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Linguistic and Cultural Evolution of the Thai Hotel Industry

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้สำรวจการบรรจบกันของภาษา วัฒนธรรม และการบริการ โดยการติดตามวิวัฒนาการทางประวัติศาสตร์และภาษาของคำว่า “hotel” ตั้งแต่จุดกำเนิดจนถึงการปรับเปลี่ยนในภาษาไทยปัจจุบันว่า “โรงแรม” การศึกษานี้เจาะลึกถึงความสำคัญทางวัฒนธรรมภายในบริบทของการบริการแบบไทย การศึกษานี้ใช้แนวทางสหวิทยาการโดยผสมผสานการวิเคราะห์ทางประวัติศาสตร์ การศึกษาทางภาษา และการสำรวจทางวัฒนธรรม เพื่อค้นหาเอกลักษณ์พิเศษของการบริการแบบไทย ซึ่งสะท้อนผ่านแนวคิดของคำว่า “น้ำใจ” ซึ่งแสดงถึงความเอื้อเฟื้อและความอบอุ่น ผลการศึกษานี้ให้ข้อมูลเชิงลึกที่มีคุณค่าเกี่ยวกับผลกระทบเชิงลึกของมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมต่อการปฏิบัติการต้อนรับในยุคปัจจุบัน โดยเน้นถึงศักยภาพในการใช้ “ความเป็นไทย” เพื่อสร้างประสบการณ์และบริการที่โดดเด่นและน่าจดจำในอุตสาหกรรมโรงแรมที่มีการแข่งขันในประเทศไทย

คำสำคัญ : โรงแรมไทย การบริการแบบไทย ความเป็นไทย อุตสาหกรรมโรงแรมไทย

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Abstract

This study explored the intersection of language, culture, and hospitality. By tracing the historical and linguistic evolution of the term “hotel” from its origins to its current Thai adaptation “โรงแรม” (roong-r~~๕๕~~m), the study examined the cultural significance within Thai hospitality. The study employed a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, linguistic study, and cultural exploration to reveal the unique characteristics of Thai hospitality, represented by the concept of “น้ำใจ” (náam jai), which symbolizes generosity and warmth. The findings provided valuable insights into the influence of cultural heritage on contemporary hospitality practices, emphasizing the potential for utilizing “Thainess” to create distinctive and memorable guest experiences and service offering in Thailand’s competitive hotel industry

Keywords : Thai hotel, Thai hospitality, Thainess, Thai hotel industry

Introduction

The allure of Thainess stands as a compelling force, drawing travellers to the vibrant landscapes of Thailand, transcending mere aesthetic beauty (Kongpolphrom, 2018; Pookaiyaudom & Tan, 2020). Embedded within this allure lies the essence of Thai hospitality, renowned for its unparalleled warmth and inclusivity, elevating the guest experience within the realm of accommodation (Chon, 2019; Khan et al., 2015; Suksutdhi & Boonyanmethaporn, 2022). Chon (2019) and Dabphet (2020) stressed that the ethos of hospitality in Thailand resonates deeply with values of humility,

respect, empathy, and friendliness, permeating interactions between service providers and guests, like the Wai—a traditional Thai greeting characterized by the joining of palms, fingertips touching the nose, and a subtle nod of the head—underscored by the ever-present smiles adorning the faces of hotel staff (Piuchan, 2023).

The historical development of the hotel sector in Thailand provides a rich backdrop to understand the evolution of Thai hospitality. During the Sukhothai Kingdom era, foreigners initiated their travels to Thailand, then known as Siam, primarily for trade, commerce, and international relations (Kavises, 2020; Li, 2019; Moussa et al., 2022). Temporary accommodations for these visitors were diverse, ranging from pavilions and residences of relatives to religious sanctuaries such as temples and even boats and ships (Christou, 2022; Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020; Nanthapaiboon, 2013). However, the hospitality landscape in Thailand underwent significant development during the Rattanakosin era. This period saw a substantial surge in the influx of foreign visitors, attributable to advancements in transportation infrastructure, which consequently catalyzed the emergence of the hotel business in the region (Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020; Nanthapaiboon, 2013).

