a seat for riding on the back of an elephant, normally with a canopy and accommodating two or more people, has been applied as a concept for the furniture design for this hotel, Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai. (b) Another hotel, which is located in the middle of Chiang Mai city, was entirely design with the concept of the Lanna community in the Wat Gate area. This “Koob-Chang” is an imitation of a nobleman’s seat on an elephant’s back, Ratilanna Riverside Spa Resort Chiang Mai. From: Author, 2016.

In certain cases, some selected furniture has been used to create a certain ambience such as a Lanna temple or in the palace (Figure 10).



Fig. 10. *Manuscript cabinet, was applied at Dhara Dhevi Chiang Mai.*

In Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, the hoteliers have applied many traditional fine art forms in their space. Furniture, sculpture, flower, painting, wood carving panel, human object, animal object and accessories are the favorite items for these hotels. All these items were applied by more than half of the five-star hotels in these two provinces. Apart from these, the selection of wood as a main material for the hotel lobby decorations was also identified. Most probably this is supported by the enormous timber availability in the northern region of Thailand.

Hotels in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai mostly were built based on vernacular architecture (Figure 11). Traditional Thai fine art was applied in almost every part of the buildings. Furthermore, these hotels use a lot of traditional furniture to enhance the vernacular identity.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Fig. 11. (a) *Dhara Devi Hotel Chiang Mai* (b) *Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai* (c) *Anantara Resort & Spa Golden Triangle, Chiang Rai* from: Author, 2016.

However, even though these five-star hotels were built based on the vernacular style, many old building components, such as old columns, windows, doors, roof structure, pediments and many more, were applied into their hotels (*Figure 12*). This trend in which the hotels recycle and reuse many older materials from old building parts has been identified as a preferred trend in creating a certain ambience. By doing this, the style or concept of the hotels was created.

As a result of the research, it was found that there are high positive relationships between aesthetic and style, colors and lighting, workmanship and furnishings, workmanship and material, function and material and function and workmanship in creating the Lanna style in the Chiang Mai province hotels. Therefore, this reveals that these factors provide a high influence in creating the Lanna style in both the Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai hotels.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Fig. 12. (a) Old door frame at the wall, Anantara Resort & Spa Golden Triangle, Chiang Rai (b) Old wall panel, Le Meridien Hotel Chiang Rai (c) Khong khiew behind the receptionist at Dusit Island Resort, Chiang Rai from: Author, 2016.

The research also indicates that the aesthetic factor had the highest influence on the impression factor for overall hotels in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Therefore, this indicates that aesthetic factor was the most significantly influential factor of impression towards fine art

as decorations in creating the Lanna style for hotels in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. This was followed, in descending order by the style factor, arrangement and material factor, workmanship factor, function factor, colors factor, furnishings factor and the lighting factor. Therefore, the aesthetic factor should be of prime concern at the hotels in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.

Conclusion

With respect to the hotels that were examined as part of this research, it is clear that the architect and interior designer have tried very hard to create a “Lanna sense of place” by producing Lanna style of design in their hotels. However, the way in which they had applied this is significantly different when compared to the practice of old. The fine art was applied more to decorative items as compared to it being applied to the main building structure, such as at the staircase, doors, windows, walls, floor, ceilings, column, beams and roof structure. This situation shows that the architect or interior designer might not be knowledgeable or skillful enough in designing the hotel lobby by integrating the concept of a local identity. To solve this problem and shortcomings, they are more prone towards applying too many decoration items in order to dominate and enhance the space. As a result, the space will become overshadowed by these unnecessary items.

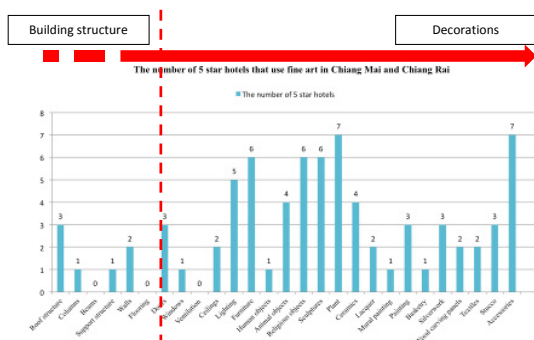


Fig. 13. *The architect and interior designer are more prone to apply fine art as decorations in the hotel lobby*

Whatever forms or elements of fine art applied, Buddhism is a fundamental idea in selecting and arranging of the fine art in the hotel lobby area. Many of the items show an influence of Buddhism. This indicates that Thai people are generally still appreciative and respectful of the values in their dominant beliefs and culture.

In certain aspects, some people believe that heritage art is not relevant in the current trends when designing their space. This is because of the thinking that “modernists totally reject the architectural heritage history because modernism itself thinks that there is no contribution from the past history to the state of ‘the spirit of times’ or soul nature of contemporary art” (Surat). However, this research indicates that it is extremely crucial for the hotel owner to design their premises in the best design as compared to other hotels. This is because the hotel guest can be easily influenced by the aesthetic value of the hotel design itself.

There are some issues involving the tourists or consumers and the tourism product that can be highlighted. Even though Thailand was ranked Number 9 in the world in 2014 for International Tourism Receipts with US\$38.4 billion collected (UNWTO), this figure does not really reflect how Thailand is promoting and selling its tourism products. In this regard, the potential tourists and consumers might not receive “the right” tourism product. What the individual tourist perceive from the local hotel industry’s image could be contradicted by the local culture that he might encounter. Additionally, some of the hotel owners might not care enough about the importance of preserving local culture. It appears that they are much more focused towards how to generate increased income in the fastest and easiest way.

Notes

This article is part of a PhD dissertation entitled “The Creation of a “Lanna Sense of Place” Through Fine Art in Northern Thailand: A Case Study of Hotel Lobby Decorations in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai” submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of PhD in Thai Studies, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The research for this article was partially funded by the Empowering

Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

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