

TOURIST ATTRACTION-BASED CULTURAL IDENTITY AND LOCAL PARTICIPATION PROPELLING SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL TOURISM IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

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Thailand is recognized to be exuberantly rich in cultural heritage. Thus, cultural tourism contributes significantly as one of the primary sources of national income. This article focuses on cultural tourism in Mae Hong Son, a northern province of Thailand with three specific objectives. First, it aims to establish the shared cultural identity of the cultural attractions in the target area. Second, it focuses on appraising the attributes of the tourist attractions associated with this identity. Finally, this study aims to assess a tour program developed by the researchers based on the attraction-based cultural identity. Initially, data regarding the area's cultural attractions from documents, surveys, and interviews were examined to determine the attractions' shared collective identity. Then, site visits were performed to objectively examine the attractions' six-dimension attributes. Finally, a tour program highlighting the attractions' identity was assessed by tourism stakeholders. Documentary data analysis reveals that "teak trade" seems to represent the attractions' identity, reminiscing the past splendor with abundant teak resources contributing to the area's rapid expansion and prosperity. Furthermore, six out of ten cultural attractions were positively appraised and incorporated in the tour program, which was favorably evaluated. The findings are beneficial for local cultural tourism development, potentially serving as a model for other areas to achieve sustainable tourism. Implications were offered to encourage and mobilize local community participation across the entire paradigm.

Keywords: Cultural identity; cultural tourism; local participation; sustainable tourism; Mae Hong Son, Thailand

1. INTRODUCTION

Thailand is recognized to be exuberantly rich and opulent in cultural heritage. Thus, cultural tourism makes a substantial contribution to the economy as one of the primary sources of national income. In October of 2022, Thailand was voted the third most popular destination attracting tourists from all corners of the world (Languepin, 2022). Despite the current accomplishment as a tourism hub, the urgent requirement for sustainable development to accommodate tourists who aspire to gain knowledge regarding cultural tourist attractions makes it appealing to upgrade and promote tourist attractions while retaining their cultural roots.

Furthermore, the current needs and demands of tourists are slightly different. High-quality tourists are curious and enthusiastic about the culture pertaining to tourist attractions. They thus deliberately travel internationally to seek opportunities to experience and appreciate diverse cultures. For them, visiting these tourist attractions is not a mere physical act of visiting, but rather a channel to fulfill their intellectual curiosity, aspiring to obtain cultural information about tourist sites so that after the tour, the sites remain imprinted in their memories and hopefully they yearn to return and be immersed in cultural heritage once more (Wang et al., 2017). Ideally, catering to the needs of high-quality tourists can be potentially powerful, not only rendering cultural tourism more sustainable while earning tourist loyalty, but also providing a wake-up call for locals to become more knowledgeable about, and proud of, their own culture, as revealed through tourist attractions.

In the era of modernization, cultural tourism has been vulnerable and susceptible to decline and exploitation. One prominent form of decline is the phenomenon of visitors coming to view tourist attractions to snap pictures to show their friends and family; however, very likely, they know very little about the sites. Moreover, the visitors do not appear to grasp a clear understanding of the sites in front of them, even though each tourist site has a lot more to offer, including spirit beings, structures, myths, legends, and rituals (Harvey, 2002; Shepherd, 2002). Given the significant role played by cultural tourism and the crucial need for proper management to avoid a possible and prime threat to local culture, this study attempts to enhance and promote local cultural tourism. Mae Hong Son (henceforth, MHS), a northern province of Thailand, is envisioned as the target area for this study, with exceptional cultural wealth and a cultural tourism advantage that will subsequently boost provincial and national economic development.

Focusing on specifically a district of MHS, cultural identity pertaining to the cultural attractions in the target area was identified. Then, the cultural attractions' attributes were appraised. Finally, a tour program including positively rated sites that share a cultural identity was developed and evaluated. This study demonstrates that highlighting cultural attractions-based identity and the role of local communities in informing cultural tourism decision-making processes can make a significant contribution to sustainable cultural tourism. The outputs generated from this study and put into practice will not only maintain, but also promote cultural tourism, potentially serving as a tourism management model for other target areas or in other contexts. Meanwhile, this research also exhorts individuals in charge of tourism to engage locals in tourism by preparing them and providing accurate cultural accounts relevant to tourist destinations, not only for tourism's sake but also for cultural maintenance and enhancement.

2. RELEVANT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

This study was founded on two important concepts: cultural identity and sustainable cultural tourism, which are briefly discussed below:

One of the most recent concerns confronting the tourism industry has been the possibility for cultural commercialization, in which local culture is turned into a product or commodity that tourists can consume. This can lead to the deterioration of cultural traditions and practices as they are modified to meet the tourists' expectations and to generate revenue (Wang et al., 2017). Traditional dance performances, for example, may be arranged for visitors rather than being a natural part of village life. As tourist places aim to appeal to a mass market by selling a standardized product, this can lead to the homogeneity of cultural experiences. Excessive tourism development will hasten the extinction of cultural heritage (Tian et al., 2020). As a result, scholars have battled with the efforts to preserve local culture while also increasing visitor contentment.

In this aspect, the concept of cultural identity is beneficial. Cultural identity refers to the distinct qualities, values, beliefs, and traditions that characterize a group or culture (McIntosh et al., 2002; Tian et al., 2020). In other words, cultural identity emphasizes a shared culture among individuals or groups of individuals who are related with their cultural background. In recent years, the concept of cultural identity has received significant attention in the tourism industry as a means of marketing and experiencing a destination. Scholars working in a variety of contexts agreed that cultural heritage has had a significant positive impact on not only visitor satisfaction and loyalty, but also on local communities' increased awareness and cultural practices (e.g., McIntosh et al., 2002 in New Zealand; Chen and Xie, 2018 in China).