Despite the extensive evolution of Thailand's hospitality and tourism sectors over decades, there is a noticeable gap in research regarding the origin and meaning of the term “hotel” in Thai. Therefore, this academic investigation sets out to explore the historical journey of the hotel sector, tracing its linguistic evolution in Thai. Additionally, it examines the cultural context to uncover any inherent importance of the term “hotel” within Thai

culture. This study examines the term's cultural implications, as well as its historical and linguistic aspects. The study seeks to understand the broader cultural narratives and values embedded within Thai hospitality by exploring how the Thai term for "hotel" has developed. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, this study aims to reveal new insights into the intersection of language, culture, and hospitality in Thailand.

Evolution of Tourism

The origins and evolution of tourism can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as the Sumerians, who pioneered the development of trade and monetary systems around 4,000 B.C.E. (Coggan, 2020). This marked the inception of organized travel, as individuals utilized currency to procure accommodations and transportation. The construction of roads in Greece from 2,000 to 1,500 B.C.E. made travel even easier, especially for military operations, government officials, and caravan traders who were trying to spread their power across regions (Riedler & Stefanov, 2021).

Scholarly discourse, as articulated by Riedler and Stefanov (2021) and Zuelow (2015), suggested that early human mobility was primarily driven by survival imperatives rather than leisure pursuits. Historical evidence suggests that the search for sustenance, such as essential food staples like grains, vegetables, and fruits, motivated prehistoric migrations. The emergence of settled agricultural societies introduced a novel dimension to travel, transforming it into a conduit for trade and economic exchange (Coggan, 2020; Zuelow, 2015). During the Roman Era, travel assumed multifaceted purposes, encompassing imperial expansion, leisurely

sightseeing, competitive sports events, entertainment, and festive celebrations (Christou, 2022).

Religious pilgrimage emerged as another significant impetus for travel, fostering the dissemination and perpetuation of major world religions across diverse geographical landscapes (Christou, 2022; Jensen, 2020; Nanthapaibool, 2013; Zuelow, 2015). The transnational spread of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam was facilitated by itinerant monks, missionaries, and devout adherents undertaking sacred journeys to holy sites such as Mecca, symbolizing spiritual connectivity and devotion to divine tenets (Greenia, 2018; Jensen, 2020; Nanthapaibool, 2013).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the inception of the Grand Tour epitomized travel as a formative experience for affluent British youth, serving as a rite of passage imbued with educational, cultural, and social enrichment (Sweet et al., 2017; Zuelow, 2015). The Grand Tour facilitated immersion in European art, languages, and societal customs (Sweet et al., 2017), shaping the worldview and refinement of the aristocratic elite (Zuelow, 2015).

In the context of Thailand, the Sukhothai Era marked the inception of Siam's engagement with international diplomacy and trade, fostering cross-cultural exchanges with European, Chinese, Japanese, and Persian counterparts (Kavises, 2020; Li, 2019; Moussa et al., 2022). The burgeoning international relations precipitated an influx of non-local travelers and foreign dignitaries to Siam, thereby stimulating the demand for accommodations and hospitality services (Kavises, 2020; Moussa et al., 2022).

Consequently, the burgeoning travel demands spurred the development of accommodations catering to weary travelers seeking respite during their arduous journeys, thereby catalyzing the nascent stages of the hotel industry's evolution (Jaroensook, 2022; Khanalizadeh & Ranjandish, 2019).

Emergence of Accommodations

In ancient times, travelers went on long, challenging journeys and stayed in makeshift places like relatives' homes, religious sites, or safe havens along well-traveled routes (Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020). As travel routes became more frequented and infrastructural facilities improved, urban leaders began establishing commercial lodgings to cater to the burgeoning traveler population (Holloway & Humphreys, 2022; Tahiri et al., 2021), offering essential amenities such as food, drink, and shelter (Jaroensook, 2022; Tahiri et al., 2021).

