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Thailand Museum Pass: Cultivating Development in Museum Tourism

ShawHong SER

Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Corresponding author e-mail: Shaw.h@chula.ac.th

Abstract

Since early 2000, the growing presence of museums in the tourism sector indicates an exciting milestone that "Museum Tourism" has emerged as one of the major products of cultural tourism in Thailand. New museums such as Museum Siam, Bangkok Arts and Culture Centre, Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, Thailand Creative & Design Center, and National Science Museum's Science Square, have been given a strategic role in assisting the development of cultural tourism. The impact the museum has on the cultural tourism sector is also becoming more and more noticeable. In this paper, driven by the researcher's scholarly interest in museums and their relationship with cultural tourism, the researcher investigates the development of museum tourism in Thailand, particularly in Bangkok, and the specific objectives are twofold (1) To review the development of museum tourism in Thailand, focusing on the evolution of Thailand's Museum Pass from 2013-2020. (2) To discuss the opportunities and challenges associated with the development of museum tourism in Bangkok. To achieve the research objectives, six knowledgeable informants from the cultural tourism and museum management field in Thailand were engaged as experts for this study. Their insights on museum tourism development in Thailand provide key data for this paper. The collected data suggests that Thailand's museum tourism holds promise as a growing domain. From its initial involvement with only four museums in Bangkok in 2013, the Muse Pass program expanded its coverage to encompass 64 museums nationwide by 2020. However, it also highlights several areas where enhancements are necessary to fully capitalize on its potential. Such as the potential of museum tourism needs to be more clearly defined and managed. Museum tourism's marketing and promotion strategy need to be more strategically designed. Key governmental and private agencies need to be more strategic in their partnership and project collaboration. By and large, this paper aims to offer an insightful overview of museum tourism in Thailand, delving into its status while analyzing the opportunities it presents as well as the challenges it faces.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, Museum tourism, Museum management, Cultural industries, Creative economy

Introduction

Often referred to as the “Land of Smiles”, Thailand is well-known to the world for its hospitality, beautiful nature, and rich cultural heritage. As one of the world’s leading travel destinations, Thailand welcomed approximately more than 25 million tourists each year (Statista Research Department, 2023). According to the World Bank’s report on “International Tourism – Number of Arrivals in Thailand”, from 2010 to 2019, tourism in Thailand has shown impressive growth in terms of the number of visitors. In 2019, the country received a record number of 39.9 million international tourists (World Bank Group, 2020a). Since 2010, with an average growth rate of 13% per annum, and a contribution of nearly 15% of the country’s GDP, the tourism industry has become an important engine of growth for the Thai economy (Lee & Gabriella, 2019).

Since the early 2020, with the globally widespread Covid-19 outbreak, Thailand’s tourism industry was vastly affected by the pandemic. The number of tourist arrivals slumps to merely 6.7 million (Statista Research Department, 2023). The pandemic presents a great challenge for Thailand’s tourism industry. Even though the tourism outlook in 2020 was difficult to predict for years to come, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) was making its plans for the industry’s recovery in 2022. The organization had a positive view of the tourism industry development and predicted 20 million international tourists would visit Thailand in 2022 (Fronde, 2021).

Thailand started to realize its potential in developing the tourism industry in the late 1950s. As a result, the Tourist Organization of Thailand (TOT) was established to be responsible for the promotion of tourism in 1959. In 1979, the organization was upgraded to be the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Since then, TAT has been serving as a state enterprise for the development of tourism in Thailand (Tourism Authority of Thailand, n.d.). Over the four decades, the success of Thailand tourism industry has been astounding. The country’s renowned tourism has grown spectacularly in terms of arrivals and revenue. For instance, in 2019, international tourist arrivals hit a record 39.9 million, and the revenue from the tourism industry had reached 1.93 trillion Baht (65 billion USD) (World Bank, 2020b). In the same year, with the number of domestic tourists reaching around 16.8 million, the domestic tourism receipts also reached approximately 1.1 trillion Baht (33 billion USD) (Statista Research Department, 2023).

