

Royal Buddhist Monasteries in Rattanakosin Period: Potential Development Guidelines for Promoting Cultural Tourism

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Abstract

Royal Buddhist Monasteries or Temples are among the world's most famous cultural attractions, full of magnificent arts such as Murals, stained glass and richly decorated gables, doors and windows panels in which some temples have been included as a world heritage. Apart from the precious architecture and beautiful courtyards, Thai Monasteries have long been the center pillar of social and spiritual guidance to Thai society. The Monastery plays an important role in various areas ranging from being the center for learning the Buddhist way of life, an education center for the young, center for sacred ceremonies for auspicious occasions and the host to various Buddhist ceremonies and local Thai festivals. Throughout its history, The Thai Buddhist monasteries, especially the royal monasteries have become a symbol of the Thai way of life and have attracted visitors from all over the world. Due to its high potential in monetary returns from cultural tourism, The Thai government have implemented various strategies in the past but had never really studied the various issues, status, role and potential of the monasteries in detail. Suggestions for the development of Royal Monasteries into a cultural tourist attraction include improvement in landscaping, security, public conveniences and facilities, attraction sites, potentials in providing services, advertising, public relations, activities and temple's management.

Keywords: Temple, Monastery, Royal Monastery, Rattanakosin, Potential, Development, Status, Role, Cultural Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Thai Monasteries and temples or *Wat* have long been the center of cultural heritage. In the past, Thai temples were considered as the center of knowledge for both spiritual and social learning. Various arts such as the intrinsic mural paintings of the life of Lord Buddha and the traditional art of massage have been combined within the temple walls and have made the temple the center for the Thai society. Up to the present day, Thai monasteries still remain its importance as a symbol of cultural heritage of the Thai People and have also attracted attention from tourists from all over the world. As a result of its popularity, the Thai government has developed various plans in the past to promote cultural tourism to boost the economy and gain in on the rich and glamorous attraction but has not been successful due to poorly planned strategies and lack of understanding. This research provides an in depth study of the various factors and potential of the monasteries and also explores the answers of the strategies to be adopted while keeping harmony and sustainability with its social surrounding, stakeholders and the people.

2. RESEARCH AREA and METHODOLOGY

Royal Buddhist Monasteries in Rattanakosin Period: Potential Development patterns for Promoting Cultural Tourist are a qualitative research. The research area was purposively chosen which included 9 royal monasteries in the Rattanakosin period which include 1) *Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm Rajwaramahaviharn* (Wat Pho-Temple of the Reclining Buddha), 2) *Wat Arun* (Temple of the Dawn), 3) *Wat Ratcha Orasaram Ratcha Worawihan*, 4) *Wat Ratchapradit*, 5) *Wat Benchamabophit Dusitvanaram* (Marble Temple), 6) *Wat Bowonniwet Vihara Rajavaravihara*, 7) *Wat Ratchabophit Sathit Maha Simaram Ratcha Wara Maha Wihan*, 8) *Wat Suthat Thepphawaram* and 9) *Wat Rama IX Golden Jubilee Temple* which are all located in Bangkok Thailand. The purpose of this research is to study the characteristics of the royal monasteries and the potential for promoting cultural tourism, the problems and obstacles in conducting cultural tourisms and the guidelines toward the development of cultural tourism promotions. The research was carried out through document analysis of related research papers, documents and field data. Field data was gathered through observations, interviews, group discussions, workshops and included a total of 118 informants during the period of January 15, 2012 to September 30, 2012. The goals of this research include 1) Study the characteristics of the royal monasteries and the potential for promoting cultural tourism 2) the problems and obstacles in conducting cultural tourisms 3) guidelines toward the development of cultural tourism

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The History and Origin of Buddhist Monasteries

During the Buddhist era, Buddhist monks were not allowed to stay in permanent lodging for long periods of time to prevent them from being attached to the materialistic world. Monks were mainly accustomed to establishing basic dwellings beneath large trees. As the popularity

and teachings of the Buddhist way of life flourished and adapted by all levels of the society, King Pimpisarn of the Ratchakreut city in India adopted the Buddhist belief and offered the “Weluwan” land to lord Buddha to use as a monastery for his disciples. From that period onwards, various royalties had donated land and built temples as a sign of faith and belief in which the Lord Buddha accepted and used as monasteries to spread the teachings of the Buddhist religion in which the Weluwan temple is considered to be the first Buddhists monasteries established.