The origins of formal lodging establishments date back to approximately 4,000 years ago along Middle Eastern trade routes, offering basic amenities such as bedding, food, and water to weary travelers (Holloway & Humphreys, 2022; Nanthapaibool, 2013). Over time, these accommodations evolved to accommodate changing traveler preferences and demands, with the quality of services contingent upon factors like price and location (Kavises, 2022).

Despite fluctuations in travel patterns, precipitated by events like the fall of the Roman Empire (Jaroensook, 2022), religious pilgrimage continued to sustain the hospitality industry, with hostels and monasteries

providing accommodations to devout travelers (Christou, 2022; Jaroensook, 2022). The resurgence of trade and travel in medieval Europe saw the transformation of these religious establishments into commercially operated lodgings catering to both leisure and business travelers (Holloway & Humphreys, 2022; Nanthapaibool, 2013).

During the late nineteenth century, hotels emerged as the preferred accommodation choice for travelers, with room rates dictating the range of amenities and services available to guests (Kavises, 2020). Typically, hotel accommodations encompass basic amenities such as beds, bathrooms, televisions, and telephones, supplemented by additional services including housekeeping, baggage storage, business centers, recreational facilities, spas, and dining establishments (Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020). The concurrent advancements in transportation infrastructure, encompassing both maritime and terrestrial modes, facilitated ease of travel to various destinations, thereby driving substantial growth in the hotel industry to cater to the diverse needs of travelers (Kavises, 2020).

Throughout historical epochs in Thailand, transient accommodations evolved to meet the needs of travelers. During the Sukhothai period (1238-1438), Western traders and merchants visiting Siam sought lodging in residences, pavilions, temples, and boats (Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020; Nanthapaibool, 2013). Most people stayed in pavilions during the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767), while special residences housed royal dignitaries (Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020; Nanthapaibool, 2013). The Rattanakosin period (1782 onwards) saw the establishment of temporary dwellings and boats, with city officials facilitating preferential arrangements

for esteemed guests to stay in palaces or designated guesthouses (Nanthapaibool, 2013). Noteworthy literary works such as Sunthorn Phu’s “Journey to Muang Klaeng” offer details about the prevalent lodging arrangements during this era (Sookying et al., 2008).

Dr. Bradley’s 1863 newspaper publication highlighted the establishment of Bangkok’s pioneering hotels, namely the Union Hotel and Boarding Hotel. The Oriental Hotel and Fisher’s Hotel subsequently opened in 1864 (Kavises, 2020). King Vajiravudh’s reign (1910–1925) marked a significant milestone in the growth of Thailand’s hotel industry. This was because many international travelers from different cultures arrived in the country (Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020; Nanthapaibool, 2013). King Vajiravudh’s astute recognition of the burgeoning leisure travel segment therefore prompted the construction of villas in Ang Sila district, Chonburi province, to cater to the burgeoning influx of leisure travelers (Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020). Consequently, this period marked the incipient phase of Thailand’s hotel industry, epitomizing King Vajiravudh’s visionary initiatives to accommodate the evolving needs of travelers during his reign.

Etymology of “Hotel”

The term “hotel” finds its etymological origins deeply embedded within linguistic evolution and historical contexts, reflecting the dynamic interplay between cultural influences and socio-political transformations. Broadly construed, the hospitality industry encompasses “businesses that serve guests away from home” (Chon & Maier, 2021, p. 5). The lexical trajectory of the term “hospitality” traces back to Latin roots, where

“hospe” signified either a host or a guest, and “hospitium” denoted guest chambers, inns, or lodging spaces (Chon & Maier, 2021; Radojevic et al., 2019). These Latin antecedents have engendered a plethora of terms in contemporary vernacular, including “host,” “hospice,” “hostel,” “hospital,” “hostelry,” and “hotel” (Lundberg, 1994).

Prior to the advent of the term “hotel,” European locales predominantly employed the descriptors “inn” and “tavern” to delineate establishments offering overnight lodging (Jaroensook, 2022; Kavises, 2020; Lundberg, 1994; Nanthapaibool, 2013). The introduction of the term “hotel” during the French Revolution, derived from the French word “hôtel,” marked a linguistic innovation that subsequently permeated the English lexicon by 1760 (Angelo & Vladimir, 2011). Over the ensuing centuries, people began to use “hotel” ubiquitously to refer to establishments offering temporary accommodations along with ancillary services.