The income generated from tourism contributes substantially to Thailand’s economic growth, employment, foreign-exchange earnings, and GDP earnings. Moreover, the industry also contributes significantly to socio-cultural exchange and development. The tourism industry as such has become one of the drivers for the country’s sustainable development.

According to Punpeng (2021), in the 9th and 10th National Economic and Social Development Plans (2002-2006 and 2007-2011), the ideas to develop the creative industries were mentioned and explored by the

Thai authority. As a result, in 2009, the Thai government initiated the “Creative Thailand Policy” as a new development strategy to support sustainable economic growth. Eventually, in the 11th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2012-2016), the development of the Creative Economy was placed in the center stage. Currently, under the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021), the creative and cultural economy has been reinforced along with the digital economy and bio-based economy per the Sufficiency Economy philosophy (National Economic and Social Development Council; NESDC, 2016).

Over the past two decades, in response to the above-mentioned national development blueprint, and the growing concern over a global economic slowdown, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has developed new tourism clusters and products to diversify and strengthen Thailand’s tourism industry. As said by Sharafuddin (2015), in recent years, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports Authority of Thailand has developed a more diverse tourism portfolio to position Thailand as a quality world-class travel destination. Newly emerging types of tourism such as adventure tourism, cultural tourism, creative tourism, medical tourism, wellness tourism, cruise tourism, and sports tourism have strategically been implemented to boost the country’s sustainable social-economic development. In addition to develop and repackage the country’s tourism, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports Office of Product Development is also working with TAT and the tourism industry to raise standards and enhance creativity and professionalism for new tourism products.

Cultural Tourism in Thailand

According to World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “Cultural Tourism” is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination (UNWTO, 2017). Culture in tourism is certainly not a recent phenomenon. Long-time ago, many cities and countries had already devoted much appreciation for the arts and culture in their tourism industry. In the context of cultural tourism, tangible and intangible cultural elements are acknowledged as an important part of tourism to a destination. As a win-win partnership, the collaboration between tourism and cultural industries brings along social, cultural and economic importance for those who are involved.

According to Chiriko (2020), on a global scale, cultural tourism’s popularity is continuously increasing at a fast pace than most other categories of tourism. It is widely accepted that the cultural tourism market segment will continue to grow in the foreseeable future. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn about cultural tourism has always been a prominent segment in Thailand’s tourism industry. Under a strategic allocation of resources by the Thai government, the country’s rich heritage and splendid historical sites, arts and cultural performances, whether the traditional or modernized versions, have been tactically employed by TAT to support the cultural tourism

development. For instance, UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as Ayutthaya Historical Park and Sukhothai Historical Park are prominent cultural destinations of Thailand. Meanwhile, cultural institutions such as the Grand Palace, Bangkok National Museum, Museum Siam, Bangkok Arts and Cultural Center are also popular cultural venues frequented by local and international visitors. For the arts, traditional art forms such as the Khon Dance-Drama (UNESCO Intangible Heritage), Thai classical dance, and visual arts exhibitions and arts festivals such as Bangkok Art Biennale are also key components that contribute to the success of the country's cultural tourism.

In 2021, Thailand was elected the fifth-best in the world for cultural heritage influence by one of the world's leading business magazines (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2021). This good result is no doubt attributable to the significant efforts made in cultural heritage preservation and promotion exercises. However, to meet the challenges in the highly competitive tourism industry and maintain the country's leading position in cultural heritage tourism, there is still a lot of work to be done in the upgrading of cultural tourism products. Meanwhile, strengthening the growth potential in cultural tourism also means that TAT will need to keep innovating tourism products to reinforce its selling points. In this sense, a new tourism cluster will need to be elevated to a higher level and "Museum tourism" or museum-based tourism should be seen as a strategic pathway of development. For this purpose, it is hoped that the Thai authority and other key stakeholders will support museum tourism as a sustainable development sector of cultural tourism.