3.2 Buddhist Monasteries in Thailand

As for Thailand, it is believed that the first Buddhist monastery is the Phra Pathom Jedi, in Nakorn Pathom province built during the 300 BC period when monks from Sri Lanka propagated the Buddhist teachings throughout Southeast Asia. From the past, Buddhism has had a strong influence to the Thai Society and has governed the livelihood of the Thai way of life. Buddhists monasteries became the center of Fine arts, Mural paintings, and indigenous knowledge of all sorts and are considered to be the cultural identity of Thai People (Ungkoon, 2001). As the teachings and beliefs were adopted by all levels of society from normal lay people to the Elite class, the construction of monasteries as a symbol of the faith in Buddhism began to spread throughout the country. Many monasteries were built and consisted of various arts and beliefs from their period. Some were built according to traditional beliefs and even consisted of foreign influences both Asian and Western culture making the monastery a unique combination Buddhist beliefs, collective art, culture and knowledge. This is consistent with Kaewmuang (1998) where the Thai monasteries are the center of fine arts, architecture, traditional medicine knowledge and spiritual guidance with the main influence coming from the Buddhist way of life.

3.3 Royal Monasteries

As the monasteries were the center of respect of the society, the royal monarchs were accustomed to uphold the religious faith and belief and have therefore built and supported the building of many monasteries. During the Chakri Dynasty, the Kings and royal families supported many monasteries during their reign. Although many monasteries were supported, only the temples that the royal ash after cremation are placed or was closely patronized by the King were considered to be a Royal Monastery. The Royal Monasteries of the Chakri Dynasty include 1) Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm Rajwaramahaviharn “Wat Pho-Temple of the Reclining Buddha” 2) Wat Arun (Temple of the Dawn) 3) Wat Ratcha Orasaram Ratcha Worawihan 4) Wat Ratchapradit 5) Wat Benchamabophit Dusitvanaram (Marble Temple) 6) Wat Bowonniwet Vihara Rajavaravihara, 7) Wat Ratchabophit Sathit Maha Simaram Ratcha Wara Maha Wihan, 8) Wat Suthat Thepphawararam, 9) Wat Rama IX Golden Jubilee Temple

3.4 Status and Potential of Royal Monasteries

In the present, Royal Monasteries have become the knowledge center of various fields such as Archeology, Asian antiquities, Fine Arts, Mural paintings, Traditional Sculptures, Religious and spiritual worships and serves as a learning center for both the society and government bodies. From the research, we find that the Royal monasteries have high potential in being a Cultural tourism destination. Most of the Royal Monasteries have good management system in organizing and planning for tourist activities and various public relations and

advertisements in cooperation with the local and government bodies. There are constant development and improvement plans for restoring archeological buildings and monuments. The convenient facilities to accommodate tourists are constantly maintained. All of the Royal monasteries are accessible to the public on regular hours except on special religious or royal event. Traveling to these monasteries can be done by both land and water transportation. Throughout the year, numerous activities both cultural and religious activities are held for the public and tourist to join. The various attractions include beautiful landscapes, archeological buildings, historic relics and artifacts, temples, shrines, fabulous moral paintings which reflect the Thai culture and heritage from past to present.

3.5 Problems and Obstacles of Royal Monasteries for Cultural Tourism

Although royal monasteries have high potential in cultural tourism, field Research has shown various problems and obstacles such as 1) the amount of garbage and littering which destroys the beauty of the temple ground and landscape. 2) Lack of control of the commercial entities surrounding the monastery resulting in unethical commercial trade and abuse of tourists. 3) Lack of Security and Safety measures in tackling pickpockets and mischievous conduct. 4) Lack of parking areas. 5) Lack of service and convenience facilities such as toilets and tourist information centers. 6) Lack of resource management in maintaining the various attraction sites and structures. 7) Lack of training and knowledge management systems in providing tourist with correct historic information. 8) Problems in Public Relations and Promotional skills in foreign language. 9) Lack of support in promoting cultural activities and 10) Controversies in temple management for developing cultural tourism.