In the Thai linguistic milieu, the term “hotel” is encapsulated by the expression “โรงแรม,” phonetically pronounced as “roong-rɛm,” with its inception attributed to the reign of King Vajirayudh. Comprising two constituent Thai words, namely “โรง” denoting a building or structure with a roof, and “รม” connoting overnight lodging, the amalgamation elucidates a premise for nocturnal residency (Office of Royal Society of Thailand (ORST), 2011). However, the Royal Institute Dictionary expands this definition to encompass accommodations for travelers furnished with requisite amenities in exchange for a fee (Office of Royal Society of Thailand (ORST), 2011). In the realm of business, Jaroensook (2022) succinctly defines a hotel as an establishment offering temporary lodging, along with associated amenities

such as food, beverage, and other services tailored to the needs for travelers. Typically, hotels operate around the clock to accommodate and serve guests, who may stay for a duration of up to one month and are billed on a daily basis. Furthermore, it is important to note that hotels are not typically managed or operated by government entities, state-owned enterprises, charitable organizations, or educational institutions.

During the reign of King Vajiravudh, an additional term emerged when Mom Rachothai pursued her education in England and authored a poem titled “นิราศลอนดอน” or “Journey to London”. Within this literary work, she employed the term “โฮเต็ล” (pronounced: hoo dten), which transliterated to “hotel” from English language (Nanthapaibool, 2013). Moreover, during the reign of King Prajadhipok (King Rama VII) (1925-1935), the term “โฮเต็ล” was also integrated into hotel names. For instance, Phayathai Hotel, when rendered in Thai, incorporates the term “โฮเต็ล” as a prefix: โฮเต็ล พญาไท. This term is regarded as informal and primarily used in spoken language (Kavises, 2020).

In the Ayutthaya period, a significant influx of Chinese immigrants settled in Siam. This migration led to the adoption of various Chinese influences, including the term “โรงเตี๊ยม” is a lodge or hotel for travelers (ORST, 2011). It is believed that the word “เตี๊ยม” may stem from “店” (diàn) meaning inn, shop, or store (SPA Supply, 2021). In Chinese period dramas with Thai translations, “โรงเตี๊ยม” is often used to denote a restaurant or café offering guestrooms for a fee.

In the realm of hotels, a significant term is “guests”, translated as “แขก”, pronounced: kɛɛk. This term holds dual meanings, as delineated by

the Royal Institute Dictionary (Office of Royal Society of Thailand (ORST), 2011). The first connotation pertains to individuals of Islamic faith or hailing from regions such as India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Java, and Malaysia. The second interpretation denotes someone visiting a place or participating in an event, akin to the English term “guest”.

Furthermore, there is an assumption that the word “แขก”, suggesting an assimilation from the Teochew Chinese dialect word “客家” pronounced as Khε-Gǎε (Laomanacharoen, 2019). Through the process of language assimilation, the pronunciation likely evolved from its original form, condensing two syllables into one.

Thai idioms promoting the hospitality

Certain Thai idioms serve as reflections of Thai hospitality, deeply rooted in Thai traditions, customs, and ways of life. One such idiom, “เลี้ยงดูปูเสื่อ” (liang doo bpoo sèuua), translates to “take care and lay a mat,” symbolizing the act of warmly welcoming guests by offering them abundant food (Office of Royal Society of Thailand (ORST), 2011). This idiom emphasizes the value of ensuring guests feel well cared for and satisfied, fostering a sense of joy upon their departure. Another idiom, “แขกไปใครมา” (kεεk bpai krai maa), literally meaning “guests go, who come,” highlights the Thai people’s inherent friendliness and warm reception towards guests and visitors (Laomanacharoen, 2019). It signifies the obligation of hosts to extend a gracious and welcoming demeanor to all who enter their home. Lastly, the phrase “ต้อนรับขับสู้” (dtǎwǎn ráp kàp sūu), which is literally

translated as “welcome and fight,” conveys the hosts’ commitment to actively engaging and ensuring that all guests and visitors have an enjoyable experience (Office of Royal Society of Thailand (ORST), 2011).