Museum and Cultural Tourism in Thailand

According to Tien (2009), the concept of museum clusters as a strategic tool for domestic economic development was first introduced by the American scholar, Michael Porter in 1990. The whole idea of museum clusters received much attention from politicians and academics across the world as a stimulant for the development of cultural economy. As such, many museums have now become a city highlight and a significant source of economic contribution. For instance, opened in 1997, the legendary Bilbao Guggenheim Museum has become the Basque city's landmark and catalyst for the whole city's social and economic development. The Louvre Museum, as one of the most popular tourist destinations not only in Paris but in the world, received more than 10 million visitors in 2018 (Vaisiere & Gibbons, 2019). The Louvre Museum no doubt is a significant cultural factor in attracting tourists and boosting the city's economic and cultural development.

In Thailand, prior to the arrival of the creative and cultural economy era, museums' potential in supporting the overall cultural tourism might not be maximized. However, the trend is now reversing. In recent years, apart from archaeological and historical sites, museums, art galleries, and design centers have also been identified as a key component of cultural tourism in Thailand, particularly in Bangkok. New museums such as Museum Siam, Bangkok Arts and Culture Centre, Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall have been given a strategic role in assisting the

development of cultural tourism. According to Ser (2020), in Thailand, from early 2000 to the present, a growing number of museums is one of the major driving factors to reinforce the growth of creative and cultural industries. New museums are opening rapidly under diverse partnership models to foster the growth of cultural tourism.

These “new generation museums” such as Thailand Creative & 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 (2020) have nowadays become popular cultural attractions of Bangkok. For instance, in 2018, Museum Siam welcomed 191,226 visitors, and 12,000 were international tourists. From January to October 2019, Museum Siam received 171,359 visitors, of which 35,586 were international tourists (Worrachaddejchai, 2019a). Opened in 2008, the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) has also grown in popularity. The rate of visitors had steadily increased from 300,000 in 2008 to 1.7 million visitors in 2017 (Bangkok Post, 2018). Evidently, “Museum Tourism” has a unique role to play in strengthening the overall development of cultural tourism in Thailand. Over the past two decades, museums have created a unique place in Thailand’s tourism industry and made a significant social and economic impact on the sustainable development of the country’s cultural tourism.

According to the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre’s Museum Database (2021), the museum’s industry has had a steady growth in the past two decades. Currently, there are around 1582 museums in Thailand, and the country’s capital is a city with a great number of museums. Based on the report of 77 Great News (2018), there are 194 museums spread out in 50 districts of Bangkok, averaging each district has 4 museums. Meanwhile, with a total number of 30 museums, the Phra Nakhon historical area is the district with the highest number of museums, followed by Chatuchak District (23 museums) and Dusit District (17 museums).

As mentioned previously, museums and cultural tourism are inseparable allies. With the arrival of the creative economy era, this alliance is now becoming even more indispensable. Museums in Thailand with no exception, have also been an essential spot in tourist experiences of all ages and interests. Before the emergence of museum tourism’s concept, for decades, museums such as Bangkok National Museum (established in 1874), Chao Sam Phraya National Museum in Ayutthaya (opened in 1961), Ramkhamhaeng National Museum in Sukhothai (opened in 1964), and Chiang Mai National Museum (opened in 1969) have already been an unmissable component of cultural tourism in Thailand.

Since the early 2000s, the new millennium brings along a big change and challenge to the Thai political and economic environment. Consequently, in the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th National Economic and Social Development Plans, 4 editions of the national and social development plans (2002-2021) have stressed creative economy development as one of the key factors of economic transformation. The creative industries as such

were seen by the policymaker as a novel strategy to stimulate and diversify the country's economic and social development. Based on the recent report of the National Statistical Office, there are over 800,000 people working in the creative industries, which contributed 9.5% to the Thai GDP (UNESCO Bangkok Office, 2019). It is difficult to judge whether this result is considering a great success or not, yet the results have demonstrated that creative industries are making an important contribution towards sustainable development for all.