3.6 Guidelines for developing Royal Monasteries for Cultural Tourism

From evaluating the surrounding environment and analyzing the various factors through SWOT analysis, we were able to summarize the development guidelines into 8 areas as follows. 1) Preserving the beauty of the landscape and historical sites by managing the commercial activities and hawkers surrounding the monastery so that garbage and trash are managed efficiently with cooperation from all parties. 2) Improve Safety and Security Measures to create confidence among tourist through improvement in safety and security measures, and establish a security service center within the monasteries during visiting hours. 3) Improvement in public service facilities by developing parking areas and restroom facilities that are up to international standards and improve guest relation service to satisfy tourists. This is consistent with Chaisorn (1993) where accessible parking area is one of the major factors in the decision process for tourists. 4) Improve tourist attractions sites by developing knowledge management skills to the monastery staffs in promoting the cultural activities held by the temple and utilize the public relation and advertisement Medias to promote the monastery. This is consistent with Chantachon (2006) where the diffusion of knowledge among the local people one an important factor for creating a successful cultural tourist attraction. The entire community and monastery staffs have to share and promote the various activities of the monastery to be successful. 5) Improve the lack of service mind among the staffs involved so that they understand the importance of their cultural heritage and help in promoting cultural tourism in the correct fashion. This is consistent with Junton (2002) in which training the staffs and community on providing service to tourists is essential for maintaining a sustainable tourist attraction. 6)

Improve Public Relations and advertising by developing media that is suitable for foreign visitors. A network and combination of media must be focused on the target group. This is consistent with Pakpinetch (2008), which states that the use of the correct mix of media and advertising is one of the success factors for promoting cultural tourism. 7) More emphasis should be put on promoting the various local and Buddhist attractions within the monastery. This is consistent with Nanthee (2001), in which the various attractions are not known to tourist due to the lack of promoting and information. 8) The temple management must incorporate the needs and wants of all the stakeholders in concern. The various needs and wants of all stakeholders have to be incorporated to create a sound management system to satisfy the various needs and wants of the tourist. Meetings and workgroups should be established to resolve the conflicts among each party so that cultural tourism is beneficial to everyone in concern.

4. CONCLUSION

Royal Thai Monasteries are a unique symbol of cultural Heritage incorporating beliefs, tradition, art, science reflecting social influence which makes it a treasure for cultural tourism. The development of these historic sites into a cultural tourist attraction must be done with care and understanding. All development strategies should be compatible with each monastery's unique characteristics. Careful Planning in promoting the cultural activities, local festivities, traditions, fine arts, history and beautiful architecture will ensure a successful cultural tourist attraction. Incorporating the needs and wants of all stakeholders and the surrounding community is an important factor for the success of cultural tourism. Everyone must participate in the strategies to be deployed. Only through cooperation will the development of Royal Monasteries into a cultural tourist attraction truly benefit the society and people of the "Land of Smile" Thailand.

5. SUGGESTIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

The knowledge from this research can be used by the royal monasteries as a framework for future development in preparing for a sustainable cultural tourism. Strategies deployed should incorporate and coincide with the monastery's distinctive features and characteristics. Customer Satisfaction surveys and research should be conducted and evaluated every year to improve on the quality of service. Safety and Security systems should be developed for protection of tourist and archeology relics. Joint development programs with the local community should be established so that all stakeholders share the same objective and help preserve the cultural treasure of their community. Future topics should include the study of the surrounding monasteries in the Rattanakosin area and explore the framework for joint cooperation among all Royal Monasteries. Future research studies should also focus on the knowledge management process and presentation skills and details of the Royal monasteries.

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