The idioms previously mentioned reveal how Thai people extend hospitality to their guests, emphasizing the need for hosts to ensure a warm welcome, attentive care, and a pleasant and fulfilling experience. These qualities align with Pang’s (2020) observation that Asian service is characterized by a personal touch, contrasting with the more corporate style often found in Western practices. Hotels that strive to offer authentic Thai hospitality mirror this approach. However, cultural influences extend beyond service to impact hotel management styles as well (Pang, 2020). Radojevic et al. (2019) propose that hotels should contemplate employing personnel from Asian nations where cultural norms improve service quality. Conversely, in countries like Japan, Hong Kong, or Singapore, where local employees have a strong cultural inclination towards exceptional hospitality, hotels should predominantly employ local staff. Their reasoning is because their cultural background in hospitality typically leads to higher guest satisfaction compared to Western staff. Additionally, these traits may highlight the higher expectations that Asian guests have regarding the quality of interactions and services provided by hotel staff, as noted by Sann and Lai (2021).

Thai hospitality

Throughout history, it was customary for households to maintain a jar or container filled with water positioned in front of their residences. Upon

the arrival of guests or visitors, it was customary to offer them water served in a traditional Thai silver bowl (Boonnak, 2020; Chon, 2019; Intathep, 2014). Occasionally, hosts would adorn the water with jasmine flowers to impart a pleasant fragrance to the offering (Boonnak, 2020). Additionally, individuals passing by these homes were welcome to quench their thirst by partaking of the water from these jars or containers (Chon, 2019; Intathep, 2014). This act is emblematic of a unique aspect of Thai culture, encapsulated by the term “น้ำใจ” (pronounced: náam jai). Comprising the Thai words for “water” and “heart,” when conjoined, this phrase conveys notions of generosity or benevolence (Office of Royal Society of Thailand (ORST), 2011).

In addition to the many amenities and services that hotels offer, hospitality is a key part of making sure that guests are comfortable and that they can interact with staff (Chon, 2019; Kasivivat, 2018). Within the realm of hospitality culture, Asian service personnel exhibit distinct characteristics when compared to their non-Asian counterparts. Asian service workers often believe that they are important parts of the hotel and work hard to make sure that guests are happy (Chon, 2019).

Besides the allure of its picturesque locales, the embodiment of “Thainess” stands as a pivotal factor in enticing tourists to visit Thailand (Kongpolphrom, 2018). Renowned for its unparalleled hospitality, Thai establishments are celebrated for their ability to imbue hotel guests with a profound sense of warmth and welcome (Chon, 2019; Khan et al., 2015). Illustrating this sentiment, Chon (2019) provides an anecdotal example wherein hotel bellmen routinely extend the greeting with the Wai and say, “Welcome back to your home,” to returning guests. Such gestures

underscore the overarching ethos of Thai hospitality, embracing guests with familial warmth akin to that of cherished family members or relatives. This way of greeting is consistent with Sundayra's (2021) findings, which indicate that the Aisatsu greetings used by Japanese service providers serve as a significant unique selling point in hospitality. They foster a sense of warm welcome and help distinguish their service from others.

Amid the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the hotel sector bore a significant brunt, resulting in the closure of numerous small-scale establishments. In efforts to rebound, hotels are strategically integrating elements of their unique cultural heritage into service provision, aiming to impart a sense of warmth to incoming guests while also distinguishing their service offerings from those of competitors (Suksutdhi & Boonyanmethaporn, 2022). Scholars such as Fakfare et al. (2021) and Sucher et al. (2013) have stressed the importance of "Thainess" as a competitive edge within the global hospitality industry. By infusing their operations with authentic Thai cultural elements, hotels aim to cultivate distinctive and gratifying guest experiences, fostering guest loyalty and encouraging repeat patronage (Fakfare et al., 2019; Sucher et al., 2013).