As creative industries are gaining importance in Thailand, museums as a part of the cultural and creative industries are as well given a new role in supporting the creative economic development. In addition to their traditional roles and functions, museums are now strategically involved in the city branding projects, community development schemes and play an active role in cultural tourism planning. In brief, museums in Thailand, particularly those in Bangkok have become a multifunctional organization that has a key role to play in the cultural and economic sustainability.

Objectives

1. In response to the researcher's scholarly interest in museums and their relation to cultural tourism, this study investigates the development of museum tourism in Thailand with a particular focus on Bangkok from 2000 to 2020. The specific objectives are: (a) To investigate the development of museum tourism in Thailand; (b) To discuss the opportunities and challenges that museum tourism in Bangkok has confronted; and (c) To provide an overview of Thailand's museum tourism development status.

2. To fulfill these objectives, a qualitative research approach was employed, and its process was divided into three stages, namely (a) Data collection was gathered through secondary sources using library and online data on tourism development in Thailand from the year 2000 to 2020; (b) Field study was conducted to collect primary data via a semi-structured interview with six knowledgeable informants. These six key informants were engaged as experts based on their professional experience in the realm museum and cultural tourism. They are (i) Nixon Chen (Assistant Professor of Tourism and Hospitality Management Division, Mahidol University), (ii) Nitaya Kanogmonkol (Director - Office of National Museums, Thailand), (iii) Songtip Sermsawatsri (Director of the Exhibition and Activity Department at Museum Siam), (iv) Luckana Kunavichayanont (Director of Bangkok Art and Culture Centre), (v) Somlack Charoenpot (Director of Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts), (vi) Toby Lu (Senior Marketing and Exhibition Manager at River City Bangkok). All interviews were arranged via zoom (an online platform) in January 2022. (c). Upon the completion of the primary and secondary data collection, the researcher reports the results and discusses opportunities and challenges of museum tourism development in Thailand from 2000 to 2022.

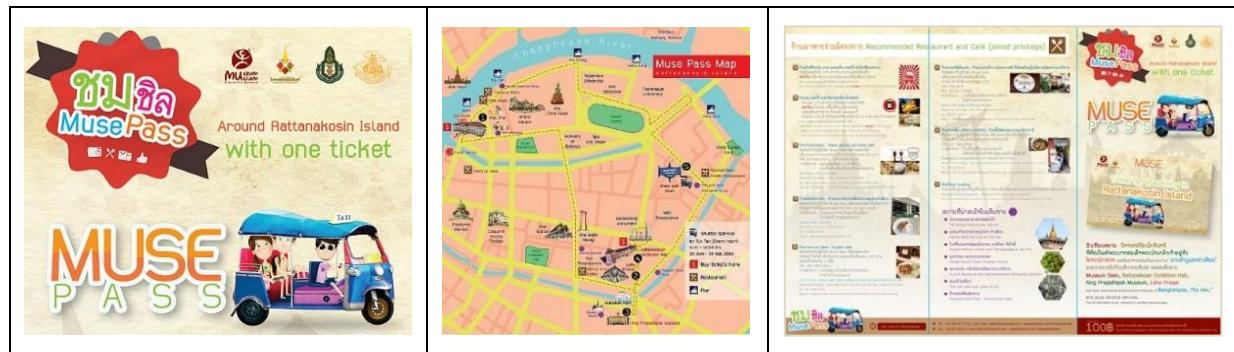
Results

1. Thailand Museum Pass's Development

Museums are conceived as cultural assets, so it is essential to create synergies around them and employed their power of attraction to create new tourist products (Graterón, 2017). For a long time, "Superstar Museums" in Europe such as the British Museum in London, Louvre Museum in Paris, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has been well-known to the world for their splendid collection and powerful position in tourism. In recent years, several museums in Asia are also earning their prominent position in supporting the nation's cultural tourism. Good examples are the Forbidden City Palace Museum in Beijing, National Palace Museum in Taipei, Tokyo National Museum, and the National Museum of Korea.

Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, museums' contribution to tourism development is also becoming more visible. For instance, in 2014, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia won a Platinum Award for Tourist Attraction (Culture, Arts and Heritage Category) organized by Kuala Lumpur Mayor's Tourism Award (Toh, 2014). In 2016, the National Gallery Singapore was awarded the "Breakthrough Award" by the Singapore Tourism Board in recognition of its contribution in rendering Singapore's tourism landscape more charming (Lin, 2016). In 2019, three museums in Thailand, Phu Wiang Dinosaur Museum in Khon Kaen, The Golden Jubilee Museum of Agriculture Pathum Thani, Dhanabadee Ceramic Museum in Lampang were given the Kinnari Awards by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) in recognition of their contributions in drawing in local and international tourists (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2019).

In Thailand, apart from being the strategic partner of the nation's overall cultural tourism development. The first exercise to promote museum tourism was the museum pass, popularly known as "Muse Pass" launched in 2013 as a strategic tool. It was the first "Museum Cluster" strategy employed by the National Discovery Museum Institute to promote museum tourism at Rattanakosin Island in Phra Nakhon district. The project was initiated to cultivate museum culture and promote museums as learning centers and cultural destinations for local people and international visitors. The project was led by Museum Siam as the main operator in cooperation with organizations and the museum network from both private and government sectors (Museum Thailand, 2021). Only sold for 100 Baht (3 USD), the Muse Pass is considered an excellent deal. The Pass not only covers free admission to three museums and a historical site (Museum Siam, King Prajadhipok Museum, Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, and Loha Prasat Buddhist Edifice), it also provides exclusive Tuk-Tuk travel service, and offers discounts at diverse cafes, restaurants, and shops associated with the project.



Source Google images of Thailand Museum Pass (2013)

Figure 1 Muse Pass (4 Museums) launched in 2013

In 2014, the second edition of Muse Pass was launched with an increase to 20 museums. The Pass price increased to 199 Baht (6 USD). As said by Rames Promyen (Project owner and Director-General of National Discovery Museum Institute) in his interview with Thai Travel News and Events, “even though many great stories and informative inspirations are found in museums of Thailand, statistics have shown a decline in numbers of museum visitors. It is for this reason that the institute launched the Muse Pass project to attract more visitors. The Muse Pass is one of the most economical ways that holders are able to visit many museums” (Barrow, 2014). Compared with the first exercise, the second one had developed a stronger package with unique selling points, though the Tuk-Tuk travel service was removed, discount privileges were not highlighted, and the admission fee was increased to 199 Baht.



Source Google images of Thailand Museum Pass (2014)

Figure 2 Muse Pass (20 Museums) launched in 2014

In 2015, the third edition of “Muse Pass 2015” was launched. As reported by BKK Kids (2015), following the popularity of Muse Pass in 2014, the 2015 edition has expanded the number of museums to 32, which covers 24 museums in Bangkok and eight more in eight provinces. Most importantly, with 12 more museums participating in the project, the price did not increase as the year before. The Pass now offers access to 32 museums with only 199 Baht. The major highlight for the third edition is the number of museums in Bangkok has increased to 24. Furthermore, museums from other provinces also participated in the project. These museums are of eight museums are Khonkaen

Philatelic Museum (Khonkaen), King Rama II Memorial Park (Samut Songkram), Phuket Taihua Museum (Phuket) Sgt. Maj. Thawee Folk Museum (Pitsanulok), Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum (Pathum Thani), Sup-jumpa Museum (Lopburi), Tanland (Ayuthaya) and Siam Insect Museum (Chiang Mai). With their participation, the “Muse Pass 2015” networking has expanded from the city capital to become a cross-provincial project. This achievement, no doubt is a new milestone in Thailand’s Museum tourism.



