

Engagement with Interactive Museum Collections: The Rise and Development of Interactive Museum Exhibitions in Thailand (2000 - 2019)

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the museum evolution in Thailand, with a focus on interactive museum and exhibition development in Bangkok from 2000 to 2019. In the past two decades, Thailand has become one of the key players of cultural industries in the Southeast Asian region. Strategically, attention to the steady development of the nation's cultural economy has been built on the stable growth of cultural heritage tourism. Museum as an art and cultural institution that falls under the category of tangible cultural resources is therefore seen as an important cultural asset that able to boost the cultural economy. Meanwhile, with the arrival of digital media and technology, interactive museum and exhibition have become a trend of museum development in Thailand. For instance, museums that opened after 2000, such as Thailand Creative and Design Center (2004), Museum Siam (2007), Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (2008), Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall (2010), National Science Museum's Science Square (2010), ASEAN Cultural Centre (2015), and King Rama IX Museum (expected 2019), etc, are new museums that employed interactive exhibitions as a way to communicate and engage audiences. As interaction design of interactive installations is now seen as an important factor and global trend in museum practices around the world. As the aforementioned this paper will provide insights into an understanding of the expansion of interactive museum exhibitions in Southeast Asia, particularly on interactive museums and exhibitions development in Thailand since the new millennium.

Keywords: Interactive museum / Interactive exhibitions / Interactive visitor experiences / Museums in Thailand / Creative industry

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Introduction

The concept and practice of museum arrived in Siam in the late 19th century. The first museum, WangNa Museum (Front Palace Museum) was established and opened on 19th September 1874 by King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) to exhibit relics and private collections of his beloved father, King Mongkut (King Rama IV) (UNESCO, 2009). In 1926, WangNa Museum has renamed the Bangkok Museum, and later on in 1934 retitled as “Bangkok National Museum”, when it came under the administration of the Department of Fine Arts. Since the late 19th century to present, as part of the nation’s cultural building, many museums have been built in Thailand with collaboration between the public and private sectors. Particularly in recent years, the nation has experienced a high museum expansion.

As documented by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (2019), at present, there are 1520 museums in Thailand, and these museums ownership can be classified into 8 different types, which are (1) national museums, (2) state agency, (3) local administration, (4) foundation/nonprofit organization, (5) community, (6) school, (7) private, and (8) monastery. Meanwhile, among the 76 provinces in Thailand, Bangkok is the leading province with a total of 236 museums; follow by Chiang Mai, 115 museums and, 45 museums in Nakorn Pathom province.



Sources Google images of Wang Na Museum and Wang Na Museum/Front Palace Museum

Figure 1 Wang Na Museum (1890) and Wang Na Museum/Front Palace Museum (2019)

In general, museums in Thailand can be categorized into 19 themes, (1) art/performing art, (2) textile, (3) military/war, (4) medical science/public health, (5) forest monk, (6) history, (7) architecture, (8) pottery, (9) natural science, (10) postal communication, (11) heritage house, (12) banking and finance, (13) archeology, (14) life history, (15) law/penalty, (16) science and technology, (17) monastery, (18) local wisdom, and (19) ethnic. At present, out of the 1520 museums, there are 574 museums or nearly 38% of museums have been established under the theme of local wisdom. This result is, in fact,

an outcome of the Thai government's long-term cultural policy that focuses on developing local cultural capital since the 1970s.

As stated in the nation's cultural policy (1978- present), the state shall promote and preserve the national culture, and one of the key substance of the policy is support the preservation of the Thai culture in all aspects through education, research, animation and development in order that culture may serve as an important tool for solving problems encountered in the conduct of individual life, for the development of social, economic and political progress, and for the strengthening of the national sovereignty (IRMO/Cultural link, 1996). Thusly, apart from the local wisdom's theme, in total, there are 218 monastery museums, 182 history museums, and 129 life history museums that have been established (under the partnership of public and private sectors) in the past four decades as a result of responding to the nation's cultural development policy.

In 1983, to the end of the communist insurgency, Thailand's politics and economic reformed bought the boom years of the Thai economy. Thereupon, from the early 1980s to the end of the 1990s, Thailand becomes one of the Asia's fastest-growing economies. The tourism industry, since then, becomes one of the major economic contributors to the nation, and cultural heritage tourism has therefore developed to be a key component of Thailand tourism product. Consequently, museums, as well as other cultural institutions such as art galleries, theatres, and creative spaces, have been strategically established all over the country in response to the rapid growth of cultural heritage tourism. Come to the 1990s, apart from its traditional roles, which serve as a cultural, educational and research institutions, museums in Thailand embraced to a new role as a cultural landmark and heritage touch-point that significantly backing the nation's cultural heritage tourism. At the same time, new museums' philosophies and exhibitions methods have gradually developed along with the new role of museums. Reached to the late 1990s "new exhibitions representation and communication approaches" such as multimedia display, site-specific installation, and interactive exhibits were introduced and realized by several museums in Bangkok. Particularly for museums opened after the new millennium, interactive museum and exhibition have become a trend of new museums in Thailand.

