

Enhancing Authenticity of Art and Craft Production Communities for Tourism Development

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Abstract

As a tourist destination, Chiang Mai, Thailand is famous for its cultural attractions including traditional art and craft products. However, the tourism boom in Chiang Mai has caused unrestrained expansions of non-traditional structures that reduce the sense of place in special art and craft districts. Therefore, it is necessary to plan for enhancement of the communities' uniqueness and sense of place. Moreover, the solutions should satisfy the tourist's expectations for authenticity. This paper describes a study of three art and craft communities using a perceptual approach which identifies patterns of perception and preferences for the environments of foreign tourists to recommend development solutions. The conclusion leads to recommendations which encourage the preferred original conditions, enhance the unpleasant areas and incorporate production activities to the development scheme in order to enrich travel experiences and enhance authenticity of the communities.

Chiang Mai Art and Craft Production Communities

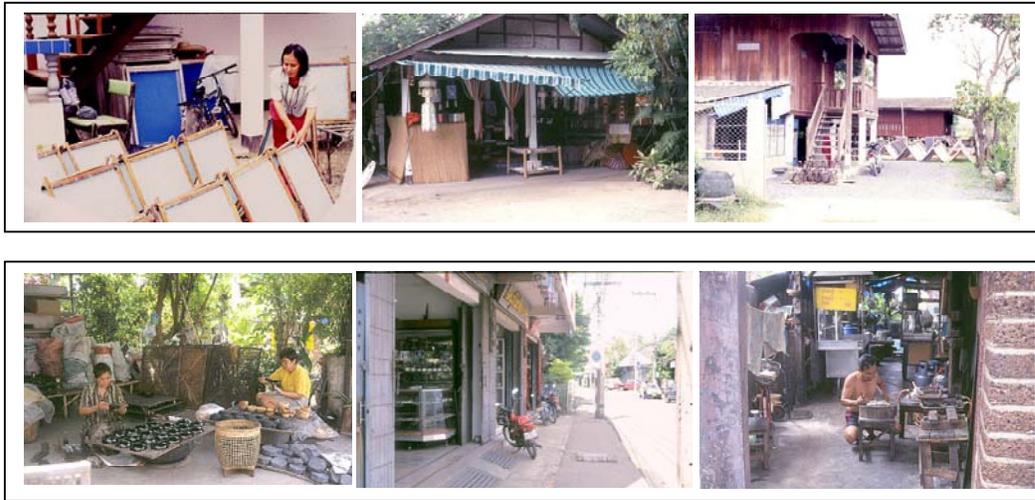
Chiang Mai is the most famous cultural tourism destination in Thailand. The attractions include historic sites, cultural ceremonies, and handcraft shopping. In 2005, 4 million tourists visited Chiang Mai and spent over 750 million US Dollars. Handcraft products accounted for 30 percent of the tourists' shopping expenses.²² Therefore, handcraft related activities and places are attractive and a significant source of income.

Baan Tawai, Borsang and Wualai are the most famous art and craft production communities for woodcarving, paper umbrella and silverware respectively. Their histories include the vernacular characteristics of production communities. While these communities are flourishing in tourism, they are experiencing unplanned growth and the loss of original characteristics of specialized production communities. This renders the communities unidentifiable, less attractive and trapped in low cost competition among mass product outlets in mundane places.



Figure 1: Baan Tawai Community

²² A Survey of Cultural Tourism by Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University (2006)



Problems of Tourism Development

Since tourism can degrade the environments and weaken cultural identity, tourism development projects are initiated to solve the problems. Communities have developed various projects that attempt to increase capacities and upgrade facilities. However, traveling is more about first hand experiences,²³ which depend on perceptions of physical environments. Still, few projects attempt to improve tourists' experiences while nourishing the local identity and physical characteristics. Therefore, development schemes that enhance local characteristics are necessary for the communities to maintain distinct cultural and physical identities and to maintain their sense of place. Here, a sense of place refers to a quality that is both a result of and a basis for unity, care and affection of people and their environments.²⁴ For tourists, unique local characteristics of the communities would intensify travel experiences and add value into the products.

Enhancing Authenticity

Local characteristics and authenticity enhance the perception of tourists have toward the environment. What they perceive in the environment gives them impressions leading to experiences that are satisfactory. Therefore, to enhance the authenticity of the communities in the eyes of the tourist, the objectives of this study are: to understand patterns of perceptions of the physical characteristics of the environment and to manage perceptions of characteristics and authenticity in the communities by improving their physical characteristics.

Preference Study

People associate meaning with the environment through their perceptions which leads to affective judgment and perceived functions.²⁵ These perceptions, meanings and consequent judgments can be expressed through preference of multiple environments.²⁶ Preference studies utilizing a preference rating survey with color photographs to obtain people's ratings on a Likert scale has been widely used to study visual perception of human toward the environment.²⁷ Reliability and validity issues of the

²³ McIntosh, R. W., Goeldner, C. R. and Ritchie, B. (1995).