Source Google images of Thailand Museum Pass (2015)

Figure 3 Muse Pass (32 Museums) launched in 2015

In 2016, under the theme of “The Infinity Discovery”, the fourth edition of Muse Pass was marketed with 40 museums access for 199 Baht. Compared with the 2015 version, four more museums from Bangkok were added to the list (Baan Mowaan Museum, Pipit Banglamphu Museum, Tooney Toy Museum and Anti-corruption Museum). With their participation, the number of museums was increased from 24 to 28. Meanwhile, museums from other provinces have also increased from 8 to 12. The Hanuman Nakhon Village (Nakon Pathom), Ripley’s Believe It or Not! Museum (Chonburi), Knowledge Center (Chachoengsao), and National Geological Museum (Pathum Thani) were four new museums involved in the project. In brief, in 2016, with the cooperation of a network of 40 museums, Muse Pass expanded its network to 12 provinces.



Source Google images of Thailand Museum Pass (2016)

Figure 4 Muse Pass (40 Museums) launched in 2016

In 2017, returning with its fifth edition, "Muse Pass Season 5: Let's Go Muse Pass Together" is now a one-way ticket to 56 museums in Thailand for only 199 Baht. According to Mr. Rames Promyen, the Muse Pass project aims to cultivate a culture of learning through museum tourism. Therefore, the project is campaigning for more museums' participation in every new edition. In addition to the museum's networks expansion, the 2017 edition is also more convenient in its usage. With online registration, the card can be used via a mobile application that is linked to the "Museum Thailand app" (Museum Siam, 2017). Compared to the fourth edition, there are now 30 museums from Bangkok and 16 museums from different provinces involving in the Season 5 edition. Meanwhile, with the involvement of 56 museums, six museums' clusters were developed to group museums based on the region they belong to. Apart from 30 museums in Bangkok, the 16 museums were grouped under the centre region (10 museums), northern region (7 museums), northeastern region, (4 museums), eastern region (3 museums), and southern region (2 museums). In brief, the Muse Pass, come to its fifth editions has become a national-wide museum tourism project.



Source Google images of Thailand Museum Pass (2017)

Figure 5 Muse Pass (56 Museums) launched in 2017

In 2018, under a new theme, "Fun Together", the 6th edition of Muse Pass was launched at a new price of 299 Bah (9 USD). With the price increment, the overall "package" of Muse pass was also be upgraded. Apart from gaining free admission to 63 museums nationwide, the Pass now included 20 participating stores discount coupons, a museum map, Muse Pass stickers, and a notebook. Meanwhile, to boost the museum culture and tourism development, the "Fun Together" edition was focused on promoting museums' visits as pleasant creation activities for family and friends. According to Mrs. Songtip Sermsawatsri (Director of Museum Siam), over the past three years, the "Muse Pass" received a great response from visitors and provided a steady increase of local and international visitors to museums in Thailand, particularly in Bangkok. Based on statistics collected from 2016 to 2018, a total of 43,514 cards were being sold and more than 56,789 usages of Muse Pass cards have been recorded (Prachachat.net, 2019).



Source Google images of Thailand Museum Pass (2018)

Figure 6 Muse Pass (63 Museums) launched in 2018

In 2019, the 7th edition of Muse Pass was launched to continue its commission in museum culture and tourism promotion. With a new theme of “Passion on Museum Journey”, 55 museums around Thailand were involved. Compared with the 2018 edition, the number of museums was slightly reduced. It was the first time in the past seven years that the number of museums participating decreased. Yet, apart from that, the Pass is still maintained as an excellent deal for the holders to enjoy free admission to museums and other additional benefits.



Source Google images of Thailand Museum Pass (2019)

Figure 6 Muse Pass (55 Museums) launched in 2019

In 2020, the 8th edition of Muse Pass was launched to carry on its mission in museum tourism reinforcement. A new name of “Thailand Museum Pass” was given to the new Pass. Besides the new name, the number of museums that joined the project also increased to a new record of 64. Meanwhile, on top of what the Pass has been offered in previous years, many extra benefits such as birthday month's free souvenirs from 11 museums, welcome drinks from 4 museums, and free parking permits from 7 museums were also added to the new Pass. In brief, the whole package is at a great price of only 299 Baht. As said by Mr. Rames Promyen in this interview with Bangkok Post, he mentioned that it is rather challenging to cultivate a museum culture, so museums must keep adapting themselves to stay relevant. He also said that tourists are shifting their focus from mass tourism to cultural heritage tourism, this means that

museums need to play a more active role in providing new experiences. Therefore, Museum Siam is collaborating with 63 museums nationwide to promote museum culture for both local and international visitors (Worrachaddejchai, 2019b).