Although tourism is a significant contributor to the world and Thai economies, it can also exert a negative impact on local populations and the environment. To avoid this calamity, the concept of sustainable tourism has received our attention. According to the UNEP and WTO (2005) report on sustainable development (p. 11), sustainable tourism development is defined as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental implications, addressing the requirements of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities.” In other words, sustainable tourism refers to tourism that is environmentally, socially, and economically responsible, with a focus on preserving local culture supporting the well-being of host communities. Weaver (2007) maintained that, based on this definition, sustainable tourism is not limited to a certain type of tourism, but provides an impetus for all tourism forms to be sustainable for future generations. Studies have demonstrated that integrating the sustainable tourism notion in tourism management not only maintains a high level of tourist satisfaction but also assures a meaningful tourist experience (Chamidah et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2011; Hardy et al., 2002; Juandi et al., 2018).

In relevance to the notion of sustainable tourism development, cultural tourism deserves our attention. According to UNWTO (2017, p. 18), as cited by Richards (2018, p. 3) cultural tourism is operationalized as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s essential motivation to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination.” Based on this definition, it is interesting that sustainable cultural tourism elucidates a new perspective, by emphasizing the creation and consumption of cultural tourism. Additionally, on reflection, it places local communities and cultural heritage at the center of decision-making. This, in turn, implicates that tourism development needs to be in tandem with the interests of the local community while encouraging tourists to immerse themselves in the local culture.

At this juncture, taking the notions of cultural identity and sustainable tourism into consideration, it is clear that both are mutually complementary, displaying a strong connection and sharing a common objective of preserving and promoting the unique characteristics of tourist destinations. Meanwhile, Lee and Hsu (2013) asserted that the most influential factor for revisit intention was the on-site tourism experience; therefore, it is expected that the cultural identity associated with a cluster of tourist attractions identified and highlighted at tourist sites will better satisfy visitors and entice them to return. Moreover, they both emphasize the prominent role played by local communities as catalytic agents who may proclaim the value of the tourist attractions’ cultural identity and be actively involved in tourism planning and development in their context for sustainable tourism. This can help to ensure that tourists appreciate rather than exploit or destroy a local culture. In consequence, cultural identities identified and asserted by local communities can be promoted and strengthened by sustainable tourism. The development of community-based tourism initiatives will give local people an opportunity to be actively involved in planning and operating tourism activities that genuinely and respectfully emphasize their cultural identity. In retrospect, by allowing local communities to define the tourist experience, visitors can obtain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the destination’s culture.

3. METHODOLOGY

Prior to the description of methodological procedures conducted in this study, to help better understand the scenario, the description of the study setting is imperative. Subsequently, in order to address the individual objectives of the study, the corresponding procedures are presented in detail.

3.1 Mae Hong Son (MHS): The context of this study

MHS is the third and the eighth largest province (in terms of area) of northern Thailand and Thailand, respectively. Geographically, it shares a border with Myanmar, with seven districts. The residents of this province have been identified as those with the highest degree of happiness in Thailand for a number of consecutive years (“Mae Hong Son wins happiness poll,” 2013; “Changwat thi yakchon thisut “Mae Hong Son” thi mi kwamsuk andapnueng khong prathet,” 2019). This distinguishing feature undoubtedly attracts tourists and visitors, be they local or foreign, who are looking for a calm, uncomplicated, self-contained, unspoiled, and serene way of life.

In addition to the above attributes that provide a succinct advantage to the province, MHS has emerged as a province with a rich natural endowment. For instance, MHS has striking Karst landscapes with more than 200 caves, including the second longest cave in Southeast Asia at 14.18 km, luscious green mountain ranges delicately and miraculously intertwined, yielding abundance in forests and splendid mountain views. Because of its elevation, MHS is often shrouded in mist, earning it the moniker “the city of three veils of mist.” Numerous meandering roads, endless rice paddy fields, and narrow alleyways add to its charm. Exotic biology has been discovered in the area, such as microscopic snails and eyeless fish. Most of the MHS areas and attractions are

not easily accessible, remaining unspoiled and well-preserved, yet posing a challenge to adventure-seeking tourists (Borowsky & Mertz, 2001; Kliengchuay et al., 2018).

MHS is unrivaled in terms of culture, owing to its historical background dating back to an early settlement some 32,000 years ago. A lot of mysteries were disclosed, including burial practices in the province's highlands. The log coffin culture in the area dates from 2,200 to 1,000 years ago, and still mesmerizes visitors who wonder how gigantic log coffins managed to be placed on posts within caverns atop limestone cliffs or being exposed to sun and rain at a rock shelter. MHS also exhibits other widespread but relatively more modern cultural traits (e.g., teak commerce, Lanna culture, and Tai Yai gastronomy) as well as a wide range of traditional expressions of various ethnic minorities like the Karen, Hmong, and Lahu, all of which have their own distinct cultures, languages, and customs. Finally, the area is home to stunning temples with distinct and exquisite architectural styles (Muyco & Pitupumnak, 2019). Overall, MHS is very down-to-earth, primarily rural, peaceful and deeply relaxing, and devoid of tourist trappings. In short, MHS is endowed with cultural tourism potentials that await tourist and visitor appreciation. These distinctive touristic attributes, whether natural or cultural, are well captured in the province's slogan *Three-season mist city, sky-piercing pagodas, verdant forests, virtuous people, ancient traditions, and Mexican sunflower land*.