²⁴ Relph, E. (1976) discusses the characteristics and meaning of place and placelessness.

²⁵ The approach is originally called Non-verbal communication approach discussed by Rapoport, A. (1990); (1992); (1999).

²⁶ Kaplan, S. and Kaplan, R. (1983) suggest that preference judgment is a holistic measure of overall reaction toward the physical characteristics of the environments; accounts for both innate and learned reactions; requires neither great consideration nor amount of time to make decisions and is almost second nature so that people do it subconsciously.

²⁷ Many studies by this approach have been reviewed and discussed in Kaplan, R. and Kaplan, S. (1995) and Nasar, J. L. (1997).

methods have been established and adequately discussed in previous research.²⁸ Analyzing dimensions of the preference yields perceived patterns from the environments that reach beyond people's conscious level.²⁹ These collective patterns of perceptions or dimensions are composed of groups of scenes depicting certain environmental conditions that people see sharing common characteristics.³⁰

Research Design

The surveys were conducted with 300 foreign tourists.³¹ First, a preference rating survey used 60 sample pictures, including scenes from different types and subtypes within three communities. The respondents rated each picture on the scale of 1 (not preferred) to 5 (very much preferred). Second, for a scene description survey, the respondents wrote down brief descriptions about the scenes. This information was used to help interpret the characteristics of the preference dimensions.³² Factor Analysis³³ was used to group the scenes into dimensions based on preference patterns, while the verbal descriptions were analyzed by Content Analysis.³⁴ The dimensions were examined, described³⁵ and verified with the most frequent comments. The dimensions were also concluded and discussed by the potential approaches to enhance the perceived authenticity and improve the physical characteristics of the communities.

Patterns of Perception

The analysis yielded 7 dimensions. Each dimension shows a group of scenes depicting common characteristics of the environments according to perceptions of foreign tourists. Six out of seven show high potential to enhance the authenticity and the atmosphere of the communities and are described as follows:³⁶



Figure 1: Dimension 1—Vast Concrete Areas (Average Preference Score = 2.53)

Dimension 1 is named Vast Concrete Areas due to the common characteristic of large barren concrete streets and parking lots in urban-commercial environments. This dimension was described by the

²⁸ The use of photograph as surrogate for environment have been tested, proved, reviewed and discussed by Daniel, T. C. and Meitner, M. M. (2001); Dunn, M. C. (1976); Kaplan, R. and Kaplan, S. (1995); Lekagul, A. (2002); Shafer, E. L., and Richards, T. A. (1974); and Shuttleworth, S. (1980).

²⁹ Suggested by Kaplan, S., and Kaplan, R. (1983).

³⁰ A review of several studies by Kaplan, R. and Kaplan, S. (1995).

³¹ Sampled by quotas of percentages of home countries of tourist population in Chiang Mai.

³² These pictures were: taken at normal eye level showing regular tourists' viewpoints; stratified and selected to represent the communities, subtypes and conditions; printed in the size of 2" ½ by 4" on letter-size papers with 6 color pictures per page in random order and bound into two sets of booklets with different orders (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1995; Lekagul, 2003). The conditions were: scenes possessing conditions or elements that could introduce biases were removed; and the scenes from three communities would be proportionally distributed but those from the same subtypes or community would not be sequentially together. Then 60 scenes were randomly divided into four sets of 15 scenes and added to the booklets for the scene description survey (Lekagul, 2003; Woods, 1995).

³³ Maximum Likelihood Factor Analysis with Promax rotation was used with procedures recommended in Hair, et al. (1998).

³⁴ Descriptions from the scenes in each group were combined, tallied, categorized and counted, following procedures suggested in Sommer and Sommer (1995).

³⁵ The scenes in each group were: arranged by their factor loadings, means, and standard deviations; examined their common characteristics; named and described.

³⁶ In each dimension, the example pictures are the 3 most representative of that dimension (determined by the highest factor loading values) while the average preference score shows how much the respondents like the dimension.

tourists as boring and empty, with wide streets or commercial areas which are unpleasant and unlikable. This dimension is the least preferred dimension by the tourists.



Figure 2: Dimension 2—Production Areas and Activities (Average Preference Score = 3.15)

Dimension 2 is named Production Areas and Activities due to its common characteristic of people doing handcraft activities in vernacular environments. The verbal descriptions from the respondents for this dimension were articulated as interesting and attractive. The tourists moderately prefer this dimension.



Figure 3: Dimension 3—Natural Village Alleys (Average Preference Score = 3.19)

Dimension 3 is called Natural Village Alleys due to its common characteristic of narrow and curved alleys with trees and other vegetation in vernacular environments. The respondents described this dimension as calm, relaxing, local and natural, which are attractive and positive. The tourists also prefer this dimension.



Figure 4: Dimension 4—Souvenir Shopping Path (Average Preference Score = 3.24)

Dimension 4 is called Souvenir Shopping Path due to its common characteristic of covered pavement in front of stores displaying a variety of small products. This dimension was described as market areas selling handcraft and souvenir, which are beautiful and interesting. The tourists highly prefer this dimension.