Conclusion

This academic investigation has shed light on the historical journey of the hotel sector in Thailand, tracing its linguistic evolution and cultural significance. Through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing historical analysis, linguistic studies, and cultural exploration, this study has provided

valuable insights into the intersection of language, culture, and hospitality in Thailand.

The term “hotel” found its linguistic adaptation in Thailand. Termed as “โรงแรม” (pronounced: roong-rɛm) in the Thai lexicon, this term denotes establishments providing accommodation to travelers in exchange for a fee. Additionally, informal variants of the term “hotel” have also surfaced in Thai discourse. Notably, “โฮเต็ล” (pronounced: hoo dten) is directly transcribed from the English term “hotel” and was initially introduced by Mom Rachothai in her literary work “Journey to London.” Moreover, the influence of the Chinese language on Thai vocabulary is evident, with terms like “โรงเตี๊ยม” (pronounced: roong dtiam) used colloquially to refer to establishments, typically restaurants or cafés, offering accommodations on upper floors. Despite these linguistic nuances, the cultural dimensions inherent in the term “โรงแรม” remain less explicit, with greater cultural significance often attributed to the manifestation of Thai hospitality within the realm of hotel services.

Furthermore, during the Sukhothai Kingdom era, foreigners initiated their travels to Thailand, then known as Siam, primarily for purposes of trade, commerce, and international relations. At this juncture, temporary accommodations for these visitors were diverse, ranging from pavilions to residences of relatives, religious sanctuaries such as temples, and even vessels like boats and ships. However, it was during the reign of King Vajiravudh that the hospitality landscape in Thailand underwent significant development. This epoch witnessed a substantial surge in the influx of

foreign visitors, attributable to advancements in transportation infrastructure, consequently catalyzed the emergence of the hotel business in the region.

Additionally, Thai hospitality, deeply ingrained in Thai society, places a profound emphasis on ensuring guest satisfaction and comfort. Thai individuals nurture this distinctive trait from an early age, which is evident in the warmth and generosity extended towards guests. As reflected in Thai idioms, hospitality is synonymous with providing guests abundant food and ensuring their contentment. Central to this ethos is the concept of “น้ำใจ” (pronounced: náam jai), symbolizing the innate benevolence and helpfulness of Thai people towards their guests and visitors. The pervasive nature of Thai hospitality extends beyond the confines of hotels to permeate various aspects of Thai culture and business practices, embodying a cultural heritage that remains intrinsic to Thai identity.

Contributions

Academic contributions

This study thoroughly examines the linguistic evolution of the term “hotel” in Thailand, emphasizing the incorporation and assimilation of foreign terminology into Thai culture. This strengthens our knowledge about language borrowing and adaptation in sociolinguistics. By examining historical texts and cultural contexts, the study provides a richer understanding of how language evolves alongside cultural and social changes.

The exploration of Thai cultural practices and their historical evolution offers advantageous information about cultural anthropology and heritage studies. It demonstrates the impact of traditional practices on

contemporary hospitality. By blending historical analysis with cultural studies, the study demonstrates the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how cultural heritage shapes contemporary practices.

The detailed examination of Thai hospitality practices, such as the concept of “น้ำใจ” (náam jai), adds depth to ethnographic and sociocultural studies. The model of hospitality, deeply rooted in cultural values, offers a framework for comparing hospitality practices across various cultures. It also adds to global hospitality and tourism studies by showing how unique and effective Thai hospitality is.

Practical contributions

Hotels can leverage the rich cultural heritage of Thailand as a unique selling proposition, integrating traditional elements into their service offerings to provide unique and authentic experiences that differentiate them from competitors. Insights from the study can inform cultural tourism strategies, helping hotels and operators develop packages and experiences that celebrate and preserve Thai cultural heritage and attract culturally inclined tourists.

By understanding the cultural foundations of Thai hospitality, hotels can enhance their service excellence. Emphasizing traits such as humility, respect, empathy, and friendliness can improve guest satisfaction and loyalty. The findings can inform training programs for hotel staff, ensuring that they embody the principles of Thai hospitality. Such practices can enhance the overall guest experience, making it more personalized and culturally enriching.

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