Thailand Interactive Museums and Exhibitions in Creative Industry Era

As reported by Kitirianglarp (2015), in 2004, Thaksin Shinawatra's government initiated a system to spur the creative economy by establishing the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC), an organization to support and promote knowledge of the creative economy. A decade

later, in 2014, Thailand's creative industry was valued almost 50 billion THB, accounting for around 13% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Currently, as the second economy in Southeast Asia and creative industry hub of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), museum developments in Thailand have been taken to a new horizon. Meanwhile, in 2004, according to the Royal Decree, the Office of Knowledge Management and Development (OKMD) was established to encourage people to seek develop knowledge and competency in order to create and develop the quality of minds of the people and youth of the country. Consequently, creative and cultural industries development have also been highlighted with an establishment of Creative Design Center and the National Learning Museum Institute to boost creative knowledge development under the OKMD supervision (OKMD, 2019). From 2000 to present, there are many new museums opening rapidly under diverse partnerships model, and interestingly, these "new generation museums" are mostly focus on employing interactive and innovative exhibitions to engage and connect with their audiences. For instance, opened in 2007, the Museum Siam is one of the leading museums in Thailand to introduce the "PLEARN" or "Play and Learn" philosophy as the key exhibition approach to enhance visitor's engagement.



Sources Google images of Thailand Creative and Design Center, Museum Siam, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.

Figure 2 Thailand Creative and Design Center, Museum Siam, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.

According to Emeritus Professor Dr. Surapone Virulrak (Founding Director of Museum Siam), "museums in Thailand have traditionally been storage places for arts and cultural artifacts. However, in recent years, museums are entering into a new era, digital and multimedia has assumed an ever-greater presence in museums' exhibitions" (personal communication, July 13, 2019). New generation museums such as Thailand Creative and Design Center (2004), Museum Siam (2007), Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (2008), Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall (2010), National Science Museum's Science Square (2010), ASEAN Cultural Centre (2015), and King Rama IX Museum (expected 2019) are no longer traditional show-and-tell spaces. Innovations in digital

technology and interactive exhibitions with multi-layers of interactions have attentively designed to transform visitors' expectations of their museum adventure. New interactive exhibitions approach such as interactive museum display case, multi-touch scanner table, augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technology, flexible context-management-system (CMS) and digital installations are, at the moment, strategically design and implemented by interactive museums in Thailand.



Sources Google images of Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, National Science Museum's Science Square, ASEAN Cultural Centre

Figure 3 Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, National Science Museum's Science Square, ASEAN Cultural Centre

In brief, over the last two decades, the digitally enhanced visual narrative and space have been introduced and practices by new museums in Thailand. Digital technologies are often brought into these museums as an innovative gimmick attempting to attract diverse groups of audiences, particularly toward younger audiences. As concluded by Emeritus Professor Dr. Surapone Virulrak, "museums with interactive exhibitions provide a new experience for their visitors in a positive and fun ways. They become a great place for visitors to spend time with family and friends" (personal communication, July 13, 2019).



Sources Google images of Interactive exhibitions at Thailand Creative and Design Center, Museum Siam, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.

Figure 4 Interactive exhibitions at Thailand Creative and Design Center, Museum Siam, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.

Literary, interactive exhibitions blurred and blended the fine line between education and entertainment experience in a dynamic way. Through the multi-sensory medium, interactive exhibitions engage and connect audiences' participation by combining innovative formats and playful programs. For instance, the Museum Siam's exhibition on "Gender Illumination 2018" highlights the nation's diverse LGBT community through highly interactive installations comprising of multimedia. ASEAN Cultural Centre employed AR and VR interactive and technological display for its 6 galleries to exhibit information of ASEAN arts and culture. Meanwhile, as an interactive self-learning museum with state-of-the-art 4-D multimedia technology, Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall exhibiting stories in many aspects of Bangkok city through five senses interactive approaches.



Sources Google images of Interactive exhibitions at Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, National Science Museum's Science Square, and ASEAN Cultural Centre.

Figure 5 Interactive exhibitions at Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, National Science Museum's Science Square, and ASEAN Cultural Centre.

In brief, new generation museums in Thailand are increasingly employing interactive exhibits as a way to increase younger audience engagement. And the result seems reasonably promising. These days, among the capital cities in Southeast Asia, Bangkok is transformed into a creative city with a promising number of interactive museums. Foreseen future, under the Thailand 4.0 innovative society development framework, more interactive museums for different groups of audiences, no doubt will be an important agenda on the nation's new museums expansion.