Despite the blessings endowed, this province has been economically one of the poorest in Thailand. MHS's Gross Provincial Product (or GPP) was the lowest in Thailand in 2019. About 60% of the provincial income came from tourism ("Changwat thi yakchon thisut "Mae Hong Son" thi mi kwamsuk andapnueng khong prathet," 2019), which was active for just four months of the year (from November to February). Based on these facts, the province's natural and cultural abundance has not yet been fully, optimally, and sustainably harnessed and explored.

This study focuses on cultural tourist attractions located in the Mueang district of MHS for a number of reasons. First, this district is commonly known to be its center of governmental administration, with a cluster of government administrative offices and facilities. Second, it is a hub of business, finance, transportation, communication, entertainment, education, etc. Third, it is in a prime location, with logistic facilities including a domestic airport to accommodate and facilitate tourists' travel needs. It is expected that the current study focusing on this district of MHS will provide crucial insights into boosting cultural tourism in a sustainable manner.

3.2 Objectives and corresponding procedures

This study intends to enhance and boost cultural tourism in the context of Mueang district, MHS province to another level that can entice tourists to seek cultural pleasure. The three specific objectives of this study are 1) to identify the shared cultural identity of tourist destinations in the target area, 2) to appraise these cultural attractions' attributes, and 3) to assess a tour program based on this attraction-based cultural identity. To address these three objectives, the sub-sections that follow describe in detail the research activities conducted, including the description of the relevant instruments devised, participants (where appropriate), data collection, and data analysis. At this juncture, it should be noted that this study project received IRB approval from Silpakorn University's Ethics Committee (COE 64.0518-064), which provided guidance on the procedures for obtaining informed consent and protecting participant rights.

3.2.1 Objective 1: To identify the shared cultural identity of tourist destinations in the target area

Two principal research procedures were executed to address this particular objective: collecting documentary evidence and administering semi-structured interviews.

3.2.1.1 Collecting documentary evidence

During this stage, a thorough documentary search was undertaken to acquire information regarding cultural tourist attractions in the Mueang district of MHS. The documents searched include not only printed materials (e.g., research reports, research articles, books, textbooks, manuscripts, newspapers, periodicals) but also internet materials (e.g., video clips, footage, podcast, online ads, promotional materials). A plethora of materials concerning the Mueang district offer a variety of cultural perspectives (such as history, archeology, and art history). Coincidentally, this documentary data collection period corresponded with one of Thailand's peak COVID-19 periods, resulting in a strict prohibition regarding entrance to the target area of MHS.

The data pool gathered through this documentary search was reviewed to initially construct a collection of cultural tourist attractions in the target area. Subsequently, the collected data were qualitatively analyzed to identify a cultural identity commonly shared by these tourist attractions. At this juncture, it needs to be noted that the compiled data at this stage allowed us to collect not only just captivating anecdotes, myths, legends, or reported personal experiences, but also a list of local individuals recognized to be familiar with, and knowledgeable of, the tourist destinations in the target area for the following step of semi-structured interviews.

3.2.1.2 Administering semi-structured interviews

The purpose of this interview procedure is to verify and validate the cultural identity and the cultural attractions determined from documentary survey. That is, this procedure is to seek consensus among selected locals regarding the tourist attraction list and the cultural identity associated with these tourist attractions. Based on the names of the individuals that emerged from the documentary search and those who at the time of study played a crucial role in local tourism, a total of seven individuals were purposively selected to be interviewees.

Data saturation for qualitative research was taken into account at this point to make sure there were enough significant insights to make the appropriate inferences. Therefore, two strategies were used at this stage of data collection to address the issue of data saturation: a sufficient sample size and in-depth questioning.

As far as the sample size is concerned, the identities of the seven interview subjects for this study surfaced during the documentary data-gathering phase. In other words, these individuals were acknowledged to have a significant impact on the target communities for cultural tourism. According to Guest et al. (2006), who carried out a thorough investigation in two African nations, it was discovered that the fundamental components of themes appeared in as few as six interviews. Therefore, the use of seven interviewers in this study, a comparatively much smaller project, seems to be justifiably appropriate to reach data saturation.

These seven individuals were contacted for interviews that took place over the course of multiple site visits. At this stage, the pandemic situation had only marginally ameliorated, and thus the visits to the tourist destinations and encounters with local people were possible although severely constrained. To be more specific, they were somewhat physically and psychologically apprehensive about welcoming or being exposed to strangers or outsiders. However, once we explained our research objectives in a preliminary conversation with each individual, they were cooperative and enthusiastic to participate in the interviews. In short, the interviewees' participation was entirely voluntary. The interview sessions were scheduled and conducted individually based on their availability, convenience, and preferred time or schedule.

An informed consent procedure was conducted, and all interviewees agreed to relinquish anonymity. In this procedure, a series of five semi-structured interview questions was devised by the research team as a tool and afterwards employed as a springboard to delve into subsequent more in-depth information at the interviewees' leisure and flexibility. The set of interview questions that was created was partially influenced by the first documentary data gathering. These in-depth questions also served as an effort to maintain data saturation. Generally speaking, these detailed inquiries are multi-faceted, which benefits data saturation and enables interviewers to consider the sites' splendor, past and present, as well as potential initiatives to draw more visitors to the tourist attractions.

The five questions addressed the following topics: 1) historical background of the tourist sites and their surroundings, 2) association between a cultural identity and the tourist attractions, 3) highlights of individual tourist destinations that attract visitors, 4) activities organized related to individual destinations, and 5) personal accounts (e.g., myths, legends, traditions, beliefs, experience, episodes, incidents, practices, celebrations) related to the destinations.

During the interview sessions, the interviewees were encouraged to produce additional evidence, artifacts, personal items, and stories that might help better comprehend and appreciate the testimonies generated. With the interviewees' permission, the photographs taken and the conversations recorded were supplemented with field notes for future use and reference. Due to the semi-structured interview nature, departure was possible, which resulted in intriguing stories or additional information.

