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Creating a deep heritage interpretation: A case study in Thailand

Abstract

One of the challenges faced by interpreters at heritage attractions is to create a meaningful theme so as to inspire visitor curiosity in an entertaining way and stimulate audiences to make their own connections to the meanings of the sites. This research note discusses the deep meaning model and the way to create a meaningful interpretation of heritage sites by presenting an illustration of a case study of Phra Ram Ratchanivej Palace in Thailand. The site complex manifests King Chulalongkorn's global views on 'civilisation' through architecture and a universal concept of Siamese - German diplomatic relations while balancing powers of France and Britain in the early twentieth century.

Key words: meaningful themes; heritage interpretation; deep meaning model; heritage sites; Thailand

Introduction

Creating a meaningful theme is considered as one of the most crucial elements for success in interpretive programs of cultural and natural resources (Ham, 1992; Ham, 2003; Larsen, 2003). However, it is challenging for interpreters to come up with a meaningful message presented to visitors in an entertaining approach, especially for heritage sites which have an accomplished and abstract concept embedded in the medium of static buildings. Therefore, what message (idea, concept, story) should be conveyed to visitors? What should a meaningful theme be like? And how to create a meaningful theme for heritage sites that now are 'lifeless'?

A theme serves as an axis which helps focus the content and make an interpretation more understandable and memorable (Serrell, 1996; Fudge, 2003; Cunningham, 2004). It is more understandable when an interpreter uses a theme, information can be connected much more easily into visitors' comprehension which in turn helps them learn and remember the information. Furthermore, the interpretive theme significantly influences how visitors freely think, feel, and behave with respect to theme-related issues (Ham, 2012). The meaningful theme possibly sticks in visitors' mind forever. Instead of telling the visitors all they know, an interpreter should select and present a fascinating and provocative idea which audiences have never before considered.

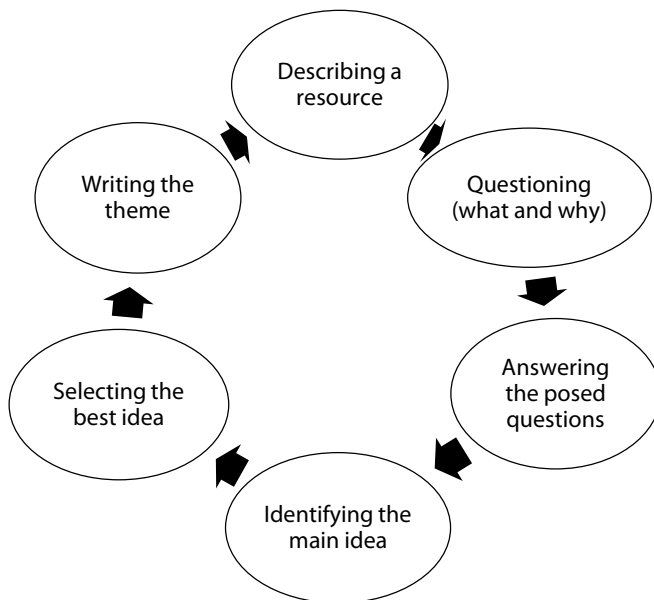
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Creating a meaningful theme: Deep Meaning Model

Crafting a meaningful theme may be the challenges of developing effective interpretive programs, especially when applying to heritage sites which have relatively abstract and complex concepts to deliver to modern visitors (Larsen, 2003; and Kohl, 2004). Such concepts include socio-political change, culture and religion, and economic conditions including globalisation. Heritage sites may have values related to a wide range of disciplines and interest such as science, philosophy, history, religion, architecture and art. Instead of focusing on exclusively on any one of these areas, interpreters may find the most meaningful story with a universal concept which contributes to connecting audiences to the heritage values. This requires great effort in articulating truly meaningful ideas that inspire visitor curiosity and interest. Therefore, the process of creating a meaningful theme ideally requires productive collaboration among scholars, multi-discipline experts, and other staff members of heritage sites.