Interactive Museums and Exhibitions' Challenges and Opportunities

With the emergence of new technologies and new media, museums have been attempting to further develop the form and content of their exhibits and installations in order to meet the visitor's evermore demanding requirements (Zheng et al., 2005). Therefore, in recent years, a trend of transforming permanent exhibition display into an interactive exhibition has shifted the global museum practices. Digital technologies and social media are spreading throughout the museum environment. For new generation museums, exhibitions have moved away from the passive display to dynamic edutainment installation. Immersive and interactive exhibitions with a touch of the latest digital technology have become a very important feature of museography in the 21st century.

According to Mark Walhimer (2008), an interactive museum and its exhibitions are not only an event "occurring between a push button interactive" between the participants. It actually requires "open-ended" or "branching outcomes". Literally, interactive museums and its exhibitions focus on the visitor experience, through facilitating the audience to investigate, they engage and understand the exhibitions through the freedom to create and explore. Thusly, an interactive museum's key mission needs to be creating interactive exhibits that can spark creativity, encourage social interaction, and inspire self-learning. Currently, in term of interactive technology development, several museums in Thailand seem able to grow along with the emergence of new digital technology in contemporary museum environments. However, on management and administrative aspects, the biggest challenge for interactive museums in Thailand now is; how to increase opportunities for interactivity and simulated inspiration of self-learning experiences for their "visitors" that is also a "creators" and "users". According to Emeritus Professor Dr. Surapone Virulrak, to motivate audiences and stimulate their interests to the "age of participatory museum" is still considered a new concept in Thailand (personal communication, July 13, 2019). Therefore, for interactive museum practitioners, there are still a lot of works that needs to be done, especially on museum communication, educational programs, and community engagement activities. Meanwhile,

to become an effective “engaging museum”, a new approach to interactive exhibitions also needed a refresher in order to foster higher-level audience engagement and interaction. Furthermore, social media’s interactive activities are another aspect of interactive exhibitions that museums in Thailand cannot afford to oversight.

Kueh (2016), in the digital era, visitors nowadays want to connect with the museum and with other visitors on a more personal level, cultivating a community that is uniquely connected in the digital world is something that was never possible before the widespread of social media sharing and other enabling technologies. For museums in Thailand, in term of “social media interactive engagement”, there is still a large room for improvement. Apart from the conventional digital platform such as an official website, many museums did not have an effective engaging social media to reach and establish their community. Although many museums operating their social and marketing communication on Facebook, YouTube channel, and Twitter, it remains only at the “post and share” dimension. A mature dynamic virtual museum community has yet been fully developed by many museums in Thailand.

In 2017, under the initiative of Thailand 4.0 development blueprint, the Ministry of Culture launched an online 3-D “Smart Museum” project to make 41 national museums’ 40,000 collections available online (Phataranawik, 2017). According to the Culture Minister, Veera Rojpojanarat, via AR and VR interactive technology, the “Smart Museum,” pilot project aims to draw younger audiences’ participants into the conservation and promotion of traditional arts and culture. Svasti (2017), the “Smart Museum” is a creative project in response to demands for information on art and culture and to raise public awareness of national heritage and Thai-ness in different aspects, and leading to sustainable social and cultural development. Hopefully, through this innovative initiation, will able to expand the horizon of an online platform for museums in Thailand, and subsequently develop a new and dynamic virtual museum community in the near future.

Conclusion

Arnold and Griffiths (2007), interactive storytelling and gaming technologies have great edutainment potential for engaging visitors with museum exhibitions. From hands-on interactive to touch screen digital displays, interactive approach has become a very important component for museums exhibitions. As known by museum practitioners, current visitors frequently address being more engaged with the museum’s exhibit when they have given the opportunities to have more

participation during their visits. Thusly, interactive museums and exhibitions have gradually changed the contemporary museography practice. At the same time, the participatory museum with new creative approaches to involve their audiences will be another global trend that sifting the museum environment.

Towards the innovation of the museum's exhibition in Thailand, there are still many aspects that need to be improved and enhanced. Apart from the museums discussed above, due to various reasons, the application of the interactive display design is still not widely used as an exhibition approaches by most of the museums in Thailand. Under the framework of creative industries, sustainable development of museums will definitely be related to specialize in the innovative use of new media and technology. Thusly, new media museology and museography, no doubt will become the biggest challenge and an opportunity for many museums in Thailand in the future. Meanwhile, on digital humanity development aspect, without a strong digital platform such as "Museums in Short", "Heritage in Motion" and etc., it also limited the museums in Thailand and Southeast Asian region to establish a substantial digital network and archive. Therefore, to establish an online regional museum platform might be a workable solution to support the ASEAN's museum development from more integrated perspectives.

By and large, the museum's practitioners nowadays realized the important and positive impacts of using an interactive exhibition as a creative method to engage their audiences in a more exciting way. It is expected that the practice of interactive museums and exhibitions will be more widely applied by museums in Thailand in order to draw the attractiveness of the future generations in appreciation of the national cultural heritage, and benefits the nation's creative industry sustainable development.

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