Upon completion of the interviews, the interviewees had access to the interview transcripts for clarification and editing purposes. Then, the data obtained from the two sources (both the documentary search and the interviews) were synthesized, verified, cross-checked, and updated. Moreover, the data were also revitalized by the interviewees' unique personal and informative childhood experiences, stories, anecdotes, and narratives that were not available in documents.

3.2.2 Objective 2: To appraise the cultural attractions' attributes

Based on the tourist destination list associated with the cultural identity and verified by the local participants, these individual tourist destinations' attributes were appraised for feasibility—the second objective of this study—using Buhalis' 6As (2000) framework.

Buhalis' seminal work in 2000 contends that assessing attractions' attributes is crucial because the site attributes are likely to influence tourists' destination choices. Buhalis' 6As framework (2000) comprises *activities*, *attractions*, *accessibility*, *amenities*, *available packages*, and *ancillary services*. In a nutshell, *activities* refer to the activities that tourists can participate in during their visit; *attractions* refer to the unique features of a destination that attract tourists; *accessibility* refers to the ease with which tourists can reach and move around within a destination; *amenities* refer to the facilities and services available to tourists, such as

restaurants, transportation, and entertainment; *available packages* refer to the pre-arranged service bundles to garner attention for the unique features of a destination; and *ancillary services* refer to the day-to-day services, including banks, internet, post offices, and hospitals (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013).

Buhalis (2000) maintains that properly maintaining the 6As to remain competitive within the tourism industry is imperative. By focusing on these 6 attributes, tourism planners and developers can create a sustainable tourism experience that respects and enhances local culture while offering a positive experience for tourists. On this note, other subsequent scholars expanded this particular framework, proposing a larger number of attributes (e.g., Nicolau & Mas, 2006 with 17 destination attributes; Eusébio & Vieira, 2013 with 9 attributes). Some of the additional attributes include entry prices, reputation, infrastructure, planned activities, traffic congestion, and transportation. The scrutiny of these additions, however, reveals that they potentially overlap or are extended elaborations upon Buhalis's rudimentary 6As (2000). Although the additionally proposed destination attributes seem to be advantageous, they can be quite daunting to implement. As a result, this study opts to adopt Buhalis' (2000) 6As, which appears to effectively address the essential components of a tourist destination. In this study, a three-point Likert scale (e.g., 1, 2, and 3 for unsatisfactory, moderate, and satisfactory) was employed to enhance the scale clarity, contributing to the appraisal's augmented practicability and feasibility when executed.

Multiple site visits were conducted by the research team of ten individuals (5 researchers and 5 research assistants) to perform the tourist destinations' appraisal using Buhalis' 2000 framework. Each site appraisal was completed objectively. In the event of ambiguity (which was minor), the team held a discussion to reach a final decision. The destinations' rating was quantitatively calculated. Based on the mean values, the interpretations are as follows: 1.00–1.66 = unsatisfactory, 1.67–2.33 = moderate, and 2.34–3.00 = satisfactory.

3.2.3 Objective 3: To assess the tour program developed based on the verified cultural identity incorporating the positively assessed tourist sites

To attain the aforementioned objective, a tour program was developed including all the tourist locations that were favorably assessed in the previous stage. Two principal procedures were conducted.

3.2.3.1 Designing a tour program

This section outlines how a tour program was developed. Given that the ultimate goal of this study is to boost cultural tourism in the target area, the findings generated from objectives 1 and 2 were integrated into devising a tour program. That is, this tour program was designed to showcase the determined cultural identity and simultaneously incorporate the tourist destinations that were positively appraised. The designed two-day tour program comprised a detailed itinerary that included essential information (e.g., brief introduction of the site, time spent on each site, suggested activities, travel information, accommodation suggestions, selected photos of the sites, stories, anecdotes, and narratives associated with individual cultural sites).

3.2.3.2 Developing a questionnaire to assess the two-day tour program

Following the completion of the tour program that highlights a collective cultural identity, a five-point Likert scale questionnaire (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 for very unsatisfactory, quite unsatisfactory, moderate, quite satisfactory, and very satisfactory, respectively) of five items was developed. In other words, the purpose of this questionnaire was to gauge stakeholders' satisfaction with the designed tour program. The five questions were as follows: 1) distance between one location to another location, 2) attractiveness of the tourist sites, 3) possibility of tour program implementation and execution, 4) time allocation on each tourist site, and 5) engaging stories or narratives accompanying each destination. Due to the obligation to observe COVID-19 preventive measures, the questionnaire was administered online as a Google form.

It should be noted that the ultimate goal of this research procedure is to ensure that the tour program generated is deemed appropriate, implementable, practical, and realistic by local stakeholders. As a result, a number of local stakeholders of the cultural tourism in the target area were recruited to assess the designed tour program. The recruitment process was facilitated by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) at Mae Hong Son (MHS), the central government agency in charge of provincial tourism. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic caused a halt or rather a slowdown in tourism activities, the TAT not only continued communication via Facebook and other social media, but also kept the connection active despite the pandemic. This means of reaching out implies that the activity was meant for those interested in the cultural tourism of MHS only. No other requirements for local tourism stakeholders were made.

Similarly, an informed consent procedure was performed. The participants were given a week to review the tour program through the use of Google forms. Finally, the obtained completed questionnaires were quantitatively analyzed for descriptive statistics. Based on the mean values, the interpretations are as follows: 1.00–1.80 very unsatisfactory; 1.81–2.60 quite unsatisfactory; 2.61–3.40 moderate; 3.41–4.20 quite satisfactory; and 4.21–5.00 very satisfactory.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section was divided into three sub-sections, corresponding to individual objectives, results, and discussion of the study.