Figure 5: Dimension 5—Original Canal Areas (Average Preference Score = 3.33)

Dimension 5 is named Original Canal Areas due to its common characteristic of common areas on a small irrigation canal between lines of small vernacular style shops with some vegetation, which is an original area in Baan Tawai community. The respondents described this dimension as peaceful and shady gardens and commercial areas, which are beautiful and interesting. The tourists prefer this dimension the most.



Figure 6: Dimension 6—Old Style Vernacular Houses (Average Preference Score = 3.15)

Dimension 6 is called Old Style Vernacular Houses due to its common characteristics of old and vernacular style wooden houses with gable roof elements and some decorative plants. The tourists described this dimension as old, pretty homes with plants, selling souvenirs and with restaurants or cafés, which are also nice and pleasant. The tourists moderately prefer this dimension.

Perceived Authenticity

From the resultant patterns of perceptions, 6 out of 7 dimensions comprise of similar scenes from more than one community. This means the three communities are inadequately distinct from the others in the eyes of the tourists. However, there is an exception for the Original Canal Areas dimension, in which all the scenes are from the original canal areas in Baan Tawai (see figure 5). This means the particular parts of Baan Tawai do have distinct characteristics perceived by the tourists. This area has the original characteristics of Baan Tawai; therefore it can be considered an authentic Baan Tawai community, which is not only unique but also the most preferred of all dimensions. Hence, enhancing the authenticity of the Baan Tawai community through enhancing its characteristics will also help increase preference for the tourists.

Other Preferable Characteristics

Although some of the characteristics perceived by the tourists are not specific to each community, they are relevant to the general handcraft communities, which consist of: Production Areas and Activities (figure 2), Souvenir Shopping Path (figure 4), Natural Village Alleys (figure 4) and Old Style Vernacular Houses (figure 6). These dimensions are not formed by characteristics of any one community but combinations of similar characteristics from different communities. In fact, they all have characteristics, which appear in all communities. They are not only perceivable but they are also preferred by the tourists.

Enhancing the Authenticity and Improving the Atmosphere

The communities can enhance their authentic environments and atmosphere by:

Maintaining and encouraging the original areas. The Original Canal Areas in the Baan Tawai community should be preserved and its characteristics should be encouraged throughout the selling and common areas of the community.

Utilizing the characteristics that are related to the handcraft sale and production communities. The characteristics of Souvenir Shopping Path, Natural Village Alleys and Production Areas and Activities

can be used to create the general handcraft sales and production communities. In addition, each community can promote these characteristics in a way that fit its own particular character, altering components such as type of products, type of vegetation, methods and tool of productions, and house elements and materials. Thus, they could become perceived as authentic communities.

Reducing the negative characteristics of the Vast Concrete Areas by: turning some of those areas into recreational uses such as small parks, and by adding nicely paved pedestrian walks, providing seating and rest areas, adding trees, and providing street furniture and decorative elements. Reducing the unpleasant characteristics of the Vast Concrete Areas will improve the character and atmosphere of the community as a whole.

Conclusions

This study has shown the potential for tourism development based on empirical data of tourists' perceptions and preferences toward the environments of the art and craft production communities. The categories of perceptions in the findings fit into the theoretical frameworks and cumulative results from previous research.³⁷

It is necessary to discuss perceptions of the communities' members.³⁸ First, they are proud of their original atmosphere of production activities in vernacular architecture and landscape. Second, they have nostalgic feelings toward the original characteristics and also prefer those that still exist and perceived by the tourists. However, there are many developments, which are individual projects by business owners who are not local residents. Therefore, the appreciations toward the old traditions were not executed. Nevertheless, similarities in the perceived authenticities and preferences by both the tourists and the locals yield possibility that the recommendations for enhancement are agreed upon and successfully applied by the communities.

However, this research did not cover Thai tourists, whose perceptions and preferences could yield different results.³⁹ The recommendations for enhancing the authenticity and improving the atmosphere are provided for the communities or professional planners and designers to develop action plans or design schemes. They can also use this study approach with other types of environments or different communities.

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³⁷ The categories found including type of environments, activities, style of building, and specific contents such as vegetation and products are usually concluded and discussed in the previous work of Kaplan, R. and Kaplan, S. (1995); Nasar, J. L. (1997); Herzog, T. R. and Gale, T. A. (1996); Lekagul, A. (2003); Sheets, V. L., and Manzer, C. D. (1991).

³⁸ A part of this research by Lekagul and Raksawin (2005) includes an interview with communities' representatives who described about their perceptions, needs and expectations of the communities. They also viewed and commented on the resultant patterns of perceptions and preferences from the tourists.

³⁹ Foreign and local respondents have been proved having different perceptions and preferences in previous studies by Strumse, E. (1996); and Yang, B. E. and Brown, T. J. (1992).

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