Jon Kohl (2004) created a meaningful theme for heritage interpretation called 'Deep Meaning Model'. Figure 1 shows a process of deep meaning model that provides a comprehensive way of converting resources into a meaningful theme by giving a greater importance of crafting the meaningful theme with respect to a universal and intangible connection. This systematic approach clearly states a powerful idea that helps provoke visitors to think deeply about the resource. The following steps describe the Deep Meaning Approach.

Figure 1
Deep Meaning Model



Source: Adapted from Kohl (2004)

1. Describing a resource (person, place, and object): Explore and examine historical background of the chosen resource and think about an interesting area to interpret. Ideally, this step requires considerable research and knowledge-sharing from a multi-disciplinary team of experts. Is there

something important about the area that visitors should know? Are there any great and significant stories relevant to the resource?

2. Posing questions (what and why): What stories are interesting, and why? What makes a resource unique, special, and different from other resources?
3. Answering the posed questions: What is the justification based on a significance of the resource?
4. Identifying the main idea: What can be the main idea and the most interesting concept to see and know?
5. Selecting the best idea: What is the most significant idea or message the interpreter wants visitors to learn and remember after visiting the resource?
6. Writing the thematic statement: Write a thematic statement that connects a resource value with a universal meaning.

There is an old Thai saying “building a house in accordance to the wishes of its inhabitants”. This saying embodies the notion of a house as a representation of its dwellers. The house has been an identifying ground for transmitting non-verbal messages and meanings of the dwellers’ identities, ideas and institutions of authority (Devakula, 1999). Architectural style is presumed to be indicative of social and intellectual development. Also, the architecture is connected to national culture, politics, and intellectual life (Whyte, 2006). In order to illustrate the deep meaning model, Phra Ram Ratchanivej, a countryside palace in Thailand, is selected to present how to create a meaningful theme accordingly.

Figure 2

The German Jugendstil architectural style at Phra Ram Ratchanivej, in Phetchaburi, Thailand



Photo: Sompong Amnuay-Ngerntra

1. *Describing a heritage site:* Phra Ram Ratchanivej (shown in Figure 2) is commonly known as 'Wang Ban Puen' and located in Phetchaburi, approximately 120 kilometers southwest of Bangkok. The palace was built on the initiative of King Chulalongkorn (ruled 1868 – 1910) as his rainy season retreat. The king suffered from hay fever during the rainy seasons of Bangkok, especially in September, and sought to find a location offering a more suitable climate (Petchaburi Military District, 2004). The palace was built in the German Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) architectural style characterised as curvilinear lines which were influenced by trees and vegetation. This popular architecture in Europe combines with industrial materials and the minor arts revealing natural splendor, liveliness, and colorfulness (Wikipedia, n.a.).

King Chulalongkorn showed considerable attention to this retreat mansion. This can be interpreted that the king himself commissioned the project. For instance, he selected the site plan of Kaiser Wilhelm II's summer palace as a model for his retreat palace. He assigned Karl Döhring and Dr. Bayer as the project architect and the project engineer. Additionally, Prince Boriphat was responsible for the site plan and the installment of electricity and modern plumbing. Being his last residence erected during his reign, the foundation stone of this palace was laid by the king in August 1910, just a few months before his death on 23rd October 1910. King Chulalongkorn did not have a chance to stay there as intended because he had passed away before its construction was completed in 1916, during the reign of his son and successor.

Influenced by the movement of steel-framed structures in Europe at that time, Phra Ram Ratchanivej is entirely Western in its design and construction methods (Suksri & Freeman, 1996). This palace is a two-storey structure built in the modern style with two spires, one large and the other small, measuring about 70 metres wide from east to west, and 60 metres from north to south. This historic site also comprises rectangular halls surrounding a courtyard.

The attractiveness of Phra Ram Ratchanivej has been described by Suksri and Freeman (1996) that this palace is characterised by large fractable entrances, and the Mansard roofs with a dome hall in the right wing. The front façade appears stately and solid, whereas the other sides are dynamic with several forms of roofs and masses, which are notably different from classical styled buildings. The interior is beautifully decorated with glazed tiles on the floors and walls, and the staircases are in a Baroque style. The furniture, the stained glass windows and the vase are decorated with roses, clematises, butterflies and dragonflies. The ornament also remains an important element of the outer architectural surfaces. Marble, glass, majolica, tiles, colourful moulding, gilding, and other valuable material are chosen with great delicacy for the decoration of the architectural structures.