4.1 Teak trade as a cultural identity

The documentary survey yielded a number of tourist attractions in the Mueang district of MHS. But as far as cultural attractions are concerned, a total of ten cultural tourist attractions were identified: seven temples (*Wat Chong Kham*, *Wat Phra That Kong Mu*, *Wat Hua Wiang*, *Wat Chong Klang*, *Wat Phra Non*, *Wat Kam Ko*, and *Wat Muai To*) and three constructions (*Sala Pong Daeng* or *Pong Daeng Pavilion*, *Bombay Burma Office*, and *Mae Hong Son Museum*). A brief description of each location from the cultural perspectives concerning history, art history, and archeology is presented in the appendix.

These ten sites might seem to be physically different (each with its own particular artistic characteristics), but through scrutiny, they were found to be culturally similar. To put it simply, the seven temples are structurally and architecturally unique. For example, *Wat Chong Kham* and *Wat Chong Klang*, though adjacent to each other with a splendid swamp in front, depict different architectural styles, artifacts, and pertaining stories. However, interestingly, both of these temples were substantially supported by the same ethnic group of affluent Tai Yai.

All in all, the documentary data analysis compelled us to conclude that these ten sites shared a common cultural identity of “teak trading.” To elaborate, these seven temples were built or initiated, being supported financially by Tai Yai (an ethnic group) affluents who prospered in the teak trade because of their accumulated skills, expertise, and experience. Similarly, the three constructions, at one point in the past, were associated with teak trade. For example, the MHS Museum houses a collection of artifacts and exhibits depicting the local people, their way of life, and the area’s history. Evidently, a number of displayed items were associated with teak trading. Overall, Mueang district in MHS is a culturally rich destination, perfect for travelers looking to experience and explore MHS cultural landmarks. For more details on the individual sites, please see Appendix.

Subsequently, to further verify the teak trade as a cultural identity, interview sessions with seven local experts and distinguished individuals were individually conducted. The interview cohort of seven individuals comprised three temple abbots and one senior monk from four famous temples and also popular tourist destinations in the target area; one academician who at the time of the study was a consultant for an ethnic group studies center; one revered community leader; and one vice chairperson of MHS Community College. The seven interviewees were male, ranging from 55 to 72 years old. On average, each interview session lasted approximately 45 minutes.

To illustrate how an in-depth interview can provide insights to our study, a following excerpt of the interview with the *Wat Hua Wiang*’s abbot in response to the inquiry regarding the historical background of *Wat Hua Wiang* is presented.

Wat Hua Wiang, an architectural masterpiece dating back to the year 1863, stands as a testament to the splendor of Tai Yai design. With its captivating galvanized zinc eaves, reminiscent of a delicate gingerbread creation, this sacred sanctuary commands attention. The temple’s name, “*Hua Wiang*,” derived from the Tai Yai language, gracefully translates to “the frontier,” an homage to its origins. As the tides of migration swept through, this revered temple now finds itself situated at the heart of the province, not far away from the bustling MHS central morning market. In 1917, a gathering of Tai Yai affluents, fervent devotees of Buddhism, embarked on a pilgrimage to Myanmar. Their sacred mission was to procure a replica of the venerated *Phra Mahamuni Buddha* statue, cast in Mandalay, a city teeming with spiritual significance. During that era, the Tai Yai people were renowned for their mastery in the teak trade. Their exceptional skills and extensive experience led to their employment by British-run teak trade companies, resulting in significant financial gains. Additionally, they garnered a reputation for their devout Buddhism, as they were always prepared to contribute to and support religious activities.

The interviewees in general felt attached to the sites, and thus when interviewed, they were enthusiastic and hopeful that these sites would be properly promoted and maintained. The interviewees unanimously agreed with the identification of “teak trade” as a cultural identity, recounting their personal experiences or narratives associated with the “teak trade.” Based on the interview accounts, the association between the three constructions and the “teak trade” seems to be transparent. Nevertheless, such an association with the seven temples might not be straightforward. To elaborate, these seven temples, apparently, have unique architectural styles, artifacts, and decors; however, after careful examination from the viewpoints of history, art history, and archeology, these temples were deeply connected through the glorious

teak trade in the old days dating back to the 18th century. To demonstrate how the teak trade played a crucial role in shaping the culture of Mueang district of MHS, the following section focuses on the evoking accounts elicited from documentary and interview data combined, reminiscing the teak trade cultural identity to be exploited for tourism promotion and upgrading purposes (Keyes, 2012; Laohachaiboon & Takeda, 2007).

During the era of British colonial period, England entered Burma and the territories adjacent to the Burmese border (i.e., northern Siam or Thailand) to exploit existing resources, especially forestry, resulting in the growth of communities that became established and permanent settlements in the MHS area. When British companies became serious about forestry in the 1880s, they enjoyed practically complete control over the northern woods. Despite the fact that the Burmese, Tai Yai, and northern aristocracy had previously been involved in the teak trade, England was able to monopolize the forestry business in northern Thailand and exported teak through the heavily financed Bombay Burma Company.

In addition, forest concession leasing and the logging business in the north increased significantly, especially with the opening of Bombay Burma Company branches in the Mueang district and other districts. The logging industry in MHS grew tremendously, and teak became a principal export commodity to England. In 1955, with the revocation of the government's forestry concessions, the Bombay Burma Company went out of business. However, due to plentiful natural resources like teak wood and forest goods, MHS attracted migrants from adjacent areas, mainly Tai Yai into MHS, a regional commercial center with an economic boom at that time.