Source Google images of Thailand Museum Pass (2020)

Figure 7 Muse Pass (64 Museums) launched in 2020

In 2019, Thailand has broken its annual tourism record with the arrival of 39.9 million international tourists. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is also forecasting the number of tourists will reach 40.8 million in 2020, an increase of 2.5%, and will earn 2.02 trillion Baht to the economy (Worrachaddejchai, 2019b). However, like many countries, Thailand's tourism industry was vastly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. As reported by Kaendera and Leigh (2021) from IMF Asia and Pacific Department, the pandemic precipitated a sudden stop in tourism flows and a significant contraction to the Thai economy. The tourism sector, which accounts for about a fifth of GDP and 20% of employment, has been especially affected by the cessation of tourist travel. In 2020, the number of tourist arrivals drops to only 6.7 million. The whole tourism industry is in peril. Consequently, the 8th edition of Museum Pass was not well received as it used to be. In February 2021, the Museum Siam continues its commitment to museum culture promotion by organized a special campaign named "TMP Chinese New Year 2021". With more discounts and promotions from restaurants and shops participating in this campaign. The museum is seeking all opportunities to boost the country's museum tourism. However, as the pandemic worsened after April, museums around the country were closed and subsequently ceased all museums activities.

In summary, from 2013 to 2020, a total of 8th editions of Muse Pass has been launched to cultivate museum culture and promote museum tourism in Thailand. Over the past 8 years, the Muse Pass project achieved steady growth. With only four museums in Bangkok involved in 2013, Muse Pass has expanded its coverage to 64 museums nationwide in 2020. Hopefully, with the world's gradually recovering from the pandemic crisis, the return of the tourism industry in Thailand will stimulate the new milestone of the Muse Pass project and museum tourism development in Thailand.

2. Discussion and Analysis

Based on the primary data collected, the opportunities and challenges of museum tourism in Thailand can be discussed as follow: (1) Museums' quantity vs. museum quality, (2) Museums' location and accessibility, (3) Museum culture and audiences' development, (4) Competitions from other attractions, and (5) Domestic and international visitors' awareness of museums in Thailand. Currently, Thailand has a great number of museums with diverse themes and modes of exhibitions that are ready to support the growth of museum tourism. Nevertheless, to ensure the sustainability of museum tourism, there is still a lot to be done. According to Nixon Chen (Assistant Professor of Tourism and Hospitality Management Division, Mahidol University), the quantity of museums is unquestionably enough to serve as a foundation to operate museum tourism, yet the quality of museums is a more crucial aspect that needs to be given attention to. Currently, there are only a small number of museums with distinctive collections and modes of exhibition that are able to establish their unique selling proposition. Most of the museums are still struggling in search of their unique position. Hence, to ensure the success of museum tourism, museums' products such as collection quality and exhibition uniqueness are the main two issues that need to be addressed. Meanwhile, museums' services such as visitor orientation and guided tour arrangement, museum shop, and cafeteria services are also areas that need to be improved.

In addition to the product's readiness, museums' location is another issue that challenges the overall success of museum tourism. For instance, apart from 3 to 5 museums that are situated near the Phra Nakhon historical town, many museums participated in the Muse Pass project are scattered at different parts of the Greater Bangkok area and nearby provinces in more remote areas. Consequently, hindered by access difficulties and modes of transport, these museums will hardly be visited by the Pass holders, especially international tourists. Therefore, transportation services such as scheduled shuttle buses or Tuk-Tuk might be a workable solution to provide logistic support for these museums.