2. *Posing questions (why and how):* Apart from examining aesthetic and scientific values, in terms of the composition of forms and the stylistic creation at Phra Ram Ratchanivej, it is essential to take into account the socio-political circumstances that coincided with this palace, especially why King Chulalongkorn selected the German architectural style. How did the king perceive the global view on 'modernisation' and apply Western architectural concepts incorporated into the traditional Siamese design? How was the Siamese and German diplomatic relations at that time? Was there any hidden agenda on foreign policy influencing the king's notions in creating this heritage site? If yes, what was it?

3. *Answering the main interesting questions:* In response to the questions of why King Chulalongkorn devoted the entire Phra Ram Ratchanivej to German arts, and why this heritage site is in the German architectural style, the German engineering, and the Kaiser's palace model in Germany, the author points out that King Chulalongkorn sought to express his attitude to entering the 'civilised' international society.

In order to support Tilden Freeman's principles (1957), interpretation should aim to present a *holistic* rather than a *partial* story. With respect to the global influence of colonialism, Europe emerged as the new world order. The supreme powers in the world, especially Britain and France, were cause for concern among the international society, including the Siamese court as early as the 1830s as much as for excitement and inspiration. Both colonial powers became a threat to Siam during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1885, Britain expanded into Burma and the Malay Peninsula. Even more than Britain, France posed a serious danger to Siamese independence by expanding her influence into Cambodia, over Vietnam around the Mekong Delta. Following in his late father's footsteps in modernising Siam, King Chulalongkorn knew that he had to rule decisively, diplomatically, and skillfully. Influenced by foreign media, the king made a series of travels to his neighbors particular Malaya, Singapore and Java so as to foster the 'civilised' policy, and through these countries he learnt numerous benefits of European technology, government systems, and commerce.

King Chulalongkorn strove to create a modern nation-state in accordance with government reform aimed at consolidating the royal absolutism with respect to the British and Dutch colonies in Asia as examples for Siam's desired development. The Siamese elite pursued legislative provisions and administrative measures, similar to those used by the colonial powers, over the outlying regions and provinces. The social construction of modernity and the refashioning of the monarchy's public image was a result of a creative process of selection, adaptation, localisation, and not just a one-way process deriving from the West. This practice was also meant to elevate his hegemonic position and prestigious image either to the eyes of his own subjects, or to the ever-threatening European diplomats.

Due to the Franco–Siamese conflict in 1893 as well as the increasing tension between the two colonial powers, Siam became a buffer state that was prone to the colonial threat and political pressure at that time. In response to such phenomena, King Chulalongkorn sought to establish multi-polar relations with other European countries, replacing the Siamese-British-Franco triplicate affairs, by bringing new powerful players to the game, notably Russia and Germany (Pensri, 1982, p. 166). One of his diplomatic strategies was to send his children to study in various parts of Europe, notably Britain, Germany, and Russia. Subsequently, King Chulalongkorn made visits to Europe twice, in 1897 and 1907, for the sake of strengthening relations and allies with various European countries. Significantly, King Chulalongkorn intended to counter-balance the power of France and Britain, rather than just to broaden horizons. Due to the close relationship with Siam, Russia was the first country in which the king had sought support; however, Russia failed to give Siam the support that Siam had requested. This was perceived to result from Russia's dependence on France for financial support and high-tech machinery in developing her country (Pensri, 1982). Therefore, the king made a swift change to Germany, one of the powerful nations in Europe at that time. He was especially impressed with German Kaiser Wilhelm II's sincerity, accepting unconditional agreements to Siam's request and negotiations. Furthermore, Germany had no colonisation policy in Asia. It was

also Kaiser Wilhelm II who advised the king to request cooperation among the colonial powers to guarantee the independence and integrity of Siam.