The interview and documentary testimonies congruently substantiated that the teak trade was inextricably linked with MHS and the formation of MHS as a city. Due to its prime and strategic location situated on the log route, the expansion of the city was rapid. The teak business was at its pinnacle and flourishing so much that a number of gracious temples were constructed. A large number of Tai Yai who prospered from the teak trade were devout Buddhists with a strong determination to contribute money or pay tribute to the Lord Buddha by renovating or constructing temples in part or whole and preserving archeological items. Clearly, the wealth, abundance, and faith of Buddhist Tai Yai were working in unison.

4.2 Tourist attractions' attributes appraised

This section presents the findings derived from the appraisal of the ten tourist attractions previously identified using Buhalis's 6As framework. The appraisals were conducted by the ten researcher team members during the site visits. In fact, the site visits tremendously facilitated the assessment. As a result, a consensus was reached without complications. Based on the 6A criteria with three rating scales, six out of ten sites were positively rated as "satisfactory," including five temples (*Wat Chong Kham*, *Wat Chong Klang*, *Wat Phra That Kong Mu*, *Wat Phra Non*, and *Wat Hua Wiang*) and one building (*Sala Pong Daeng* or *Pong Daeng Pavilion*), leaving the other three sites as "moderate" (*Wat Kam Ko*, *Wat Muai To*, and the *MHS Museum*) and one as "unsatisfactory" (*Bombay Burma Office*). The summary of the assessment is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Attribute Appraisal of Ten Tourist Attractions Using Buhalis's 6As (2000)

No	Site	Attraction			Accessibility			Amenities			Available Packages			Activities			Ancillary Services			Mean	Meaning
		3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1		
1	Wat Chong Kham	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			2.67	Satisfactory
2	Wat Chong Klang	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			2.67	Satisfactory
3	Wat Phra That Kong Mu	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			3.00	Satisfactory
4	Wat Hua Wiang	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			2.50	Satisfactory
5	Wat Phra Non	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			2.67	Satisfactory
6	Wat Kam Ko		✓		✓			✓				✓		✓				✓		2.00	Moderate
7	Wat Muai To	✓			✓			✓				✓		✓				✓		2.17	Moderate
8	Pong Daeng Pavilion	✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			2.67	Satisfactory
9	Bombay Burma Office		✓			✓			✓			✓			✓			✓		1.50	Unsatisfactory
10	MHS Museum	✓			✓				✓		✓			✓			✓			1.83	Moderate

Note: Rating scales: 1 = Unsatisfactory; 2 = Moderate; 3 = Satisfactory

Mean interpretation: 1.00–1.66 = Unsatisfactory; 1.67–2.33 = Moderate; 2.34–3.00 = Satisfactory

As illustrated, five of the temples received "satisfactory" appraisals (ranging from 2.50 to 3.00), whereas two temples and the museum were rated "moderate," lacking available packages, activities, and ancillary services. The site with the lowest rating, *Bombay Burma Office*, was not favorably rated. Although this particular construction bears tremendous significance in the history of the teak trade, the place has sadly grown extremely dilapidated, without sufficient upkeep and leaving the teak trade history tied to it adrift and lost in time. In short, out of a total of ten sites associated with the teak trade identity, only six of them were satisfactorily rated and deemed to be ready for inclusion in a tour program.

4.3 Tour program assessment

According to Buhalis (2000), tourism planners and developers can focus on favorably rated destinations to create a sustainable tourism experience that respects and enhances local culture while offering a pleasant visitor experience. In accordance with this assertion, the six rated attractions associated with the teak trade identity with positive appraisal were included in the tour program. The remaining four sites with not so favorable appraisals were designated as recommended locations for visitors to explore at their leisure.

A two-day tour program incorporating the six positively assessed destinations commenced with available choices regarding how to arrive at MHS's Mueang district, followed by the detailed itinerary accompanied by brief descriptions and time allocations for each site. The six tourist destinations were sequenced, taking into consideration the sites' locations and the appropriate visiting time (e.g., morning or afternoon to appreciate sunrise and sunset when appropriate). For example, *Wat Phra That Kong Mu* is breathtakingly gorgeous at night when illuminated. As a result, this location was scheduled for the evening of the first day. To put it simply, the Mueang district tour program consists of the following places, in this particular order spanning over the course of two days: Day 1 - *Wat Phra That Kong Mu*; and Day 2 - *Wat Hua Wiang*, *Wat Phra Non*, *Wat Chong Kham*, *Wat Chong Klang*, and the *Pong Daeng Pavilion*. At this juncture, personal anecdotes or legends are shared with visitors to pique their attention and keep them engaged.

The tour program was assessed by 15 local stakeholders, as recruited by TAT at MHS. One participant (or 6.77%) was beyond the age of 51, seven of them (46.77%) were between the ages of 41 and 50, while the other seven participants (46.77%) were under the age of 41. All had some connection to local tourism at the time of study. Four of the assessors worked in tourism-related business sectors (i.e., hotel owners and tour operators), four were representatives from local government or state enterprise employees in charge of MHS tourism, four were university students who occasionally acted as local tour guides when they were available, and the final three were independent and self-employed tour guides.

The analysis of the tour program assessment (as shown in Table 2) demonstrated that the program received a favorable rating of 4.27 out of 5.00, and the maximum score of 4.47 was attained for the item on the practicability of the tour program. Overall, the developed tour program was considered very favorable.