From my interviews with four prominent Thai officials, I have received signal that there is good prospect for the Thai museum tourism. Nitaya Kanogmonkol (Director-Office of National Museums) mentioned that museum tourism in Thailand is gearing in a promising direction. As she said, in Thailand, there are different types of museums with distinctive themes that provide a great product diversity. However, to achieve a sustainable museum tourism sector, she alerted that several challenges need to be overcome. Most importantly, the culture of visiting museums in Thailand needs to be strategically and habitually cultivated. Without a substantial museum-visit culture, it is not easy to develop a solid domestic market for museum tourism. Concurrently, in developing an international market, the museum authority has to strengthen strategically its public relations and marketing campaigns overseas by showcasing their quality products.

Meanwhile, Songtip Sermsawatsri (Director of the Exhibition and Activity Department at Museum Siam), felt that the image of Thailand as a destination of beautiful nature, exotic culture, and shopping paradise had already been strongly founded in both domestic and international markets. Building up substantially Thailand's museum tourism as a branded tourism product is a long-term project that requires a great effort to realize. She held a positive and optimistic view that over the past decade, Thailand's Muse Pass project has witnessed a steady expansion of museum tourism in Bangkok. As she concluded, Thailand has diverse museums with interesting contents and exhibition approaches. If all key stakeholders continue to work closely together, museum tourism will grow significantly.

The third and fourth interviewees were respectively Luckana Kunavichayanont (Director of Bangkok Art and Culture Centre) and Somlack Charoenpot (Director of Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts). Their view was that although Thailand has many interesting museums, most international tourists were not aware of their existence and what they could offer. They felt that pushing forward strategic promotion campaigns are an urgent matter that needs to be addressed. Moreover, they argued that museums must have creative contents and unique artifacts, and partnership between key tourism and cultural agencies in executing a more comprehensive promotional strategy is critical.

Conclusion

By and large, key informants involved in this research acknowledged that Thailand has great potential in developing museum tourism. On the product, there are many interesting museums ready to be explored and marketed. Moreover, with the nation's policy of developing a creative economy, museums no doubt will have many opportunities to engage in the overall development of the cultural tourism sector. However, to realize the full potential of museum tourism, there are still many challenges that need to be overcome. For instance, museum tourism as a product and its positioning within an overall cultural tourism development need to be clearly defined and managed. Meanwhile, museum tourism's marketing and promotional strategy for domestic and international markets also need to be redesigned. In addition, key governmental and private agencies that are involved in museum tourism development also need to be more strategic in their partnership and project collaboration.

Museums have long contributed to cultural tourism in Thailand and act as an important organism to attract tourists, especially those with special interests in arts and culture. Furthermore, since 2000, as the creative and cultural industries are coming into focus in Thailand and become more influential in the nation's economy. The museum sector has been given a more vital role to play in overall cultural tourism industry development. Based on the data collected from this research, museums as catalysts of tourism growth have achieved an exciting milestone. For instance, the Muse Pass project (2013 to present) has successfully involved more and more museums to participate in museum culture cultivation and museum tourism promotion. Museums have also been involved in art festivals such as Bangkok

Art Biennale 2022, and Bangkok 240th anniversary celebrations in 2022. According to Toby Lu (Senior Marketing and Exhibition Manager at River City Bangkok), for cultural tourists, museums could be a crucial factor when deciding where to travel, the duration of the trip as well as whether they would revisit a destination. Therefore, he sees Thailand's museum tourism as a sector with great potential that needs strategically positioned and promoted. By and large, Key informants who participated in this research recognized that many museums in Bangkok are ready to engage in a more exciting project that is linked to museum tourism development. As concluded by Luckana Kunavichayanont (Director of Bangkok Art and Culture Centre), the products are available, the challenge is how key stakeholders can work out a more comprehensive plan to position and promote museums in a tourism context.

The research was unable to fully delve into the policy and strategic dimensions of museum tourism development due to its scope. Consequently, future studies incorporating key policymakers and a broader spectrum of museum personnel would be invaluable in exploring recommendations for policy and strategy regarding museum tourism development in Thailand.

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