King Chulalongkorn sought to foster relations and allies with Germany. Thus, Phra Ram Ratchanivej Palace certainly represents the cordial relationship between the Siamese king and Kaiser Wilhelm II. If not, the German Emperor would not have presented a model of his summer palace to the king after his second journey to Europe made in 1907. This palace also manifested his considerable attention to the construction details. He himself selected a site plan, a location, the project architect and engineer, and the project commissioner. Moreover, the king assigned Prince Boriphat, his son who was educated in Germany, to be responsible for the site plan and the installment of electricity and modern plumbing. It can be asserted that King Chulalongkorn was detail-oriented to the construction of this retreat mansion.

Despite the persistent trouble with the colonial powers, King Chulalongkorn seems to have enthusiastically embraced much of European thought and taste. Peleggi described the king's appreciation of Western culture in his *Lord of Things* (2002), consumption by Siamese elite was a means to imitate and keep pace with the Europeans, and the court invested heavily in the arts, colonial style buildings, royal portraits and public rituals. The king admired the high class, elegance, and Western goods, as can be seen from the interior decorations of his residences. To the king, Western structures were symbolically used to portray the good and modernised 'image' of Siam, as unlike that of other, primitive countries in the region. Possessing various styles of architecture and international art movements demonstrated Siam's multiculturalism and strong position in foreign affairs. With his 'global views' on modernity, the king marked Siam's position in the international society as not inferior to others (Poshyananda, 1992; Thongchai, 2000).

4. *Identifying the important or meaningful idea:* Being fascinated by the Kaiser's palace in Germany, King Chulalongkorn manifested his 'global views' of civilisation and modernisation through the Jugendstil architectural style at Phra Ram Ratchanivej. The king might have used cultural materials, notably architecture, as a political tool to strengthen his hegemony over his native subjects. As Siam was integrated into the new world order led by the 'West' during the nineteenth century; therefore, selecting the Jugendstil architecture also indicated his political position not as a figurehead of an ancient empire but a regional leader of a modern nation-state (Noobangjong, 2003). Simultaneously, the king might have used the architectural style in balancing the powers of France and Britain.
5. *Selecting the best idea:* Phra Ram Ratchanivej does not remind simply a close friendship between King Chulalongkorn and Kaiser Wilhelm II. This palace is also served as a 'footnote' in King Chulalongkorn's multi-polar diplomatic policies, for the sake of strengthening the Siamese and German relations while balancing powers of France and Britain, at the end of his reign.
6. *Writing the thematic statement:* "Phra Ram Ratchanivej Palace represents cordial relationships between King Chulalongkorn and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany while balancing powers of France and Britain in Siam".

Conclusion

A meaningful theme has played a significant role in drawing visitor attention and provoking their thoughts and imaginations by making meaningful connections to resources. The theme ensures what is important and meaningful for visitors to know and focus. It also limits the scope of contents to be presented which helps make the interpretation more powerful and relevant to visitor experiences. Without a meaningful theme, heritage interpretation tends to be unorganised, uninteresting, and unmemorable.

Making comparisons, analogies, metaphors, and stories with universal meanings also provides a high degree of relevance to a great number of people. To appeal visitors' interests and intellects, a theme should involve and connect to what they have never before considered but they already care most about. This requires considerable research, collecting data, and refining related information to be its most compelling. Therefore, one of the critical questions an interpreter should bear in mind is what and how to convey something unexpected, consequential, and worth consideration. However, before doing any interpretive programs, the interpreter should ask these following questions: What is so special about this heritage site? What is the universal idea hidden in the building or architectural style? Will the selected theme be related to the heritage site and the interests of most people? What would most audiences find interesting and worth remembering?

Recent research suggests that creating a meaningful theme is applied to develop interpretive programs and empowers visitors to understand and appreciate the values of heritage sites. A theme may be tried out with visitors early in the interpretive planning stages. Their responses and comments on interpretive programs possibly tell whether their travel experiences successfully reflect and incorporate the theme or not. Meanwhile, interpreters and site managers can make use of such evaluation to modify or tight up the interpretive plan (Serrell, 1996). To appeal visitor interests and intellects, creative learning activities related with the created theme are recommended to integrate into the site management and the development, especially with respect to the interpretive plan so that the visitors can engage in interpretive programs and enrich their travel experiences.

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