Based on these findings, this study has identified a cultural identity for sustainable tourism based on the tenets that cultural identity is an important factor in attracting tourists as well as representing a vehemence to preserve it, and that sustainable tourism in turn has the potential to promote and strengthen cultural identity. This tourist management concept, in congruence with Sangragsa and Lukhananuluk (2013), may produce or increase the income or revenue for local communities to spend in the conservation and repair of cultural landmarks and subsequently upgrade the local economy. Furthermore, with a greater understanding of cultural value, locals will be able to present the attractions to tourists with a meaningful and genuinely enriching experience, contributing to visitors' increased loyalty and stronger intention to return. For instance, various temples, at a first glance, might appear physically similar to visitors or tourists. However, with a cultural identity in mind, a physical construction comes to life, reflecting the tie or relationship, imparting deeper cultural connotations, and offering an authentic cultural and emotional tourist experience. For example, front-line employees at tourism destinations who have daily contact or direct participation with tourists need to understand, appreciate, and cultivate the relevance of cultural identity in order to enrich and facilitate the tourist experience. In other words, in alignment with Anantamongkolkul and Pattanapokinsakul (2022), this study suggests that cultural tourism management with community engagement contributes to residents' heightened awareness of their own culture. Finally, community involvement fosters greater understanding among residents and responsible organizations, paving the way to, or opening the door to, further collaboration (Charoensit et al., 2022).

Table 2: Tour Program Assessment Results (N = 15)

No	Item	Mean	S.D.	Meaning
1	Distance between one location to another location	4.27	0.88	Very satisfactory
2	Attractiveness of the tourist sites	4.27	0.80	Very satisfactory
3	Tour program implementation and execution	4.47	0.64	Very satisfactory
4	Time allocation on each tourist site	4.13	0.92	Quite satisfactory
5	Interesting stories/narratives accompanying each site	4.20	0.94	Quite satisfactory
Mean		4.27	0.83	Very satisfactory

Note: Rating scales: 1 = Very unsatisfactory; 2 = Quite unsatisfactory; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Quite satisfactory; 5 = Very satisfactory

Mean interpretation: 1.00–1.80 = Very unsatisfactory; 1.81–2.60 = Quite unsatisfactory; 2.61–3.40 = Moderate;

3.41–4.20 = Quite satisfactory; and 4.21–5.00 = Very satisfactory

Finally, this study has demonstrated that, to achieve, thrive, and maintain sustainable cultural tourism, encouraging locals to take part in every step of this effort is pivotal. As presented, some carefully selected locals

were invited to verify and validate the identification of teak trade as a cultural identity of the target area, based on documentary evidence. Subsequently, this cultural identity together with the list of tourist attractions were validated to ensure that they are truly associated with the teak trade. Eventually, the tour program developed encompassing the favorably rated attractions was assessed by the locals who are tourism stakeholders.

At this juncture, in retrospect, the legacy of sustainable tourism, if possible, should be extendedly assigned to the youth group. In addition to local adults, the local youths can be considered significant and priceless human resources and beholders of local culture. Thus, they need to be empowered to authoritatively share their cultural identity with visitors. In so doing, they will not only be authentically immersed in their own identity, but also actively propel their local cultural tourism.

5. CONCLUSION

Tourism has been one of Thailand's major sources of income. It is anticipated that after COVID-19, tourism will revive and expand at an exponential rate. With this projection, this study was contextualized at Mueang district, MHS province, Thailand. The venue is nestled in the mountainous location with a rich tapestry of culture and historical landmarks, making it an ideal destination for cultural tourism. Some examples of attractions include exquisite temples erected in the early nineteenth century that are popular with both locals and tourists and are home to a number of important Buddhist artifacts, functioning as important cultural and spiritual centers for the local community.

The analysis of extensive documentary data revealed that teak trade represents the attraction-based cultural identity of the target area. To ensure that such identification was not imposed by outsiders, like researchers, multiple interview sessions with selected local community leaders were conducted, subsequently endorsing this particular cultural identity. As advocated by Buhalis (2000), attraction attributes can contribute to sustainable tourism. Therefore, an attraction appraisal was performed, and six attractions were favorably assessed, indicating that these sites are in a ready state to support sustainable tourism, which can in turn support cultural identity by encouraging the preservation of cultural heritage sites. Finally, a detailed tour program consisting of six attractions highlighting the teak trade cultural identity was assessed by 15 stakeholders. The results show that the tour program was very satisfactory.

Despite a wealth of insights provided, this study suffers from certain limitations. It focuses on a single target area of MHS's Mueang district. Given that each area has its own cultural identity and characteristics, the specifics of how to integrate cultural identity may vary according to individual contexts. Consequently, other areas of the province remain to be explored for local tourism and sustainable tourism. This study thus represents only an attempt to establish sustainable tourism. Moreover, due to the lingering pandemic, the possibility to implement the tour program was hindered, resulting in the research loop not being completed. However, because our stakeholders who assessed the tour program were from the tourism industry, we thus could be ensured to a certain extent regarding the program's feasibility.

It is also expected that, for future use, this MHS model of cultural tourism can be utilized as a blueprint, with some careful adaptations, for other areas to marshal their tourism plans and organize their tourist strategies that accommodate individual contexts, addressing the specific needs and goals of local communities. Evidently, the MHS model implementation with modifications is needed to ensure that cultural sustainability meets tourist demands.

Due to time constraints and COVID-19 preventive measures, this study's limitations must thus recommend further research. For instance, it would be intriguing to examine the impact of the tour program on visitors or to gauge their reaction to cultural attraction-based cultural identity and the tour program. Moreover, in light of the perilous digital era, it would thus be interesting to integrate the application of new technologies into cultural tourism and investigate whether such application increases visitors' level of engagement and desire to return. The impact of disseminating cultural information to tourists via new technologies prior to their actual visit, in an effort to pique their interest, also remains to be investigated.

On this final note, this study suggests that, with appropriate cultural tourism management, the relationship between tourism and culture is not necessarily a destructive one, but can be mutually supportive. Cultural heritage maintenance can be accomplished by enlisting the active participation of local community residents. In fact, the tourism industry, culture, and education are usually viewed as separate entities; however, this study illustrated and implicated that they may be mutually and concurrently promoted and substantiated. Overall, this suggests that the ultimate goal of tourism is not merely to have more visits, but rather to create favorable sentiments and memories associated with cultural attractions. Thus, making visitors yearn to return and resulting in enhanced satisfaction and intention to return both during and after their visit. As demonstrated, this can be accomplished integrating the locals' participation across the entire paradigm.

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APPENDIX

The seven temples that emerge from the documentation search include *Wat Chong Kham*, *Wat Chong Klang*, *Wat Phra That Kong Mu*, *Wat Phra Non*, *Wat Hua Wiang*, *Wat Kam Ko*, and *Wat Muai To*.

Wat Chong Kham is the first temple in MHS, dating back to the year 1827 in Tai Yai architectural style. Tai Yai is one of the biggest minority ethnic groups in Myanmar. A devout Buddhist and Tai Yai affluent, who made a fortune in the teak trade, sponsored the construction.

In adjacency to this temple is *Wat Chong Klang*, built in 1867. It is much larger compared to *Wat Chong Kham*. Originally, it was merely a pavilion that accommodated monks attending an abbot's funeral. Similar to *Wat Chong Kham*, after the funeral, the construction was led by Tai Yai community affluents who prospered in the teak business. The distinguishing feature of this temple is its multi-tiered roof, which is reminiscent of the Mandalay Palace in Myanmar. The roof is decorated with galvanized zinc eaves that drop down in flowery or vine designs, a distinctive Tai Yai craftsmanship talent. The bright green roof contrasts with the gold eaves contributing to augmented beautiful splendor, making this temple the highlight of the district and the province. A number of Buddhism-artifacts associated are on exhibit.

Wat Phra That Kong Mu is perched on a hill. This temple has two major pagodas. The larger one was constructed by a wealthy Tai Yai trader in 1860 in the Mon style. The other is smaller in size and was constructed by the first MHS governor (who was also a Tai Yai) in 1874 to commemorate his ascension to the position. This pagoda is in Mon style too, with galvanized zinc eaves reminiscent of Tai Yai architecture. Due to the temple's elevation, it is one of the popular locations to visit, overlooking the city of MHS and affording spectacular views, especially at night when all pagodas are illuminated.

Wat Phra Non or the Reclining Buddha was built in 1875 by the first MHS governor. The Reclining Buddha is of Tai Yai style and the biggest one in MHS. Specifically, the characteristics of the Reclining Buddha (such as the lack of a halo, the manner he was robed, or the position of his feet) mirrored those of Mandalay art in Myanmar. Legend about this Buddha statue goes that the roof caved in on a rainy day. A herd boy who took shelter at this temple fell asleep and awoke to see the Buddha statue move to dodge the dripping rain. He hurried off to share the story with the locals. When they returned to the temple, they noticed that the two feet of the statue were not in alignment. Inside the temple museum, a variety of religious and non-religious artifacts are on display.

Wat Hua Wiang, erected in 1863, is located close to the central morning market of MHS. This temple is home to a very sacred Buddha statue, which is a reproduction of a venerated Buddha statue in Mandalay, Myanmar. A Tai Yai devoted Buddhist introduced it to MHS. Interestingly, this statue was cast in nine sections and hauled along the Salawin and Pai Rivers. These parts were assembled at the Reclining Temple before being relocated in 1936 to *Wat Hua Wiang*, a construction with gingerbread-style galvanized zinc eaves. Out of respect, it is considered a living Buddha statue. Therefore, every year, males alone perform a religious rite in which they wash their faces and bathe the statue.

Wat Kam Ko was built in 1890 by Tai Yai craftsmen and financially supported by Tai Yai affluents. The first abbot was a Tai Yai migrant, and the temple was built in the Tai Yai architectural style.

Wat Muai To was built in 1889 by the second MHS governor, the widow of the first governor. The temple name was coined by the first abbot, who moved from a temple of the same name in Shan State, Myanmar. The temple is in the Tai Yai architectural style. The principal Buddha statue was brought from Myanmar. Interestingly, this temple not only exhibits Tai Yai architectural style but also upholds Tai Yai traditions.

The three buildings or constructions that emerge from the documentation search include *Sala Pong Daeng* or *Pong Daeng Pavilion*, the *Bombay Burma Office*, and *Mae Hong Son Museum*.

Sala Pong Daeng or *Pong Daeng Pavilion* is an old construction of over 160 years built by Bombay Burma Company when it was granted a concession to operate a teak business in MHS. Following the concession termination, this construction performed a variety of functions, including providing shelter for passers-by and merchants on an MHS–Myanmar route. After all these years, this pavilion has deteriorated, and memories associated with teak trade seem to have disappeared.

Bombay Burma Office once belonged to Bombay Burma Trading Company when the British expanded the teak business in northern Thailand. This construction in a Thai style served as a residence for a boss and is now in a dilapidated state. Currently, it is managed by the MHS Forest Resources Management Office.

Mae Hong Son Museum is over 100 years old and was built in a Thai style. It was once the residence of a high-ranking police officer. It is situated among the MHS police officers' residences. Renovations were made possible from donations. Inside the museum, a large collection of personal objects such as commemoration coins, photographs, over 127 years old newspapers, and police officers' uniforms, are on display. As a Thai-style wooden house, the raised platform was supported by many wooden pillars. It is noted that some pillars were handcrafted and etched with the letters B, B, and C. Speculatively, these letters are quite telling, indicating that these pillars were part of the teak business.